

R. Venter

Prof. R. Venter, Research Fellow, Department Historical and Constructive Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, South Africa.
E-mail: rventer@ufs.ac.za,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1054-4007>

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The Trinity and an ecclesiology from below

ABSTRACT

The article investigates themes found in Kobus Schoeman's practical theological work. The specific problem addressed focuses on the interaction between an ecclesiology from below and contemporary trinitarian scholarship, and the possible mutual enriching conversation. The article describes the views of Haight on the shift from an ecclesiology from above to one from below. This is followed by an examination of existing attempts at developing trinitarian ecclesiologies. The final part of the argument explores the dynamics of the dialectical interaction and proposes, as elements of a "trinitarian ecclesiology from below", 12 coordinates that express a vision for thinking about the church. Weaknesses in the Haight approach are addressed and the existing trinitarian ecclesiologies are expanded with a focus on the work of each one of the triune persons. The vision of the church that transpires, highlights features such as intellectual vibrancy, hospitality, publicality, vulnerability, and transgression, among some of the 12 coordinates. One crucial insight that emerges from the research is that the incarnation enables theology to think non-competitively about the theological and empirical dimensions of the church. The article demonstrates that a dialogue between specific contemporary discourses on the church and the Trinity could result in a fruitful theological outcome.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Theological reflection on the Trinity and on the church has experienced an intense renewed interest since the mid-20th century. Impulses from the Second Vatican Council and the turn to social models of the Trinity have resulted

in renaissances in both these fields of theological study. Ironically, these two foci of academic enthusiasm have not always intersected in a thorough engagement. This article addresses a specific question: Could a conversation between a so-called ecclesiology “from below” and contemporary trinitarian scholarship result in a constructive understanding of the nature of the church? This contribution addresses the theological orientation of an ecclesiology from below and suggests a consistent trinitarian grammar. At the same time, it is argued that existing trinitarian ecclesiologies could be expanded by the dialogue with a model from below. The final contribution is found in the intimation of primary direction “coordinates” for thinking about the church. The argument is developed in a simple and linear fashion. The article investigates the views of the major proponent of an ecclesiology from below, Haight. This is followed by a discussion of existing proposals of trinitarian ecclesiologies. The final part of the article maps the direction of a trinitarian ecclesiology from below by identifying, succinctly, 12 coordinates for determining direction for reflection on the church.

The article is a modest attempt to convey recognition and gratitude to a friend and colleague, Kobus Schoeman, for his theological accomplishments on the occasion of his retirement. His theological work over the years has motivated the focus of this research.

2. SCHOEMAN ON ECCLESIOLOGY AND ON TRINITY

Over the years, Kobus Schoeman has established himself as a capable and knowledgeable thinker on ecclesiology in the South African context. In this purview, an overview of his theological contribution cannot be given. Rather, the focus is on the two perspectives identified in the introduction, namely the notion of an “ecclesiology from below” and the trinitarian confession. Both these motifs are to be found in his research work, and two critical articles in his oeuvre have been identified as providing ample insight into his line of thinking (Schoeman 2020; 2022).

Schoeman is acquainted with the theological views of a person such as Haight who coined the phrase “ecclesiology from below”. In his article on how contemporary ecclesiologies should be developed, Schoeman (2020) explicitly refers to Haight and operationalises his proposal. It is important to highlight which aspects of this ecclesiological approach appeal to Schoeman (2020:98-100, especially 100), for whom the significance is to be found in the focus on the local context. Although he mentions the other dimensions identified by Haight, he does not engage with

them. Schoeman (2020:104) not only advocates that one “need[s] to pay attention” to approaches from below, but also continues to signal where the significance lies. That would prevent the implementation of a “blue print or a prescriptive model” from above (see also Schoeman 2020:102). In his proposal for a contemporary ecclesiology, Schoeman (2020:101) eventually identifies four aspects of the church that should be clarified and explored, namely the “essence” of a congregation; the context and the society; the self-understanding of the congregation, and discernment. In the discussion of his “framework”, it is clear that he is sensitive to the theological dynamics, that is, the reality of God, in the process.

In his article, Schoeman (2022) examines this theological concern at greater length. In this important and quite interesting reflection, his interest is fairly ambitious; he investigates the implications of the confession of the Trinity for practical theology as such. Schoeman’s (2022:1) basic conviction is that the “tracing” of God should be an integral part of this academic discipline and form the normative component thereof. In the development of his argument, Schoeman (2022:4) associates the Trinity especially with the notion of the *missio Dei* and with relationality. The identity of God is to be understood in terms of “action”. For Schoeman (2022:4), this implies that the divine action within every context should be described in an ecclesiology. Furthermore, the Trinity implies communion and unity-in-diversity. In his own creative proposal for practical theology from a trinitarian orientation, Schoeman (2022:5) refers to a “few markers” and identifies three aspects, namely a specific kind of ecclesiology, hospitality, and lived religion. In an ecclesiology from below, he mentions this approach explicitly: the Trinity would impact on understandings of power and authority, leadership styles, congregational identities, and social engagement. The motif of trinitarian perichoresis would function in the practice of hospitality. Without arguing it explicitly from a trinitarian angle, Schoeman mentions the centrality for practical theology of a lived religion, that is, everyday life. Schoeman (2022:6) merely, but suggestively, states that “[i]t would be worthwhile to trace experiences and followership of the Trinity in everyday life as lived religion”.

One could express appreciation for Schoeman’s openness to, and acquaintance with trends in ecclesiology and systematic theology, as well as for his constructive attempts to explore the significance of approaches “from below” and of trinitarian developments. Two critical questions may arise. Does Schoeman engage Haight’s notion of an “ecclesiology from below” adequately enough? Should one not explore work on “trinitarian ecclesiologies” in more detail? This article wants to continue the conversation and attends to both these questions in greater detail.

3. HAIGHT AND AN ECCLESIOLOGY FROM BELOW

The three-volume work by Roger Haight, *Christian community in history* (2004-2005), is a major accomplishment and any ecclesiological reflection should take careful note of this study. In this instance, one encounters an ecclesiological view informed by a person with an acute sense of changing times, a deep acquaintance with history, and a creative and committed theological ability. In the first volume, subtitled *Historical ecclesiology* (2004), Haight extensively accounts for his approach; his explanation of an “ecclesiology from below” is of interest to this article. Volumes one and two describe the history of ecclesiological thought from the formation of the church up to the end of the 20th century. Volume three conveys his constructive proposal for a “transdenominational ecclesiology”.

Haight’s basic departure is the observation that the church never settles down, and that change is continually being negotiated. He then aims to develop “a historically conscious constructive ecclesiology for our time” (Haight 2004:8). To signal the radical contemporary changes in the social and intellectual landscape and what that may imply for doing theology, specifically ecclesiology, Haight employs notions conventionally associated with Christology – “from above” and “from below” – for thinking about the church.

To contrast the two approaches, Haight (2004:26-56) identifies six perspectives that are fundamental to ecclesiology, namely the historical context, the object, the method, the sources, theology, and the historicity of the church. Each of these is briefly discussed to convey the differences between the two views and to capture the shifts that are apparent in reflection on the church.

An ecclesiology from above is a-historical and untroubled by a sense of historical conditioning. An approach from below, with its historical consciousness, is acutely aware of the face of our time. Haight (2004:27-35, 57) mentions and describes seven features, namely post-modernity; globalisation and pluralism; appreciation for other churches, other religions and the world; human suffering; the position of women, and secularisation. For Haight (2004:31), this has far-reaching implications for an understanding of the mission of the church.

Whereas a specific (denominational) church was the object of study in older ecclesiologies, a change has manifested itself in this instance. The whole Christian movement is in the focus, together with a conviction that the church is that which is empirical, human, and historical (Haight 2004:37). Haight is emphatic in this instance. One should view the

church as an empirical human reality, and one should accommodate and appreciate plurality. Haight (2004:37) is careful to deny the “theologically defined transcendent dimension”. The church is both a historical and a theological reality.

When thinking about the church, the method has been drastically expanded. Not only Scripture and doctrinal statements are authoritative. The so-called “turn to the subject” has been embraced; hence, the consideration of human experience and sociological dynamics has become crucial (Haight 2004:45, 59). Haight (2004:47, 59) mentions another sensibility, namely the need for an apologetic approach. A language is required that appeals to common human experience.

When the method of ecclesiology expands, the sources at stake are obviously also widened. One should consider Scripture, history, confessional doctrines, and human experience. It is noteworthy that Haight discusses the question of the origin of the church in this context. An appeal to doctrinal self-definition will not suffice, as found in conventional approaches from above. An ecclesiology should begin with “a critical reconstruction of the origin of the church”, with an acknowledgement of the historical and sociological development (Haight 2004:21, 60).

The fifth perspective of comparison, the theological, is of particular relevance for this article. In this instance, Haight (2004:22, 52, 62) makes an interesting and provocative proposal. A Christocentrism should be replaced by a pneumacentrism. He offers an intricate argument. The logic of an ecclesiology from below requires this. A focus on the Spirit explains the origin of the church better and conveys divine presence, power, and activity more adequately than a Christocentric one. In a footnote, Haight (2004:53, n40) acknowledges that “all Christian language about the church is implicitly trinitarian in its source”, but he does not elaborate on this. He retains Jesus Christ as norm, but also insists that the symbol of God as Spirit expresses divine experienced grace better.¹

The final perspective, historicity, addresses the question of change, sameness, and identity. Conventionally, adjustment to new situations of change were absorbed into existing and traditional structures. Haight (2004:25, 54), obviously in an approach from below, emphasises change,

1 A full treatment of Haight’s position should arguably also consider his other major work, his Christology – Jesus symbol of God. In his discussion of the divinity of Christ, Haight (1999:445-465) leans favourably towards a “Spirit Christology”. In this instance, intricate matters surface such as, for example, his notion of salvation and the position of world religions (Haight 1999: Chapters 12-14).

but he identifies some criteria, namely fidelity to the past, intelligibility for today, empowerment into the future, and communion with the church as a whole.

The merit of Haight's proposal is to be found in the integration of a large number of intellectual currents of late 20th-century thought. The acknowledgement of change and radical shifts in the intellectual landscape, the expansion of the field, the turn to the historical concrete material reality, and the openness to alterity are all sentiments to be appreciated. At the same time, a number of fundamental questions, and specifically two, could be raised. Is Haight's discernment of the social landscape after 20 years still satisfactory? Is his theological orientation acceptable and sufficient?

4. TRINITARIAN ECCLESIOLOGIES

The so-called renewed interest in the Trinity, with a long history stretching back to the 19th century, and which manifested itself prominently since the early 1970s, stimulated a revisioning of traditional doctrines from especially a relational orientation.² The large number of attempts to construe ecclesiologies from a trinitarian perspective should be placed within the context of this theological development.

Traditional ecclesiologies have always displayed some sense that one should consider all three persons of the Trinity when designing a theology of the church. But a typical approach was followed, which is not quite what is to be found in more consistent Trinitarian projects. The departure was the three well-known metaphors used for the church, namely people of God, body of Christ, and temple of the Spirit. One encounters this, for example, in the older but seminal text by Küng (1968:107-260). The article briefly refers to Kasper's (2015) more recent and equally magisterial work on Catholic ecclesiology that follows a similar method, in order to illustrate this approach. His work is also significant for its reflection on Vatican Two's innovative theological emphases.

The symbol "people of God" situates the church in a long historical tradition, but more happens. It is placed in the universal history of both mankind and salvation (Kasper 2015:120-124). As people of God, the church could never be captured for exclusive ideological purposes, whether nationalistic or sectional (for example, the poor and the oppressed). Apart from this universal import, this symbol also conveys the doxological nature of the church, its focus on God. Kasper interprets the phrase "body of Christ" sacramentally, and links it with the notion of a eucharistic ecclesiology,

2 For a discussion of the Trinitarian renaissance, see Venter (2019).

that is, the church is where the eucharist is celebrated. Deeper theological considerations are at play in this instance. According to Kasper (2015:131), “the term ‘body of Christ’ expresses the synchronic and diachronic unity of the church at all places and times”. A fruitful additional interpretative move by Kasper includes in this discussion the metaphor of the church as “bride and prostitute”. This brings the “drama”, often conflictual, between God and God’s people into focus, because it evokes associations of infidelity (Kasper 2015:131). In a brief aside, Kasper (2015:127) mentions the motif of universality also in connection with this symbol. The church is the space filled by Christ (Eph. 1:22); a universal cosmic dimension emerges then. This same emphasis on the universal appears emphatically again in the discussion on the church as the temple of the Spirit. Pneumatology links the church, in a new way, to a universal horizon (Kasper 2015:142). The Spirit gives life to everything and works everywhere. The critical insight is that the Spirit leads the church to dialogue, internally and externally; “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions” (Kasper 2015:143). When discussing the interplay between charisma and institution, Kasper highlights the centrality of *communio*. Although he refers, in a typical Augustinian manner, to an “analogy to the inner-Trinitarian order”, he never explores this conceptual resource.³ The approach exemplified by Kasper carries some constructive significance and no ecclesiology can ignore these insights. When this is compared with the central motifs and emphases found in the more recent Trinitarian ecclesiologies, one easily detects the weaknesses.

Two examples of a Trinitarian ecclesiology, those by Gunton and by Volf, are briefly given in this instance.⁴ This not only serves to show the difference from the approach by Kasper, but also, in some sense, establishes the groundwork for the creative proposal later in the article.

In the important article by Gunton (1997) on the Trinity and the being of the church, in his collection of essays on trinitarian theology, one finds most of the motifs of a Trinitarian ecclesiology. He ascribes historically the inadequacies of the theology of the church to the failure to base it on an understanding of the being of God. He is seeking an ontology of the church, and that, he asserts, should be “rooted in the being of God ... the sole proper ontological basis for the church is the being of God”

3 It remains sad and somewhat of an enigma why Kasper has not used his Trinitarian theology, which he worked out in a remarkable manner in his outstanding work *The God of Jesus Christ*, in his ecclesiology. The section on the Trinitarian mystery of God remains one of the particularly fine treatments of this subject (Kasper 1983:233-316).

4 The literature has become quite voluminous. One source should be mentioned – the collection of essays by well-known Patristic scholars on the Trinity and the church (see Anatolios 2014).

(Gunton 1997:70-71). In the past, bad theology led to bad practices. When turning to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, Gunton (1997:67) makes a crucial distinction: an emphasis on Christology tends to universalise, and one on pneumatology to particularise. He argues for two new directions in ecclesiology, namely a greater stress on the work of the Spirit, and more attention to the humanity of Christ. This will result in greater freedom, particularity, contingency in one's understanding of the church, and avoidance of a "docetic" doctrine of the church (Gunton 1997:69, 70). According to Gunton (1997:71), the being of God should be understood in terms of "personal communion". Then he addresses one of the critical and controversial tenets of a Trinitarian ecclesiology – the question of an analogy between God and church. Gunton (1997:73) explicitly states that

we should not claim such detailed knowledge of the inner constitution of the godhead that we can attempt direct and logical readings-off of that kind.

Gunton (1997:78) coins, quite constructively, the phrase "analogy of echo". This allows then a clear understanding of what the church is. The church is what it is by virtue of being called "a temporal echo of the eternal community that God is" (Gunton 1997:78). Because the church consists in the relations of the members to one another, this view of the church would have great practical import (Gunton 1997:75, 80).

Volf has acquired renown with a number of outstanding texts, one of which explores the role of the Trinity in thinking about God – *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity* (1998). He also summarised his views succinctly and most helpfully (Volf 2005). He regards it as a self-evident proposition to claim that the church as community takes its shape from the communion within the Trinity. The connection between church and Trinity is found in baptism. Because Christian initiation is a Trinitarian event, the Trinity should be considered its determining reality (Volf 2005:156). Volf is interested in the primary question as to how one should think about the correspondence between church and Trinity. When using terms such as "person", "community", and "relationship", one obviously does not think about identity, but in an analogous manner (Volf 1998:199). Ecclesial personhood corresponds to Trinitarian personhood in terms of mutual relations of giving and receiving (Volf 1998:205). In an interesting move, Volf (2005:166) stresses the limits of correspondence and dismisses that one could think of ecclesiological perichoresis, as human beings cannot be internal to one another. The unity of the church should be construed in a different – pneumatological – manner. When discussing the possibility of applying Trinitarian resources to the contentious question of church

structure, he dismisses both Roman Catholic (Ratzinger!) and Orthodox (Zizioulas!) positions. From a typical free church tradition, Volf (1998:217) advocates the “polycentric and symmetrical symmetry of the many”. Volf (1998:218) emphasises the entire local church in correspondence to the Trinity.

It may add credibility to the argument to attend briefly to some sceptical voices about the project to view the church from the perspective of the very being of God. Two expressions of such a position have been selected. Scholars such as Hunt and Sanders have also written extensively about Trinitarian developments. Having examined the Trinitarian ecclesiological proposals developed by Boff, Volf, and Zizioulas, Hunt (2005:232) concludes dismissively about such an undertaking. Her argument is based on a single observation that these scholars’ proposals correspond to their respective denominational affiliations. The train of thought in such ecclesiologies, according to Hunt (2005:232), functions merely to produce idealist views on the church. Ultimately, Hunt’s (2005:234) position is focused on the application of the Trinity to structures of the church. She clearly prefers the psychological model of the Trinity to a social one and places the notion of participation over against imitation of the social model (Hunt 2005:234).

In his critical overview, Sanders (2020:311) identifies three approaches in Trinitarian theologies of the church: those that emphasise communion, or mission, or a structural analogy. He believes that it could make sense to establish a transcendent reference in one’s definition of the church; this would pre-empt mere historicised understandings (Sanders 2020:313). He (2020:318) remains critical of both *communio* and *missio Dei* approaches, because, according to him, they stand in tension to each other, the one with a focus on the immanent, and the other with a focus on the economic Trinity. Both run the risk of a reduction to either the social or the historical. Like Hunt, he also engages with Volf’s position in conversation with Ratzinger and Zizioulas, and concludes, in similar vein as she, on a negative position whether one could deduce structural views from the Trinity. Sanders’ (2020:321) final conclusion is dismissive and minimalistic:

Ecclesiology can make limited use of the *communio* and *missio Dei* motifs, and at most a strictly chastened use of structural analogies.

The question could be raised, in all fairness, as to whether the negative views by Hunt and Sanders do not paralyse theologians in an effort to employ Trinitarian resources for reflecting about the very nature and mission of the church. To relate an ontology of the church to the identity of God goes way beyond the conventional exposition of symbols such

as people of God, and so forth. If baptism as initiation is a Trinitarian event, an exploration of the determination of the nature of the church by the triune God is a fully justified endeavour. Notions such as personhood and relationality also belong typically to the grammar of Trinitarian theology, and they are obvious entry points to the search for some kind of correspondence. Both Gunton and Volf are adequately aware of the limits of analogous thought, and the proposal to employ the metaphor of “echoing” is a fruitful attempt to maintain some form of correspondence with explicit awareness of limitation.

5. TOWARDS A TRINITARIAN ECCLESIOLOGY FROM BELOW

5.1 Perspectives on the dialectical interaction

In his proposal for an ecclesiology from below, Haight addresses theology proper in only one of the dimensions he identifies (see heading 3 above) and then replaces Christology with pneumatology as the central optic. In the examples of Trinitarian ecclesiologies given, a confessional or denominational preference is at most present, but not an engagement with sentiments in contemporary ecclesiologies such as the shifts one finds, for example, in Haight’s work. This article intends to address the weakness in both, that is to allow Trinitarian dynamics a much greater prominence in a paradigm from below, and to expand Trinitarian ecclesiology with sentiments one finds in a specific approach from below. The intellectual challenge, however, is how to approach this interaction.

A simplistic option could be to merely critique Haight for replacing Christocentrism with pneumacentrism, and to redefine his fifth dimension trinitarianly. But this will obviously not suffice. A more nuanced dialectical manoeuvre is necessary. Some form of interaction is required that allows Trinitarian resources to become operative in all of Haight’s dimensions, and to enlarge current Trinitarian ecclesiologies beyond the focus on the three major emphases identified by Sanders. This is, in all fairness and honesty, a complex argumentative undertaking.

In the process to give this dialectical interaction some shape, two prior theological perspectives should be raised. How do doctrines function? How does one do Trinitarian theology? It appears that these are essential to allow an engagement between the Trinitarian doctrine and a specific view on the church. Both these questions have attracted intricate and extensive reflection and the state of scholarship is fairly large. May it suffice to refer to two sources that address these explicitly. In a most

recent publication on the nature of Christian doctrine, McGrath (2024:11, 25) advances the position that doctrine enables “a new way for seeing” and “a new manner of living”. These performative functions are at stake in this argument. These basic convictions are given expression in the concrete suggestions below. In one of my publications (Venter 2010:567-573), I proposed that the Trinitarian symbol could function discursively in three ways: it could denote divine agency; it could suggest direction for mimesis (following an example or model), or it could be employed heuristically (that is, to solve problems). These various ways of rhetorical functioning are rarely distinguished in reflection on the Trinity. In the various approaches mentioned by Sanders’ critique earlier in the article, these could have been helpful. In an ecclesiology, when employing Trinitarian resources, one can refer to what the triune God is doing, or to how the church could echo the identity of the God it worships, or to reconcile unity and plurality with reference to divine perichoresis, all three rhetorical functions come into focus. One encounters agency, mimesis, and heuristics. In the proposal below, the views of McGrath on doctrine and my earlier work will be operative.

One particular advantage of thinking from a Trinitarian vantage point is the immense possibilities it opens for doing theology. There is a perennial reservoir of meaning that can be hermeneutically explored. When the actual act of doing Trinitarian theology is intentionally embraced and combined with an appreciation for the old Trinitarian convention of appropriation, that is ascribing unique action and associations to each one of the divine persons, whilst keeping their inseparable unity, one avails oneself of a fertile world of ideas and insight. This brings into focus the rich world of Old and New Testament traditions and a surplus of meaning that awaits exploration. This will be followed in the proposal. There will be a certain triangulation between the various functions of doctrine, the diverse discursive possibilities of trinitarian rhetoric, and the play of biblical appropriative divine associations. What will eventuate is an implicit conviction that doing theology is a hermeneutical, constructive, and imaginative practice. Thinking from a biblical and Trinitarian perspective is to have cognitive possibilities activated and challenged.

A dialectical engagement is messy and unpredictable; the continuous outcome is always, in a sense, destabilising, but primarily enriching. This may be noted in the following intimations of what a Trinitarian ecclesiology from below could be.

5.2 Coordinates for thinking church from below with Trinitarian resources

In this instance, brief suggestions should be worked out in much greater detail. To use a metaphor, these are merely “coordinates” – a play between two orientations – to situate position in an ongoing journey. They indicate the direction to be followed. Twelve coordinates will be identified and reference to sources will intentionally be kept to a minimum, considering the purview of the length of an article in a journal.

- Thinking church from the perspective of the Trinity and the scholarship, which this doctrine elicited over two centuries, brings in its train an emphatic intellectual texture. One cannot speak trinitarianly without a memory of the fundamental and intricate theological controversies and struggles of the patristic era to reflect on the nature of the divine and the personhood of Jesus in a new manner with the conceptual tools available. The recent work by Zachhuber (2020) on the rise of Christian theology and the “end of ancient metaphysics” conveys something of the intellectual feat of that era.⁵ To express that God could be one and plural, and that Jesus as person could be human and divine, required a transformation of the thought structures of the time. Haight emphasises that an ecclesiology from below should be “apologetic”, speaking to the time. A Trinitarian approach does not imply a dogmatic prescription position, but, in view of its own genesis, a radical critique and alternative to speak in, and to our time. This is closely connected with Haight’s insistence that ecclesiology must be contingent, for a specific concrete historical moment. A Trinitarian ecclesiology resists any intellectual fundamentalism and any academic compromise.
- The intellectual imperative of an ecclesiology, that is thinking the nature and mission of the church, is intrinsically the result of a theology of the first person of the Trinity – the Father. Such a theology, which is often overshadowed by Christology and pneumatology, evokes in the most radical manner a sense of transcendence and mystery. As ultimate origin of divine life and of creaturely reality, the Father is utterly incomprehensible, and is logically associated with superabundance, plenitude, and fecundity.⁶ The existence of the church should be viewed in this light as sheer gift. At the beginning of the church, one finds this transcendent element. This has several implications. The church is a community, first and foremost, of doxology; it celebrates this giftedness. On another level, this orientation to a reality that

5 See especially Chapters 2 and 3 on the Cappadocians.

6 For a good treatment of this, see Durand (2011:373, 377).

goes beyond creaturely life should create a commitment to ultimacy. Concretely, it protects the church, especially local congregations, against the perennial temptation of degenerating into bourgeoisie activities and preoccupations. The church is the space where the “big questions” of life are perennially raised and addressed, and where the temptation of succumbing to social conventions is resisted.

- A theology of the God the Father gives rise to a critical insight, namely hospitality. The God who eternally generated the Son and the Spirit (in Trinitarian language, “begets” and “proceeds”) and who welcomes community is a space-making deity. The divine life in community is the deep mystery of reality. This God, without necessity, created a cosmos to extend communion. The deepest motive for this could be construed in various ways. One way to perceive this, metaphorically, is to refer to “hospitality”.⁷ It is interesting to note that he treats this theme immediately after a discussion and as continuation of the divine attributes in a Trinitarian light. The narrative of the Christian God is not about solitude, but about alterity. The identity of the life of God bespeaks differentiation, plurality. Why is there something, and not nothing? The Christian answer to this is because God welcomes otherness. The implications for ecclesiology are obvious. As hospitable community, it should embrace otherness. In his exposition of a view of the study of the church from below, Haight places a large premium on an expansion of conventional dialogue partners. It is about the whole Christian movement, dialogue with world religions. The hospitality of the triune God not only sanctions this, but also requires this embrace of the other.
- A basic conviction of an ecclesiology from below is that it focuses on the concrete empirical church. Church is not an abstract invisible entity in a metaphysical realm. Haight insists that the church is both a historical and a theological reality. He does not argue this in terms of an ontology. The ramifications of a Trinitarian, and specifically a Christological contribution become exceedingly relevant. The incarnation of the incomprehensible God in the human Jesus from Galilee is a central conviction of the Christian faith with an immense reservoir of significance. The incarnation obviously values creation, human bodily existence in its fullness. The value of materiality acquires a strong divine appreciation with this event. The Son of God is fully human and fully divine, in one person. That was the Chalcedonian intellectual accomplishment. In a major recent study of the incarnation, the pre-eminent Anglican scholar Williams (2018:xii) argues in depth

7 For an excellent discussion, see Kärkkäinen (2014:310-340).

that the divine and the creaturely are never in “competition”. This non-competitive nature, as embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, should also inform ecclesiology. The incarnation enables one to think of this community in duality – human and trinitarianly oriented – in a unified manner. This is how an ontology of the church could be construed.

- To pre-empt theology another flight into an abstract anthropology, another perspective should be raised. This human Jesus lived in a specific time and place. Despite the many controversies of the historical Jesus research, one of the major contributions has been to study and clarify the specific social conditions of Jesus in Galilee under Roman imperial rule.⁸ This social trend in the Jesus research highlights the conflictual power conditions of his life, and includes several issues such as class conflict, economic deprivation, gender stereotypes, and even demon possession. At stake, in this instance, are multi-levelled power conflicts which Jesus had to navigate. When this reality receives the attention it deserves intellectually in a responsible Christology, it generates critical dimensions for an ecclesiology. This is absent from Haight’s proposal. An ecclesiology from below that honours the second person of the Trinity, is a public church that has a sensitive antenna for social conflict and contemporary power misuses. An ecclesiology with such a sensibility also appreciates de-colonising voices in contemporary theology, especially in Africa. This sentiment and insistence are important contributions which Trinitarian theology brings to ecclesiology.
- The kingdom’s message is a most impressive de-colonising strategy; it places God’s reign in direct opposition to Roman imperial reign. His eventual death on the cross had immeasurable implications for an empire. He became the victim of imperial power, but he revealed the final triumph of love over violence. His death gave the fabric of reality a new status – cruciformity – and it becomes an ontic reality. Authentic life is to be found in vulnerability, weakness, and kenosis. The central role a thinker such as Paul accords to cruciformity is well-known. One could refer to Gorman’s (2001) classic study on this. The Constantinian church was an aberration; the church is a community of the vulnerable. The cross is first an event in the life of the triune God before it manifests itself in the life of a community. It is the key to unlock the mystery of divine agency. What seems as impotence, as absence, is an ontic irony: in silence, the triune God is at work. The church, as vulnerable

8 For a brief and excellent orientation to the scholarship, see the recent article by Crossley (2022:248-257), who advocates a “materialist” construction of the life of Jesus in several studies.

and ironic community, is a witness of this power. An ecclesiology from below expresses this cruciform irony. Power and victory are to be found in weakness.

- The church is more than a public anti-bourgeoisie community where intellectual vibrancy, hospitality, and vulnerability are embodied and appreciated. With its “theological” or transcendent orientation, the church is the community of new, that is redeemed, people. Jesus as Messiah, the One who has accomplished salvation, is followed and worshipped. This soteriological dimension poses several complex challenges to theology. For example, questions about the scope of salvation, the intelligible contemporary translation, and the historical forms it might take all come into play. These three questions are particularly pertinent to an ecclesiology from below. For a community with a self-understanding of being transformed, what dominant metaphors do they employ for denoting that newness? What visible features do they take in their life? How do they relate to an extension of that newness to the rest of the planet, social structures, and adherents of other religions? Hermeneutical re-imaginings in terms of liberation, reconciliation, and flourishing have become fairly popular. How that translates into ecological and structural terms is not always easy to capture. The New Testament evidences a rich world of diverse metaphors to envision what Christ has done.⁹ The new appreciation for the Trinitarian confession has elicited an enthusiasm for participation imagery; people become part of the divine life. Whether that will always suffice, apologetically, is an open question. A Trinitarian optic does generate an appreciation for the cosmic (universal) scope of salvation, the immense hermeneutical metaphoric denotation possibilities, and the unpredictable movement of God beyond myopic human imagination. One finds those sensibilities in an approach that engages the roles of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, respectively.
- Apart from the death on the cross, the resurrection from the dead is another most powerful symbol associated with Christology, and that obviously has tremendous potential for thinking about the church, a church that lives cruciformly and that creates an immense dynamic of hope. The question is: Hope for what? A simplistic answer, in popular understanding, is that human beings will also be raised to eternal life. Maybe an additional nuance and association is required. The belief in resurrection has roots going back to the intertestamental period

9 For an excellent overview, see Colijn (2010).

and one primary interpretation was in terms of justice.¹⁰ As new and redeemed community, the church lives in hope that the triune God would establish a world of justice. The last book in the Christian canon, Revelation, tells this dramatic vision of a just world. Justice is not a peripheral pre-occupation of a few political hotheads. It is a fundamental value associated with the biblical God and the movement of history. An ecclesiology from below is called especially to echo the justice of the triune God in its life and public witness. It is a community of justice: its relationships, its structures, and its prophetic role should embody that.

- A trinitarianly informed ecclesiology is marked by a strong eschatological thrust. The Hebraic-Christian God is the God of the exodus and of the resurrection. The future forms part of God's very being. The Holy Spirit, in the genius of Paul's thought, is the first fruit and the deposit of that future. Something of that future is made present in the presence of the Spirit. The change Haight so often referred to should be interpreted as signs of the Spirit's activity. One could even claim that a church, which resists change and renewal, does not live in the power of the Spirit. The church does and should manifest something of the transgressive; it should go against the grain of conventional values, expectations as echo of the divine future. Rieger (2008:132) perceptively speaks about the "resistance Spirit". His context of interpretation is empire and its controlling and assimilating power. In the present world, it is imperative to be aware of new forms of imperial power and how that should be resisted (Rieger 2008:139). The "pneumatological surplus" enables human beings to embrace new ways of being persons. That applies also, and expressly, to the church.
- Closely linked to the previous perspective is the pneumatological virtue of discernment. A central tenet of an ecclesiology from below is an explicit mapping of the current times, and Haight also identified the textures of the landscape. The irony is that change is, in fact, more intense than Haight has claimed. In the 20 years since his three-volume book was published, new "namings of the present" have appeared. Post-modernity has lost most of its lure: one encounters increasingly more references to ecology and the impact of the Anthropocene, technology, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and artificial intelligence,

10 See, for example, the insightful discussion by Setzer (2001:especially 90) who argues that "[r]esurrection of the dead functions as a rhetorical powerful symbol that ... frame(s) solutions to questions of justice".

cynical theories and identity politics, and even apocalyptic times, as well as the reality of nuclear war. The need for discernment has acquired a renewed status.¹¹ The stress on the intellectual dynamics of a church from below also finds some application, in this instance. The church should be a community of “naming the present”, of discerning the movement of the Spirit. This intensifies, in a sense, Haight’s insistence on the explicit historicity of the church. The complex question is whether change is to be viewed as power/s destabilising the creation of God, or whether it could be interpreted in the dynamic unfolding of the evolutionary nature of God’s creaturely project.

- The expansion by an ecclesiology of the traditional sources of theology to include lived experience is justified and part of a much larger sentiment in cultural and intellectual life, that is, the turn to affectivity. For too long, anthropology has been kept captivated in a truncated state. The greater prominence and acknowledgement given to experience, affections, emotions, and the senses have enriched our anthropologies, but more – of theology as such. This expansive sentiment also stimulated thinking about the divine along these lines and opened new avenues for biblical interpretation. One encounters a God and a Jesus who have emotions, experiences of their relational encounters with others. In a recent major study on the Holy Spirit, Zahl (2020:see especially Chapters 1 and 2) argues for a new appreciation of experiences of the Spirit. In a trinitarian sense, these find some legitimising, but more is at play. Human experiences, affections, and senses should be viewed fundamentally as part of the dynamic of the complexity of life as gift. In an ecclesiology from below, a space should be created for the expression of the spectrum of these gifts, whether it is trauma, exhilaration, melancholia, or resilience. They can be healed or celebrated as part of the fullness of a life given by a God of fullness.
- Apart from the first perspective, the previous ten are all primarily linked to the Father, Son, and Spirit as expression of the so-called appropriation convention in Trinitarian thought. They express something polyphonic of the splendour of the life of the three persons. But the glory of divine life in unity should also be expressed. Maybe one should conclude and name an ecclesiology from below a community of love, as the unity of God keeps it all together. The narrative of the divine life and of the triune God with creation are stories of love. Divine plenitude pluralises,

11 For a discussion of the contours of discernment and the suggestion of “heuristic categories” for interpreting the work of the Spirit, see Venter (2012:378-386).

while simultaneously intensifying coherence and unity. The deepest mystery of divine and creaturely realities is arguably found in love as interpersonal relationship.¹² Love is the grammar of Trinitarian life; it is the grammar of ecclesial life, and it should be the grammar of all social life. The church should echo that.

6. CONCLUSION

Both the shift to an approach from below in ecclesiology and the renewed appreciation of the Trinitarian confession have been constructive theological developments. This article indicated that a dialectical interaction could enrich a view on the church, and that existing Trinitarian ecclesologies can be expanded by attending to a specific model from below. One could conclude that Haight's proposal should be developed in a consistent Trinitarian manner, and that existing Trinitarian ecclesologies should be envisioned from below. The major contribution could be that one should rather talk about a "Trinitarian ecclesiology from below". To approach an ecclesiology from the avenues of the appropriation tradition – that is considering patrological, Christological, and pneumatological views, respectively – takes reflection beyond the existing foci on communion, *missio Dei*, and structures. The 12 identified coordinates create a rich and textured vision for the church. The perspectives of intellectual vibrancy, the focus on ultimacy, hospitality, publicality, vulnerability, justice, transgression, discernment, affectivity, and love could profile a vision of the church for our time. The article also showed that, on a fundamental level, the incarnation enables an understanding that could integrate the theological and empirical dimensions meaningfully. The proposal also holds together an emphasis on divine and human agency. It speaks implicitly of ontology and of ethics – what the triune God has done and is doing, and what the church must accomplish. Such a vision of the church could be appealing as it echoes the splendour of the triune God.

12 For an excellent discussion of the various interpretations of love, see Vanhoozer (2001: especially 2).

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