

We believe in the Holy Spirit... the Holy Catholic Church

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Introduction

‘The clauses on the Church ...follow from belief in the Holy Spirit, for the *holy* church is the fruit of the *Holy Spirit*...If we believe in the Holy Spirit, we also believe in the existence of one Church in the one Spirit’.¹

Contemporary social ontology and ecclesiology

- Groups appear to be responsible for oil spills, financial crashes and the rise of xenophobia in ways which don’t reduce straightforwardly to individual actions.
- Recent work on the metaphysics of groups has attempted to make sense of these intuitions.²
- Why think this literature might be helpful for theology? Consider the following remark from a sermon on John 17 by Johann Blumhardt, which I think highlights the need for a clearer social ontology:

Do we as Jesus’ disciples really want to become one? ... We must find a way where what you believe I believe and what I believe you believe. For the Lord says in his prayer, “I have given them glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.” What is this glory given to him which he passed on to his disciples? ...Jesus emphatically promises to give his disciples the Holy Spirit: the Comforter, the guide to all truth, and the One who will unite them. Without this Spirit, they could not become one.³

¹ Torrance, TF. 2016. *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical theology of the ancient Catholic church*. (T&T Clark), 252

² See Deborah Tollefsen’s *Groups as Agents* (Polity Press, 2015) for a good overview of this literature.

³ *Gospel Sermons* (Plough Publishing House, 2019), 86.

- Some terminology from social ontology:

Coalition: A group with a shared goal, but without a joint decision-making procedure. For example, ‘environmentalists’, ‘the oil lobby’, ‘democracy-promoting states’, ‘conservatives’⁴

Combination: a group ‘constituted by agents who do not together constitute a coalition or a collective. Examples of combinations include “men” (since common advantage does not suffice for a common goal), “humanity”, “the international community”, “the people in this pub”, and “me, you, and Shakespeare”⁵

Collective: a group ‘constituted by agents that are united under a rationally operated group-level decision-making procedure that can attend to moral considerations.’⁶ E.g. The British government is constituted by the ministers of the cabinet, who, through a series of group-decision making procedure, deliberate on the ‘best’ course of action for the country.

- On Blumhardt’s (or something similar) position, the church is thought of as a coalition.
- This way of thinking about the church is problematic; in Tom Greggs’ words: “The being of the church is not held in the particular contingent phenomena of the church’s forms; the being of the church is held in the constancy of the Holy Spirit.”⁷
- How are collectives united?
- Christian List and Philip Pettit, for instance, hold that a group agent must have the capacity to form ‘representational states, motivational states, and a capacity to act on their basis.’⁸ Moreover, it must do so in a way which meets some basic standard of rationality.

⁴ *Group Duties* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 16.

⁵ *Group Duties*, 20.

⁶ *Group Duties*, 12

⁷ *Group Duties*, 19.

⁸ *Group Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 20

- For List and Pettit, ‘to count as an agent, a group must exhibit at least a modicum of rationality. And so, its members must find a form of organization that ensures, as far as possible, that the group satisfies attitude-to-fact, attitude-to-action, and attitude-to-attitude standards of rationality’.⁹
- Some possibilities for meeting these criteria without voting procedures, etc...:

Honey Bees: ‘bees can combine, on the basis of simple signals, so as to perform as a group agent’.¹⁰ While no single bee has this complex level of decision making by itself, the swarm as a whole has ‘impressive powers of decision making, especially with respect to simultaneous-option decisions’.¹¹ ‘It is harder to imagine, though not conceptually impossible, that nature or culture could work to a similar effect on human beings eliciting, coalescent agents’.¹²

Terrorist cells: Think of the cellular organization by which, so we are told, many terrorist organizations have operated. We can imagine that a cellular network may be established for the promotion of some goals, without those recruited to the different cellular tasks being aware of the overall purpose; they

⁹ *Group Agency*, 36. Similarly, according to Stephanie Collins, there are three individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for holding a decision-making procedure to be group-level:

1. ‘each member is committed (even if only tacitly) to abide by the procedure’s results. This commitment can be overridden, but is presumptively decisive in the member’s decision-making’ (*Group Duties*, 12)
2. ‘the beliefs and preferences that the procedure takes as inputs, and the way the procedure processes those inputs to form decisions, systematically derive from the behaviour (e.g. deference, votes, meetings, contributions, etc) of members, while be *operationally distinct* from the inputs and processes that any member uses when deciding for herself’ (*Group Duties*, 13)
3. ‘the enactment of the group’s decisions requires actions on the part of its members, where those actions are also properly understood as attributable to the collective’ (*Group Duties*, 14)

¹⁰ Thomas Seeley, ‘Decision Making in Superorganisms: How Collective Wisdom Arises from the Poorly Informed Masses.’ In *Bound Rationality: The Adaptive Toolbook*, edited by Gerd Gigerenzer and Reinhard Selten (MIT Press, 2001)

¹¹ Seeley, ‘Decision Making in Superorganisms’, 249.

¹² *Group Agency*, 33.

may be kept in the dark or even deceived about it. The organization would be composed of a group of people, in perhaps a thin sense of group, and would function as an agent. But it would do so without joint intention among its members, with the possible exception of a few coordinators.¹³

- While these examples might have some insights for thinking about how individuals relate to the church, the work of the Spirit can act as a kind of black box for unity in these cases.

The social ontology of dictatorships

- As soon as we begin to specify the role of the co-opting agent in the previous examples, we are met with the difficulty of explaining how the whole derives its unity from one individual while retaining a truly *social* ontology.
- Consider a parallel case in List and Pettit's remarks on the nature of dictatorships:

Although some group agents may exist by virtue of the authorization of an individual spokesperson, this case is degenerate, since everything the recognition of such a group agent entails is already expressible in an individual-level language. ... The realism appropriate in relation to this kind of group agent is a thin and relatively redundant one.¹⁴

- This concern can be circumvented by thinking more broadly about what counts as a group agent. Consider an example from Stephanie Collins which can help illustrate:

Collective Rescue. There are six strangers at the beach. One is drowning and the others are sunbathing. Each sunbather has the goal that the swimmer be rescued, each believes that every sunbather has this goal (and each therefore believes each has prudential reason to do what they can towards this), and each is disposed to act responsively to the others (insofar as they encounter one another) to realize the goal. All of this happens

¹³ *Group Agency*, 33. I consider these two examples in 'Analytic Ecclesiology'.

¹⁴ *Group Agency*, 7-8.

via their exchange of concerned expressions...Each sunbather is wholly unknowledgeable about rescuing swimmers—except Laura. All see the drowning, but only Laura knows what any of the required individual actions are. Thankfully, Laura knows what *all* the required actions are. Laura asks if any of the others know what to do and receives puzzled looks in response. So she starts instructing one to drag the boat, one to pull the starter cord, and so on. At each instruction, Laura checks that the relevant beachgoer is willing and able to follow the instruction. Each commits (if only tacitly) to follow her instructions and each supposes the others have too. Laura’s instructions divide the necessary actions among the sunbathers. Each performs the action that Laura instructs him or her to perform, because Laura has instructed it. The swimmer ceases drowning.¹⁵

- On this account, ‘the decision-procedure is group-level (and not merely Laura-level) in that the beliefs and desires that Laura takes as inputs when she is deciding for the group are different from the beliefs and desires that she would take as inputs if she were deciding for herself.’¹⁶
- Put simply, while ‘The group’s attitudes...fully track Laura’s attitudes...this is only true of Laura’s attitudes *qua* leader.’¹⁷
- On Collins’ more permissive account of social ontology, all that is needed to give a non-redundant group ontology of a dictatorship is that, ‘Non-decision making members (i) are committed to the procedure and (ii) have inputs into the procedure, at last [sic] in the minimal sense that they could leave if they wanted to’.¹⁸

A benevolent dictator? Group agency in the one Spirit

- Collins’ picture of collective ontology in which decision-making is rooted in the decision-making of one individual helps to focus our ontology of the church away from the members of the church and onto the agency of the Holy Spirit, but contrary to List and Pettit’s

¹⁵ *Group Duties*, 108-109.

¹⁶ *Group Duties*, 167-169.

¹⁷ *Group Duties*, 167-169.

¹⁸ *Group Duties*, 166.

concerns, it does so in a way which allows us to distinguish between the agency of the Spirit in the church and the agency of the Spirit more generally.

- A collective ontology rooted in the will of a single decision-making person, the Holy Spirit, emphasises that unity is not equivalent with shared beliefs or shared actions, but only arises through the agency of the Spirit.
- A worry...does it dispense with community and the gathered worship of the institutional church and her sacraments altogether?
- While the church must be thought of grounded in the work of the Spirit, we must still note that it through a community of word, sacrament and fellowship in the which Spirit moves. The community is vital for revealing the will of the Spirit to the church.¹⁹
- Some reflections on why the community of the church might be especially important for playing this role...
- David Efird and I have argued that an engagement with God in community has potential to provide a richer and deeper experience of God's presence than one might encounter alone.
- John Campbell on mutual-object perception:

[T]he individual experiential state you are in, when you and another are jointly attending to something, is an experiential state that you could not be in were it not for the other person attending to the object. The other person enters into your experience as a constituent of it, as co-attender, and the other person could not play that role in your experience except by being co-attender.²⁰

- Just a driver's attention to the road is shaped by a passenger, our experience of God's presence in the context of communal worship

¹⁹ Gregg continues, "This community is so vital, since, 'the individual is not already free; sin continues in the life of the church as in all creation....But in the concrete givenness of the other is the gift of the Spirit of God—a gift which leads us to our true identity in God' *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, 44

²⁰ Campbell, ". "Joint Attention and Common Knowledge", in *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds*, edited by Naomi Elian, Christoph Hoerl, Teresa McCormack, and Johannes Roessler, (Clarendon Press), 287.

can allows others to point or direct our attention to God in ways which would simply not be possible alone.