

# Introduction

IN THE CONCLUSION TO his study *Structures of the Church*, Hans Küng set as a task for modern theology the reexamination of the original meaning of the ecclesial structures:

There have been times in the history of the Church when it was theology's task to establish the structures of the Church. The task was a necessary one. Today the task of theology should be to lay bare the original structures that have been covered over in the changes wrought by time. This too is a necessary task.<sup>1</sup>

The main task of this book is to lay bare the structures that define the life of the eastern churches nowadays. In pursuing this goal, I apply techniques of the critical theory, particularly as they have been employed in structuralism and poststructuralism. I believe these techniques are applicable to the church insofar as it is not only transcendental but is also a social phenomenon, with administrative and ministerial structures. I distinguish the *nature* of the church and its *structures*. My critical assessment targets primarily the latter. This does not mean that the nature of the church cannot be critiqued, provided it comprises the human and social elements in it. Nevertheless, distinguishing between the nature and the structures of the church allows me to make criticism more pointed.

The goal of the book is not so much to critically assess the most recent scholarship on particular church structures, as to explain the mechanisms behind the evolution and interaction of these structures. In some sense, I follow Avery Dulles in constructing ecclesiological models.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to Cardinal Dulles, however, I propose models not of the church

1. Küng, *Structures of the Church*, 352.
2. Dulles, *Models of the Church*.

## 2 Scaffolds of the Church

as such, but of ecclesial structures. My hope is to present through these models a dynamic picture of how the structures of the church emerged for good reasons, often became abused and failed, and eventually were either abandoned or reinvented. At every stage of their evolution, they have had the potential to turn toxic for the body of the church. At the same time, they should not be stigmatized because of this potential, but should be viewed as capable of being restored to their original meaning and purpose.

I present the ecclesial structures through the semiotics of different kinds of borderlines and edifices: partition walls, ditches, strongholds, pyramids, and strata. These images reveal the characteristic features, the strong and weak points of the ecclesial institutions—supra-communal administrative structures (dioceses, metropolises, patriarchates), canonical territory, autocephaly, primacy, and ministry—which are central to the Orthodox churches' relations with one another and with other churches. I narrow the scope of study to the eastern Christianity, because critical analysis of its structures is practically missing in the modern scholarship.

The book begins with the propaedeutic image of fine lines drawn by a pencil on a piece of paper. This image illustrates the distinctions between the church as it appears and as it is in effect, between the church as it is perceived to be for everyone and as it is for the elect only. These contrasts are imagined, not real. They are often caused by a bipolar worldview that tends to see the world and the church in the terms of profane and sacred, black and white. Such a worldview, despite its speculative character, often contributes to real divisions in the body of Christ. Also a schematic distinction between the church universal and particular, when abused, can be divisive. Thus, exaggerations of universalism in the western church provoked the great schism in the eleventh century. Particularisms of the eastern churches draw them to nationalism and recently led to the difficulties that the much-awaited Panorthodox council experienced. These are illustrations of how the ecclesial structures can act against the nature of the church, causing tensions and disagreements in it.

Initially, however, the structures of the church were designed to contain tensions and disagreements. In accordance with the classical definition of social structures, they were supposed to correct the behavior of those who subscribed to them.<sup>3</sup> In reality, however, the patterns

3. "The social factors that are held to influence our behaviour are known as social structure." Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 1.

of behavior often changed the rationale and functionality of the church structures.

The fine pencil lines made up blueprints for building real things capable of both uniting and dividing the church. Let us take, for example, the evolution of the administrative structures of the church, which are presented here by the image of partition walls. Partition walls organize the space within a house to facilitate its inhabitants' communication and peaceful coexistence. At the same time, they can alienate the inhabitants from each other and encapsulate hostility. So also in the church: its administrative and territorial borders have both served and damaged the communal life of the Christians. Their gradual evolution has demonstrated an innate ambivalence.

Initially, the Christian communities were largely independent from each other. They did not have to give account to one another, unless they chose to do so. However, very soon the communities faced problems that they were unable to solve on their own. This was particularly the case when they had to pass judgment on their leaders or to install new ones. These two problems constituted the main driving force for the development of supra-communal structures. Such structures were intended to serve the communities and to help them develop with as few hindrances as possible. In contrast to the communities themselves, these structures were "virtual": they emerged as an additional function bestowed on chosen communities by other communities. Supra-communal structures evolved in several stages, which are presented in this book as the models of neighborhood, metropolis, diocese, patriarchate, pentarchy, monarchy, *millet*, and nation.

Neighborhood was the earliest and the most egalitarian model of arranging the relations between different communities. According to it, the problems of a community were solved with assistance of nearby communities. Any community could ask its neighbors for help and any community could be asked for help in return. This principle secured the ethos of equality which the church had inherited from the apostolic times. I argue that equality or even kenotic anti-hierarchy are foundational for the church and constitute the properties of its very nature.

The principle of hierarchy, in contrast, can be *useful*, but is *not essential* for the church. It was implemented for the first time in the metropolitan system, which succeeded the neighborhood model. This happened when the network of the Christian communities became more widely distributed and more complex. Some communities were entrusted with

the permanent privilege of arranging matters for other communities. The main criterion by which communities were chosen for this role was their location in the important urban centers of the Roman Empire: metropolises.

The metropolitan system underwent further modifications in the diocesan (based on the grid of the Roman civil *dioecesaes*) and patriarchal models. The latter became the most viable. Many elements of it, including the name, have survived until our days. By the end of Late Antiquity, the patriarchates composed a network, which later would be called “pentarchy” (“the rule of five”). This network allowed them to take *ad hoc* decisions related to the entire church. As the Middle Ages advanced, the two most prominent patriarchates, Rome and Constantinople, turned into a kind of monarchies, and the whole of Christendom became focused and dependent on one or the other. The rise of the monarchical model in the church led to the schism between the East and the West. It also imposed uniformity and intensified stratification in the church.

Ottoman rule created a new model of administrative structure in the eastern church based on social groupings with diverse cultural backgrounds but the same religious identity. They were called in the beginning *tâ'ifse* and later *millet*. The Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire was organized to a single *millet-i Rum*, with one head, *millet başı*, who was the patriarch of Constantinople. The sultans endowed the patriarchs of Constantinople with unprecedented ecclesial and political control over the Orthodox in the empire, which led to a further decline in the authority of the other eastern patriarchates and a strengthening of the monarchy of the *millet başı*. Simultaneously, the circumstances of Ottoman rule forced the eastern churches to realign more closely with their communities. Communities became important in the church again. As a result, the Ottoman period turned out to be no less effective—if not indeed more effective—than the Byzantine period in the formation of modern eastern church structures.

The process of the emancipation of the hierarchical structures continued when the new national states emerged from the collapsing Ottoman Empire. Enlightenment ideas of national statehood were adopted by the majority of the eastern churches, and led them to redesign the partition walls between them. National identity has played a key role in this model, which remains dominant even now under the guise of the model of patriarchate. In most cases, modern patriarchates are ethnic churches that promote nationalistic ideology and give it sacred forms.

Their primates play the role of ethnarchs and take care that the people remain faithful to the modern identity of nation.

All administrative models were supposed to safeguard the integrity of the church. Each of them was only partially successful in achieving this goal and had its shortcomings. Thus, the metropolitan model facilitated the spread of Arianism. The patriarchal model led to the schism between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches. The monarchical model caused another great schism—between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic. The *millet* model infected the church with unprecedented corruption. Finally, the national model has brought nationalism to the church.

This story of the supra-communal structures separated by partition walls clearly demonstrates the ambivalence of these structures. What originated as a means of unity often became a means of separation and had to be redesigned. These structures also caused changes in theoretical ideas about the church and its properties. Thus, the partition walls led the church to refocus from community to territory. The principle of territorial sovereignty became important in the church and was embodied in the notion of “canonical territory.” As a term, “canonical territory” is a recent invention, but as a principle of the church’s organization it extends back before the age of Constantine. Borderlines demarcating canonical territories are illustrated in the book by the metaphor of ditches, features that once protected the Roman frontiers. They served, however, not to lock up already possessed lands, but as platforms for further limitless expansion of the *Pax Romana*. So it was with the early church, whose earliest territorial structures did not impede its worldwide mission. Both the Roman state and the Christian church changed their attitude to territory when they refocused from furthering their influence beyond their temporal borders to protecting what they already held. Territory became a thing of value in itself, over which medieval states and churches fought. Church battles over territory contributed to the schism between Rome and Constantinople.

The Peace of Westphalia in the seventeenth century created a new philosophy of territory with state sovereignty at its cornerstone. The Orthodox churches embraced this philosophy. It is difficult to say whether they were aware about its western roots. Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), a conservative Catholic and ambassador of the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia to Russia, who was a proponent of the sovereignty of the Catholic

church, might have planted the seed of this philosophy to the Orthodox soil.<sup>4</sup> Whatever is the story of the transmission of the western ideas of sovereignty to the eastern churches, in their relations with each other, they began behaving like sovereign political entities. The principles of the Peace of Westphalia, although they are outdated in international relations now, still define the Orthodox churches' attitudes to the "diaspora" and the "canonical territory." In line with these principles, the idea of "diaspora" remains a rudiment of the colonial mentality in the post-colonial era.<sup>5</sup>

It is as ditches surrounding strongholds that we can best illustrate the institution of autocephaly. This is an ancient structure which goes back to the time of the council of Ephesus (431) and even earlier, when congregations were not yet organized into established supra-communal structures and were, in effect, autocephalous. With the passage of time, however, supra-communal structures borrowed the understanding of autocephaly from communities. Autocephaly in its early supra-communal form, supported by the council of Ephesus (431), served as an instrument to secure church independence from the state. It was, in some sense, counter-cultural. During the Middle Ages, it reversed, becoming an attribute of statelike political status and an instrument of *transitio imperii* from Constantinople to the new Slavic empires. In the nineteenth century, it became a token of the cultural and ethnic maturity of a people. In the twentieth century, it was a symbol of struggles for decolonization, an instrument of the deconstruction of the imperial projects. These transformations of the institution of autocephaly are illustrated in this book with the cases of the Orthodox churches of Bulgaria, Serbia, Moscow, Greece, Ukraine, and in the United States. Autocephaly is an example of a church structure that was reinvented several times during its evolution. In different periods it meant different—sometimes opposite—things, but always under the same name. Instead of abandoning it altogether, the church chose to recast it. This is because autocephaly appeared to be helpful in protecting the rights and privileges of the local churches, turning them into strongholds.

The rise of patriarchates, in combination with the structures of canonical territory and autocephaly, made primacy a pivotal issue of inter-church relations. Primacy is the most-discussed topic in the

4. See Miltchyna, "Joseph de Maistre's Works in Russia," 241–70; DeVille, "Sovereignty, Politics, and the Church," 366–89.

5. See Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou, "Orthodox Naming of the Other," 1–22.

Orthodox-Catholic dialogue,<sup>6</sup> and one of the most troublesome issues in the relations between the Orthodox churches. Unlike other issues that are discussed between and within the churches, it is the one that goes far beyond the formal rhetoric and hits a raw nerve in the church. It is the issue which must be solved if we want to make real steps towards Christian unity and to sustain the unity within the families of the churches that participate in the dialogue. At the same time, it is the hardest one to reach an agreement upon.

Everyone in the dialogue agrees that primacy is important in the life of the church. Everyone also agrees that it should be balanced by conciliarity.<sup>7</sup> Only a balanced primacy can be healthy. The difference between healthy and unhealthy primacies can be illustrated through the theory of social hierarchical pyramids. According to this idea, there are on the one hand productive hierarchies,<sup>8</sup> which facilitate complex organizations, such as universities or governments, in organizing their work. These hierarchies function in a constructive way. On the other hand, there are so-called dominance hierarchies,<sup>9</sup> which emerge from the struggle for access to limited resources. These primacies are oppressive. The same distinction is applicable to the church, where only productive hierarchies can facilitate the restoration and sustainability of unity. There are, however, also dominance hierarchies in the church, which are often confused with productive hierarchies and perceived as divinely established structures.

Although hierarchy is commonly understood as a super-structure that encompasses other ecclesial structures, this book argues that it cannot be associated with the nature of the church any more than any other structure. Otherwise, the hierarchical principle would come to clash existentially with the dictum of Christ, who, in response to the dispute among his disciples about who would be regarded greater in his kingdom, said: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ Not so with you; instead the one who is greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves” (Luke 22:25–26). The early Christian ethos stemmed from the equality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Incarnation provided an even more radical premise for Christian egalitarianism:

6. See Küng, *Structures of the Church*, ix.

7. See Weisgerber, “Primacy and Collegiality,” 696–99.

8. See Rubin, “Hierarchy,” 259–79.

9. See Sidanius and Pratto, *Social Dominance*.

the fact that the supreme God became a humble human in a God-forgotten corner of the world and preferred to associate himself with the lowest social class was received as a powerful message that Christianity was different from the social and religious hierarchies of the world around. Therefore, the ranks of prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, givers of support, interpreters of tongues (1 Cor 12), admonishers, benefactors, and those who show mercy (Rom 12:6–8) reflected the multiple gifts of the Spirit and not positions in the church “hierarchy.”

Nevertheless, as soon as the initial Jesus movement expanded and embraced more pieces of the Greco-Roman world, Christian ministry increasingly adopted its features. This world was structured hierarchically,<sup>10</sup> which also affected the Christian communities coming in contact with it. Hierarchization of the church, however, was not like an infection contracted from a diseased organism, that is, a lose-lose situation. It was a lose-win situation. On the one hand, the church compromised its initial egalitarian ethos. On the other hand, it realized the potential of hierarchical models to address problems it faced, such as defining procedures for admission to and expulsion from the community, regulating the balance between the integrity of communities and the variety of charismatic gifts, and maintaining coherence in relations between the expanding communities. Ignatius of Antioch implied these problems when suggesting that the ministry of *episkopos* play a key role in resolving them:

You should act in accord with bishop’s mind, as you surely do. Your presbytery, indeed which deserves its name and is a credit to God, is as closely tied to the bishop as the strings to a harp. Wherefore your accord and harmonious love is a hymn to Jesus Christ. Yes, one and all, you should form yourselves into a choir, so that, in perfect harmony and taking your pitch from God, you may sing in unison and with one voice to the Father through Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Ignatius became an advocate for mono-episcopacy as a new instrument for securing the integrity of ecclesial communities and harmony in relations between them. This instrument was not the only possible one, and it was certainly not the most perfect, but it turned out to be the most effective in addressing the problems of the church at the time. As a

10. See Eckstein, *Rome Enters the Greek East*, 342; Haldon, “The Byzantine Successor State,” 8.

11. *Ephesians* (CPG 1025) 4, in Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 89.

result, the church gradually embraced mono-episcopacy, which eventually became central to its life and the basis for subsequent hierarchical structures.

The downside of the convenience of hierarchy was a transformation in the ethos of ministry from a servant duty to a privilege. Hierarchy came to replace the early Christian egalitarianism and ministers became “hierarchs.” They turned into an *ordo clericorum*, a distinct ecclesial *stratum* or class departing from the “laity.” As a result, the laity emerged as a separate category, and this category was regarded as inferior to the clergy. The church became stratified. The image of geological strata is employed in the book to illustrate the hierarchical structure of ministry. They are layers of rocks and soil, consistent within the same stratum, but different from those above and below. What is important about this image is how the elements of different strata come from the same source: volcanic or other geological activity. Only with the passage of time did elements of the church form into hierarchical structures and become separated from each other. They look as if they were always like that, but they were not: there was time in the history of the church when there were no hierarchical strata.

A hypothesis of this book is that the formation of administrative structures in the church increased the distance between ordained clergy and laity. Indeed, the growth of administrative institutions helped to intensify divisions between ecclesial strata. The church, with its stratified clergy and laity, turned into a pyramid. The top of this pyramid claimed exclusive rights to be associated with the church proper, thereby contributing to the secularization of the bottom part: laypeople, told for centuries that they were not quite the church, one day decided to accept this idea and dissociated themselves from the church. The church, in result, was left to those at the top who had appropriated the ecclesial identity for themselves.

Another hypothesis of the book is that the development of the internal borderlines in the church strengthened its imagined external boundaries. The boundaries of the church are projections of its administrative structures. As a result, the church passed from the idea of local strongholds to perceiving itself as a universal stronghold surrounded by non-church. To correct this mistake and differentiate the internal and external borderlines of the church, the book employs the metaphor of frontiers, which is applicable to the boundaries of the church more than any other metaphor explored here. The argument of this book is that it is

impossible to draw a clear line between the church and the non-church. The rationale of a frontier is not to protect the territory inside, but to expand and to cover as much uncultivated land as possible. This metaphor relates to the dynamism of mission, which constitutes an intrinsic feature of the nature of the church.

The conclusion of the book is that all of the church's borderlines are ambivalent. On the one hand, they are helpful in organizing church life, making it more manageable, and protecting the integrity of the church. On the other hand, they can cause tensions within the church and even lead to schisms. This happens when they turn to different sorts of *-isms*: hierarchism, institutionalism, ecclesiocentrism, *etc.* These and other *-isms* falsify the church and function in the capacity of ideology, to use a term from critical theory.<sup>12</sup> In poststructuralist parlance, they turn the structures of the church into simulacra. The book concludes with an experiment, attempting to speak about the structures of the church in the language of structuralism and poststructuralism. This language is helpful in the critical assessment of these structures. At the same time, it protects the church itself from accusations that are properly addressed to the ecclesial structures. It is therefore a liberating language, capable of correcting the ecclesiological *-isms* and of making the structures coherent with the mission and nature of the church.

12. See Bailey, *Critical Theory and the Sociology of Knowledge*.