

Research Article

Rut Björkman's Spiritual Critique of the Church as an Impetus for a New Ecclesiology

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Abstract

This text investigates the nature and concept of the Church through the dialectical tension between individual religious experience and institutional social structures, engaging critically with Rut Björkman's spiritual critique. The analysis initially categorizes ecclesiological frameworks into two distinct foundational approaches. Bottom-Up Theories view the Church as an abstract, adaptable social entity emerging from the collective historical interactions of individual believers. Top-Down Theories emphasize primary divine agency, grounding the Church in a transcendent origin and an enduring, normative organizational structure. Furthermore, the text distinguishes factual diversity (*plurality*) from relativizing ideology (*pluralism*), as represented in the Pluralist Theology of Religions (PTR). PTR explicitly rejects the unique hypostatic union of Christ, level-setting doctrinal content to a non-binding universal religion. In contrast to exclusivist models, sacramental mediation envisions the Church as a participatory partner in Christ's work. At the center of the inquiry is Rut Björkman's spiritual critique, which strongly targets institutionalized top-down ecclesiology and dogmatic restrictions. Björkman denies the unique incarnation and divine sonship of Jesus, viewing him instead as one exemplar among many who discovered the "Creator Spirit" in creation. She asserts that dogmas and doctrines obscure inner human access to the divine source, playing historical tradition against Jesus. In her view, redemptive power lies not in "faith in Jesus"-which she argues divides humanity-but in "believing like Jesus," thereby awakening the hidden divine power within every human being.

Keywords

Bottom-Up Ecclesiology, Top-Down Ecclesiology, New Being in Christ, Pluralist Theology of Religions (PTR), Hypostatic Union, Communio Sanctorum, Critique of Dogma

1. The Concept of the Church

Before examining the critique of the Church, its object-namely, the concept of the Church-will be briefly outlined. Once what is meant by "Church" is understood, any critique directed against it can be constructively received. In this regard, there are varying determinations of what constitutes the "Church."

Fundamentally, when defining the concept of the Church, one can distinguish between a "bottom-up" and a "top-down" understanding-depending on whether the Church itself is regarded as a "worldly thing" (*ein weltlich Ding*, in reference to Luther's understanding of the sacrament of marriage [1]) or as being of transcendent origin [2, 3]:

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1) *"Bottom-Up" Theories*: These theories view the Church as an abstract entity emerging from the collective interaction of individual subjects of faith [2, 58, 59]. How the emergence of the Church unfolds in concrete historical terms remains an open question. Consequently, no ecclesio-political constitution or specific self-understanding is set in stone; rather, it remains adaptable and subject to revision according to situational contexts.

2) *"Top-Down" Theories*: These theories, on the other hand, emphasize divine agency-acting, as it were, as the central organizing principle amidst the creative chaos of interacting individual believers [3, 20, 56]. Here, God is and remains the primary agent and orderer, which limits the believers' authority to shape the concrete institutional constitution of the Church.

In any case, "Church" is an abstract concept used to designate a collective of individuals (consisting of at least two or more); therefore, ontologically speaking, the "Church" possesses a different kind of reality than the individuals themselves. "Church" is thus understood either-bottom-up-as a community of like-minded individuals emerging from their mutual interaction [2, 58], or-top-down-as a "new covenant" postulated in a Judeo-Christian sense, variously designated as the mystical "Body of Christ," as the eschatological "People of God" (as in *Lumen Gentium* [4]), and ultimately as the "Temple of the Holy Spirit" [4, 46, 60].

Is the Church, understood in this manner, unique, or are there an arbitrary number of churches? Here, the concept of pluralism must be distinguished from that of plurality: Pluralism denotes the arbitrariness, relativity and indifference of all religious communities, whereas plurality refers to the factual diversity of communities of faith [5, 6, 57]. Plural ecclesiological models thus emphasize the unity of the "one" Church "for all" in various forms. Pluralistic models, on the other hand, postulate the equivalence of doctrinal contents and thereby level their substantive core, leaving behind only a rudimentary "least common multiple" in the sense of a vague universal religion [5, 9, 10].

How does the Church view itself in relation to other faith communities? Here, a distinction is made between exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist models [7, 48]. However, this approach hardly considers the (bottom-up) foundational pillar of the collective "Church"-the faith of the individual-as a criterion.

From this, various 'essential determinations' of the Church are derived:

1) *Reductionist models*: These identify the Church with its historical or sociological genesis, thereby focusing on history and change. Examples of reductionist models include national-church concepts such as Jansenism in 17th- and 18th-century France, which prioritizes national-political interests in defining what the Church is [8], or other national-church frameworks, as well as anthropological and transcendental reductions of the Church.

2) *Pluralist Theology of Religions (=PTR)*: Following concepts in the philosophy of religion, the thesis of the aforementioned PTR posits that a diversity of subjective divine revelations corresponds to a diversity of human soteriological responses, thereby rejecting the absolute claim of the Catholic Church [9] and reducing Christology to a symbol of divine activity [47]. "The divine object of experience is unlimited, whereas the human subject of experience and its conceptual apparatus are limited" [10].

PTR denies the uniqueness of Jesus's mediation of salvation as well as his divine-human nature: accordingly, God is not capable of incarnation in the sense of the hypostatic union [10, 44, 45], nor is He knowable with regard to His being or His will; hence, there exists a plurality of equally valid and equally (non-) essential paths to salvation across all religions. The Catholic Church's self-understanding, however, is that it constitutes the only secure "path to salvation"-otherwise, only individual "elements of salvation" are recognized [4, 11].

PTR frameworks begin with Christology and draw their conclusions for ecclesiology from it: "From ecclesiocentrism and Christocentrism to theocentrism and soteriocentrism" [12]. The most prominent proponent of PTR-alongside Leonard Swidler [13], Paul F. Knitter [12], Schubert Ogden (b. 1928) [14], Alvin Plantinga [15], and Richard Swinburne (b. 1934) [16]-is John Hick (b. 1922) [10]: he proceeds from a subjective religious experience of the "eternally One" or the "divine noumenon" in order to infer, from the diversity of religious experiences, the diversity of religions and religious communities. What all religious experiences are said to have in common is a primal religious experience, which alone is capable of establishing social consensus [10]. The Church thus becomes a non-binding association of shared conviction and expression within a single universal religion.

1) *Ecclesial Absolutism*: This refers to the aforementioned exclusivist model of the Church, outside whose visible form-following Cyprian-no salvation exists [17]. The mystical Body of Christ is completely identified with visible membership in the Church.

2) *The So-Called "Church of the Spirit"*: By contrast, only the invisible Church is recognized here, attributed to the operation of the Spirit-who can blow and work anywhere-within the individual [18, 19, 62]. Only the individual is, strictly speaking, a "temple of the Holy Spirit", a reality manifested in the selfless mutual care and fellowship of the ecclesial community. Here, the objectifiable sacramental-theological and eschatological characterization of the Church as the "People of God" in the sense of a "supernatural" work of grace risks disappearing.

3) *Analogous Mediation*: According to this view, the Church is a sacramental mediator of salvation in the sense of a "participatory mediation (a) in relation to the mediation of Christ and (b) in relation to the Trinitarian economy of salvation" [20, 21]. The Church is grounded

"top-down," such that the initiation of the Church originates from God, whereas its historically developed realization is the (bottom-up) product of a responsive Church in perpetual dialogue between believers and God [20, 49, 50]. If the eternal covenant between the Church and God is not lived out in an existential-dialogical manner, then the Church is simply no longer realized. Human dialogical existence is hereby sacramentally mediated.

2. Rut Björkman's Spiritual Critique of the Church

When Rut Björkman's critique of the Church is addressed below, it becomes clear that it is directed against a "top-down" understanding of the Church [23, 24]. For her, too, the origin of this critique lies in a relativization of the person and being of Jesus, insofar as the uniqueness of Jesus's incarnation in the sense of the hypostatic union [44, 45] and his unique mediation of salvation (1 Tim 2: 5 [22]) are negated.

Insofar as Jesus is now viewed as an "example" (and not as the archetype and initiator) of a successful mystical union alongside other mystics and founders of religions [23, 24], the unique mediation of salvation by the Church is likewise rendered obsolete. The result is PTR, based on a primal mystical experience accessible to every human being, in order to confess the one God-transcendent in the sense of a negative theology and incapable of being appropriated or claimed absolutely by anyone-in His "endless" "manifestations" [10, 24].

From this follows an attitude of ecumenical tolerance or indifference toward all manifestations of divine action. Since God is transcendent and can only be approached analogously, any appropriation of God implies an ideology, which includes the visible Church of Jesus, as it loses its connection to its divine ground through its self-isolation [24, 25].

Furthermore, Rut Björkman equates "religion" with institutionalized confession [25]. The mystic or the true human being, however, is not religious. They resist any form of institutionalization, as it leads to self-alienation into the external world due to particular power-political interests separated from God [25, 51].

Furthermore, no "faith in Jesus" as propagated by the Church is deemed possible, but merely a faith "like" Jesus believed [26]: subject-immanent faith as an act of being and self-actualization is anchored directly in God-without a constitutive mediator of salvation [26, 63]. Here, an identification of consciousness and being also resonates, insofar as the divine-human unity of Jesus is conceived only mystically, on the level of individual consciousness, or by way of grace, but not ontologically or hypostatically.

The Catholic Church, by contrast, believes "in" Jesus precisely because "faith" necessarily presupposes participation in the hypostatic union or in the "new being" of Jesus [27, 38, 44]. This "new being" is not a postulated or merely imagined possibility, but is grounded as equally real through the reality

of Jesus-as a realistic possibility "to be."

In her view, the ecclesial community-lived and experienced only deficiently in everyday life-as well as the Church's disappointed messianic expectation (Rut Björkman likely means the Jewish hope for the restoration of earthly conditions through the return of the Messiah, and not the universal transformation of all creation in the eschaton [28, 52, 53]) also speak against the Church. While drawing on a long tradition of mystical interiority that seeks God within the human soul [43], Björkman plays dogmatic history against Jesus: God's self-communication occurs-alongside other "incarnations"-in the being of Jesus, but not through any doctrines about him [29, 37]. Dogmas, accordingly, obscure inner access to the divine source within the human person through external restrictions. Likewise, access to the divine nature of Jesus himself is buried beneath "doctrines" about his person [29].

A unity of "messenger" and "message" of the divine-human unity, as confessed by the Church-for instance, following Bonhoeffer [30]-in relation to Jesus, or the uniqueness of his divine sonship as a successful self-communication of God, is not recognized in its unrepeatability. On the contrary, it is the "tragedy of Christianity," namely "its inability to become salvation for the world... Therefore Jesus was isolated, made the sole Son of God, fundamentally different from all other human beings and incomparable to them. Thereby, however, his message of the Kingdom of God was betrayed. As the sole and unique Son of God, he cannot serve as an exemplar" [31]. Consequently, Jesus's decisive message is also not anchored in the messenger Jesus: namely, the call that God's "power, from which we originated," should "take effect in us and through us" [32].

In summary, the following key points of this critique of the Church can be highlighted:

- 1) *Jesus is merely one example (among many) of possessing the Pneuma*: "With this, the connection to the divine origin was established... He discovered the Christ-power as the power of the Holy Spirit in his creation and professed faith in this power" [33].
- 2) *The invisibility of the Spirit leads to the invisibility of the Church of the Spirit* (but not: the visibility of Jesus leads to the visibility of the Church): "No ideologies or worldviews make us true human beings. It is solely the breakthrough to the human-forming power of the Creator in creation, it is faith in the Creator Spirit within us, that fills us with this Spirit of the Creator and transforms us" [34].
- 3) *True religion is to be purified of ideology*: "The enlightened person is not religious in the sense of belonging to a specific organized religion; he advocates no doctrine, he merely reveals his existential truth as having originated from God" [35].
- 4) *Jesus is not the goal of faith-and therefore all the less so the Church*: "Not faith in Jesus, but believing as Jesus did, is redemptive. Faith in Jesus leads to the division of humanity. But believing as Jesus did, in the power of the Creator Spirit

hidden within human beings, would unite people” [36].

3. Outlook: Ecclesiology of the "New Being in Christ"

Formally, what is striking about the spiritual critique of the Church is the unresolved relationship between the individual and the collective: Is the critique directed at individual persons and their faith? Or against an externally constituted and institutionalized Church as an abstract social system? [37, 40] If one attempts to identify the ontological distinctness of the Church as a collective with the ontological reality of the individual, one either sacrifices the individuality of faith to a collective content of faith or, in the sense of PTR, treats all subjective contents and experiences of faith as identical, thereby sacrificing the collective content of faith for the individuality of faith. Likewise, the top-down constitution of the collective “Church” threatens to be lost as well [37, 40].

Is there a way out of this aporia that can align the subject-centric impulse of the spiritual critique of the Church with the particularity of Jesus’s being? Perhaps an ecclesiological focus on the “New Being” could offer a potential solution: Paul Tillich speaks of a “New Being”-lived subjectively and objectively grounded in the being of Jesus as a possibility-as an *a priori* starting point of religious experience [38, 39].

If one generalizes this approach, by understanding Jesus as the existential-ontological realization and grounding of the “New Being” vicariously for all human beings, one can speak of a “New Being in Christ,” which analogously reflects the “New Being” of the heavenly *communio sanctorum*: the collective “Church” reflects the reality of the heavenly collective top-down [30, 38, 40, 60].

Being “in Christ” can be understood in as concrete a sense as possible as a universal empathy of love: everyone is “in” everyone; everyone recognizes and loves “all” and “the” Other, and therein themselves [40, 64–66]. The universal connectedness of all human beings implied thereby is grounded in the in-being within the divine-human being of Jesus, which in turn mediates being in God-and vice versa [40–42, 61, 67].

4. Conclusion: Contextualizing the Critique and Developing a Sacramental Ecclesiology of the "New Being"

Rut Björkman’s spiritual critique of institutional ecclesiology does not stand isolated within twentieth-century religious thought; rather, it shares some structural affinities with broader developments in Western spiritual literature. While Björkman articulated her critique from a Protestant background, remarkably similar perspectives have gained traction within contemporary Catholic popular and mystical theology. Authors such as Richard Rohr, Diarmuid O’Murchu, and Ilia

Delio likewise emphasize an experiential, Spirit-centered transformation, frequently contrasting the immanent awakening of the divine spark with rigid dogmatic structures and exclusive ecclesial claims. In these frameworks, as in Björkman’s, the emphasis shifts from a top-down, sacramentally mediated institution to an immediate, panentheistic realization of the divine presence within creation and human consciousness.

To construct a viable ecclesiological response to this critique, engaging Paul Tillich’s category of the “New Being” (*Neues Sein*) offers a promising starting point, yet it simultaneously presents a crucial theological challenge. Tillich rightly identifies Jesus as the Christ who manifests the New Being under the conditions of existence, overcoming existential estrangement. However, from a Catholic perspective, Tillich’s theological anthropology remains vulnerable to an abstract symbolization that risks undercutting a robust ecclesiology of objective sacramental mediation. If the Church is reduced to an existential symbol or a subjective horizon of ultimate concern, the ontological reality of Christ as the effective Head of the Body-working concretely through the sacraments-threatens to evaporate into mere existential interiority.

A key insight for resolving this tension lies in recovering the original experience of the early Christian movement: the existential encounter with a genuinely “new humanity”. This primary experience-famously designated by Francis of Assisi as *nova vita*-was not merely an individual illumination or an interior shift in consciousness. Rather, as early Christian witness demonstrates, it was experienced as an objective participation in a newly inaugurated reality. The existential longing expressed in modern spiritual critiques (whether in Björkman or her Catholic counterparts) correctly identifies the necessity of this original experiential dimension; where institutional structures lose connection with this *nova vita*, ecclesiology degenerates into empty legalism.

It is precisely through the Church as a sacramentally mediated, living organism—recalling Romano Guardini’s dynamic vision of the Church as the objective, living reality of Christ in history [54, 55]—that the Incarnate Head continuously communicates His *nova vita* to the faithful. The sacraments are not external, artificial barriers separating the soul from God; they are the physical-spiritual instruments through which the Head touches, heals, and incorporates human beings into His divine-human life.

Consequently, a spiritually grounded and deeply Catholic ecclesiology does not reject the subject-centric desire for personal transformation; rather, it fulfills it. It demonstrates that the genuine experience of a “new humanity” (*nova vita*) is neither self-generated nor found in opposition to the Church, but is sacramentally communicated by the Incarnate Lord who acts through His Mystical Body as its active and enduring Head.

However, for this *nova vita* to remain more than a transient subjective ideal, it requires an explicit Christological and ontological enabling. The “New Being” is not merely an inherent

human potential awakened by an exemplary teacher, as Björkman posits; it seems ontologically grounded in the singular event of the Incarnation-the Hypostatic Union-where human nature is definitively assumed and transformed by the divine Logos. It is precisely through the sacramental mediation of the Church, as the visible and historical Body of Christ, that the Incarnate Lord continues to act as Head, sacramentally communicating this *nova vita* to individual believers. Thus, a deeply Catholic ecclesiology integrates the valid subject-centric impulse of spiritual mysticism not by abandoning sacramental institutionality, but by anchoring the subjective experience of the "new humanity" in the objective, ontological reality of Christ's ongoing sacramental presence.

Author Contributions

Imre Koncsik: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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