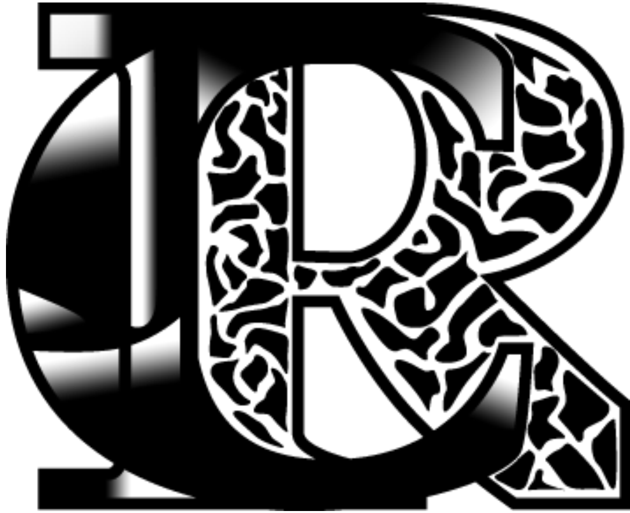

Journal of Religion and Culture

Easton, Anthony.
Review of *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*,
by Ephriam Radner.
Journal of Religion and Culture, vol. 24 (2013): 83-87.

The *Journal of Religion and Culture* is a peer-reviewed journal published by the graduate students of the Department of Religion at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

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A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church
Ephriam Radner
Baylor University Press, 2012. 450 pp.

A Brutal Unity is a densely argued work on the implications of schisms and heresy in Christian churches. That it returns again and again to Nazi Germany, seventeenth-century England, and Rwanda, suggests it also has a profound interest in how unity in a religious order can be constructed to mean unity in a social or political order. Radner's arguments are tightly wound and profoundly elegant. He argues with the skill of a classical rhetorician and the aesthetic power of early Anglican polemicists, which he seeks to emulate. Radner seems to make two simultaneous arguments. The above discussion about the nature of schism in the Christian Church and a deeper, thornier argument about the nature of unity as it relates to claims of sexuality, nationalism, tradition, and history—within the Anglican corpus. The first makes the book highly recommendable; the second isolates a general audience.

Beginning with a discussion of how the book can be used by a general audience (and here general might mean Christian, but there is enough residual information in how Christian systems interact with nationalist political systems that its appeal is much broader). Radner argues against schism—claiming that the splitting apart of the church is a splitting apart of the body of Christ. The problem, according to Radner, is that even within a church that values unity, it has absorbed a current culture that considers disunity a virtue. He contends that the tension between the polyvalent nature of current philosophical discourses and the history of Christian theological practice is common, and so rarely discussed. This tension might be one of the reasons that theologians rarely take the problems of schism seriously.

Radner posits that one of the ways that we fail to take schisms seriously is to refuse to discuss what the implications of church politics are to the lay. He does not limit this to an Anglican, Protestant, Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox lens, but works carefully through the history of the church. Beginning with the Chalcedon council of 431 C.E., he discusses continual efforts to define Christendom as a push of those in ecclesial power against the collective lay. (It is uncertain that this is an issue of an elite versus the laity, but of a group of people who think naively about agreement—something Radner thinks is elusive—often for the sake of political expedience). Though much of the discussion of ecclesial power is the discussion of the lay in relationship with

the priesthood, often this is not the focus. Radner provides the example of the work done by German ecumenical discussions in the 1980s around the concepts of justification discussed in the 1530s, which separated the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans. This attempt at reconciliation was refuted by German theologians in 1992 as well as an American denomination of Lutherans around the same time. Radner ends this discussion of the Lutheran problem of schisms saying: "Other Lutherans, like the group, 'Word alone' have argued that the Joint Declaration was in any case brokered by a small group of elites, unrepresentative of most Lutherans" (236).

In chapter five, "The Limits of Concensus," Radner discusses the Anglican Consultative Council meetings in Kingston, Jamaica in 2009. The ACC has worked on problems of unity and reconciliation from 1971 onward, and ostensibly features bishops, clergy, and lay (237). The 2009 meeting was about the implications of the American Episcopal church integrating sexual minorities into their leadership structures. The council was taped, and via a close examination of the primary sources—Radner points out a problem in how the vote was constructed and a set of implied tensions. There are those, especially in liturgical circles, who view parliamentary systems of decision making as providential. If this is the case, then the failures of these conferences or councils, is a failure of understanding how God intersects with the world. In this sense, the argument against the parliamentary as providential is that this system ignores the democratic potential of protestant history—it betrays Luther's "priesthood of all believers."

These are not the only problems of agreements and meetings. Radner mentions issues of general practice that remain to be unsolved by this parliamentary process. For example, some of the early Church fathers in the Orthodox tradition were anathematized by the western church—that was part of the tradition. How does an unchanging tradition reverse itself, what are the social or political implications of de-anathematizing someone? The book continues as a set of discussions around the failures of unifying the church.

This does not mean that Radner is concerned that the church will become too unified. For example, in the first chapters, he notes that under the genocide of Rwanda: "One of the elements of Christian failures in the 1990s, in Rwanda, that most starkly strikes observers is the way that church leaders made decisions rigidly bound by self-interest and the desire for survival, initially political and later personally…the ecumenical veneer of certain efforts at liberalization of discussion and accountability was quickly exposed as but a

cover for the ongoing personal efforts at self-protection by bishops, pastors, church bureaucrats, religious orders, and local lay leaders" (72).

There is some suggestion that the failure of unity is in the establishing of hierarchy downwards over those who are not part of the ecclesial elite. But the argument is actually much subtler. For those who are not used to working through theological contexts, the dispute between absorbing or rejecting parliamentary systems for settling church disputes seems like political minutiae. But, for those in the midst of these debates, it is as serious and as complicated as attempting to discern the will of God. To be wrong about the proper way to reunite the church is to be wrong about the body of Christ. And to be wrong about the body of Christ is to be wrong about the will of God. The parliamentary process might provide a way forward—it makes sense within the tradition of Western Christianity, but there are other ways of thinking about how power works within the rhizomatic systems of Christian political process.

Being Episcopalian, Radner attempts to resolve this via the ideas of the sixteenth-century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker, "who simply saw the process of conciliar activity as overriding error through its ongoing functioning of self-correction. Meeting, listening, and sufficient time will, with a focused set of intentions, bring minds into unanimity. With its added pneumatic rationale, these kinds of convictions uphold the crucial elections of popes by cardinals closeted together in an enforced environment of converging preferences. But is this even true theoretically? Bayesian providence assumes not only "rationality" but the trustworthiness of the information exchanged among parties as being both valid, such as to be received and learned from and consistently given, with the result that self-correction and new inferences can take place over time" (250).

His refusal of rationality and his re-establishment of forms that are not mutable, suggest that this argument against Bayesian providence is, by extension, an argument against the twentieth-century's linguistic turn. In his discussion of the failures of committee work to provide genuine change in the theologically charged post-Genocide Rwanda, Radner argues that the universalizing instinct of this linguistic turn refuses the work on the ground. In this sense, he ironically reverses the atheist philosopher and moral relativist, Richard Rorty, using his ideas of the local for a theological sensibility: "[…with] Richard Rorty we can begin only with our 'local' and to some extent conventionalized solidarities, but which our I-ness looks itself publicly to smaller communities" (394). In this sense, the localized processes can provide a

set of small negotiations that prioritize Christ without the colonial processes that caused serious damage. It is possible that Christians processing small or localized problems of social power using parliamentary models may lead to an understanding of secular problems. In parliamentary ways of thinking, the space between secular and sacred is less than it might appear to technocrats on either side.

Radner makes this localized nature of faith explicit: it is not the minor disagreements and small power squabbles that bring catastrophe—but the belief that mutual rationality can bring any amount of useful consent—that it can unify the church. He also is concerned about having only one solution. Though he ends the book with a small argument in favour of the localized, much of the text reads as uncertain about the connections between the state and the church. So, the local might be prioritized, but it can only be prioritized as a critique of the state.

The worst connections between the state and the church are not seen in Rwanda, nor the seventeenth-century English church, though Radner mentions both explicitly. Evading recent apologetics that argue that the Nazis were not Christians, he makes the argument that the nadir of the state's relationship with the church was Germany in the 1930s and 1940s: "In political contexts, this reality has, of course, dogged the stability of the 'coalition' agreements and their related species, forever. Catholics and National Socialists may well vote together, but they do so not on the basis of substantive 'consensus'—although the term agreement may be meaningful up to a point. Still this 'agreement' takes place on the basis of individual preferences and goals whose intersections with those of another group are purely transitory, though often misleading and distorting to those who live with them, as we have seen with respect to the German Christian churches and Nazism" (251). This suggests that the idea of consensus, i.e. social or political attempts towards both religious and political unity, might not be possible within the framework constructed since the rise of a humanist enlightenment. The institutional churches' absorption of this idea of power has proven to be a kind of slow poison, which leads to a refusal to understand the intersections of theological consensus.

This poisoning of the body of Christ through this failure of consensus, or at least the acknowledgment that consensus can rarely occur because of the ongoing problems of mutual understandings and the failure of reconciliation, puts Radner's book in an odd place. For Radner, the church must be

reconciled in unity. He sees a broken church as a sin so grave that it might make the Eucharist illegitimate—because only a unified church can break bread together. But the traditions of a unified church are thought to be ineffective, perhaps to have essentially failed. Using traditional ecclesiastic metaphors, the body of Christ is corrupt beyond measure. This corruption does not come from simple human sins, but from the traditions that attempt to unify the church. If this decay originates from the efforts of the traditions themselves, how can Christians continue to participate in these institutions? Radner is excellent at pointing out the problems, but fails to posit solutions. (Though, fashionably, he points to Levinas' foregrounding self-sacrifice as a possible way forward.)

Though this work is intended to be by Anglicans, for Anglicans, the problems of the secular intertwining with the religious are central to current religious discourses. That Radner discusses these problems within the context of Christian theological context provides two useful oblique reference points. The first is an extrapolation to the recent neo-liberal cults of mediation and concession. The second is a conservative argument that uses work like Rorty, Derrida, and Levinas. Seeing as it's been twenty years since the culture wars in which conservatives declared these thinkers to be toxic, it is interesting to see them integrated in a text that is quite reactionary.

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