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Gerard Mannion's *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*

"Exclusivism" and "Neo-Exclusivism"

Dennis M. Doyle

I will begin with a brief description of Gerard Mannion's 2007 book, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time*.¹ Then, I will focus on his use of the categories of "exclusivism" and "neo-exclusivism." Finally, I will raise some critical questions.

Mannion's *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*

Mannion aims at constructing an ecclesiology designed to address the postmodern world in which we live. He presents his approach in contrast with what he perceives as a reactionary response to postmodernism that cuts across denominational lines. The Roman Catholic example of this reactionary response was the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and its head who had, by that time, become Pope Benedict XVI. Mannion labels this overall approach "neo-exclusivism." Along with the CDF, Mannion acknowledges the need to reject "relativism," but he thinks that the opposite extreme of "dogmatism" needs to be equally rejected. He proposes an ecclesiology based upon a virtue ethic as the best way to accomplish this.

Mannion then examines the ecclesiological virtue ethic of Stanley Hauerwas but finds it wanting, especially in its depiction of Christians as "Resident Aliens." He finds in Hauerwas's overall approach another form of "neo-exclusivism."

In constructing his own ecclesiology based upon a virtue ethic, Mannion turns to a range of authors writing about trinitarian theology. He does this in order to counter what he sees as ecclesiologies that are too narrowly christological. He then draws upon the work of Roger Haight to carve out an approach that is transdenominational. The main thrust of Mannion's

ecclesiology is to reject claims to superiority in favor of striving to live out the faith to which the community bears witness. As a result, Christians are called simultaneously to do three things: (1) remain faithful to their tradition, (2) become radically open to other traditions, and (3) practice a universal justice that includes all of humankind.

Mannion's Use of the Term "Exclusivism"

I want to be clear that Mannion does not just whip out from nowhere the term "neo-exclusivism" and then start sticking labels on people. In the background are the well-established academic categories of "exclusivism," "inclusivism," and "pluralism." These categories, of course, along with others and with some variation, have been used to describe the spectrum of positions taken by theologians in regard to the relationship between Christianity and other world religions. Briefly, "exclusivists" take their own religion to be superior and reject other religions. "Inclusivists" also take their own religion to be superior but find a way to "include" other religions in a positive manner. "Pluralists" reject any claim to the necessary superiority of any one religion over another, as they tend to stress the limitedness of all religions in relation to the ultimate.

When Mannion does apply the label "neo-exclusivist" to the CDF and to Hauerwas, he is very clear that he is using the term in an analogous sense and that, in some ways, his own use is quite different from the original use. He thinks, however, that a similar mentality underlies both forms of an exclusivist position. In the post-Vatican II era, exclusivism labeled the old tendency to be closed toward other Christians, other religions, and the world. The postconciliar shift, as experienced not only by Catholics but by many other Christians as well, was directed toward a new openness and affirmation toward other Christians, religions, and the world. Mannion finds in the CDF of the last quarter century and in Hauerwas the reverse tendency to be overly suspicious of the world and to withdraw inside one's own community. It is in this reverse tendency that Mannion senses a type of exclusion that is at root another version of the same old problem. In particular, he finds the CDF, especially in *Dominus Iesus* (2000), to be exclusive toward other Christians and toward other religions. He finds Hauerwas, with his concept of Christians as resident aliens, to be exclusive toward the world in which we all live.

Mannion thinks that a similar mentality underlies both forms of exclusivism:

1. top-down methodology, "from above,"
2. presumption of one's own superiority,
3. negative judgment of the other,

4. one-sidedness,
5. lack of humility,
6. being out of touch with present-day realities,
7. defensiveness,
8. lack of appreciation of what is good in the modern world.

Some Critical Questions

It is important to understand that from the point of view of pluralists, both exclusivists and inclusivists appear to be relatively exclusivist in their view of other religions. Let me say that again: from the perspective of the pluralists, exclusivists practice exclusivism, as one would expect; but it is also true that, from the perspective of the pluralists, the so-called inclusivist position is relatively exclusive in its retention of the idea that its own religion is superior to others.

Before raising my critical questions, I would also like to say that I think Mannion's book has made a significant contribution to contemporary ecclesiological discussions. I have many sympathies with the positions that he takes, and some—though not all—of the critical questions I will raise for him are questions that I could ask of myself as well.

1. Following Roger Haight, Mannion emphasizes the unity that Christians share and minimizes the importance of current differences. He wants Christians to feel at home in their own traditions as they affirm other Christians in other traditions. Is not achieving that balance, however, much more difficult than what Mannion seems to acknowledge?

The experience of conversion evokes recognition that, most often through no merit of one's own, one has become radically better than one would have been if one were not experiencing such conversion. On the one hand, one wants to avoid simply projecting one's own experience on to others, either implying that the other is unconverted or that conversion is impossible apart from one's own community's path. On the other hand, however, one usually has convictions that neither can nor should be completely divorced from the particularities of one's own experience and one's own community's path. I am trying to say by this that the complexities of faith and religion present legitimate tensions regarding the first two of Mannion's goals: affirming one's own tradition and feeling easy in affirming the tradition of the other. These tensions increase when we consider that conversion is linked with ultimate meaning and the absolute. Mannion stresses the one side of how standing in the face of the ultimate should make us humble. Is there not necessarily and legitimately another side to this? Is it not impossible and even undesirable to do away completely with the belief that belonging to and participating in one's own community is superior

to not doing so? Does this not present complications when it comes to affirming other Christians in other traditions? Can one acknowledge these complications and still remain self-critical and relatively open? Can there be humility in accepting patiently the slow pace of ecumenical progress as Christians of all traditions try to sort the wheat from the chaff?

2. Mannion discusses a transdenominational reality in which the fault lines of the things that unite and divide us religiously fall across the swath of Christian traditions more so than uniting traditions within themselves and dividing traditions from each other. And surely anyone who would assume that all Roman Catholics think one way, all Methodists another, and all Anglicans another should find this point and the supporting evidence to be quite illuminating. The point is a necessary and helpful corrective to naïve views of the way in which particular beliefs and practices unite and divide Christians from each other today. But how far should one take this point?

I see this point as a corrective to a view that remains fundamentally true even when naïve understandings are peeled away. Mannion seems to present the point more as a replacement for what he takes to be the false view that there is anything substantial and legitimately church-dividing in the things about which groups of Christians currently still disagree. As I see it, Mannion is attempting to use this point to subvert any notion that belonging to a particular church tradition can rest upon convictions concerning important matters of faith that unite those church members with each other in a way that distinguishes them from other Christians and that transcends the personal and the subjective.

I am particularly sensitive to this point, because, as a Roman Catholic, I believe that one of the strengths of my tradition is that we share among ourselves a unity of faith in a manner and degree that many other Christians do not share with each other in their own traditions. We have clearly designated teachers and official teachings, and for all of our diversity and problems, we do not experience the same type or degree of divisions leading even to schisms that many other Christians experience.

This is not to say that differences and divisions do not exist among Roman Catholics, or that we appreciate our own diversity sufficiently or deny that even in this matter of unity we need to listen to and learn from other Christians. It is, moreover, not to deny that a number of Roman Catholics have left the Roman Catholic Church. Neither is it to deny that those currently experiencing schism are exhibiting on both sides the courage to fight for what in conscience they believe to be of the Lord. The point Mannion makes about transdenominational realities offers important qualifications about the reality of Roman Catholic unity as well as overall Christian unity. In my judgment, though, it is precisely that, a qualification when applied to the real strength and distinctiveness of Roman Catholic

unity. Should it become a point used to subvert or deny that unity or the importance of that unity?

Are the ones being labeled “neo-exclusivist” simply those who hold a different position than Mannion concerning the relationship between the “church” and the “world”? The actual position of many of the people labeled “exclusivist” is often the “inclusivist” position of the Vatican II period. Even Joseph Ratzinger’s (the present Pope Benedict XVI) own position on other religions, as expressed in *Truth and Tolerance*, though conservative, is itself more sophisticated than a simple inclusivism. He explicitly recognizes the need to respect other faiths.

I think it worth noting, furthermore, that for most Christians, the question about the possibility of salvation for others, which was most crucial in regard to the categories under discussion, no longer appears to be on the table in a serious way; that is, even those whom Mannion labels “exclusivist” lean in a somewhat universalist direction on this key matter. This difference is large enough to call into question even a highly analogous use of the “exclusivist” label. It also calls into question the practice of taking present-day conservatives and lumping them together with the traditionalists. I grant that *Dominus Iesus* is truly problematic. Is it either accurate or fair, however, to depict conservative theologians and church leaders in an overall sense as trying to reverse the gains associated with Vatican II? For the most part, are not we really talking more about competing interpretations among those who affirm the Council?

Moreover, are present-day conservatives not engaging in legitimate discourse when they depict the “world” as a dark and sinful place? Does Mannion agree with David Tracy that, whereas the dialectical will reject the analogical, the analogical must include the dialectical?

An even bigger problem with using “exclusivism” to describe people, such as Ratzinger and Hauerwas, lies in the fact that in today’s world the term “exclusivism” is associated with systematic forms of oppression. The word “exclusivist” is used to label the oppressors when it comes to matters of social, economic, gender, and racial discrimination. Whether Mannion intends it or not, and aside from any genealogy of his personal use of the term, the use of that label insinuates deep and dreadful things about those to whom you apply it. Does Mannion’s use of the label “neo-exclusivist” meet his own stated criterion of fostering a critical engagement that transcends mere polemics?

Mannion and I agree on many big points and many little points. We are both interested in developing positions that balance concerns about relativism with concerns about dogmatism. In my own work, I have raised my own critical questions about certain documents of the CDF. I think that where Mannion and I differ is in our overall approach to those whom he

labels “neo-exclusivists.” I read them, often disagree with them, but then emphasize that they represent legitimate positions and that their voices need to be part of a larger conversation. I have learned too many valuable things from such authors to be able to simply dismiss them. Many of the concerns that they raise are serious ones, and those of us who find ourselves on the other side of the present-day culture wars neglect those concerns at our peril.

Notes

¹ Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).