



KYIV-MOHYLA
HUMANITIES JOURNAL

KYIV-MOHYLA SCHOLARLY PEER-REVIEWED JOURNALS

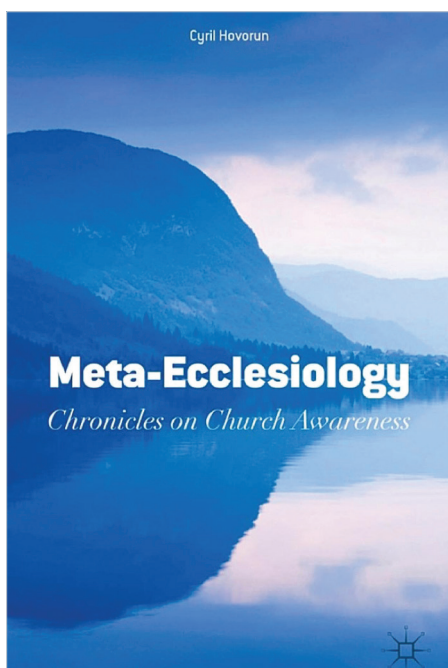
Cyril Hovorun. *Meta-Ecclesiology: Chronicles
on Church Awareness*. New York: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2015.

Reviewed by: Olena Chemodanova

Source: Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal 3 (2016): 237–240

Published by: National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

<http://kmhj.ukma.edu.ua/>



Cyril Hovorun

*Meta-Ecclesiology: Chronicles
on Church Awareness*

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. xiv. 242 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-137-54541-1

Reviewed by Olena Chemodanova

The history of Christianity has witnessed many cases when ecclesiological concepts contributed to hostility, breaches and wars between Christians. It is enough to mention the Great Schism of 1054, the Thirty Years War, or the Russian aggression against Ukraine today. In these and other cases, not only the differences in theological dogmas, but also various issues related to the church's structure, leadership, sphere of power, especially when explained in the terms of "God's right," often aggravated the situation. In other words, the understanding of what the church is played a significant role in the historical developments, which means that ecclesiology matters.

A recent study by Cyril Hovorun is devoted to "the evolution of the church's awareness of itself — what can be called meta-ecclesiology" (p. 1). As the author explains: "The history of the self-awareness of the church is in effect a history of ecclesiological concepts, which differed depending on historical context. This book explores these concepts in a systematic way" (p. 13). The crucial point of the book is that the church, though unchangeable in the fundamental sense, demonstrates constant changes as an historical and social phenomenon. Its changeability in this sense is reflected in its differentiated attitudes to itself (pp. 2–3). The study traces the history of the church's self-perception from the very beginning up to the 21st century, and considers all major denominations and movements.

Any attempt to cover large chronological scales faces the dilemma of balancing between the completeness of the characteristics of the studied phenomenon, on the one hand, and the difficulties in exploring all chronological periods with the same depth and geographical extent, on the other. It seems that *Meta-ecclesiology* is not an exclusion.

The book effectively consists of four parts. The first chapter presents an historical narrative of the church's self-perception, which is comprehensive, consistent, and coherent. Chapters 2–8 explore this history in-depth. The author's endeavor to identify the most crucial foundations, on which an effective ecclesiology should be built, is accomplished in the ninth chapter. The last chapter comprises two attempts at interpreting the church in the languages of phenomenology

and analytic philosophy. Finally, the appendix contains a report from the Sixth meeting of the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group regarding the meaning of Vatican I.

One of the main points of the book is that the church can be described in multiple ways depending on its various features, as well as on historical and social contexts. It is often the case that ecclesiological descriptions or theories highlight only limited aspects of what the church is — they are by definition unable to provide a complete image.

An eloquent illustration of this can be found at the beginning of the book. Hovorun points out that the earliest ecclesiology can be found in the Scriptures in the form of metaphors. Some of them, like “the Kingdom of God,” “a shepherd and his flock,” were introduced by Jesus Christ himself, while others, like “the body of Christ” or “the bride of Christ,” were invented by Christ’s disciples. Finally, many images, such as “the people of the God,” “Israel,” “the holy nation,” and so on, were adopted by the disciples from the Old Testament and filled with new meaning (pp. 3–10). These metaphors described the church from different perspectives, accentuating its eschatological value, unity and integrity, as well as “the universal and all-embracing character of the ecclesiological community” (p. 5). When considered together, the New Testament metaphors present a big picture of what the early church was. With the passage of time, however, this charming clarity faded away and, as the author notices regarding later theological literature, the metaphor of the “body of Christ” became most popular (p. 6). I would only add here that even now, this metaphor is often used by clergy as divisive propaganda, while, for example, the image of “the Kingdom of God,” which invites dialogue, is often abandoned.

I would like to provide a few more snapshots from the book. Going beyond the borders of traditional Greek-Latin narratives, Hovorun explores Syriac religious poetry, which in his description appears full of emotional theological concepts, aimed at personal experience, and is open to the whole world, which is colorful and diverse (pp. 56–59). Needless to say that looking at the ongoing refugee crisis, not many of us are aware of the richness and deepness of the ancient Syriac Christian culture.

It seems that the chronological periods that the author covers with the strongest arguments include ancient time, or patristics, and the modern era from the end of the 18th through the 21st century. The narrative about the Middle Ages is based on the sound idea about the hierarchisation of the church along with similar processes in society, as well as on the evolution of the idea of primacy in the Western church. The latter, in fact, is crucial for the modern ecumenical movement.

The Reformation and the Council of Trent are also thoroughly analyzed. However, what lies beyond the author’s attention or intention is medieval and early modern East-Central Europe, regarding which I would like to make a few suggestions. Let us draw three pictures and raise a few questions. Picture one. Starting from the 7th century, the fertile lands of East-Central Europe were covered with new, formed by recently immigrated or emerged peoples, states: Moravian, Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, and so on. This led to at least two clashes: the one between the spheres of influence of the Eastern and Western churches, and the other between the rulers of the young Slavonic states and Byzantine influence. Did these conflicts leave documents that would contain ecclesiological ideas? If so, were they original or typical for church-state relations in the Byzantine style, with difference only in language: not Greek but Slavonic? The second picture depicts the rise of theopolitical theories in the

Grand Duchy of Moscow. Have these theories contributed to ecclesiology? Picture three shows the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This land, after having served as a good example of tolerance, eventually faced hostile religious rivalry. Could the brotherhood movement, which emerged in the Orthodox regions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, be presented as a predecessor to the clergy-laity congresses later held in the Balkans (pp. 85–86)? If so, then not only the republican ideas but also the political rule of the elites from other denominations contributed to the emancipation of the church. Coming back to Ukraine — did the polemical literature produce interesting ecclesiological ideas? Possibly, *Meta-ecclesiology* will encourage the academic community to study these issues more thoroughly.

Speaking about geographical gaps, it is a pity that the author, while dedicating some of his texts to “Nestorianism,” made the book silent about Asia and the Far East. It would have helped if he had provided a section on Asian church self-awareness as well.

Still, given that it is not easy to cover two millennia in one study, *Meta-ecclesiology* has done well in producing an impressively comprehensive narrative, especially as regards modern ecclesiology theories. German romanticism, neoscholasticism, ecclesiological schools in Victorian Britain, Russian sophiological ideas, the emergence of sociology and its encounters with theology, *nouvelle ecclésiologie*, postmodern ecclesiologies including liberation and feminist ones, and many others, Vatican I and II — all these types of ecclesiologies have been explored in-depth. From this period, I would like to make snapshots of only some ecumenical issues and surprising interrelations between different branches of Christianity.

As the author mentions,

the twentieth century, however, made all the churches increasingly aware of each other and opened them up to one another. Most churches declared, each with its own degree of sincerity, that they need to move closer toward one another, toward a restoration of the unity that had existed in the first Christian millennium and was commanded by Christ (John 17:21) (p. 125).

The ecumenical ideas were thick in the air when this movement was born in the Protestant community in 1910 as an effort at a common missionary strategy. Soon after that, in 1920, the Patriarch of Constantinople proposed to establish an ecumenical program that would follow the pattern of the League of Nations (p. 135). These ideas led to the conclusion that the churches should find a solid common ground for dialogue. Although attempts at creating an extraconfessional ecumenical ecclesiology, compared by the author to an “ecclesiological Esperanto,” had the same success as Esperanto itself, i.e. were not accepted by the local churches (p. 27), the need to find common, acceptable for all, ecclesiological features remains.

In the wake of this need, some ecclesiological approaches became particularly popular in different traditions, like, for example, the Eucharistic and personalist ones. According to Eucharist ecclesiology, the church is where the Eucharist takes place. First introduced by Roman Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac, this approach became popular among Russian emigrants in the West and theologians in Greece (pp. 129–130). Even more adventurous appears the story of personalist ecclesiology. Although personalism as a philosophical movement and worldview emerged in Western Europe in the first decades of the 20th century and was then adopted in the

United States, Orthodox theologians started using its ideas in the middle of the 20th century. They claimed that their approach was original and deeply-rooted in traditional Orthodoxy (pp. 130–134), which was not true. This demonstrates that the world is much smaller than we think.

Leaving historical narratives behind, I would like to put the last accent on Hovorun's own ideas about the foundations of ecclesiological theory. I have appreciated them a lot. As the author explains,

the “self” of the church can be located in a system of coordinates that help trace and evaluate the trajectories of church self-awareness. The axes of this system are unity and relationality, and the starting point is Christ himself (p. 150).

This geometrical image is worthy of elaboration. Concerning Jesus Christ as an indispensable starting point, the author has noticed that in history, “the churches that departed from Christocentrism and arrived at ecclesiocentrism often compromised their doctrine and ethics. They supported bad regimes, blessed and legitimized political words and deeds incompatible with Christianity” (p. 150). This reasoning is applicable to the conflicts mentioned at the beginning of this review. As for church unity, he underscores: “Without exception, all ecclesiological metaphors and concepts refer to the unity of the church. The idea of the church and the idea of the unity of Christ's disciples were born together, as twins” (p. 150). At the same time, it is difficult to arrive at a consensus on what unity is and how it can be achieved (p. 151). Finally, Hovorun states:

The relational nature of the church consists of both in the horizontal relationships of its members with one another and in their vertical relationship with God. Relationships are impossible without the free choice and effort of human beings. [...] Therefore, the church cannot exist without freedom (p. 152).

Can all these ideas be useful tools for an ecumenical dialogue and for resolving existent conflicts? I suppose so.

As for the last chapter of *Meta-ecclesiology*, where the author presents his interpretation of the church by the means of phenomenology and analytic philosophy, I would rather be hesitant to endorse them. Of course, there was a time when the ideas of Aristotle or Plato influenced the worldviews of peoples. At the same time, I doubt that phenomenology or analytic philosophy today play similar roles, and that they can be comprehensive or useful for an average Christian, or for Christian communities worldwide. However, those who admire philosophy will probably appreciate the author's experiment.

To sum up, *Meta-ecclesiology* has successfully managed to bring together ecclesiological concepts from the two thousand years of Christian history in a systematic and coherent way. This outlook is impressive in its diversity. It also provides us with original ecclesiological notions. Therefore, *Meta-ecclesiology* will definitely help those who want to study church history, the church's interrelations with society, and the role that the church plays on the global scene. The book will also be highly useful for those who labor in the ecumenical fields.