

# Church autonomy and the *corpus mysticum* tradition

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Churches can be forgiven for describing themselves, like any other civil society organization, as “voluntary.” This Lockean portrayal, after all, dominates the American political imagination. But an exclusive or even primary emphasis upon the freely choosing individual should give churches pause. Does not Saint Paul describe each member in more corporate terms, as together making “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27), who is to “grow up in every way into him who is the head” (Eph. 4:15-16)? And might Saint Paul’s description be not merely metaphorical, but rather indicative of a corporate bond, through which “he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit in him” (1 Cor. 6:17)? Today, the public discourse of churches too often lacks this scriptural and corporate register. Yet, given our modern tendency to atomize groups into combative, rights-seeking individuals, a positive corporate vision would be most welcome indeed.

Thus, aware of the complex [histories](#) that inform our modern notions of individual rights, I here examine instead the theologically corporate inheritance of the Christian tradition. In particular, I focus upon the medieval idea of the *corpus mysticum*, or mystical body of Christ, which [Henri de Lubac S.J.](#) recovered for ecclesiological reflection in the mid-twentieth century. I begin, then, with de Lubac as interpreted by historian Ernst Kantorowicz. Then, by way of contrast, I address John Locke’s non-mystical conception of the church. And I conclude with the *corpus mysticum* today, considering its relation to modern ecclesiology and to recent disputes over church freedom. Throughout this essay, my history will be terribly selective and incomplete by necessity. Nevertheless, I hope that it will pique interest in the *corpus mysticum* tradition, which serves as a compelling reference point against which to view our modern emphasis upon the individual.

## The medieval *corpus mysticum*

A seminal piece in the study of medieval political theology is Ernst Kantorowicz’s [The King’s Two Bodies](#) (1957), which details how the medieval political commonwealth (or “state”) came to be known as the *corpus mysticum* — a term once reserved for, or within, the Church alone. As one might imagine, the application of such a term to the state endowed the king (and his political machinery) with a certain spiritual gravitas, one which helped legitimize the burgeoning power of medieval civil authority. To explain this phenomenon, Kantorowicz draws upon de Lubac’s interpretation of theological texts. The transference or “migration” of the *corpus mysticum* might be summarized as follows.

First, in continuity with the Pauline epistles, early medieval theologians viewed the “body of Christ” in an expansive sense: it entailed not only Christ’s actual physical body (the one crucified on the cross), but also the sacrament (the Eucharist) as well as the believers who are spiritually incorporated into Christ’s body (the Church). Carolingian theologians would maintain the essential connection between the physical, sacramental, and corporate understandings of Christ’s one body. Nevertheless, relatively hard distinctions were made. Paschasius Radbertus (b. 786), for instance, in his text *Liber de corpore et sanguine domini* distinguishes between the “mystical body of Christ” (the Eucharist) and the “true flesh of Christ” (his actual physical body). But, to note: the adjective “mystical” (or *mysticum*) was *not* used to describe the collective body of believers. At this stage, its meaning was strictly sacramental — that is, reserved for the Eucharist alone.

Taking the above to describe the original state of the medieval *corpus mysticum* doctrine, we now consider the first major transference. According to de Lubac and Kantorowicz, this occurred in the twelfth and

thirteenth centuries when certain heresies attempted to over-spiritualize the Eucharist. In response, Church authorities emphasized the literal or physical presence of Christ in the sacrament. The term *corpus Christi*, which by tradition had been associated with Christ's physical body (as well as the Church), was therefore used to describe the sacrament. At the same time, and in a contrary move, *corpus mysticum*, which had been reserved for the Eucharist alone, was transferred to the Church. Thus, amid dogmatic and liturgical controversy, the *corpus mysticum* made its first migration — moving from the altar to the corporate body of believers.

A second medieval transference soon followed. With the Church now viewed as the mystical body, the term *mysticum* became conflated with the juridical form of the Church's organizational life. This formal or "corporational" understanding then easily transferred to civil authorities, who, as newly self-sufficient political bodies, also used laws to govern large collections of individuals. De Lubac and, to a greater extent, Kantorowicz associate Aquinas with this shift, pointing to the latter's use of the term *corpus Ecclesiae mysticum* (the mystical body of the Church) in the *Summa theologiae* (III, 8, 3–4). As a new designation, this term seemed to evoke the fictional group-person of medieval (canon) law and thus suggested that the Church itself had a body which was separate and distinct from the spiritually corporate body of Christ, its head. Whatever Aquinas's involvement in this conceptual shift, the basic idea that "the juridical could be mystical" was taken up by the burgeoning state: the king was now able to imbue his authority with a complementary — or competing — mystical character. He, like the Pope, could be a hallowed emperor of a "holy Empire."

## John Locke's "true church"

Continuing our foray into the *corpus mysticum* tradition, we now consider the seventeenth-century philosopher [John Locke](#) (1632–1704), whose influence upon American law and religion is hard to overstate. Of course, the connection Locke has with the *corpus mysticum* is not so obvious: indeed, in Locke's re-articulation of the Christian faith (*The Reasonableness of Christianity* [1695]), one finds none of the typical scriptural verses concerning the mystical body (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12, Eph. 4:4, or Col. 2:19). Our reason for drawing Locke into discussion, then, pertains to the decidedly *anti-corporate* position he takes with respect to the church. By investigating his ecclesiology, we might better understand our own voluntarist conception of churches, including our modern forgetfulness of the *corpus mysticum* tradition.

Locke's classic definition of the church (not "the Church") can be found in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1683–1689):

A church then I take to be a voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord, in order to the public worshipping of God, in such a manner as they may judge acceptable to him, and effectual to the salvation of their souls.

As Locke's definition indicates, a church has two central characteristics: salvation as an ultimate end, and voluntary membership. A third characteristic — tolerance toward religious difference — is mentioned earlier in the *Letter*: "I esteem that toleration to be the chief characteristic mark of the true church."

The first "mark," care for one's salvation, might also be thought to represent a minimal, or straightforwardly scriptural, Protestant theology. The core of this theology was Locke's belief that the individual should attend to his own salvation. As a duty that "belongs only to [a man] himself," acceptance of religious truth could never be forcibly compelled. That said, Locke was not agnostic toward the content of true religious doctrine. The "believing and doing [of] those things . . . , which are necessary to the obtaining of God's favour," was key. In the *Letter*, he writes:

But since men are so solicitous about the true church, I would only ask them here . . . to make the conditions of her communion consist in such things, and such things only, as the Holy Spirit has in the Holy Scriptures declared, in express words, to be necessary to salvation.

We may attribute this position to Locke's pragmatic political leanings, especially at the time of the Glorious Revolution. But, as [Nicholas Wolterstorff](#) suggests in an analysis of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), we might also understand Locke's minimal creed in light of his positive estimation of human reason, including its ability to cut through theological, or "mystical," pretense.

As for the other two characteristics of Locke's church, it suffices to say that, when detached from a minimal Christian theology, they easily combine to create the "voluntary association" of today: groups of consenting individuals who voluntarily come together for self-identity-building reasons, enjoying the state's (tacit) approval insofar as negligible harm is caused to others. This [political liberal conception](#) finds its proximate roots in Locke's "true church" — not the *corpus mysticum*.

## Corporate religious liberty and ecclesiology

The brief episodes just described reveal how widely the concept of the *corpus mysticum* has traversed throughout history — moving from the Church to the state, then receding with the rise of liberal ideology. I have elsewhere explored the moral significance of the mystical body with reference to [salvation](#) and the development of [virtue](#). Here, I focus upon the *corpus mysticum*'s modern renaissance, which notably occurred in ecclesiological discussions precisely when church communities were articulating [international standards of religious freedom](#). In theory, this correlation is significant. But the practical consequences of this ecclesial and legal discussion remain to be seen. Consider the following.

As a forerunner to the World Council of Churches, the Conference of the International Missionary Council stated in 1938 that church freedoms

are primarily the rights and obligations of men as children of God, and its [the Church's] own existence as the *Body of Christ*, in which the head speaks to members and through which he makes Himself known to all men.

The Catholic Church echoed this corporate dimension during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Reflecting upon the constitutions *Lumen gentium* (1964) and *Gaudium et spes* (1965), Joseph Ratzinger and Guy Mansini O.S.B. noted an active (group) agency that was uniquely attributed to the invisible Church of Christ. (It *subsists*, or acts and exists fully, within the visible Roman Catholic Church alone, they note.) And prominent Catholic intellectuals at the time — among them, Henri de Lubac S.J., [Hans Urs von Balthasar](#), and [Jacques Maritain](#) — published works explicating the *corpus mysticum* tradition in various ways.

Despite these corporate reflections, however, church teachings on religious freedom did not quite match these mystical ecclesiologies. The World Council of Churches, for instance, framed its 1948 and 1961 statements on religious freedom in terms of individual rights, making no clear reference to the mystical tradition. And *Dignitatis humanae* (1965), the Catholic Church's declaration on religious freedom, nods only tacitly to the *corpus mysticum*. It speaks to the rights "of the person and of communities" instead. Why this disparity?

In short, it seems that the normative elements of the *corpus mysticum* tradition could not gain traction in the post-war liberal consensus. So while Avery Dulles S.J. claimed in 1966 that the twentieth century would be known as the Century of the Church (and later wrote that the Church's [sacramental model](#) was the most comprehensive and true), the corporate reflections involved rubbed against the contemporary articulation of individual rights. Indeed, given the horrors of the First and Second World Wars, certain arguments in favor of corporate or collective life appeared grossly out of place. Moreover, in countries

like the United States, individual rights already sat secure within the realm of law and politics — Locke’s “true church” had already been established.

And so, when an echo of the *corpus mysticum* was heard in [Corporation of the Presiding Bishop v. Amos](#) in 1987, Justice Brennan — who described a religious community as “an organic entity not reducible to a mere aggregation of individuals” — ultimately justified church protections on the basis of individual “self-definition.” And in 2012, when the federal government’s contraceptive mandate threatened church freedoms, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [responded](#) in strikingly non-mystical terms, stating that “[r]estrictions on religious liberty are an attack on civil society and the American genius for voluntary associations.”

These voluntarist justifications are not in themselves so problematic. (Indeed, they might even be necessary in today’s legal contexts.) But once Christians find themselves singing from a Lockean hymnbook, they may wish to critically evaluate how they conceive of their church communities in light of their rich ecclesiological inheritance. The practical difference this may have in courts of law may be minimal in the first instance. But, given today’s winner-take-all disagreement and weakening of fellow-feeling, ecclesiological reflection can hardly be morally insignificant. In the *corpus mysticum* tradition, it helps bind persons and communities together in perfect charity.