The Church's Tragic Space, Pro-existential Performativity and Constantine's Unfinished Project

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Abstract

The argument starts by critically discussing Yoder's "Constantinianism" thesis, initially embraced by Hauerwas, that Constantine's influence negatively impacted Church performativity, but turns Hauerwas against Yoder. I point out that Hauerwas's argument on "peasant Catholicism" overturns this thesis. The argument advances towards a theory of performativity based on three aspects. These are Hauerwas' approach to Church practice, the Orthodox appropriation of Constantine's activity as salutary for the Church, and my personal reading of biblical passages in terms of the Church's performativity as the communal body of all Christians carrying the weight of their specific material cultures. Contrary to Yoder, I argue that these material cultures are less the aspect that has held back Christian performance throughout millennia; they are rather the expression of the expansion of the Church's tragic space, from the underground of the catacombs to the full daylight of the public square.

Key-Words

Performance, Practice, Pro-existence, Tragic Space, Martyrdom, Fools for Christ, Agency of Objects, Constantinianism, Peasant Catholicism

Ever since the persecutions of Christians approached their end with the acclamation of Constantine as Augustus, in 306, and most notably in the year 313 with the formulation in Milan of a generalized official policy regarding the just treatment of Christians (Leithart 2010: 99), the performance of Christian identity has been allowed to be transferred from the underground of the catacombs to the public space. Yoder's "Constantinianism" thesis suggests that Constantine's involvement in Church matters brought a "shift" from the performativity of the Church, as a body of members who preferred to speak truth to power even at the cost of embracing martyrdom, to performativity as a merely public engagement of ecclesial and political

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actions (Yoder 1984: 140). Rather than engaging in a historical criticism and refutation of Yoder's thesis, which has been produced quite convincingly by Leithart in *Defending Constantine* (2010), I take my criticism of Yoder's "Constantinianism" thesis as a starting point for my argument about what I call "Constantine's unfinished project." The orientation of my interpretation of Constantine's role in the subsequent development of Church life differs from Yoder's view in my emphasis on a performative reception of Constantine in the Church's Holy Tradition.

From this performative dimension, which for millennia has been cultivated in the Church, notably in the Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox Churches, there can be no "-ism" applied to Constantine's profile. Such an "-ism" eliminates the iconicity of Constantine as a "figura" manifested as "the intellectual and spiritual energy" that "does the actual connecting between past and present" (Said 2004: 103). Thus understood, the iconicity of Constantine implies that he performed an iconic role in the constitution of the Church's public performance of what it is to be a Christian. Seen in this light, Yoder's thesis is anachronistic, as it seems largely influenced by modern political theology and contemporary secularism.[1] The temptation to read Constantine anachronistically (as just another modern authoritarian ruler) as well as reading Constantine's "palace" as the "White House" (Leithart 2010: 176) determines a scholarly drifting away from the performative core of Roman and Byzantine Christianity. Yoder's "Constantinianism" thesis anachronistically emphasizes that, under the authoritarian rule of Constantine, there was a shift in Church life, from the covert performance of the Christian faith, to the merging of faith and political power in the performances of Christian identity in the public realm. Keeping the focus on the performative dimension, as it has been cultivated through Church Tradition, there is another possibility in acknowledging Constantine's contribution. While this contribution may historically still remain open to debate, from the point of view of the Church's performativity it can be argued that Constantine helped reveal the Church's existing need to harmonize the underground and public forms of performing the Christian faith.

My criticism of Yoder's thesis is only the starting point for my broader argument, that Constantine's unfinished project may function as the performative horizon of Christians worldwide, across local denominations. They can thus conduct their lives in the public square, beyond the secular

1 For instance, Leithart argues that what Yoder took as "Constantinianism" would better be described as "Lockean" Christianity (2010: 140-145).

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limits imposed by the Enlightenment to human relationships, without veering towards fundamentalist and extreme forms of behavior. From this point of view, I suggest that the Enlightenment has accomplished, although by paying the price of secularism, what the Universal Church has always aspired to globally, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, but failed to accomplish because of the deep antagonism, persecutions and war between Christians. Continuing this "unfinished" project would have meant minimally promoting a faith-based model of self-centered co-existence between human beings, irrespective of their religious faiths and convictions and, in a more engaged way, a selfless following of the pro-existential call of Christ culminating in the "foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) of doing "all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15), even at the cost of endangering one's own self (John 15:13).

Today, centuries after Constantine failed to bring dogmatic "consensus" throughout Church (Drake 1995: 5), the dogmatic differences between denominations are still maintaining the Universal body of Christ in a fragmented state. This is a core existential tragedy of the Church. I suggest that performativity may constitute that alternative in the rapprochement between the segments of the Church's body, as it may bring together Christians from diverse denominations in their honest, sincere, naïve and sometimes plain foolish choice to perform the self-sacrificial righteousness of Christ. This inevitably contrasts with the choice – influenced by modern models of Church identity and rooted in the nation-state identity paradigm – to make the excuse that the lack of action at the sight of crying injustice and abuse is motivated by the responsibility towards forefathers to keep the material traditions intact. On a darker note, these excuses have sometimes gone as far as protecting the abuser (who only too often has been a high-profile member of the Church) and silencing the victim because of the concern that confronting the abuse publicly would endanger the good name of the community.

In this respect, I consider it apt to talk about the Church, in its historical witnessing of so much trauma perpetrated by those who were supposed to be its shepherds, as the violated bride of Christ. I do not see this as a departure from my argument about the collective performativity within the Catholic-Universal Church. What I wish to convey is that performativity needs to be taken seriously in our co-existential dimensions of life. Performativity starts with the cry of those who might be considered all-too-insignificant by those proud of being members of high-profile communities. At the risk of veering towards what, in terms of scholarly exchange, might be considered

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mere pastoral exhortations, and without possessing any representational credential in my local community, I dare to say that "we", the siblings of the little siblings of Christ, the members of His shattered and violated body, need to step away from the type of narcissistic identity promoted by nation-state political models. "We" need to adopt a more humble, "peasant Catholic"-like attitude towards what is "clearly" different (Hauerwas 2016: 84-85) about the performative embracing by the Church of the materiality of this unfriendly world.

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It would be a mistake to consider that, after the time of persecutions, Christianity simply distanced itself from underground performativity. Indeed, in the new framework provided by the official recognition of the Church, this kind of performativity was perceived differently by the members of the Church, without being strictly "transformed". After all, at the heart of this underground performativity remains an aspect still present in modern times, and which determined Kierkegaard to believe in the "necessity" of martyrdom (Cockayne 2022: 555), and in contemporary times brings Hauerwas to talk about God's worship becoming "unavoidable" (2016: 85). This core aspect has always been the very vocation of performing Christ under the heaviness of the cross, already noted by Paul as the "message of the Cross," which appears as "foolishness" for the world, and which is actually the "foolishness of God" and the "foolishness of the message" of the Gospel to "save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). This new perception of the foolishness of Christ in the public space may be clearly seen in the creation of artworks depicting the tormented body of Christ. One of the most illustrative examples is Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *Der Leichnam Christi im Grabe* (1521), which can be considered not only as a kind of performance of Christ's body by the painter himself, but also as a summoning for every Christian to be deeply challenged, disturbed by the message of Christ's foolishness, and take upon oneself the task of continuing the performance of this foolishness. This is what Dostoevsky felt upon contemplating the painting, and which made, for him, the worship of God unavoidable, and somehow inescapable throughout his writings, despite being troubled at the possibility of the very loss of faith at the contemplation of Christ's supplicated body as nothing but the outcome of foolishness (Young 2007-2008: 91; Kaftański 2013-2014: 113; Pelikan 1955: 83-84).

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This means that the first component of the performativity of the Church as the bride and communal body of Christ lies in making perpetually present the vocation of the tragic,[2] and inciting every member to follow the foolishness of Christ, by performing His foolishness in their own lives. Despite having moved into daylight, the Church has never left the underground tragic space, where the supplicated body of Christ had been performed by early Christians during the time of persecutions. This very conservation of the tragic space, and its message contradicting, in the clarity of daylight, the self-, kin-, group-, ethnic-, status- or gender-centered rationality of other ways of being throughout the Empire (Galatians 3:28) has made *a pro-existential performance* of Christ's foolishness unavoidable: to dwell not only *with* others (i. e. a mere *co*-existence), but also *for* others, as the ontological condition of being recognizable as "brethren" in Christ (John 15:5; Matthew 25:40). In other words, to perform Christ pro-existentially, both in Christ's submission to the Father's will (Schürmann 1977: 166) and as Christ's service to someone in need (Stăniloae 1963) involves transcending the usual parallel co-existence in society by means of imitating Christ's goodness. This imitation need not be understood as a simple *mimesis*, but rather as an attitude starting with the full simplicity of the *peasant Jesus*, who was born in a manger surrounded by domestic animals (Luke 2:7) and felt at home in the company of the (sometimes animal-like) roughness of those deemed either irrelevant or overtly despised in their societies (Matthew 9:11). This attitude follows the vocation of the creative performance of Christ's Own Person at the very intimate level of the Christian's breath, heartbeat, pulse, rhythm of ritualized gestures, and contemplation of the participation of objects and nature in the Logos' engagement with humans. This performance remains deeply motivated by Christ's call to do away with the suffering of the Other as a way of tackling with one's own suffering and shortcomings.

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This pro-existential vocation to perform the foolishness of the cross, due to the presence of the crucified and resurrected body of Christ within Christians' own bodies, rests on the "unavoidability" of worship, an aspect that Hauerwas saw happening nowadays in the hearts of "peasant" Catholics

2 When used as a noun, "the tragic" means the element or quality of tragedy (Oxford English Dictionary).

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(2016: 85-86).[3] The very fact that the Church has never lacked "peasant" Catholics (Hauerwas 2016: 85-86) and "fools for Christ's sake" (Ware 2000: 167), and generally speaking those invisible members who have actually borne the brunt of a life dedicated to performing the tormented body of Christ, implies that the Church has never been predominantly "Constantinian" (in Yoder's sense), despite its clergy's many collaborations with political powers throughout its tumultuous history. Taking into consideration the tragic space of Christianity, made public under Constantine's policy, it becomes clearer that the main driver of the spreading of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire was not Constantine's policy itself. It was rather the pro-existential message that spoke directly to the hearts of people, troubled them, and awakened them to the faith in the foolishness of embracing the Christ's cross and feeling the unavoidability of performing the body of Christ in their own bodies.

Still, as Hauerwas acknowledges, there is another dimension of the Church's performativity, which still accompanies Christian peasants' way of life: "Christian peasants usually do not think they are called to be holy. It is enough that they pray, obey, and pay" (2016: 84). Is this Constantinianism in Yoder's sense, as an exclusive attachment to external rituals and submission to the external ecclesiastical and political power, that does not define the purity of the original Christian faith, or is it actually a reiteration of faith within a different facet of the tragic space? In this respect, Hauerwas, who has initially helped popularize Yoder's thesis (1994: 104), proves Yoder wrong by emphasizing the very paradox that has always been connected to the external performance of worship within the Church: people who have never thought about being called to become *holy* are being remodeled by the Church's "community of practice" (Hauerwas/Coles 2008: 247, 251) in such a way as to become *whole* persons. This very wholeness of personhood

3 By the phrases "Christian peasants" and "peasant Catholicism", Hauerwas describes the "peasant" simplicity of the most modest and poor members of the "Catholic" Church understood as the Universal Church (2016: 83-87). I adopt this broad application of the phrase "peasant Catholicism" throughout this essay. I also understand Hauerwas' "community of practice" in the pro-existential sense as the practices shared within the Church in the company of others, and in communion with the Otherness of those who perform Christ. In this sense, it may be that the "community of practice" does not exclusively happen between fellows deliberately engaged in the act of re-presenting Christ; it means that "community of practice" may transcend fellowship, and may happen even between individuals, communities and peoples separated by schism, war, or excommunication.

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makes holiness "unavoidable" through the very performance of the external rituals and denominational identity.

To fully understand the fact that "the worship of God" becomes "unavoidable" for Christian peasants, even when they do not invest themselves internally into holiness – as the first generations of martyrs did in the centuries of persecution – one needs to follow the direct connection, noted by Hauerwas, between worship and the very shaping of the body and habits that happens within a community of practice (2010: 153-168). The community of practice Hauerwas mentions consists of "people who are poor" (2016: 85). Nevertheless, poverty is not *per se* the factor triggering the practice within that community, even though it is an existential aspect of life that indeed impacts this practice. Despite poverty and the difficulties they face in nourishing and taking care of their bodies, Christian peasants display an extraordinary capacity, which cannot be called "intellectual" in the strict sense: "they have knowledge habituated in their bodies that must be passed on from one generation to another" (2016: 84). This "knowledge", which is more than intellectual, but rather a supra-intellectual, or supra-rational kind of acknowledgment, opens the Christian peasant to "the importance of holiness – venerating people, sacraments, and relics that are clearly 'different'" (2016: 84-85). At the same time, despite understanding that "the salvation offered by the church is not dependent on her ecclesial representatives", the Christian peasant knows that it is important to "obey" them (2016: 84-85) for the sake of passing on, through practice in the company of, or in community with others, this bodily habituated knowledge.

So, the question remains: what triggers that community's practice? I have stated that the ultimate origin of practices within the Church is the pro-existential message of Christ. Still, even this pro-existential message has been spoken and performed by an Incarnated Logos to a material creation (John 1: 10-14) inhabited by beings composed of soul and body. This means that, in spite of the immateriality of the message, its expression has been made through material supports right from its profession by Jesus, to spread the good news to "all nations" (Matthew 28:19). These material supports are, notably, the Scriptures, but also some of those that are mentioned by Hauerwas, and even more, especially when the possibility of reading Scriptures was not available to illiterate peasants: relics from the times of the Apostles, and even relics of martyrs and of later saints, sacraments, churches, places of pilgrimage, holy days of worship, icons, religious paintings, calligraphy, Church Fathers' writings or legends and

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customs about them, and any other monument of Tradition. All these are indeed part of the material cohort of objects that addressed the depths of the hearts of the peasant, and of any other Christian, by their very character perceived, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, as "clearly 'different'" (2016: 85) or infused by holiness.

It is self-evident that the status of these material relics, that "clearly" contain the pro-existential message, is somehow not equal to the message itself. And still, they have formed, much before Constantine, and throughout millennia, a kind of salutary infrastructure of the spreading of the Gospel to "all nations". But is it not a risk for the very message of Christ, to consider that the very practices of the Church depend directly on these material means of spreading the message? After all, even the Apostles were perfectly aware that letters written on "tablets of stone" are not the same as those written on "human hearts", and that the letter in itself "kills", and only "the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:1-6). No material extension of the message, in this case even the materiality of the word, may be redemptive by itself. By making Constantine the scapegoat of the modern submission of ecclesiastical power to political agendas (Leithart 2010: 322), Yoder seems to have exaggerated a legitimate apostolic concern against the reductionist approach that is implied in any encasing of the Spirit in diverse material vehicles. From this point of view, there is always the risk of the integration of such a materially encased Christian call into the rationality of state systems, as just another means of obtaining and maintaining the loyalty of subjects. Still, such a position, that attempts to fight reductionism by taking a radical stance of suspicion regarding all material supports of the Spirit's flow into this world, inadvertently falls into another form of reductionism.

This happened, for instance with iconoclasm, when it tried to avoid idolatry within the Church in the 8th and 9th centuries (Florovsky 1950), as it fell in the other extreme of canceling the use of the icons as material sources through which holiness performed itself and shaped the Christian peasant's cognitive sensibilities. Besides Hauerwas' argument, that any kind of "relic" housing holiness generates the Christian peasant's feeling that there is something "clearly 'different'" about it, there is also another aspect, intimately connected to the re-cognition of this concealed holiness by any Christian engaged in the practice of worship. I call this aspect *supervenience of higher-level performances out of lower-level material, but salutary, objects and structures re-presenting holiness.*

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The iconoclastic argument, and any other argument that remains too focused on the risk of the material support of holiness to degenerate into a reductionist discourse related to material, rather than spiritual relations (Latour 2002: 21), commits a major error. This is the understanding of the performative work of *re-presentation* that these supports are meant for, as a rigid *representation* in which their only value is the symbolic value already codified in them by the ethos of a certain culture. Taking the object as a rigid representation might mean it is enough for a distanced anthropologist to decode all the meanings engraved on it, or encased in it, without the need of any experience of holiness mediated by that object. From this point of view, it remains significant that the kind of ethics promoted by the Enlightenment seems to have ignored the possibility for the objects themselves to "re-present", that is to perform holiness, or perhaps more exactly to become transparent for the presentation of holiness by the Holy Spirit.

In this aspect, van Loon's observation remains significant: "by equating things with objects and depriving objects of any capacity to act, the Kantian universe would never really welcome a consideration of 'ethical objects' in the first place" (2012: 191). The dimension of "re-presenting" (Cooke 2006: 5) may indeed be connected to the possibility for "ethical objects" to "subjectify", that is "to open up the virtual, multiply possibilities and occasion temporalities" (van Loon 2012: 202). This involves the possibility that the same thing, object or material support "presents" holiness in different ways to different people and at different times, and addresses each one of them to engage God's grace according to each person's own material and spiritual possibilities. This is something radically different from a mere "representation" of the sacred that simply involves the encoding of significations needing to be identically decoded by people interested in a specific, and sometimes sectarian, interpretation. So, as long as the object is taken only as an inert mediator, without the capacity to "subjectify", that is to *perform* what it is being supposed to *present*, indeed the object is no more than a "letter" that may "kill" rather than give life.

Of course, ultimately these objects are nothing but material supports, and this can also be said about the materiality of the Scriptures, and even about the words in which the Revelation has been written.[4] Still, there is a

4 The acknowledgment of their status of merely lower-level material supports and structures prevents Christians from slipping into an approach which takes the registered word of God as more fundamental than God's own presence, and whose members try

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phenomenon of supervenience of worship that is connected to these lower-level material mediators. As we have seen, Hauerwas acknowledges that, somehow, worship becomes "unavoidable" as Christian peasants orient themselves towards holiness by engaging with material mediators of God's grace that has been manifested in diverse ways: through saints and their relics, through liturgical objects, and even more existentially empowering for people in their everyday lives, through the Church's Sacraments. This supervenience, or unavoidability of worship may have been made possible thanks to the following elements: the very choice of materials by master builders, the capacity of materials to carry the mark of the passing of time in a way that transforms a simple process of degradation into a mysterious semiotic suggestion of the presence of an atemporal power, the way the object has been ornamented, and the very material and aesthetic organization of a building or a place. All these have had a specific contribution to the way holiness is being subjectively experienced by each and every member of the community.

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Roman, Byzantine and later post-Reformation Protestant material cultures have contributed in specific ways to the supervenience of traditions of worship, practice of virtue and local identities. These traditions are ultimately branches of the fundamental Holy Tradition that weaves, on the one hand Christ's original *self-presentation* as the speechless lamb in the hands of its shearer (Acts 8:32) – a presentation imitated through the foolishness

to engage in a kind of legalistic relation with God, by attempting to negotiate their sinful behaviors by skillfully interpreting the letter of their holy texts to their own advantage, but irremediably to the disadvantage of others. This is mostly a religious attitude that takes co-existence of humanity with the word of God in the same way which human beings are trying to *co-exist*, by adjusting their behaviors according to contracts. The very fact that, on one hand, the major interest of these religious people in engaging with God lies in obtaining individual advantages, and on the other hand that the very letter and interpretation of the recorded word of God generate unjust treatments of others, reveals that these kinds of religious attitudes are far from becoming pro-existential. Still, confessional and Church-wide communal introspection, as well as interfaith dialogue of Christians with other religions may contribute to this *pro-existential opening* in two ways: within the Church, so that Christianity may not devolve into just another religion; and of the Universal Church towards other religions, so that these religions' believers' truly pro-existential encounters may be treasured, exemplified and invoked by Christians, in their performance of worship and togetherness, as non-Christian ways to connect with Christ and His little siblings.

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of the early martyrs, to believe that humanity may be saved by Christ's embracing of the cross – and on the other hand the post-Constantinian *re-presentations* of Christ's and Early Christians' foolishness. These post-Constantinian re-presentations have been perpetual manifestations of the performance of the Church's message of foolishness for Christ's cross. For instance, bodies of early and modern-day martyrs and saints have continued to perform the message of Christ even after these persons died. More broadly, this performance may be understood in many ways, from miracles mediated by relics, to their "subjectifying" role as inciting Christian peasants' sensibilities towards holiness. This is also the case of any other relics, such as clothes believed to have been worn by Jesus, by biblical figures and martyrs, modern-day saints, and any other liturgical objects, texts, buildings, rituals and sacraments.

Of course, some members of local denominations of the Church may not feel too attached, at least to some of these kinds of material supports. This still happens as a consequence of some particular sensibility supervening in a certain tradition, and which may find it hard to adjust to the material products (such as those exemplified above) of the sensibilities that supervened in other Christian traditions. Interconfessional tensions regarding specific sensibilities have existed in the Church ever since its early days (1 Corinthians 3:5). To consider supervenient Traditions as the fruit of the mere idiotic merging, by Church clergy encouraged by Constantine, of spiritual power with political power, is a blunt reductionist approach. This hurts rather than helps the performativity of what it means to be a Christian in this world.

The figure of Constantine need not be scapegoated as the forerunner of modern and contemporary authoritarian leaders and dictators, that have tried to degrade the non-compromising Christian faith by subjecting it to their own models of socially- and politically-informed faith. The performativity of the Church before, during, and after Constantine's time implies an uninterrupted communal consciousness, throughout the Church, that there always was an unbreakable connection between the tragic space of the persecuted Church and the tragic space of the Church having embraced the weight of material challenges and limitations of this world, as Jesus embraced the material weight of His cross.

This explains why buildings that were destined to be used as churches by local communities were built, in the time of Constantine and afterwards, on the tombs of martyrs (Armstrong 1974: 16), and why today these buildings are housing martyrs' relics (usually in their altar table). This material

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dimension has always performed the holiness of church-buildings, since the housing of relics of many kinds makes the clear difference between a church as a place of worship and any other building, used for worldly purposes, which may be aesthetically indistinguishable from a church from the outside. This reveals the very material culture of the Church as ultimately rooted in the tragic performance of the foolish message of Christ, that each and every person is worth integrating in the "complete unity" and love of the pro-existential relationship between the Son and the Father (John 17: 20-25).

The tragic space of underground Christianity's performance has not been abandoned under the friendly treatment applied by Constantine to the Christians of the Roman Empire. There has never been a complete transfer of the tragic space of Christian performances, from the underground to the upper ground, despite the multiplication of material objects being used in these performances of inner faith and external identity in full daylight. Actually, these objects have been infused in diverse ways (e. g. by solemn consecration, or by the attentive choice of the master builders knowledgeable of their properties, or simply by God's providence) with a special capability. This does not mean that these objects have come to possess only the potential of *encasing* signification, but rather that of themselves *performing* this signification in terms of "subjectifying", i. e. awakening the hearts of those contemplating them to the sense of holiness.

While the modern mind might find it hard to believe that the Emperor Constantine may have actually had visions by which he felt a special call from God (Doležal 2022: 433), in a more humble approach, it may be reasonably expected that the great and glorious Constantine could have been internally touched, not unlike the most insignificant and pusillanimous of his peasant subjects, by his encounter with some relics, which for him, as well as for the peasant, might have felt "clearly 'different'" (Hauerwas 2016: 84-85). From this perspective, if there has been any Constantine "moment" in the history of the Church (Leithart 2010: 188, 287), this moment implies the ideal of the leader of the greatest world power of that time, a leader internally touched by the sight of the martyrs' performance of faith, to make his whole Empire a Church – Christ's Church – and not to make Christ's Church a worldly Empire. This is Constantine's project which, perhaps for reasons related to Constantine's own difficulty of reconciling his peasant pious intentions with the political pressure to instrumentalize Church discipline towards Empire discipline remained unfinished. From this point of view, Yoder's thesis remains useful only in a minimal sense:

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that of emphasizing that Constantine was, after all, just a man caught between the call of his personal faith and the requirements of his worldly status. In terms of the Church's performativity, it may be understood that Constantine's attempt to reconcile both the free performativity of the Church, rooted in the Holy Spirit's initiative (John 3:8) with the pre-designed performances imposed from above by the Empire brought a serious setback to his project of making the whole of the Roman Empire Christ's Church. Nonetheless, Yoder goes in a completely different direction, which is basically an anachronistic reading of Constantine's project, which keeps in mind our modern and contemporary historical experience of the collaboration of clergy with political rulers. It is by virtue of this anachronistic reading that Yoder talks about a "shift" operated within the Church, under the pressure of Constantine's rule, towards a concert between the Church's public performance of faith and the performance of loyalty to the emperor (Yoder 1984: 140).

The history of the Church and Eastern-Western Civilization has shown that, unfortunately, Constantine's project has been overshadowed by the latter kind of outcome, the collaboration of clergy with earthly rulers, which Yoder unfairly called Constantinianism. Under the pressure of the sinful rationality promoted at the level of political rulers, the two types of performance – one martyrdom-oriented and the other supervenient based on material culture – that Constantine helped bring together in the public space by his friendly treatment of the Christians of the Roman Empire, have not always been consonant with each other. In principle, the very fact that there has been a perpetual questioning of the way the latter type of performance remained rooted in the original performance of martyrdom is a mark of healthy enquiry throughout the Church. So the scrutiny launched by movements, such as iconoclasm and the many other doctrinal disputes in the Eastern and Western Roman Empire, and the Reformation and counter-Reformation movements would have been most welcome for the performativity of Christian identity within the Universal Church. Still, under the pressure of "the ruler of this world" (John 14:30) they simply could not unfold without bearing antagonistic clashes that bluntly contradicted Christ's call by devolving into fratricide actions and wars. On one hand, these clashes have radicalized the reductionist approaches of the protesting members of some local churches against the sins of the higher clerical hierarchy, and on the other hand they have widened the perceived gap between the two types of performance. Indeed, both the protesters' and the counter-protesters' collaborations with political powers that have

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aggravated the clashes have continued up until the modern era, and even survived the reductionist orientation of the Enlightenment, reaching our century in the guise of today's nationalism and populism.

Still, instead of seeing these contemporary forms of the continuation of many Christians' idiotism for the political power as the heritage of Constantinianism, we might wish to conceive of this not as the great achievement, but rather the great failure of Constantine's project. Rather than a reductionist reading, I have attempted to propose in this essay the possibility that Constantine's project illustrates the very challenges of what it meant to perform Christ's message, and to perform the Church as the body of Christ in the context of the material culture of the Roman Empire. Constantine's project may rather be seen in its full complexity as an engagement to reveal a kind of "universal" order weaving an invisible, sometimes less accessible tragic space, and another tragic space, this time all-too-visible and ubiquitous, in which human destiny unfolded throughout history. This is admirable, in the sense that Constantine's unfinished project may have laid down the incentives for the constitution of a world culture of a divinely-enlightened humanism, on the path of which the Enlightenment's still "unfinished" project (Kirschner 2022: 527) has embarked only after paying the price of secularization.

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The continuation of Constantine's unfinished project would have provided not only the Church but the European civilization and beyond with a non-secular model of implementing what – under the influence of the Enlightenment – goes by the name "public reason" (Quong 2022). The Enlightenment's lack of attention to the aspect of performativity, in the sense that not only rational human beings, but also objects contain capabilities to "subjectify" (van Loon 2012: 202), determined a conception of humanism that became manipulative of inert and passive objects. Ultimately, this conception has led to the very objectification, manipulation, and elimination of other human beings for the sake of promoting conceptions of order and coherence that humanism was supposed to conserve (Baldwin 2007: 698). Still, after having contemplated the horrors of modern and contemporary wars, even the postmodern critics of humanism may not be able to surpass the limited rationality of Enlightenment humanism, because their talks about "good life", or "good society" (Cooke 2006: 165) mostly exhort a general *co-existence* between people who need to adjust, mostly legalistically, to

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each other's culture, but who otherwise do not have feelings of attachment for each other.

Constantine's unfinished project attempted more than this: to go beyond the "letter" that "kills" (2 Corinthians 3:1-6), a letter so present in conceptual and cultural differences. By convoking the First Ecumenical Council (325), Constantine upheld a model of "consensus" that would have been oriented towards "inclusiveness and flexibility" (Drake 1995: 5). This may be read in terms of a commitment towards otherness, via the imitation-performance of Christ, culminating in fully embracing the tragic dimension of life, and of course dogmatic rigor, after the tragic has been addressed. This would have laid down the incentives for transgressing the mere co-existence among the people of the Roman Empire. It would have been a decisive step towards realizing, much before the Enlightenment, and in a non-secularized way a conception of *pro-existential* embracing of the performance of the tragic dimension of humanity before each-other, against the material backdrop of our world (and spiritualizing it), and before Christ.

The unfinished character of Constantine's project reverberates into the Christian tragic spaces as our failure, as Christians, to perform the whole material world as our Church, as Christ's body. By our performance, we need to show that there is much more to the materiality of the world than an incessant self-interested search for safety and material wellbeing, that inevitably succumbs in decay, suffering and death. There is also sufficient space in this world – although a tragic space – to perform love, healing, and the promise for the Creation's resurrection to eternal life (Romans 8:19-23). I *believe* that the deepening insight into the performative dimension, that is being manifested within the Church today, is still rooted both in the *simplicity* of "peasant" Christians' practices of worship and in the *complexity* of Constantine's project to reorient human dependence on the objects and powers of the Empire towards an active, and tragic, engagement with the agency of such material cultures. Such an embracing of the performative dimension of the Church might allow the members of the Church to develop, initially at least minimally a limited (and by this tragic) dynamic of the merely co-existential ways of life made popular in the secular world, and later on (under the assistance of the Holy Spirit) a pro-existential fulfillment in togetherness. This inclusive approach to performance, rooted in the inclusiveness of Constantine's project, which is ultimately the Gospel's message for Christians to be pro-existential in loving even those that hate, despise or persecute them (Matthew 5:43-45), will allow Christians to say "we" across dogmatic limitations and historical and political fragmenta-

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tions. The performative dimension allows Christians worldwide to invest faith in each other's capacity to heal the body of Christ and heal the world. By this, we will have faith that Constantine's project has not irremediably failed, but that it is only *unfinished*, since even the Enlightenment and postmodernity may be considered as secular versions of this project.

Thus, instead of sinking into interminable contestations of the Enlightenment and postmodernity, Christians may continue to have faith in another path, which is tragic not only in the sense of the impossibility of togetherness, such as the post-Enlightenment and postmodern times have confirmed at cognitive and existential levels. This path may embrace Enlightenment and postmodernity as stages of an all-too-human approach to this world, and integrate them within a broader, and deeply human, cry to be able to say "we" in a non-demagogical way, and in the sincerity of faith in the intimate, but risky proximity of the Otherness of human beings under God's Providence. In this tragic approach, we as Christians need to understand, once more, that Enlightenment advancements happened because of the Church's failure to provide models of togetherness that could have nourished at least a satisfactory co-existence of human beings. The Enlightenment's orientation towards situating human knowledge and relationships strictly within the limits of what secular reason might provide, has resulted from the failure of many Church members and clergy to respond to the "call" of faith (Matthew 22:14) in a minimal co-existential way. This is because "they", as our forefathers, and by extension even "we", who have inherited the old habits and, through them, our forefathers' obtuseness that is limiting our performative capacities, have fallen for the narcissistic temptation to take the secular rationality of the world as something that is requested from them/us by Christ himself. More simply, Christians have forgotten how to perform the goodness of this world beyond what is being requested by social morality. We have forgotten the foolish message of Christ, as we have ourselves become ashamed of the pro-existential message of Christ's cross.

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There is still an important engagement that is needed, throughout the Universal Church from Protestant, Catholic and Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches and any other Christian denomination, regarding the character of being Christian and living secular lives. We need to step away from the destructive polemic spirit regarding our dogmatic and ritual differences,

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by embracing an approach to *performing these differences* so as to nourish each other by the diversity and beauty of Christ's members, understood as limbs of His broken and segmented, but still alive and unified body. Thus, the performance dimension reveals another contribution to philosophical and theological approaches to "practice" (MacIntyre 2007: 60; Hauerwas 2010: 176-178). While "practice" may seem too localized, and sometimes open to polemics, performance feels more focused on admiration of the beauty of the practice, on how to "translate" that practice into our own practices, so as to embrace the communion with the "same other" (Petrilli 2023: 17). By performance we do not abandon our differences; we only abandon our polemical attitudes regarding these differences and create more space – although still a tragic one – for reconfirming our practices.

This early reflection is not meant to settle a neat distinction between the two dimensions of human action and enactment, but rather to emphasize the performative dimension in connection to practice. From this perspective, I favor the notion that the repetitive character of practice, as well as its instrumental force, may be countered by the performative dimension. This retains the virtue of interrupting both the manipulative potential effects of practice over human mind and its alienating character when practice leads to routine, semi-automatic accomplishments of the desired goals, and even to disciplining human beings according to standards of political and collective expectations. Of course, what may blur the thin line separating the two dimensions is the aspect that, after all, all practices are performances. Still, while specific, analyzable performances may be identical to practices, *performativity* as a human capability is the source of both specific practices and performances. At the same time, performativity allows for performances which are not necessarily (although they may become) practices, and may contribute to the perpetual reappropriation of practices from one generation to another, or from one community to another. Moreover, practices themselves *as* performances – including the performance involved in the "agency" of objects (van Loon 2012) used during rituals, objects which may perform holiness in specific ways for specific people – remain perpetually open towards renewal via (more or less agonistic) encounters with otherness, depending on the material, historical and political contexts of a certain religious culture.

In the end, what unites performance and practice is that, as Christians, we live in the Church and in the world as tragic spaces. And performance implies the foolish attitude of suspending even ritualized practices of communion, if this serves the pro-existential performance of the broken body of

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Christ in the suffering of His little siblings (Matthew 25:40). This involves the performing of our Shepherd's foolishness to leave His ninety-nine sheep and go looking for the lost one (Matthew 18:10-14). When people are suffering and dying of hunger and thirst, it might seem consonant with the economic, political and religious rationality of the modern world to abandon them in their abject condition for the sake of conserving our status, our privileges, our national unity, our cultural coherence, and our traditions, despite the fact that we feel truly sorry about the "way things are" (Untea 2021: 343). Still, at the light of the pro-existential message of Christ, this is plainly ridiculous and just a deliberate ignorance of Christ, who performs Himself in the suffering of His "little ones" (Matthew 18:6). In the same way, there is a need for introspection, throughout the Church, on the past evils generated by our local traditions to our own siblings in Christ. Performance might help us take distance from our traditions, while not suspending them indefinitely, because, in the end, they are part of the material environment that has contributed to the supervenience of our spiritual sensibilities in the first place. Performance will help us engage in a ritual movement, a paradoxical and tragic engaging in a collective dance, rhythm and resonance that take distance from, and at the same time brings us back to re-embrace our confessional and local differences.

Pro-existential performativity might just enable us to do something considered impossible by the rationality of the secularized world: on one hand engage in a movement to imitate, and follow the foolishness of Christ, to abandon established traditions of worship for the sake of performing the bodies of those who suffer martyrdom; on the other hand moving towards an existentially-informed approach regarding the traditional vehicles and practices of worship. In this way, this movement of return to our traditions will not only be performed by ourselves, but also either in the full company of (or at least impregnated by the intimacy with) those whose suffering bodies we would have performed. This informed return might help us dispel the sorrow of feeling existentially so far from the love of Christ, and transform it into the joy of having found this love in togetherness with our other suffering siblings (John 16:20). Upon our return, we might just rejoice in the doing of "all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15) of not having abandoned our heritage and traditions that have been so painfully built, by the sweat and self-sacrifice of our Christian forefathers, who were ready to suffer deprivations and ultimately martyrdom just to conserve the integral performance of their traditions and confessional identities. In this way, by embracing the tragic dimension of Christianity to its full extent, as both

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what needs to be done to perform Christ in the body of the suffering human being, and what needs to be done to perform those who followed Christ in martyrdom for their tradition, we might be able to bring back the unity of the Church's Holy Tradition, seen by Vladimir Lossky as "the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, communicating to each member of the Body of Christ the faculty of hearing, of receiving, or knowing the Truth in the Light which belongs to it, and not according to the natural light of human reason" (1974: 152). From the perspective of pro-existential performativity, it may also be added that the Church's Holy Tradition weaves together the materiality of our local cultures and the message of faith in a love for humanity – our love nourished by God's love – that transcends any material, social, linguistic, racial, gender or national boundaries (Galatians 3:28).

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The pro-existential embracing of the Church's ongoing worldly mission looks for ways of performing our materially-encased identities that would heal, rather than hurt. The Church, the violated bride of Christ, needs so much healing in the twenty-first century, which is a healing from the wounds which have been, perhaps, less inflicted by outsiders, but mostly by Christians. Repellent acts, such as sexual abuse, committed by famous theologians and high-profile members of different Christian denominations, Yoder being one of them (Guth 2015);[5] the current so-called "special oper-

5 As I completed my critique of Yoder's Constantinianism before this section, my reference to him as an abuser is not connected to that critique, but rather with my argument about the narcissism of many high-profile members of the Church, which, if left unaddressed, risks metastasizing over the larger segment of Christ's body (i.e. a certain local Church). I have included this detail in the text, rather than in a footnote (although it may carry with it the risk for my entire argument to be read as tendentious), having taken into account Guth's honest cry that she was faced, during a public event, with the embarrassing situation of having to address Yoder's abusive behavior regarding women, on which she had had no previous knowledge despite having studied Yoder's theology for many years, and even though Yoder's abuses had already been made public in 1992 (Guth 2015: 119-120). This ambiguous attitude among scholars of Yoder, to either mention Yoder's documented history of abuse only in a footnote, or even completely ignore it, has continued to this day (Untea 2022: 656-657). My argument here needs to be read as referring to the power used by highly-respected individuals who are supposed to further the pro-existential message of the Church, and who attempt instead to intimidate and take advantage of young minds and sometimes the most vulnerable people.

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ation" conducted by Russia in Ukraine, with all the atrocities attached to it, between Orthodox brothers in Christ; and the current lack of empathy of Christians living in "civilized" countries for other human beings fleeing their home countries because of persecution and war. These are only a few examples of the ways the bride of Christ has been repeatedly violated. Through such acts, too many Christians have shifted from performing Christ to performing the Roman soldiers and the members of Sanhedrin mocking Jesus: "Prophesy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?" (Matthew 26:68). Like a victim of rape, the Church has often found herself in the painful situation of being ashamed of recognizing *who* are those who have abused her, because of the very fact that those abusers were illustrious names of her own family. The tragic character of this situation reveals the need for the Church to develop the gifts of prophesying ways to embrace the foolishness to accept the painful process of having her abused body publicly displayed and judged for the sake of justice and, more than this, for reconciling Christians with each other, and healing her wounds by the warmth of the Holy Spirit.[6]

6 A clarification is needed here: this discussion about the abused "Church" is not about the Church as an institution, but rather the Church that is simultaneously the broken/violated body of Christ and the broken/violated body of Christ's specific little siblings. In this respect, the reader might usefully consult Reaves, Tombs and Figueroa's edited collection (2021) on the "scandalous" possibility of Jesus himself having been the victim of sexual abuse (Reaves and Tombs 2021: 1). In the light of this, I emphasize that I do not wish to obscure the fact that many victims of abuse have (still) not been recognized by those who purportedly wish to safeguard the Church's good name. The pro-existential call of Christ points towards this: when one of His siblings suffers, Christ suffers, as He Himself feels violated in His own Body, and thus the Church suffers. "We" as siblings of Christ, need to keep in our hearts this intimate connection between individual suffering and the suffering of the Church, or we alienate ourselves from the pulsating life of Christ's Body, preferring to remain safely within our rigid confessional identities. It may be indeed painful for every member of the community to adopt the tragic attitude that places the delicate and mysterious intricacies of the community's inner life on public display, to be judged, mocked, and connected to aspects of human instrumentalization of otherness that truly shocks the average believer. Yet this is the tragic vocation that the pro-existential message of Christ requires from us: to endeavor to leave our comfort zone, otherwise, our shame when confronted with the pain and suffering that spoils our narcissistic approaches to Christian identity will only bring more pain and suffering on the most vulnerable little siblings of Christ, while concealing the sin of respected individuals in the community.

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"We"[7] have arrived in this abject situation not because we have embraced Constantine's project, but precisely because we have abandoned it. Somehow, at some point in our lives, we have become ashamed to carry the cross of a Fool who dared to believe that the order of this world may be changed so as to reconcile the world within itself and with God (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). "We" have found it more tempting to adopt the deeply secular conceptions of rationality, co-existence and humanism, and moreover, have even distorted them so as to perform them in the shadow of secrecy, ugliness and powerful influence of the "ruler of this world" (John 14:30) as standard behavior within the Church. Somehow, our practices of worship did not prevent the spirit of the "ruler of this world" from infiltrating our identities. This explains why the rationality of the world has trapped these practices in the rigid ritualistic behaviors allowed by the separation

7 A last note on the issue raised, during the peer-review process, regarding my choice of what may be called the "pastoral we". While not possessing any administrative or clerical position in my own Church, I have used "we" as a way of contrasting with the standard requirements of the academic and intellectual exchange. One of our most pressing issues, at the level of the Universal Church has been, ever since the Great Schism, the impossibility of talking, acting and being the "we", the Church-bride of Christ. The moment someone dares to say "we" outside their own little group, there will always be the question: "In *whose* name are you talking? *Who* do *you* represent? *Who are you*, to say 'we'?" Under the influence of Enlightenment and (post)modernity, these questions are legitimate for a co-existential dwelling of individuals, communities and nations. Perhaps we take them too quickly as legitimate questions within the Church. In the end, the Church's own history of schism, religious scapegoating and wars (and by extension, as I have argued throughout the essay, Christians' failure to further Constantine's project) has led to the emergence of the spirit of the Enlightenment. This impossibility of hearing the "we" pronounced by an Other without becoming instantly suspicious, or at least worried about the potentially unpredictable development of what the "we" may bring forth on the long term, is another symptom of our fragmentation. So, I dare to ask this here, in a footnote, because the "we" may not be compatible with standard academic practice even within the Church: how to speak and act *for* the Universal Church, even when one does not have the appropriate credentials, if the "we" has fallen out of grace, so to say? I believe that "we" may still be used within the Church as long as it does not bring forth the political or representational dimension, but humbly focuses on the *performative we*. After all, the Performing Christianities ZRKG-conference of 15-17 June 2023 focused on performativity across Christian denominations, and during my own presentation I used the "we" without anybody objecting. I believe this was because I was contributing to an actual collective performance of the "we" (nourished by the transdenominational and ecumenical ideal, and perhaps – without forgetting the requirement of modesty – to a potential sustaining of our efforts by the Holy Spirit that has given unity to Christ's Church). This is another reason for which the enquiry on performativity throughout the Universal Church is in need to be continued.

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of the public and the private, and between the spiritual and the secular. Trapped in this way by Enlightenment rationality, our practices cannot express themselves meaningfully to the outside world, nor even to other Christian denominational traditions. What we need, as a coherent unified body of Christ, is to come together again and find performative ways to present and re-present our different practices to each other, so as to make them permeable and capable of sensing that there are other practices, that have not supervened in our own tradition, but which may also "subjectify" (van Loon 2012: 202) towards our siblings' engagement with holiness.

Rediscovering the performativity of the Church as the broken body of Christ and the violated bride of Christ implies coming back to the project of reconnecting and always keeping together the two tragic spaces: the one that founds the possibility of all material expression of pro-existential rationality, and the other that takes this very material expression as a dimension to be treasured, healed, reconciled with itself, and ultimately transcended through reconciliation with the love of God. The Church needs healing through the concomitant performance of both the "foolishness of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) and the dignity of the "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:19). This kind of twofold performance will show the world the Church's capacity of self-healing, and healing the outside world, but not because modern public relations require the Church to function better as yet another corporation aiming secure longevity through attracting public trust. Sometimes, the Church may need to embrace the foolishness of risking leaving the security of its own established traditions, if this is something that may faithfully perform the kind of politics entailed in Constantine's unfinished project: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

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