

## RESPONSE TO CHRIST, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE CHURCH

By: Joe Gordon (11/1/12)

Before I get to the substance of my response, I would like to offer thanks to Fr. Doran for inviting me to respond to Dr. Ormerod's paper *Christ, Globalization, and the Church*. I am especially thankful for this opportunity because I have found and continue to find Dr. Ormerod's work, extremely interesting and stimulating. I owe Dr. Ormerod thanks for the extremely helpful work he has done on behalf of furthering understanding of the mystery of the good news of Jesus Christ, especially because his own extensive, penetrating, and nuanced work has enabled me to better understand aspects of my own theological projects. I therefore offer what follows in humility and gratitude. In this paper, Dr. Ormerod impressively brings elements of his previous work on revelation, globalization, virtue ethics, and grace into fruitful synthesis with Fr. Doran's own work in *Theology and the Dialectics of History* and Bernard Lonergan's discussions of the vectors of progress, decline, and healing in history laid out in the essay "Healing and Creating in History." There are a couple of key features of Ormerod's argument that I would like to comment on and some pressing questions I want to raise in response.

First, I would like to return our attention to Dr. Ormerod's discussion of the unsettling nature of the concrete particularity of the incarnation. I want to briefly examine the implications of this affirmation for our understanding of the healing work of the Triune God in history, particularly as this healing work is mediated through the Church. Dr. Ormerod writes:

" . . . there is something profoundly unsettling about the concrete particularity of the

Incarnation. The divine Word enters into history as an element within history, not above

or beyond history, and so injects the healing vector of God's graciousness through historical process itself. God's saving action, which has a universalist intent, takes place within the concrete particularities of a concrete human history" (5).

Dr. Ormerod stresses rightly, in my judgment, that in the incarnation revealed incarnate and religious meaning has (I emphasize here) *entered into human history* in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (see pgs. 4 and 5). This claim, to me, seems to be as apt a summary of the content of Christian belief as one can offer with so few words. There is indeed evidence of the healing vector in history, and Christians affirm that Jesus Christ is the fullness of this evidence himself; the Triune God has fittingly ordained the concreteness and visibility of the mission of the Word (6).

Dr. Ormerod goes on to stress that the Church itself is "the historical prolongation of the mission of Jesus" (6), "embod[ing]" the historical agency of Christ. In fact, he argues that "the mission of the Church is intrinsic to the whole process of reversing decline in history"(7). I have absolutely no objections to how tightly Dr. Ormerod has connected the mission of Christ with the mission of the Church. I do wonder, however, what Dr. Ormerod means by Church here. I would also like to more closely examine Dr. Ormerod's suggestion that "the Church seeks to meet the objection of the historical particularity of Christ, through the emergence of an historical movement which claims for itself an incipient universality . . . called to constantly go beyond the present boundaries of its existence, in order to preach the Gospel to all peoples." (7). I will first raise some questions concerning this latter point, regarding the Church mitigating the world's objection at the historical particularity of Christ, and second, I will raise questions

concerning what Dr. Ormerod means by “Church” which will draw on my comments about the Church mitigating Christ’s particularity.

The scandal of the particularity of Jesus Christ seems to be, to me at least, simultaneously FIRST the scandal that this 1st century Jew from backwater Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, is the incarnate Son of God, and SECOND that the form of his life, of his meaning and values in the entirety of their dimensions, whether religious, interpersonal, etc., is itself an adequate, complete and constitutive revelation of the life of the Triune God in concrete, created history. I think that Dr. Ormerod means that the Church mitigates the scandal of the first dimension of Christ’s particularity: i.e. this Jew, at this time, is God Incarnate. Dr. Ormerod does not mean that the Church mitigates the scandal of Christ’s single-minded love for the world unto death, and that this form is the form of the love of the Triune God. He is not saying that the Church mitigates the apparently foolish wisdom of God according to St. Paul in 1st Corinthians, “Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Gentiles and foolishness to the Jews” (see 1:18-31). Christ’s form of life, exemplified in the cross, is the principle of the catholicity of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Christianity’s universality *is* its particularity! This is the scandal the world rejects.

In Chapter 5 of *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, Fr. Doran writes that the Church “will have missed the mark” if it fails to embody the form of the suffering servant revealed by Deutero-Isaiah and fulfilled and manifested in the entirety of the Christ-Event but especially in

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<sup>1</sup> “Being in Christ Jesus is not tied down to place or time, culture or epoch. It is catholic with the catholicity of the Spirit of the Lord. Neither is it an abstraction that dwells apart from every place and time, every culture and epoch. It is identical with personal living, and personal living is always here and now, in a contemporary world of immediacy, a contemporary world mediated by meaning, a contemporary world not only mediated but constituted by meaning.” Bernard Lonergan, “Existenz and Aggiornamento,” in *Collection*, CWBL 4, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 231.

our Lord's passion.<sup>2</sup> Fr. Doran argues, in stark terms, that lacking this form, "ecclesial ministry is simply not collaboration with the divinely originated solution to the mystery of evil."<sup>3</sup> He later writes that

"without the participation in the law of the cross, the ministry of anyone, even one with the fulness of orders, is ministry only in the attenuated sense of *ex opere operato* in those limited areas where such an understanding of sacramental grace is applicable; and in other areas it is nothing but 'sounding brass and tinkling cymbal' (1 Corinthians 13.1)."<sup>4</sup>

The strong affirmations of the Church's commission to embody the form of Christ made by both Dr. Ormerod and Fr. Doran raise significant and perplexing ecclesiological questions for me. First of all, I need to ask a basic question for clarification: to what Church is Dr.

Ormerod referring when he argues that the Church is the historical continuation of Christ's work? Is his focus solely on the Roman Catholic Church, or is "Church" more ecumenically inclusive for him? I ask this question in humility, from my admittedly Protestant perspective.

Am I included? Second, I want to raise a question of fundamental importance: what is the Church if it is not the historical continuation of Christ's work? Or better yet, can the Church fail to embody the self-sacrificial love of Christ and still be the Church? If it is not the Church that is failing in all of the failures of Christians through the centuries, then who or what is failing? As a Protestant, I have few objections to setting Christ over against his Body when the Body needs discipline. I have no problems with a corrigible Church. Does Dr. Ormerod hold either of these

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 109. "[Avery Dulles'] model of 'servant' names the constitutive intelligibility of the other models, that without which the church is simply *not* a community of disciples, a sacrament, or a faithful carrier of a mission from God to the ends of the earth." *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

positions? Dr. Ormerod mentions that the Church has often been on the wrong side of progress in affirming the value technological and scientific advances, but can it also not be wrong in its actions? This is an admittedly provocative question. I raise it in humility, unsure of what the Roman Catholic Church teaches on the matter.

Dr. Ormerod is certainly right to raise the question of whether or not there is evidence of the healing vector in history, and he is right to point to Christ and answer affirmatively. His discussion of the Church as the continuation of Christ's mission, however, raises key ecumenical and ecclesiological questions for me. Would not an ecclesiological realism—in which Christians acknowledge the failures of both understanding and action perpetuated by Christians are actually failures of the Church to live up to its participation in Christ's mission—be an apologetic aid (in both senses of the word) and motivation for the Church as it grapples with the difficulties of globalization? The form of Jesus Christ is universal but not totalizing precisely because it is *transimperial*, and so the mission of the Church is not subject to the critique of cultural imperialism, at least it is not subject to this critique when it embodies and carries forward the historical causality of Christ.<sup>5</sup> The Church then, is to meet globalization's pluralism by embodying Christ's self-sacrificial work of healing in history. Dr. Ormerod has admirably drawn our attention to this fact, and I look forward to discussing just how the Church can carry forward this healing vector communally in greater depth. Thank you.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 127.