Faith and Culture in Conversation:
Another Theologian at Work


The 2004, Issue 3 of *The Australian eJournal of Theology* was a tribute to Marist theologian, Rev. Dr. John Thornhill, to recognize his contribution to theology and theological education in Australia. On that occasion, I examined the theological underpinnings of Thornhill’s work as he engaged the area of faith and culture.

In this review article, I wish to continue that discussion but in relation to another theologian’s contribution in the same area, namely Dr. Neil Ormerod, Professor of Theology at the Australian Catholic University. I would like to use two recent publications as a platform to review his work – its scope and some of its persistent concerns.

Ormerod’s theological endeavours seem to take the form of three concentric circles of a conversation. His first is with a spotlight primarily within the Catholic tradition and *Creation, Grace and Redemption* is representative of this. This book also reflects Ormerod’s effort to engage with resources and scholars beyond the Catholic tradition or the discipline of theology.

Ormerod sets the scene right from the start of this book: ‘Theology likes to ask the big questions’ (xi). Ultimately, these are about the origin, identity and destiny of humankind and the universe. ‘These are the great questions to which the Christian tradition responds and with which Christian theology struggles’ says Ormerod (xi). They provide the stepping stones from which, drawing on sources past and present, he tries to bring these questions and the Christian response to them into sharp relief so that ‘Christian theology has no need to feel on the back foot’ (xi).

The trajectory of Ormerod’s work is, in reality, an interchange between theology and anthropology. It is clear, however, that, for him, the human person is not an isolated self but a relational being, embedded in a network of relationships (interpersonal, divine/human, social, political, economic, cultural and ecological). This provides the matrix within which the big questions are articulated and addressed.

He starts with the God of creation and human beings in Creation (the role of men and women in the world). He proceeds through the structure of moral evil and Original sin on to Jesus and the story of redemption, grace and the supernatural, Church and sacrament, forgiveness and reconciliation. He concludes with the main issues in Eschatology involving death, the end of the world and the afterlife.

What is distinctive about Ormerod’s approach? He notes that one reader of the draft version observed that it was a strongly ‘positional’ text. He concurs and explains that he is
not just expounding the views of others. He is defending a position that he finds 'most intellectually coherent and consistent within the Christian tradition' (xii). I would like to suggest that beneath this 'positional' stance there is a 'personalized' dimension. Ormerod has immersed himself in the theological tradition, has reflected on what he has received, critically evaluated it, distilled it and then appropriated it into a personal vision. It is intriguing how often in this book and elsewhere his use of footnotes is minimal. Yet, the reader is in no doubt that Ormerod is surefooted in his knowledge of the theological landscape.

Second, at times, he brings a refreshing approach to well-worn topics. This is true, for instance, in his treatment of moral evil and its various expressions at the social, cultural and cosmic levels. Again, there is his reading of Original Sin in which he draws on the work of René Girard and Sebastian Moore. He sees it in terms of the experience of victimhood. We are 'first and foremost sinned against' and that this, in early childhood, entails a 'human brokenness, an interior shattering or distortion of consciousness that muddies search for direction in the movement of life' that brings with it a 'weakened sense of our own worth which inclines us, with a statistical inevitability, to sin' (79). Finally, Ormerod brings clarity and insight in his treatment of the 'dual language' of sacrifice. This is embodied in Jesus as both 'victim' with other victims and the 'victim' whose sacrifice is voluntary self-giving love.

Third, Ormerod is an internationally recognized specialist in Lonergan. While this methodology and perspective colours his approach in this book, it does not dominate. In fact, this book demonstrates the breadth and scope of his theological perspective. With other Australian theologians, he has been a particularly formidable contributor to ongoing debate in Trinitarian theology. He has also become more immersed in the tradition with his probing work on, and increasing appreciation of, Augustine and Aquinas. This is also reflected in The Trinity: Retrieving the Western Tradition (2005) where, as one reviewer notes, he exhibits insight and courage in going against the theological tide in his positive re-appraisal of the psychological model. He also has an ongoing concern with Ecclesiology and its intersection with, and need for engagement with, the social sciences.

As elsewhere, so here, beyond authors already mentioned, Ormerod draws on de Lubac, Rahner, liberationist and feminist theologians etc. He brings the Christian tradition into dialogue with other religious traditions. This is consistent with the book being part of the series 'Theology in Global Perspective.' Another significant quality in Ormerod is his style and presentation. They are always clear and accessible. There is never a wasted word. Here, he offers questions for reflection, suggestions for further reading and a very helpful index.

Theology within a wider perspective brings us to the second circle of Ormerod's work. It is engagement with the issue of theology and culture but with a specific focus – that of modernity and post-modernity. Emblematic of this is his recent discussions on the need to reconsider the question of natural theology in the light of Charles Taylor’s work on secularism, personal identity and ethics of authenticity and its correlation with the thought of Lonergan. As a backdrop to his investigations, Ormerod draws on the work of Robert Doran (expanding Lonergan). Within the three models of culture (cosmological, anthropological and soteriological), there is a discernible dynamic at work. It is presented as a theology of history, which brings us to the third circle of Ormerod's work.
This is the concern underlying his joint project with Shane Clifton, *Globalization and the Mission of the Church* within the series ‘Ecclesiological Investigations’. Here, the focus is on the broader issue of theology and history/culture but now in collaborative mode – the complementary relationship of Ormerod’s Catholic and Clifton’s Pentecostal perspective. This is a substantial and scholarly book that is really an extended application of Lonergan and Doran’s approach to the contemporary world.

The authors begin by acknowledging that ‘globalization’ is a contested concept. In their survey of various approaches to it, they suggest there is an emerging consensus. The term captures a world becoming smaller, where structures of social relationships are not as restricted by physical geography and that this phenomenon touches the personal, economic, technological, political, cultural and religious spheres of life. Associated with it is a ‘future-oriented reflexivity’, a critical awareness about what it could and should become. The question arises: as a participant in this process, what is the role of the Church?

Having clarified ‘globalization’, the authors address their approach to the investigation. It needs to be acknowledged that, for many readers, Lonergan and his followers seem to use an ‘in’ language and conceptual system which can prove just too forbidding. Ormerod and Clifton seem to recognize this and suggest that if a reader has difficulty with the ‘technical’ explanation of the ‘framework’ for the investigation in Ch.2, they should move on to Ch. 3. This may be a mix of realism and thoughtfulness on their part. But, for a non-specialist in Lonergan, Chapter 2 offers a very lucid and compact outline of Doran’s framework on a theology of history that would be hard to better.

Nevertheless, to encourage other non-specialists to read this significant book, it may help to give a brief outline of the framework used in addressing the question: how should the Christian Churches respond to an increasingly globalized world? First, the authors start with an observable, predictable, universal life-pattern or movements in history: life, in all its forms, involves a creative tension (‘dialectic’) between stability and growth, integration and expansion, or progress and decline. This manifests itself at the horizontal level. But, within that process there is, at the vertical level, an ‘upward’ or creative vector to human progress and a ‘downward’ or redemptive vector through the gift (or grace) from a divine-transcendent source. This brings the healing of sin and evil and the fulfillment of human aspirations through participation in the divine life. In other words, nature needs grace. This distinguishes the model as a ‘theology’ rather than simply a ‘philosophy’ of history. This life-pattern is reflected in nature, the person, society, culture, religion and entails a scale of values appropriate in each of these five domains.

Second, in investigating how this recurrent life-pattern is present in, for instance, globalization, one should be guided by the key life-questions (transcendental precepts) which, for Lonergan, are used by human beings in trying to understand their experience: What’s happening? What does it mean? Is my understanding correct? What needs to be done? Further, in this context, to ask ‘if I am a Christian, what difference does that make to how I answer these questions?’ The measure of the life-pattern of progress, decline and redemption is by the exercise of these life-questions that bring us to insight and leads to transformation. The design of the framework incorporates the Christian perspective as the controlling factor. This framework helps discernment and action with regard to whatever
fosters or opposes the thrust towards progress and transcendence, such as evil and sin, in relation to the scale of values in the five areas of human existence.

Using this investigative framework, Ormerod and Clifton are guided by the five life-questions: first, in coming to understand and appreciate the ‘data’ of globalization in the light of a wealth of scholarship in the social and cultural sciences; second, as they probe and clarify the life-pattern driving human existence and the values needed to promote it. They are concerned with assessing globalization’s potential for transformation in various spheres: life itself in relation to global poverty and the environment (Ch 3); social structures that frame communities, specifically the impact of changes in family life, in technological/economic areas and in governance/world politics (Ch 4); cultural values that guide and sustain societies – their multi-layered character and the impact of neoliberalism, and the human rights and environment movements (Ch 5); the promotion of whole persons everywhere through the virtues – those stable attitudes and dispositions to act in a way that fosters authentic humanity in love, justice and hope (Ch 6); and, finally, in the sphere of religious values. Modernity’s global thrust has stimulated global religious revival but also questions about it as a source of discord and conflict. Religious communities and the Church, in particular, must focus on the values that arise from true religious experience rather than on institutional survival or the exercise of power (Ch 7). The dominant lens in this investigative framework is religious, namely the Church’s mission to proclaim and embody the religious values of the Gospel and to mediate divine grace and healing in those particular domains of human and cultural life.

The authors see their task in terms of practical outcomes: how useful is their framework in throwing ‘light on the question of globalization and the Church’s mission’ (ix). Despite the complexity of the issues and trends, the authors do illuminate the issues and their relationships, and for that reason have every reason to feel satisfied (as they hope to be, ix). They acknowledge, at the outset, their need to go ‘beyond their comfort zone’ and to read in disciplines such as economic, political and cultural theory (ix). In investigating the meaning of events and trends (be attentive, be intelligent), their aim is to arrive at wise choices (be responsible) based on informed judgments (be reasonable). This is done in the light of the Gospel, going beyond ‘faith seeking understanding’ to a faith that seeks ‘transformation’, namely, the formation of persons and communities in the virtues, namely to foster conversion in its various forms (moral, intellectual, psychic, religious) in the Reign of God.

With the help of their overall framework, it is remarkable how consistently the authors distill a wealth of complex material into manageable and intelligible form and so arrive at judicious evaluations. They are thus enabled to present a case that makes sense – it is coherent, consistent and convincing. In this, they are helped by the clarity of their analysis, the modesty of their claims and the accessibility of style and presentation. There is a seamless quality in this book – not an easy task for joint authors. Each chapter ends with a succinct summary, has endnotes, and the authors provide an extensive bibliography and index.

Further, transformation is not achieved by looking to the Church for laws or decisions based on the exercise of authority. Ormerod and Clifton’s approach exemplifies the ‘tradition of moral reasoning’ generated by the Church ‘which strives to greater and greater clarity on moral issues, and addresses new issues as they arise, often in tentative
and provisional ways’ (43). The ultimate benchmark of how to act morally is the wise person. From that point of view, Ormerod and Clifton are working within a long-standing sapiential tradition found not only in the West but also in the cultural and religious heritage of the East.

In this book, Clifton makes common cause with the hard-nosed quality of Ormerod’s other theological activities (as in the first book reviewed here). It can be traced back to Ormerod’s first major work *Grace and Disgrace: A Theology of Self-Esteem, Society and History* (1992). The aim is always on theology’s goal – faith seeking to understand God and the ways of God, in other words, ‘what we are saved for.’ But what distinguishes Ormerod is that he consistently tries to grapple with ‘what are we saved from.’ Now, with Clifton, their joint effort to probe and articulate the ‘from’ leads them beyond superficial analyses of the issues arising from globalization or of evil’s presence in the world.

For instance, they are wary of blaming the breakdown in the family on secularization and a shift from biblical values. Such trends as cohabitation, decreasing birth rates, changes to divorce laws, increasing acceptance of gay relationships are ‘not so much the cause of the breakup of families as they are symptoms of the pressures placed on the family as the result of the rapid and radical social and cultural changes relating to globalizing forces’ (88).

Again, they appreciate the need for a critical theology and Church involvement that highlights ‘the priority to justice to the poor.’ Careful analysis and reflection are needed to identify ‘the biased and shallow values’ that emerge when capitalist structures ‘are left to their own devices’, to discern ‘ambiguities and blind-spots’ inherent in neo-liberal economic theory so as to offer ‘reasonable and practical responses’ (99-100).

With the help of the human sciences, then, Ormerod and Clifton are prepared to follow sin and evil’s tangled roots (e.g., in injustice, prejudice, bias, discrimination, victimization) wherever they lead. This can be in individuals, societies, political structures, governments, cultures, Churches and in the process of globalization itself. In other words, Ormerod and Clifton are theologians who ask not only the ‘big’ questions but also the ‘hard’ ones.

In using one particular ‘model’, the authors acknowledge that it is ‘an approach’ that can only be measured by how useful it is in illuminating the issues. Its strength seems to be in offering a unified framework of investigation with its own methodology. In that, it appears to differ from the Niebuhr’s theology/culture model of mutually critical correlations that centres on interpretation. For Ormerod and Clifton, religion and revelation are within the operating framework and the theological focus is on understanding leading to transformation (i.e., forms of conversion and fostering of the virtues). From the start, Ormerod and Clifton point out they are offering answers to stimulate further conversation. In that spirit, two possibilities arose for me. First, the authors acknowledge the universal ‘presence and agency of the Spirit’ that generates ‘a genuine willingness to embrace the truth wherever it is to be found’ (182). It would be interesting to pursue further the Spirit’s action in events and trends so that the Church’s has something to learn from history and cultures about values. Put another way, how precisely can the dialectics at work in history reveal the workings of social grace?
Second, in fostering values, the authors rightly argue, first, that global religious communities should give priority to sustaining authentic religious experience and second, that the Church must frame ‘its mission by way of a thoroughgoing embodiment of the religious values that constitute its essence’ if it is to accomplish anything ‘of lasting significance’ (163). In the light of other ‘models’ of the Church, for instance, as communion or herald, how does this call to witness relate to the authors’ view that the Church’s primary role is in mission for the world? What can we learn from studies on the dynamics of witness and its inter-subjective reverberations, for instance, in the experience of moral beauty or of suffering? This is particularly relevant in the light of the postmodern world’s concern for authenticity and its sensitivity to what ‘rings true’ in what people or groups say or do.

So, to sum up this review. We are indebted to Neil Ormerod for Creation, Grace and Redemption. This is a very fine book. His scholarship is real but not pretentious. He has crafted a particularly helpful update for anyone who wants to understand some of the thinking and developments in contemporary theology in the Catholic tradition.

His collaborative effort with Shane Clifton Globalization and the Mission of the Church is indeed, in the words of one reviewer on the back cover, a ‘theoretically sophisticated and analytically rich’ exploration of globalization and its challenges to the Church. In offering an integrated model for theology engaging history and culture, it makes an important and innovative contribution at the international level. It may also anticipate further collaborative projects from within the Catholic and Pentecostal traditions.

Neil Ormerod and Shane Clifton deserve congratulations for this work of considerable and perceptive scholarship. This is true whether one is a fellow theologian, or someone interested in Christian theology in relation to culture, or amongst those, in the Church or community, concerned with the issue of globalization. It is certainly a book that will provoke further discussion.

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