

# Theological Studies

<http://tsj.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Book Review: Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology. By Neil Ormerod**

Christopher McMahon

*Theological Studies* 2014 75: 927

DOI: 10.1177/0040563914548658q

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://tsj.sagepub.com/content/75/4/927.citation>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Theological Studies, Inc

**Additional services and information for *Theological Studies* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://tsj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://tsj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Nov 27, 2014

[What is This?](#)

way, highlighting the centrality of forgiveness and the fundamental continuity between “this world” and the “world to come.” Perhaps in a future book he might turn his eschatological imagination to the cosmic dimension, to how all creation and all the fruits of human labor will find their place with the saints in the “new heavens and the new earth.”

*John R. Sachs, S.J.*  
*Boston College School of Theology and Ministry*

*Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology.* By Neil Ormerod. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014. Pp. x + 444. \$49.

It is not often that a book begins with an acknowledgement of its own failure, but Ormerod proffers far more than a “failed experiment” here (viii). Rather, this is a substantial work that offers a framework for an authentically systematic ecclesiology from a Lonerganian perspective. The author consciously and repeatedly credits the foundational works of Joseph Komonchak and Robert Doran and brings their theoretical contributions to life by engaging the data of the church in history. One of the book’s many strengths is that it does this without codifying the presentation with jargon, an unfortunate feature of otherwise significant theological efforts from many who are rightly devoted to developing Lonergan’s project. The method used here represents an important and even pivotal contribution to an authentically systematic approach to ecclesiology, one that stands simultaneously as a framework for, and an invitation to, further research and collaboration.

The book falls neatly into two parts with substantial methodological chapters (1–5) followed by an exploration of the history of the Catholic Church that is highly schematized but substantially illustrative of the methodological material (chapters 6–10). Chapter 1 specifies what O. means by a systematic ecclesiology, one that is qualified as empirical/historical, critical, normative, dialectic, and practical, and connects to a proper understanding of the relationship between theology and the social sciences. Chapter 2 highlights Lonergan’s account of human intentionality and the drive toward meaning and value over and against accounts of the social sciences that stand as “neutral” but fail to adequately address the problem of evil and the unintelligible. Moreover, the chapter unmasks the ideological distortions of the social sciences, both the myopic secular self-understanding of the social sciences and the theological dismissals of them (John Milbank, for example), thus paving the way for an account of the organic relationship of theology and the social sciences.

Chapters 3 and 4 move the reader to the heart of O.’s project, with the former chapter offering a set of categories for understanding Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom using Doran’s account of the “scale of values.” These personal, social, and cultural values involve the reconciliation or integration of the two poles of human existence: limit and transcendence. The skewing of the dialectics that comprise these values represents the distortions, reverse insights, and surd of human history. On the other hand,

however, the perfection or integrity of this scale of values (in light of the experience of grace and corresponding religious values) supplies a theoretical framework for irreducibly categorizing the proclamation of the kingdom of God, but in a way that renders this proclamation intelligible and useful in light of the social sciences. Chapter 4 brings the scale of values to bear on the church itself by using it to shed light on its mission and structures. Chapter 5 further specifies the dimensions of the church offered in chapter 4 by focusing on the church's threefold ministry (bishop, priest, and deacon) to meet practical needs as they emerge in history, needs met by the creativity of the church as it seeks to orient its mission in a concrete and historical world mediated by meaning and values. O.'s treatment of the dynamics behind the emerging practical needs of the church, its ingenuity in the face of these needs, and its fidelity to soteriological values provides a helpful resource for nuancing claims about the role and place of ministry and ministers in the church and mitigating facile notions of how the church is and is not unchanging.

The scale of values explored in the methodological chapters provides a recurring basis for the exploration and evaluation of church history in the book's second half. Chapters 6 and 7 delve into the church's struggle to mediate its mission and its soteriological values—self-sacrificing love and new life that is a share in God's own life—within a thoroughly cosmological culture, one that envisions culture as the reflection of divine order reflected in nature itself. With the emergence of the late classical period and the dawn of the Middle Ages, O. traces a cultural shift from a cosmological to an anthropological culture, one centered on the intentions and moral obligation of human beings. Although highly selective, these chapters cover extensive ground and on their own serve as a valuable overview of historical theology.

The modern context of the church, the subject of the last chapter, is dominated by the skewing of anthropological culture and the disintegration of cultural values in particular. Modernity's embrace of a thoroughly anthropological culture left the church identified with cosmological culture in a way that moved the church into an emphasis on ecclesial identity, one that fixed social and cultural forms following the post-Reformation era and compromised the church's ability to effectively adapt its form to the demands of the new culture and therein mediate soteriological meanings and values.

The book's commitment to the incarnational and empirical dimensions of sociological and historical research is buttressed by the book's subplot, the relationship of grace and nature as well as faith and reason. The book effectively introduces readers to a systematic approach to ecclesiology while giving an insightful analysis of the Roman Catholic Church's current situation (though O.'s project is equally applicable to other churches), as its mission is threatened with a counterfeit and dubious theology that thinly masks a politics of identity. No book that accomplishes so much could rightly be considered a failure.

*Christopher McMahon*  
*Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, PA*