

SED CONTRA, ERGO, RESPONSIO:

Honoring the Legacy of Christopher Morse as a Teacher of Christian Theology

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In the fall of 1991, with two years of course work toward our doctoral studies completed, we began two years of work as UTS Tutors for Professors Christopher Morse and James Cone in the introductory theology sequence of ST103 and ST104. To say this experience was formative would be an understatement.

A central component of Christopher's ST104 course, Foundations of Christian Theology, was gaining skills in theological argumentation in order to demonstrate how Christian doctrines can be applied to contemporary issues. Generations of Union students developed this skill through writing *Utrum* essays. In this exercise Christopher adapted the steps of "theological dialectic" set forth by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*. We were lucky to be working with Christopher as he was completing his seminal work, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, and enjoyed applying the *Utrum* form to the foundational theological claims. In *Not Every Spirit* Christopher states, "The purpose of this exercise is to develop the complementary skills in addition to doing scriptural exegesis and historical exposition required for what is called "dialectic," meaning here the pros and cons of argument involved in adjudicating disputed issues, a task of dogmatic theology as a "testing of the spirits."¹ Reading dozens of *Utrum* essays and watching Christopher demonstrate this skill in many classes over two semesters of tutoring ST104 shaped our own theological method profoundly. Learning to examine contemporary theological and ethical issues through the *Utrum* format remains one of the most important intellectual and academic skills we gained in our doctoral programs at Union.

When we were approached individually to contribute to a volume honoring Christopher and his career we responded enthusiastically "Yes!" Given our joint work together as tutors with Christopher we thought it appropriate to coauthor an essay for this *festschrift* by choosing two contemporary issues central to our own current work and using the *Utrum* format to examine them and develop our own positions. That is what follows in the two sections below.

1 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*. New York and London: Continuum, 2009 (2nd edition), 387

Mary Beth (M.B.) Walsh wrote her doctoral dissertation under Christopher's mentorship reclaiming the ecclesiological image of body of Christ from a feminist liberationist perspective. Since her younger son Ben's diagnosis of autism at age two, M.B. has devoted considerable time to addressing theological issues related to autism, and particularly the participation of persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders [ASDs] in the church. She believes to this day that she would never have completed her doctoral work without Christopher's support. In the midst of her doctoral program, after the dissertation proposal was approved, but before she began writing, she gave birth to her older son. Very little work on the dissertation took place that first year of sleepless nights and infant care. Returning to Union to register for the semester, and needing her advisor, Christopher's signature on her registration card, she sheepishly confessed to Christopher that she had made virtually no progress on writing her dissertation. Christopher said to her, "Oh, M.B, don't worry about that! The work you are doing now is so much more important. And when you return to writing theology, the theology will be better on account of the work you do now." Her essay below is a modest attempt to bear witness to the truth of Christopher's advice.

Dan Spencer wrote his M.Div. thesis under Christopher's supervision on the hermeneutics of John Howard Yoder, with particular reference to Yoder's book, *The Politics of Jesus*. His doctoral work in ethics drew on feminist, gay and lesbian, and Latin American liberation theologies to develop a Christian ecological ethic of sustainability and justice. More recently he has been examining issues of climate change and social inequality in the context of globalization. His essay below addresses arguments from some Christians that we do not need to address climate change because we can trust in God's providence to maintain and sustain the earth and human wellbeing.

UTRUM #1: CHRISTIAN LITURGY AND INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

[*Utrum*] Whether it is the case that Christian liturgical celebrations should welcome individuals with behavior disorders, such as Autism Spectrum Disorders [ASDs], regardless of whether their behaviors may disrupt the celebration or prove distracting to others in the congregation.

[*Videtur*] It seems to be the case that churches (Christian communities) have an obligation to assure that worship services proceed with reverence, decorum, and minimal distractions so that those who are called out to gather together and offer thanksgiving to God are able to do so.

Scripture testifies that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Prov. 9:10) and this affirmation, repeated in the Psalms, grounds the orientation of Christian worship. Approaching the Holy One with due reverence and respect is the embodiment of this affirmation that recognition be given to the vast difference between creature and Creator. The Psalmist is more explicit

in the language of the King James version that “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about [God.]” (Psalm 89:7, KJV) Reverence, decorum, order, appropriate behaviors are not simply social conventions of Christian worship, but rather are the result of one of the foundational professions of Christian faith. Precisely because Christians profess God as Creator and in recognition of ourselves as creatures, Christian worship is marked by due reverence and decorum. Paul devotes himself at some length to giving the church at Corinth instructions regarding worship, but saves his clearest admonition for last when he sums up by stating, “but all things should be done decently and in order.” (1Cor.14:40.) Following Paul, but long before the formal establishment of liturgical norms, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds his audience to, “offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.” (Heb. 12:28) Scripture makes clear that reverence is a reflection of correct understanding of who we are and who God is. Some individuals diagnosed with behavior disorders such as autism spectrum disorder may not be able to control their vocalizations or movements during religious services. It is important that disruptions during worship from individuals with behavior disorders are not interpreted as willful or intentional, and the disorders themselves are not viewed as the fault of either these individuals or their parents. At the same time, however, it may not always be possible to include such individuals in worship that is by prescriptive necessity orderly and reverent.

The tradition of Christian worship is long and varied by both denomination and location. Yet all recognize the importance of hearing the Word of God and the value of moments of reverential silence. Periods of silence are commonly observed during the Penitential Rites, following the sermon or homily, and after communion. A quiet and decorous congregation is better able to apprehend the Word of God in both scripture and preaching in its full force and meaning for today. The General Instructions on the Roman Missal of the Roman Catholic Church admonish that “all must listen with reverence to the readings from God’s word, for they make up an element of greatest importance in the Liturgy.” (GIRM, 29: 2011) The behaviors of some individuals with ASDs may make it very difficult for worship services to conform to these historically valued norms. Few, but some, individuals with behavior disorders such as ASD may find it impossible to remain still during services. Others may not be able to fully suppress their vocalizations during required periods of silence in worship. Stereotypic movements that are typical of ASDs such as repetitive movement of the hands or arms, or more challenging, self-injurious behaviors like hitting oneself in the head with a hand, are notoriously hard to eliminate from the behavioral repertoires of some individuals with autism. When these behaviors result in the production of sounds and noise, it may sadly not be possible to include such individuals in worship celebrations that require periods of silence.

In addition to the dictates of scripture and tradition, the needs of the whole worship community must be taken into account. We are called out for worship as church communally; one cannot “be church” in isolation. Because we come together by virtue of our identification as followers of Jesus, communities need to

find a way to make sure that worship is attentive to the needs of the community as a whole. This sort of attention to the greater good is clearly seen in church architecture when sanctuaries include “crying rooms” available to parents of infants prone to noisy and unpredictable outbursts. Beyond that, many congregations make their expectations known to individuals who make noise, including babies, through stares or angry glances. These of course, are not the most charitable ways to respond and while they should never be condoned, nonetheless speak to the needs of the congregation as a whole for an ordered and decorous service.

[*Sed contra*] On the other hand, churches have an obligation to welcome those with behavior disorders like ASD, or other intellectual and developmental disabilities, who may not be able to sit quietly or keep all their limbs still during services because Christian worship is incomplete unless open to all who are baptized and called out by faith to gather and give thanks to God.

Scripture testifies that Jesus told his friends, “That when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Mt. 18:20) When Christians gather to give thanks to God through sharing the word and Eucharist, they form, though not through their own power or volition, the body of Christ. We know, as Paul writes, that “in the one Spirit we were all baptized into the one body” (1Cor. 12:13) and it is not possible to exclude any members and still claim to be the body of Christ, for as Paul says, “the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you.” (1Cor. 12:21) The corporate character of the faith community that claims to be the body of Christ necessitates inclusion of all the baptized.

The creedal mark of the church as “one” can only be satisfied with the inclusion of all who approach the table. Through the Eucharist, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, the church has historically claimed to be one despite the evident lack of unity in polity and parish. This faith claim, which Christians cling to despite ample evidence to the contrary, is given some measure of objective validity when the community gathering includes all who come. Chastened though we must be by the many ways Christians betray this claim, including those with ASDs and other neurological and behavior disorders allows our congregations a small measure of affirmation of our claim that the church is one. Including and welcoming those with behaviors that may be disruptive breathes life into the profession of the oneness of the church in Christ.

Some individuals with ASDs may find it challenging to sit quietly through a typical Sunday service. Some individuals with ASDs will feel the need to move around, or will make vocalizations, or may engage in stereotypical movements such as flapping their hands or tapping feet. An empathetic response to these behaviors must be grounded in the recognition that it is no simple matter to assign intention to any of these behaviors. Indeed, the very designation of ASDs as “behavior disorders” suggest as much. When the behaviors are the result of the disability then how responsible is the person engaging in the behavior for them? Generally we refrain from blaming people who use wheelchairs for not being able to get up the stairs. Most would be horrified if their church said to someone who uses a wheel chair, “well, too bad you use that chair and can’t get up the stairs,

otherwise we'd love for you to join us." And yet, how is it different when we say to individuals with autism, "if only you could stay in your pew and sit quietly and still, then we'd be happy to welcome you." While people with physical disabilities no longer face blame for their disabilities, the same cannot be said for those with neurologically based intellectual and developmental disabilities [I/DD], such as ASD. Churches have an obligation to educate themselves about developmental disorders and to refrain from blaming or punishing by exclusion those who cannot stop themselves from making noise, or moving around during services.

Given the prevalence of ASDs, which are now estimated by the Centers for Disease Control to affect as many as 1 in 68 children,² Christian faith communities cannot afford to exclude their families and supporters. As our church communities continue to struggle for relevance in an increasingly secular society, it would be foolish indeed to overlook the evangelical dimensions of including even those whom it may be challenging to include. A national study on living with autism found that fewer than 20% of families of children with autism felt that they had strong ties to their religious communities, while almost 40% of parents of typically developing kids reported strong ties.³ Including individuals with ASDs and their families must be understood as both a means of meeting the needs of people longing for community and also bearing witness to the Gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ. Inclusive communities reflect the inclusive mission and ministry of Jesus that always extended welcome to those on the margins and admonished all to, "let the little children come to me." (Mt. 19:14)

[*Responsio*] I respond that churches must work to welcome and include individuals with developmental, neurological, and behavior disorders in their communities and worship.

[*Ergo*] Hence, churches have an obligation to work at becoming inclusive communities where all are truly welcomed and valued.

A pastor friend once told me with excitement that a family with a young adolescent with autism had recently joined their congregation. The pastor was so proud of her congregation because when the teen with autism got out of his seat, and stood next to the pastor as she read the Gospel from the pulpit, the congregation was okay with that. They welcomed this family, and this young person, regardless of his behaviors and how those behaviors might have disrupted their planned worship. I've struggled with this story since first hearing it. While I do genuinely appreciate the inclusivity of the congregation, as the parent of a teenager with autism I feel a responsibility to look at the situation from the perspective of the individual with autism and ask, does this sort of inclusion best serve his needs? So I ask, will my son continue to be included if he behaves this way? Will he be welcomed when there is a new pastor, or he attends a different church? Will his faith community be able to appreciate his gifts if they feel they must always make

2 "Autism Spectrum Disorder: Data and Statistics." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 24 Mar. 2014. Web. 29 Mar. 2014.

3 "Easter Seal's Living with Autism Study." Harris Interactive, 2009. Web. 6 Mar. 2014.

exceptions for his behavior? Will he be happier, in the long run, wandering around the sanctuary alone during services, or sitting with others as a member of the congregation? And most critically, is he capable of learning to sit when others sit and stand when others stand?

Parenting is hard work, and parenting a child with autism is to typical parenting precisely what extreme sports are to sports in general. If extreme sports are seen to involve a high level of difficulty and risk, spectacular stunts, and excitement, then I hold that it is fair to call parenting a child with autism, extreme parenting. Parenting a child with autism is extreme parenting because of the very nature of autism. Autism makes learning hard, and learning is in essence the acquisition of new behaviors. So, I have learned to observe my son's behaviors and ask not just is this okay here and now, but how will this behavior look in 5 years? In 20? Behaviors that others are willing to overlook in a child or young adolescent can be perceived as dangerous in adults. Pushing others out of the way to rush to the front of the line may be cute in a three year old, annoying in a 13 year-old, and a downright danger to others at 23 years old. Parents of individuals with ASDs need to figure out ways to teach our children to be members of communities, how best to live in the world, how to make sure they will go on being included after we are no longer with them to facilitate their inclusion.

The challenge of the "anything goes" sort of welcome is that it overlooks the ability of individuals with ASDs to learn. The reason I use the phrase "individuals with autism" or people with autism here is to underscore that they are not "autistics" before they are people. Highlighting the humanity of individuals with autism is intended to point out that as human beings, people with autism are capable of learning. The challenges of autism largely adhere to the fact that it is so little understood. With no blood tests or brain scans that can form the basis for diagnosis, medicine bases diagnoses solely on observed behaviors, our crudest tool for identifying a condition. Additionally, the criteria for the observed behaviors and the language that medicine uses to describe and diagnose autism spectrum disorder(s) changes with frequency, often several times within a generation.⁴

Lack of understanding of what autism is results in parents and caregivers being faced with a wide variety of options for intervention and treatment. Truly effective intervention and teaching is expensive and hard to access. In the absence of effective intervention some families will adopt any method that works for them to support and include their loved one with autism. This can result in difficulties for congregations⁵ but true inclusivity is never simply the function of a community on behalf of individuals who might be challenging to include; inclusion only occurs when communities and individuals work together toward common goals. It is sim-

4 The American Psychiatric Association publishes the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which contains the standard definitional criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) used in the United States. The definition of autism has changed and been significantly expanded over the past 30 years through various revisions of the DSM. What may have been labeled "learning disabilities" 30 years ago, was diagnosed as "Asperger Syndrome" twenty years ago, and would simply be called "autism spectrum disorder" today.

5 In 2008 a church in Minnesota sought a restraining order against a 13 year-old with ASD.

ply a false dichotomy to separate out the needs of the individual versus the needs of the community. There is no community without the individuals who show up at the table of the Lord.

Individuals with autism are best served when welcomed and included, *and* respected as people able to learn, to acquire new behaviors, and to contribute. It is entirely possible to teach someone how to attend church.⁶ Shaping of behaviors so that over time the behaviors become less disruptive will be in almost all cases quite possible. Families of individuals with disruptive behaviors need to reach out to parish staff and communicate how important it is to them that their loved ones be included. And church workers need to commit to working with the families toward that goal. Just as each individual with autism brings to the community unique gifts and challenges, so the work of inclusion will vary according to need. This work of inclusion may not be easy but it will always be worthwhile. While my pastor friend's congregation did indeed behave admirably in accepting the teen with autism who stood by the pulpit during the gospel, I hope that they also sought out the family and offered support and help in teaching, perhaps over a very long time, the teen with autism to sit with friends and family in worship and beyond.

There are common elements of Christian worship that are likely to naturally facilitate the inclusion and contributions of individuals with ASDs. Many individuals with autism appreciate repetition and are especially good at recognizing patterns. Even the most liturgically experimental congregations will have elements of worship that remain the same week after week providing a point of connection for some with ASDs. At a minimum, most churches gather in the same place each week, at the same time, and with many of the same people present. There is almost always a donation to put in the collection basket, a bulletin to pick up or hand out after the service, and a pastor to greet with a handshake. Predictability is often valued by individuals with ASDs, and the predictable elements when we gather as church can be the means for not only facilitating inclusion but moving beyond it to empower individuals with ASDs to become contributing and valued members of the community. The people with autism in your congregation are the ones who will be there each and every week, even when the weather is bad, even when the church leadership is squabbling, even when Sunday school takes a break for the summer. Routines are valued by most individuals with autism; the most "disabled" member of my family is the one who makes sure I am in church every Sunday.

Helping individuals with ASDs to become valued and contributing members of the faith community, even if the process takes years, provides a place to belong for many who will struggle to belong anywhere. For individuals with autism like my son, who will not live on his own, or marry, or drive, or read, who will need help even with simple functions of daily living for all of his adult life, there will come a time when almost all of his interactions with people will be with paid support staff. It's entirely possible that his faith community will be the only place that he is around people who are not paid to be with him. Yet, I can claim with

⁶ Teaching Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders To Attend Church. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Caldwell College, Caldwell, NJ. 2008. Jessica Rothschild, Sharon Reeve, Linda Meyer, and Dr. Patrick Progar.

certainty that his faith community will be richer for including him on account of the gifts he will bring and not just because he offers an opportunity for others to be kind to him. Including those who may initially be hard to include gives witness to our most fundamental faith claims about church.

Scripture speaks of reverence before God, derived from our recognition of ourselves as God's creation. But the very same insight recognizes also the vastness, beauty, and complexity of all creation, and with that the need to gather before God in our brokenness and noise. Reverence will take many forms. The Spirit will be present, this Jesus promised us. And including even those who may challenge us to include, will be our best opportunity to reflect the ministry of Jesus who never turned away from the outsider or the marginalized.

While moments of sacred silence are correctly valued during Christian worship, they are not ends in themselves. Elements of worship practice can never be viewed as more important than the members of the body who gather at the table. Even those who may occasionally break our silences are to be included, and valued, and taught and loved.

The expectations and practices of any one congregation will change and vary over time. Communities that love children will learn to tolerate some noise and distraction. Pastoral leadership is critical to help communities value all and learn to see themselves as a reflection of the expansive love of God that was reflected in the inclusive ministry of Jesus. Valuing the needs of the community can never justify excluding the challenging.

UTRUM #2: CLIMATE CHANGE AND GOD'S PROVIDENCE

[*Utrum*] Whether it is the case, that trust in God's Providence requires Christians to respond actively to current evidence of threats from climate change.

[*Videtur*] It seems to be the case that Christians should trust in the power of God as Creator and Sustainer of creation, and in the promise of God's ongoing Providence of creation alone to protect and sustain life, both human and other-kind, from any alleged effects of climate change.

Scripture testifies that God is the creator of all things (Gen. 1) and is sovereign over all creation: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1). Moreover, in the promise and covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-16), God promises to provide for the needs of his people and his creation, as testified by Abraham on Mt. Moriah and the rest of scripture, "The Lord will provide" (Gen. 22:1). Hence, "the earth, and with it all the cosmos, reveals its Creator's wisdom and is sustained and governed by His power and lovingkindness."⁷

⁷ Much of the theological position developed in the *Videtur* comes from documents of The Cornwall Alliance, particularly, "The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship," and "An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming." Available at www.cornwallalliance.org.

Humankind is created in the image of God, and is given the vocation of exercising dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26–28) through caring stewardship that “affirms that human well being and the integrity of creation are not only compatible but also dynamically interdependent realities.”⁸ Given a privileged place in God’s creation, human persons are moral agents “for whom freedom is an essential condition of responsible action.” Though humans fell into sin by disobeying God’s Law, bringing God’s condemnation through a curse on the earth (Gen. 3), “God in His mercy has not abandoned sinful people or the created order but has acted throughout history to restore men and women to fellowship with Him and through their stewardship to enhance the beauty and fertility of the earth.”⁹

A critical component of the human vocation of stewardship is attention to the wellbeing of the poor (Deut. 15:10–11; Luke 4:18–19); hence concern for the earth and concern for the poor are complementary rather than competing obligations for people of faith.

Current proposals to address the alleged threats of climate change focus on governmental mandates to reduce emissions of greenhouse gasses, particularly CO₂. These actions are unjustified theologically for several reasons. Most importantly, such actions will have a disproportionate impact on the poor; “abundant, affordable energy is indispensable to human flourishing, particularly to societies which are rising out of abject poverty... With present technologies, fossil and nuclear fuels are indispensable if energy is to be abundant and affordable.”¹⁰ Such policies are essentially a regressive tax that contradicts the biblical requirement to protect the poor from harm and oppression.

Second, mandated emissions reductions are premised on the belief that human actions are driving the alleged effects of climate change, for which there is no scientific consensus.¹¹ Christians trust in God’s Providence to sustain creation and “deny that Earth and its ecosystems are the fragile and unstable products of chance, and particularly that Earth’s climate system is vulnerable to dangerous alteration because of miniscule changes in atmospheric chemistry.”¹²

Third, government-mandated reductions in use of fossil fuels are an unwarranted restriction of individual human freedoms that increases government control over individual human persons while harming the poor. Scripture warns against the “principalities and powers” (Eph. 6:12) concentrated in government that is “given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation” (Rev. 13:7); international treaties such the Kyoto Protocol and others currently being proposed by the United Nations are a dangerous concentration of power in international governance that threatens the freedom of individual human persons to act according to moral conscience.

Finally, environmental perspectives that see humans primarily as consumers and polluters and argue instead, that “nature knows best” and should be left

8 The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, www.cornwallalliance.org.

9 Ibid.

10 An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming, www.cornwallalliance.org.

11 <https://www.skepticalscience.com/global-warming-scientific-consensus.htm>

12 An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming, www.cornwallalliance.org.

largely alone, free from human influence, reveal a romanticized view of nature. These views deny humankind’s biblical vocation as producers and stewards, that, “as bearers of God’s image, [can] add to the earth’s abundance.” “A clean environment is a costly good; consequently, growing affluence, technological innovation, and the application of human and material capital are integral to environmental improvement”¹³—particularly to meet the needs of the poor. Opposing human dominion over the earth often results in deifying nature itself, confusing the creation with its Creator, which Christians recognize as idolatry.

Hence, faithful Christians should not view governmental mandates for reduction in greenhouse gas emissions as expressions of stewardship within God’s Providence. It is God alone who is responsible for creating, maintaining and sustaining creation. Rather, political leaders should focus on policies that protect human liberty, keep energy affordable, and stimulate economic growth to help the poor to rise out of poverty.¹⁴

[*Sed Contra*] On the other hand, it would seem that a faithful understanding of God’s Providence and concern for the poor requires Christians to act in response to current threats of global warming. The witness of scripture is consistent throughout that God’s promise of creation’s continuance does not contradict human responsibility to act with God to protect the integrity of creation while prioritizing the needs of the poor.

As noted in the Evangelical Climate Initiative’s “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” “Because all religious/moral claims about climate change are relevant only if climate change is real and is mainly human-induced, everything hinges on the scientific data.”¹⁵ And here the evidence is clear and stark. According to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), “Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree that climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities, and most of the leading scientific organizations worldwide have issued public statements endorsing this position.”¹⁶ The most recent findings of the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change conclude that warming of the atmosphere and ocean system is *unequivocal*, that there is a clear human influence on the climate, and that it is *extremely likely* that human influence has been the dominant cause of observed warming since 1950.¹⁷

Hence faithful Christian response requires joining with others to mitigate the causes of climate change, particularly greenhouse gas emissions generated by affluent lifestyles well above the meeting of basic human needs, while attending to

13 The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, www.cornwallalliance.org.

14 An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming, www.cornwallalliance.org.

15 “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action.” The Evangelical Climate Initiative. Accessed from <http://www.npr.org/documents/2006/feb/evangelical/calltoaction.pdf>

16 <http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus>

17 Working Group I Contribution to the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report. Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis. Accessed from http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/uploads/WGIAR5_WGI-12Doc2b_FinalDraft_Chapter09.pdf

the legitimate social and economic needs of poor peoples and nations. As stated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Action to mitigate global climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice that does not put the poor at greater risk or place disproportionate and unfair burdens on developing nations.”¹⁸

The Christian moral tradition provides several virtues and principles to guide this response. Central to the Catholic Bishops position is the virtue of prudence, taking steps now to mitigate probable negative effects in the future:

The virtue of prudence is paramount in addressing climate change. This virtue is not only a necessary one for individuals in leading morally good lives, but is also vital to the moral health of the larger community. Prudence is intelligence applied to our actions. It allows us to discern what constitutes the common good in a given situation. Prudence requires a deliberate and reflective process that aids in the shaping of the community’s conscience. Prudence not only helps us identify the principles at stake in a given issue, but also moves us to adopt courses of action to protect the common good. Prudence is not, as popularly thought, simply a cautious and safe approach to decisions. Rather, it is a thoughtful, deliberate, and reasoned basis for taking or avoiding action to achieve a moral good.¹⁹

Acting prudently also requires prioritizing the needs of the poor and socially vulnerable. The effects of climate change have disproportionately higher effects on the poor who bear little responsibility for causing climate change but have the least ability to respond and adapt. The longer we delay addressing the causes of climate change, the worse off the poor will be in the future.

Coupled with concern for the poor is commitment to the wellbeing of future generations, both human and otherkind. The search for endless economic growth in our global economy that generates excessive levels of greenhouse gasses also undermines the ecological wellbeing and sustainability of the planet itself, while increasing social and economic inequality both within and between nations.²⁰ All of this undermines the very conditions needed for future life to survive, let alone to flourish. Christian scripture and tradition consistently bear witness that our

18 “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good.” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Accessed from <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/global-climate-change-a-plea-for-dialogue-prudence-and-the-common-good.cfm>

19 Ibid.

20 James Gustave Speth, *The Bridge at the End of the World: Capitalism, the Environment and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, 1–2; Isabel Ortiz and David Anthony, *Global Inequality: Beyond the Bottom Billion – A Rapid Review of Income Distribution in 141 Countries*. United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), New York, April 2011, vii.

vocation of dominion rooted in freedom is exercised faithfully only *within* dual commitments of justice for the poor and the integrity of creation.²¹

[*Responsio*] I respond that trust in God’s Providence requires Christians to respond actively to current evidence of threats from climate change.

[*Ergo*] Hence affluent Christians in particular have an obligation to acknowledge, take responsibility for, and address the contributions of affluent persons and nations to climate change.

A few years ago I supervised a Master’s thesis that surveyed conservative Christians for their theological responses to climate change.²² While there was some diversity in the responses of the thirty-five Christians who were interviewed, most responses could be grouped into a few answers: (1) climate change is not happening; (2) if it is happening, it is a natural phenomenon and not human-induced; (3) if it is happening, God is in control and there is nothing that humans can or should try to do in response. Virtually all of the responses drew on an understanding of God’s Sovereignty and Providence where God is in control of the present and the future and therefore if climate change is real, it is part of God’s plan and humans should not intervene. Trust in God’s Providence served as justification for not acting in response to climate change, *and* for there being no need to look at the contribution of affluent nations, and affluent Christians, to climate change whose effects already are harming the poor and the planet. Evangelical Christian groups such as the Cornwall Alliance provide further theological justification for opposing governmental efforts to address climate change through mandating reduction of greenhouse gas emissions as (1) harming the poor, (2) restricting human freedom and liberty, (3) increasing the power of oppressive governments, and (4) preventing human actions and productivity that benefits the earth by making it more productive. These positions also deny that there is a scientific consensus that climate change is occurring and is largely human caused, typically adding that it is not even *possible* for human activities to affect something as large and complex as global climate systems.

I find these positions—which have proven to be very influential in debates about climate change in the U.S.—to be deeply troubling, for both their theological and scientific reasoning, as well as their practical effects.

First, I believe the scientific evidence about human-caused climate change is unequivocal. Scientific consensus should not be confused with scientific unanimity: while vigorous debate continues on many aspects of climate change, the overwhelming consensus among climate scientists is that global warming from climate

21 <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/hist-e.html>

22 Wylie Carr, “The Faithful Skeptics: Conservative Christian’s Religious Beliefs and Their Perceptions of Climate Change.” Unpublished Master’s Thesis, The University of Montana, 2010. See also, Wylie Carr, Michael Patterson, Laurie Yung and Daniel Spencer, “The Faithful Skeptics: Evangelical Religious Beliefs and Perceptions of Climate Change.” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, Vol. 6.3 (2012), pp. 276–299.

change is real, increasing, and is largely human induced. If it is largely human induced, then we have a moral responsibility to address it.

Second, there is a particular responsibility for *affluent* Christians in affluent nations to address climate change, and particularly how our affluent lifestyles generate much of it. Studies of per capita consumption of energy resources that generate greenhouse gasses demonstrate that affluent nations and individuals generate a disproportionate amount of the emissions responsible for causing global warming.²³ Negative impacts fall disproportionately on the poor (and other species; many of the mechanisms causing climate change are also generating a global crisis in biodiversity). It is deeply troubling to see concern for the poor used as a reason for continued economic growth based on fossil fuels and cheap energy as justification for the wealthy not to have to examine and change our lifestyles. The appropriate response for affluent Christians is confession and repentance: acknowledging and confessing how our overly affluent lifestyles harm the poor and the earth, both now and well into the future, and then to begin the hard work of *metanoia*: repenting and turning from our sinful ways.

Third, the role of government is critical in this response. While Christians must always be vigilant that government not overstep its bounds and restrict or prohibit individual freedom and exercising of moral agency, the global scale of climate change requires responses at all levels of our lives, including government. Here the traditional ethical principle of subsidiarity, “that human affairs are best handled at the lowest possible level, closest to the affected persons”²⁴ is critical: it serves as an important check on government overstepping its bounds on human affairs, but it also recognizes that problems must be addressed at the scale appropriate to the problem. The complex and global dimensions of climate change whose effects pay no attention to political boundaries require actions at *all* levels, including and especially at the international level. In addition to cautioning against the potential tyranny of the “principalities and powers” (Rev. 13), scripture and tradition also affirm the importance and appropriate roles of government in maintaining social order and protecting the common good (Rom. 13).

Fourth, it is critical that we distinguish between kinds of economic growth and the energy use it requires. Economic growth and social development to meet the needs of the poor continue to be critical moral obligations for people of faith. In the short term such growth will continue to generate greenhouse gasses; here people of faith must distinguish between “survival emissions” and “luxury emissions”: energy produced to meet basic survival needs versus energy produced to increase the affluence of the already affluent.²⁵ Both scripture and tradition are clear that luxury and affluence that come at the expense of the wellbeing of the poor and the earth contradict God’s command for faithful stewardship; the moral maxim to “live simply so that the poor may simply live” reflects faithful Christian commitment.

23 <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC>

24 http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/what_you_need_to_know/?id=84

25 Henry Shue, “Subsistence Emissions and Luxury Emissions,” (1993) 15(1) *Law & Policy*, 39–60.

I believe the theological position articulated in the *Videtur* and based on documents of the Cornwall Alliance is a distortion of Christian views of God’s Creation, Sovereignty and Providence. In Christopher Morse’s perceptive use of Leo Tolstoy’s important insight, doctrine that is true may yet harbor a lie in how it is used: “I have no doubt that there is truth in the doctrine; but there can be no doubt that it harbors a lie; and I must find the truth and the lie so that I can tell them apart.”²⁶ To affirm trust in God’s providential care for the wellbeing of creation is central to Christian faith; to interpret God’s Providence as providing justification to avoid taking responsibility for our actions that contribute to climate change, thus imperiling the wellbeing of both the poor and the planet, is truth harboring a lie.

Christopher’s chapter on Creation in *Not Every Spirit* provides helpful guidance in further discernment of the theological contours of Christian dogmatics in response to climate change. Here he outlines four traditional roadblocks or complaints about creation doctrine; the second is directly relevant to this paper: *It would seem that Christian doctrine is fatalistic.*²⁷ The short response to this claim is clear: “To such teaching the objection is that human apathy and social irresponsibility in the face of injustice are the intolerable moral outcome.”²⁸

Christopher derives this position in part from what he terms “Rachel’s Refusal.” Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus draws on Jeremiah to link the coming of the Messiah to King Herod’s slaughter of the children of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16): “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more (Matt 2:18). The promise and joy of the gospel can never be used to ignore, diminish or dismiss the reality of loss and suffering in this world, particularly suffering caused by human hands. With respect to destruction of creation, Christopher observes, “God alone can manifest in keeping covenant with Rachel’s refusal of consolation in the face of all within nature and history that currently seeks to oppose and destroy the creature’s good.”²⁹

Fatalism in the face of climate change is not an option for Christian faith.

Key to understanding faithful response to climate change is the traditional category in Christian doctrines of providence known as *concursum*: “the ‘conjoining’ of divine and creaturely actions.” That is, God maintains and conserves creation’s good by using creaturely means. Yet this is never done in a way that violates freedom: “At the heart of this faith is the refusal to believe that God’s ways of upholding and governing creation ever violate the freedom and integrity of the creature who is being upheld and governed. Perhaps no disbelief of Christian faith continues to be less recognized by critics of the doctrine of providence than

26 Leo Tolstoy, *Confession* (orig. published 1885; New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 88–91; cited in Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*. New York and London: Continuum, 2009 (2nd edition), 12.

27 *Ibid.*, 201.

28 *Ibid.*, 202.

29 *Ibid.*, 217.

this one. God's providing is always custom made to fit the creaturely recipient so that the creature's own freedom is never abrogated but activated."³⁰

Here is the Christian answer to both apathy and fear of loss of freedom in responding to climate change through confession and repentance: it is precisely God's grace that frees us to recognize our sinful behavior in contributing to climate change and the destruction it wreaks, as well as frees us to join with God's maintaining and conserving the goodness of creation in our response. As Christopher notes, "The point deserves underlining. This emphasis upon the conforming of God's grace to the created integrity of its recipients is one of the most consistent themes present through Christian doctrine."³¹ Or as the Second Helvetic Confession states, "We disapprove of the rash statements of those who say that if all things are managed by the providence of God, then our efforts and endeavors are in vain... and we will not have to... do anything."³²

Christopher's conclusion to his chapter on creation is perhaps a fitting place to draw this *Utrum* essay to a close: "If the 'dominion' given the human creature is one of serving God's own *conservation* of creation's good, a very different picture arises from that of the profiteer or exploiter, whose power to 'subdue' in the sense of subjugate is seen as a sign of divine endorsement. Theologically considered, responsibility toward creation centers not in any human dominance over the environment, but in God's providential *concursus* in which human agency is conjoined with God's purpose of making a home for righteousness."³³ Making a home for righteousness (2 Pet. 3.13) echoes Isaiah's vision of a new heaven and new earth (Is. 65.17) centered in justice for the poor and oppressed and the integrity of all God's creation. As faithful Christians we repent of our ways of living that contribute to climate change and the harming of God's good creation as we commit ourselves to joining God in bringing forth a new creation rooted in justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

CONCLUSION

We conclude this essay with two additional notes of affection and appreciation for what Christopher has meant to us, personally and professionally. First is our appreciation for the well rounded and in depth theological education we gained under Christopher's wise counsel. In the quarter century since we worked formally with Christopher our interests and issues have ranged widely, but the theological methods and knowledge imparted by Christopher have equipped us with sharply attuned analytical skills, informed by the witness of scripture and tradition, and attentive to both insights from and consequences for the poor and marginalized.

As valuable as our formal theological education was, we are equally grateful for Christopher's mentorship, especially as that mentorship has undergone a metamorphosis from student/teacher to colleague/friend. Christopher models the importance of theology informing all aspects of our lives not only through his brilliant insights and analysis, but also through the integrity of his life and his generosity of time and spirit with both colleagues and students, which continues long after our time as students. We are especially grateful for the opportunity to honor this wise and gentle man publicly, and to thank him for the many ways he has enriched our lives and the lives of many at Union, in church and throughout society. In the spirit of Christopher, we need to make clear that he did not bribe us to write these words; they are ours alone. May the ongoing work of each of us continue to bear witness to the integrity and legacy of our mentor and friend, Christopher Morse.

30 Ibid, 219.

31 Ibid.

32 Cited in Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 219.

33 Ibid, 224.