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Theology Brief Postscript

CREATED ORDER

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My Theology Brief on ‘Order’ has, it seems, been fertile in generating numerous lines of thought in the minds of colleagues working in a wide range of academic disciplines. I observe, reassured, that none of them take strong exception to what I wrote, even though I was trespassing on disciplinary territory other than my own. Here, I will respond to a selection of items that have provoked me to think again or further. And for the sake of simplicity and clarity, I will respond to each in turn and in the same order that they appear.

Contemplating Disorder and Trauma in Literature

I anticipated that some readers would react to my ‘conservative’ choice of topic and affirmation of the good of order. I am aware that my position is one I take in reaction against the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, certainly in Western universities, which finds its inspiration in the social, cultural, and political rebellion of the 1960s. I can imagine other circumstances where I would put my weight on the other foot and talk up more loudly the virtues of disorder. But we are here, not there.

Of the several colleagues who do talk up the value of disorder the first is David Mahan. Specifically, he recommends the virtue of *contemplating* the disorder of sin and, in particular, *appreciating* the difficulty that the victims of trauma often have in seeing moral order at all and believing in it. I take his point. I quite agree that bluntly asserting such order to such people would be pastorally stupid. It would also be unpersuasive. Evidently, there is a lot of moral disorder in the world, some of it horrific, and belief that it is not basic and will not triumph ultimately requires an act of faith.

Nevertheless, the empirical phenomena are ambiguous: there is good in the world as well as evil, or—as Terence Malick’s extraordinary 1998 film, *The Thin Red Line*, puts it—glory as well as horror. And human beings who suffer injustice do have deeply implanted within them—for a reason that begs explanation—the conviction that things *should* be different. And hope that they *will* be different can in fact survive the most dreadful experiences. If I remember correctly, that was the gist of Viktor Frankel’s 1946 book, *Man’s*

Search for Meaning, which observed that different Holocaust survivors reacted to their common experience in different ways. Not all were driven to despair and suicide; some had their faith and hope restored. Still, words alone will not suffice to save. That will require the powerful beauty of personal incarnations of moral order.

What is the Source of Moral Obligations?

In my essay I say that the moral dimension of the created order of the world comprises, at base, human goods or aspects of human flourishing. At one point I also say that "basic human goods generate natural law". In asserting this, I implicitly reject the view that moral obligations are created by divine commands, because I object to the idea that morality is based on inscrutable, arbitrary divine *fiats* and to the allied picture of God as a despot who obliges something *for no other reason* than that he fancies it. Instead, it seems to me that the intrinsic worth of human goods, their beauty, their attractive power are quite sufficient to ground moral obligations. We ought to do something, because it will promote an intrinsically valuable good; we ought not to do something, because it will harm such a good. In brief, the law exists to serve human flourishing. Surely, no orthodox, Pauline Christian can think otherwise. Law is not its own justification. It is not the first and last word. It is not the point. For, as Jesus himself famously put it, "The Sabbath was made for Man, not Man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2.27, KJV).

About divine commands, Nicholas Wolterstorff agrees with me. However, he argues that human goods alone do not generate moral obligations, for some ways of promoting goods are not obligatory, and some ways of diminishing goods are not wrongful. So, in order to determine what is and is not obligatory, we need something beyond the goods themselves. We need, Wolterstorff argues, human dignity or "the worth of persons".

I agree that goods alone do not determine obligations. Human dignity, however, seems to me a concept too vague to be helpful. I prefer a more definite alternative along the following lines. While talk simply of 'human goods' is succinct, it is too abstract to be sufficient. Rather, we should talk at greater length and more concretely of 'aspects of the common human flourishing of a human individual'. No individual human being flourishes in quite the same way. Each individual develops some aspects of flourishing less, more, and differently than others—contingent upon external circumstances, inner talent, and God's calling. Note that what commands our care, whether in promotion or defence, are still human goods, albeit as they are uniquely instantiated in a particular person.

Further, the reason that we are not always obliged to promote every human good is that we cannot. We lack sufficient resources of time and power to do so. That is why universal positive obligations are general, not specific. We are always obliged to love our neighbours in some fashion, but we are not always obliged to preserve their physical lives by feeding them, because sometimes we lack food ourselves.

And we are not always obliged not to diminish a human good, because sometimes we find ourselves placed in tragic circumstances where we cannot defend the good of an innocent neighbour without

damaging the good of the neighbour who is oppressing him. Whether or not it is right to damage the latter's good depends on three things. First, that there is an overriding duty to defend the innocent. Second, that the damage is unintended (that is, an unavoidable side effect of defending the innocent). And third, that it is proportionate (that is, no more than necessary to achieve the good, intended end).

So, I agree with Wolterstorff that the goods alone don't suffice to determine what is and is not obligatory. But I still think that it is the intrinsic value of human goods, uniquely instantiated in particular individuals, that generates such obligations as we have, even if other factors are required to determine what obligations obtain in particular circumstances.

Revolutionary versus Organic Change in Social and Political Orders

A second advocate of the value of disorder is Alan Bell, who asserts that "too much emphasis on order ... runs the risk of leading to an alignment of Christianity with sociopolitical conservatism", and that "Jesus' mission had a strong strand of disordering built into it". Moreover, Bell suggests that my view of social hierarchy comes perilously close to rehearsing 19th century anti-abolitionist arguments that "slavery is fine as long as owners are nice to their slaves".

Of course, I agree that there is such a thing as an excessive emphasis on order. I think that I was careful in my essay to distinguish between the divine moral order and human legal and political orders, and to make clear that the latter are subject to potentially disturbing judgement by the former. Surely, no follower of Jesus could suppose otherwise.

On the other hand, I do not read Jesus as an advocate of revolutionary politics in the modern sense of forced regime-change followed by state-sponsored, top-down social and economic reform. That option was open to him in the form of nationalist, Zealot opposition to foreign, imperial rule and he rejected it (John 6.15). And while he was fiercely critical of Jewish religious elites, he refused to be drawn into condemning Caesar—"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's ..." (Mark 12.17)—and commended one Roman (auxiliary) centurion as a paragon of faith (Matthew 8.5-10, 13). The kind of revolution that Jesus called for was organic, gradual, bottom-up—as indicated by his use of the metaphors of yeast (or leaven) and mustard seed to describe the growth of God's kingdom (Matthew 13.31-33). His model of social, economic, and political change was closer to that of Edmund Burke than those of Robespierre or Lenin. And, at least in relation to the French Revolution, Burke is usually considered to be a conservative.

Moreover, I do think that there are important truths that the alignment of Christianity with sociopolitical radicalism—which is usual, in my experience, among academic colleagues—obscures important truths. Moreover, it runs *with—not against*—the flow of the 'progressive' *Zeitgeist* that now prevails in universities and therefore among cultural elites. That, in itself, does not make it wrong. But it ought to make it *prima facie* suspect among those who, following Jesus, should expect the Word of God to appear from left field. Therefore, to talk up important truths that regnant sociopolitical radicalism tends to overlook or downplay

is, at this time and in this place, prophetic.

As for slavery, I do not think that a careful reader will infer that I think that it is okay so long as slave-owners treat slaves ‘nicely’. What I said was that functional hierarchies in which functional superiors treat functional inferiors “fraternally” are unobjectionable. Thereby, I alluded to Paul’s injunction to Philemon to receive back his runaway slave, Onesimus, as “a beloved brother” (Philemon 1.15-16). When masters treat slaves ‘fraternally’—not just ‘nicely’—they treat them as, in a certain sense, equals. And in that case the institution of slavery, wherein the slave is the master’s disposable property, cannot long survive. Note that for Paul, as for Jesus, the model of social change is organic, occurring from the inside outward.

The Intelligibility of the Universe and Human Moral Order

I share Javier Sánchez-Cañizarez’s interest in the question of the connection between belief in natural law—or, better, natural moral order—and belief in (the biblical) God. It is clear that the latter entails belief in the former: to believe in the one God who created the world out of chaos entails belief that the created world bears the marks of that God’s moral coherence. It is not so clear, however, that the entailment works the other way around: that those who believe in a natural moral order are bound to believe in God—or as Sánchez-Cañizarez puts it, that “intelligibility of the universe drives towards the acceptance of a personal Creator”.

And yet, it does seem to me that a vision of the universe as basically impersonal, blind, and heartless is naturally allied to a view of the human condition as basically amoral. It chimes with the Hobbesian view that, until human beings happen to make contracts or conventions or laws that promote their fundamental common interest in avoiding pain and death, there simply are no morality or justice. The idea that a heartless universe would throw up intrinsically valuable goods—especially non-material, spiritual ones such as knowledge of the truth (regardless of its utility) and appreciation of sheer beauty—seems most odd.

Moral Order and Adaptive Change in Legal and Social Orders

Terry Halliday is another who talks up the value of disorder, when he writes that “*a vibrant social or legal order requires constant disturbance as a dynamic of adaptation*”. (The emphatic italics are his.) I agree with the basic point, namely, that all humanly created social or legal orders, being finite, fallible, and sinful, deserve to be disturbed into new and better forms. I would add the conservative qualification, however, that human flourishing is not compatible with *constant* social, legal, or political disturbance, if by that is meant permanent revolution. Human flourishing normally requires a social context that is considerably stable, predictable, and reliable. That, I take it, is why, in the 1950s and ‘60s, several million Chinese chose to flee the warn-torn and anarchic mainland of China for the British colony of Hong Kong, which, while not democratic, at least offered the considerable social benefit of the rule of law. Only when a political ‘order’ keeps the peace by means of arbitrary state-terror might human flourishing best be served

by incurring the risks and hazards of political revolution.

Halliday quite reasonably asks to see how, specifically, the created moral order bears critically upon social and legal orders. That would require the articulation of an account of human flourishing and its constituent goods, and of a set of moral principles and rules in the light of those goods and of human finitude, fallibility, and sinfulness. These rules would then have to be brought into dialogue with the particular social or legal matters under consideration. I say ‘dialogue’, because the content of moral rules is often refined and determined by the nature of the matter to which they are being applied. The matter sometimes talks back to the rules, which learn and adapt to it. It is not always passively subject to them. For that reason, the task of bringing the moral order to bear upon social and legal orders ought to be interdisciplinary, involving both Christian ethicists on the one hand, and social and political scientists on the other.

Of course, human understanding of what the created moral order actually is, what its principles and rules are, and how it bears upon fields of human conduct is itself bound to be finite, fallible, and sinful. It will take various forms, relatively conflicting. The variety of vying Christian traditions of ethical reflection over two millennia bears ample witness to that. We cannot escape the cognitive limits of our human condition. All we can do is to put our best foot forward, absorb and sift the criticism conscientiously, adjust our direction accordingly, and keep on walking. After all, while we may be Christians, we remain sinful creatures, not gods.

Christian Virtue and Civility in Academic Discourse and Public Debate

My Oxford colleague, Jörg Friedrichs, tells a candid and moving story about how demanding the exercise of Christian virtues in the context of academic controversy can be. I stand and salute him! All I would add is to say that the manner in which Christian academics argue is quite as important, perhaps even more so, than the content of what they have to say.

My own experience of the ‘culture war’ over colonial history, since I was first dragged into it in December 2017, has revealed a shocking degree of aggressiveness, intemperance, and dishonesty on the part of some academic colleagues that I imagined to exist. I have learned that some abuse is best simply absorbed, that not everyone who addresses one deserves a response, that some want a no-holds-barred fight rather than a conversation, and that maintaining one’s dignity and staying doggedly (even if sharply) reasonable is important above all else. It may not impress (at least in the short term) the colleague who is shouting in your face, but it may well impress the dozens or hundreds or (online) thousands who are watching.

I am convinced that in the current climate, Christians, believing as we do in our common subjection to the Truth and feeling obliged by the virtues required to approximate it more closely, have a very important, prophetic role to play in keeping campus controversy civil, showing students how to handle it well, and thereby populating society with graduate citizens trained to so restrain themselves as to be capable of respecting the right of others to speak freely. Legal rights require a virtuous citizenry to have effect.

What Confucian Virtue-Talk brings to the Christian Tradition

In his cross-cultural comparison, K. K. Yeo tells us that in Confucian thought order does not overcome chaos but co-exists with it in “a dynamic relationship”. It is not quite clear what Yeo himself thinks of this idea, but it strikes me as odd. I can understand it as a description of an experience of history as an unavoidable cycle of order and chaos. I can also make sense of it, if I substitute the word ‘disorder’ for ‘chaos’ and understand it along the lines that several respondents have already asserted—that finite, fallible, and fallen human orders invariably need moments of disruption to correct themselves and improve. But, insofar as ‘chaos’ is the very opposite of ‘order’, the notion that we should accommodate ourselves to periodic bouts of chaos as part of a natural ‘dynamic relationship’ seems to me fatalistic and desperate—especially when ‘chaos’ connotes for me the lawless tyranny of brutal warlords (or revolutionaries) in a time of anarchy. And I cannot imagine that ancient Chinese peasants suffering under the heel of such anarchical tyranny during China’s many bouts of bloody civil war were wont to accept it philosophically, unless driven to do so by utter despair. Certainly, the Hebrew authors of the creation myths in the Bible did not view chaos kindly, perhaps in the light of their own people’s traumatic experience of Israel being conquered, Jerusalem sacked, ethnic cleansing, and compulsory exile in Babylon. Consequently, the God to whom they prayed was very definitely one who overcomes chaos and (re)orders the world.

Yeo’s discussion of Confucian thought reminds me of my own study of it in relation to rights, which appeared my 2020 book, *What’s Wrong with Rights?* There (on pages 212-15) I observed that, while the absence of rights-talk is a weakness in Confucian thought, the presence of virtue-talk is very much a strength. This is because, contrary to normal discussion in the contemporary West, rights-talk does not suffice. This is for two reasons. First, the existence of a legal right leaves wide open the moral question of how to use it well. For example, the law may grant me a right of free speech to spit on your sacred cow for the sheer fun of riling you, but the obligation of the virtue of charity forbids me to exercise it. And second, as I have said already, for my right to be effective (without having recourse to the courts), it needs you to possess the virtues that enable you to restrain yourself sufficiently to respect it. Therefore, the Confucian emphasis on virtue is something that Westerners would benefit from paying attention to. And if they were to do so, Western Christians might be reminded that their own tradition also has much more to say about virtues than about rights.

A Prophetic Role for Christians in Secular Universities

In his response, Stewart Gill discusses the constructive role that Christian institutions can play on the campuses of secular universities, and he reports the success of his own Centre for the Study of Science, Religion and Society in providing a forum at the University of Queensland for the self-restrained, respectful, virtuous discussion of “subjects that were anathema to many ‘mainstream’ academics”. I can only applaud that and say again and more loudly that I think that Christians have a very important,

prophetic role to play in modelling the Christian virtues necessary to enable careful, give-and-take, rational discussion of incendiary issues at a time when too many academics and students are frozen in the headlights of the aggressively illiberal expression of ‘progressive’ views of gender, race, and colonial history. I think it no accident that here in the UK, Christians have often been at the forefront of efforts to defend free (and respectful) speech. And I find it a delicious and satisfying irony that we people of faith have turned out to be the champions of rationality and liberality. Of course, for those who appreciate the Christian view of the human condition, it is no irony at all.

Rights, Wrongs and Post-Modernists

An important part of defending rationality and the respectful, liberal engagement of different points of view involves taking the war to the enemy. And among the main enemies are certain reaches of postmodern philosophy, which Denis Alexander discusses in his response from the point of view of the natural sciences.

While postmodernists are right to be sceptical about many aspects of the modernist ‘Grand Narrative’—for example, its faith in a narrow conception of reason, in science, and in inevitable progress—they are wrong to imply that all narratives are equal and that there is no rational way of telling between them. I remember a panel discussion about empire in Oxford some years ago. At one point I turned to a fellow-panelist, a professor of international relations, and observed that she had made two assertions whose logical consistency was not obvious to me. “Enough of your donnish, tutorial tactics!”, she declared imperiously, sweeping my rational objection off the table. At first, I was stunned. But when I had gathered my thoughts together, I asked myself, “Does this dialogue have any rules? If not, what on earth is the point of it? Indeed, if not, is it really a dialogue at all?”.

Further, while postmodernists are right to alert us to the ways in which dominant narratives and their means of construction can be the tools of power, they are wrong to obscure the fact that they object to ‘power’ only because they assume it to be unjust, and in that assumption they are making a claim about what is morally true. In other words, insofar as they expect their claim to have moral authority over anyone else, they are in fact appealing to an objective, transcendent moral order. And for that , they need to be held to account.

Further still, postmodernists are also wrong to overlook the fact that their critique of prevailing ‘power’ is itself a bid for power that can be abused—and, judging by the unscrupulous behaviour of many ‘woke’ academics, it often is abused. In brief, Christians need to remind postmodernists that they are sinners, too.

The Need for Interdisciplinary Dialogue among Christians

To a theologian, it is obvious that Christian colleagues working in non-theological disciplines ought to reflect on how their Christian beliefs should shape the way they think about their disciplinary matter. No

doubt, most Christian colleagues do not need persuading of that. However, time is short and most academic theology does not lend itself to ready use by non-specialists. Like every academic discipline, it has developed a language of its own, which provides insiders with an efficient shorthand they all understand—otherwise known as ‘jargon’. Think ‘kenotic Christology’ or ‘realised eschatology’ or the ‘kairotic moment’. It does not necessarily intend to blind outsiders with esoteric science, but that is often its effect. Hence, the importance of the mission of the Global Faculty Initiative, namely, to get theologians to *think* about how to communicate relevant facets of theology to academic colleagues in a fashion that is readily intelligible.

So far, perhaps, so condescending. For the traffic is not just one way—from the enlightened theologian to poor, benighted Christians in law, biology, music, etc. The theologian has a lot of things to learn, too. As a *moral* theologian (or Christian ethicist), who deals in questions of good and bad, right and wrong, I am more inclined to be sensitive to that than, say, systematic or philosophical theologians, because I cannot begin to apply moral principles appropriately, without first having reached some understanding of the matter I want to apply them to. If I want to apply them to the practice of medicine, I need to know what that practice is. If I want to apply them to the practice of war, I need to acquire an appreciation of military affairs. If I want to apply them to social and political issues, I need first to learn from social and political scientists.

But, actually, the word ‘apply’ is not quite right. For, what is going on here is not the simple ‘application’ of a ready-made, complete moral concept to inert matter. Sometimes, the matter talks back. Sometimes, the moral concept learns from the encounter and adapts. What is actually going on is more a dialogue than an application—more dialectical than monological.

Here is an example. In September 1998 I ran a conference in Oxford under the title, “Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict”. I did so because I had been working on theories of the Atonement and issues of forgiveness and reconciliation. The topic was also highly topical because the Good Friday Agreement had been signed the previous April, ending thirty years of intermittent bloodshed in Northern Ireland. And the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa was about to deliver its report the following month. Among the two hundred people present at our conference were a number of Christian theologians. For us, talk about ‘reconciliation’ was second nature. We all assumed that it was appropriate to deploy the idea straightforwardly in relation to the aftermath of civil strife. However, after one presentation up stood Ulrike Poppe, a Lutheran deacon who had been twice imprisoned by the communist authorities in East Germany for her dissident activity. “What’s all this talk of ‘reconciliation’? I live on the same street as the man who informed on me to the Stasi. I didn’t know him before, and I certainly don’t want to know him now! ‘Reconciliation’? What do you mean?” Poppe’s startling intervention was a moment of revelation. It sparked a train of thought that also took into account reports I had read of criticism of Archbishop Desmond Tutu for urging the too-quick forgiveness of murderers by the relatives of their victims during public hearings of the TRC. The conclusion I drew from all this is that talk of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘reconciliation’ is most at home in intimate relationships of family and friends. Their paradigm is depicted in Rembrandt’s famous paintings of the gladly forgiving Father embracing his

Prodigal Son. However, when we move from the domestic sphere of intimate relationships to the political one of relationships between strangers, the meanings of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘reconciliation’ become attenuated. It really was not appropriate for us to have implied that Ulrike Poppe should have embraced her Stasi informer on the street. In her case, it would have been more appropriate to expect ‘co-existence’ or ‘accommodation’ rather than ‘reconciliation’.

If that sounds just too anaemic a concession, consider this. About ten years later, partly inspired by things I had learned in 1998, I ran another conference under the provocative title, “Is Forgiveness Immoral?”. During the proceedings a Danish philosopher showed us a photograph taken at a *gacaca* trial in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. In this photo, a tall man stands next to a short man. One of them murdered the other’s relative. The bad news is that they cannot look each other in the eye. The good news is that they are standing close to each other. That picture confirmed what I had begun to learn a decade before: that under the grim circumstances of the aftermath of civil war, ‘co-existence’ or ‘accommodation’ is no mean achievement.

I say all of this simply to illustrate two occasions when I, as a theologian, found myself corrected by empirical data—and on the second occasion that data was delivered to me by a colleague in another academic discipline. So, the traffic between theologians and their Christian brothers and sisters in other disciplines is by no means merely one-way. We all learn from what should be a genuine dialogue. We all *need* to learn—non-theologians to think more Christianly, and theologians to think more realistically.

Further Reading

Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public: How to do Christian Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2011)

_____, “A Case for Casuistry in the Church”, *Modern Theology*, 6/1 (October 1989)

_____, “Less Hegel, More History: Christian Ethics and Political Realities”, *Providence*, 18 May 2016

_____, “Religion’s place at the table of ‘secular’ medical ethics: a response to the commentaries”, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41/11 (November 2015)

_____, “Why Religion Deserves a Place in Secular Medicine”, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41/3 (March 2015)

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