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in research universities

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**LEADER GUIDE | CREATED ORDER AND DISORDER
MODULE 2 | MORAL ORDER**

Session Objectives

- For participants to explore Biggar's claim that moral laws are objective and foundational to the way God has created the world, and to apply this discussion to their disciplines.
- For participants to explore how to disagree well, or seek a 'tense consensus', about moral claims.

Reading

- Biggar, Theology Brief sections 4-6
- Wolterstorff
- Biggar, postscript section
- Look at the Order Topical Guide sections on 'Moral order' and 'Discerning moral order', and read one or two entries which interest you.

Questions

Q1: Biggar writes, 'the creation narrative in the book of Genesis tells us, repeatedly, that what God created was "good". What is good is the foundation of moral order, since morally right behaviour defends or promotes what is good, while morally wrong behaviour damages it. What is good (or "the Good") is the state in which a being flourishes as the kind of being it is.' **Name some ultimate human goods – things that promote human flourishing. What moral goods does your field implicitly or explicitly aim at (if any)?**

Leader prompts:

- Biggar lists human life, beauty, the pursuit of truth, charity and justice, moral integrity, friendship with God, alongside the physical necessities for our survival.
- VanderWeele adds 'happiness, bodily health, meaning, character, good relationships, and material and financial means'.
- Lam and Li: 'While **engineers and natural scientists** typically work on programmes that strive to help humanity flourish by means of material prosperity, such as, developing sustainable energy

systems, creating smart cities, etc., **social scientists** are keen on investigating non-material goods, such as mental wellness, family relationships and social welfare.'

- VanderWeele on **public health**: 'Health in some sense was, and is, God's intent [for the human body].'
- VanderWeele: 'Care for our world is part of the task that we have been given by God to do. We are to have a certain love for all of creation as all of the created order was originally created good by God.'
- Mahan argues that **art** has the ability to tell truths about evil and inhabit the experience of trauma alongside its survivors.

Q2: **Biggar** claims that goods are prior to moral laws: laws exist to defend what is good. Do you agree? What are the advantages or disadvantages of this conception?

Leader prompts:

- Biggar lists that it provides a positive motivation, allows for the complexity of moral discernment, makes love and human flourishing the highest value, mitigates against legalism, and makes it easier to explain the law to someone with a different worldview.
- Biggar: 'Goods are the fundamental principles of a moral system, being logically prior to moral rules of conduct. Morally right conduct promotes the goods; morally wrong conduct detracts from them. This priority is important, partly because it is otherwise impossible to explain satisfactorily why moral rules carry the authority that they do and why it is that one should heed them. Moreover, it prevents moral rules from being perceived in ultimately negative terms as constraints that simply weigh down and frustrate. If they do frustrate in the short term, it is only with a view, ultimately, to realising human flourishing.'
- Kong: 'Biggar stated that God's moral order is one of "ordered freedom" -- it is created for our liberation and salvation, for basic human good and abundant life. As the Bible says, "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32), I believe there is an inherent freedom in God's moral law. God's law is not repressive but enables us to live in peace and be free from the slavery of sin.'
- Peteet on **psychiatry**: 'What I find most intriguing in Created Order is the idea that goods (e.g., "friendship with God, personal integrity, just relationships, the experience of beauty, and creativity") precede moral laws, which serve them. This has at least two liberating implications for me as a psychiatrist. One is that more patients could access spiritual resources helpful in their healing if they appreciated this ordering, rather than feeling that moral rules have arbitrarily deprived them of a good life, or engendered toxic shame. A second implication is that moral laws can provide valuable guidance in realizing the good. For example, I have recently been part of a project to show how the virtue of accountability, which includes embracing corrective input,

contributes to mental health and human flourishing.'

Q3: Biggar makes a strong claim that moral laws are inherent in the way God has created the world. He calls this the 'moral order' or 'natural law'. 'Monotheists, therefore, are led by the logic of their theology to believe in a created, given, natural, objective moral order. This order is objective in the sense that it precedes, frames, and endows with moral weight the subjective choices of human creatures.' **What difference does it make to assume that such a moral order exists? What claims does a created moral order make which may be disruptive within the norms of our disciplines?**

Leader prompts:

- This question gets to the heart of Biggar's argument and sets up the content for the remaining sessions, so it is worth spending some time on it.
- Biggar claims that there is an objective moral standard, whereas it is more common today to assume that morality is relative and socially constructed.
- According to Biggar's vision, the priorities and goals of our fields are held accountable to a set of values given by God. This has implications for the way we conduct research (e.g. how we approach the ethical impact of our research methodology, for example considering the environmental impact of scientific experiments) as well as the contents and goals of the research (e.g. social scientific work will be framed by a Christian vision of human flourishing).
- Biggar argues that this higher moral standard is why we can critique **international law**, which is the highest form of human law in our world. He describes NATO's military intervention in Kosovo in 1999, which occurred despite UN opposition, making it 'formally illegal [but] morally necessary'.
- Dean describes her secular colleagues in the field of international relations as showing awareness of a universal moral order: 'They assume that values such as the dignity of human life, and the importance of "loving your neighbor" are globally true and need no justification. I see this as a recognition of those values imbued by God in His created order. They are indeed "visible," even to those who do not believe in God.'
- Halliday shows how a created moral order will critique **legal or social systems**: 'When the created order comes into contact with a legal or social order, the friction of the two, perhaps always, will produce disorder in extant legal orders. If a current legal order is held accountable to the norms of the created order, it will be subject to "prophetic criticism." The assumptions, veneers and practices of a given legal order will be exposed, revealing its moral inadequacies and ethical shortcomings. The sociolegal scholar attuned to the ideals of God's moral order will point to mismatches between those ideals and the law on the books and law in action. That scholar will consistently ask: does the law produce the practices consistent with the created order? This

stance of accountability therefore introduces moral disturbance to legal orders and thus acts as a motor of legal change.'

- Wolterstorff on **art**: 'There are some writers who hold that there is no embodied goodness, no objective worth or praiseworthiness in things. Things have value because we human beings value them. Biggar rightly insists that fundamental in the Christian understanding of reality is the affirmation of objective embodied goodness. … The things God made are not of worth because we value them; when things go well, we value them because we discern their objective worth.'

- Mahan on **literature**: 'First, in proposing the possibility of a God's eye view of evil, though severely limited by our finiteness and corrupted vision, we find a tacit recognition of divine order, that there is goodness which evil has disfigured. Indeed, I would argue that the dissonance we experience when confronting evil inspires a *longing* for goodness in the face of that disruption. A second related point, which is more germane to my consideration of literature in particular, is the unique capacity of art to help us appreciate how deeply *dis*ordered we humans are.'

- Hastings writes that the created order raises complex questions about weapons manufacturing: 'I would like to know as an engineer who does research how it guides me with respect to the choices of research, in particular, research on weapons and what classes of weapons. Is all weapons research acceptable if it helps sustain the created order within the context of natural law or, better, just war?'

Q4: Biggar's account of the created moral order assumes that Christians will often disagree with their colleagues about ethical questions. He writes that Christians must seek a 'tense consensus' with their non-Christian neighbours. **How does Biggar define the tense consensus? What are the topics where this is most necessary, particularly those which impact your research area?**

Leader prompts:

- This question asks how we define the 'tense consensus', and the topics where it usually comes up (its content). The next question will cover how we seek a 'tense consensus'. Encourage participants to reflect on the topics where this is salient.

- A tense consensus may exist between competing camps in a scholarly field, and it may also apply across broader differences of worldview, such as those caused by differing religious or political commitments. Some current examples include culture war issues, issues to do with identity, distributive justice or redistribution, the value of international aid, or global conflicts such as the Israel/Palestine conflict.

- Encourage participants to reflect on disagreements they have had with colleagues which were driven in part by their Christian worldview.

- Biggar's definition: 'The created, given, objective moral order, therefore, does offer the possibility

of a measure of moral consensus across cultures, and between Christians and non-Christians. However, whatever consensus emerges will be imperfect and tense, containing significant points of disagreement.'

- Biggar: 'Since all human beings exist in the one world of God's creating, subject to the same universal divine order, some consensus about what is good and right is to be expected and can be found. International agreements and institutions and cross-cultural enterprises, therefore, may involve common moral elements. However, Christians' view of the human condition and belief in God's saving activity occasion specific understandings of human goods and virtues, which not everyone will share. Cross-cultural or public agreement, therefore, will always contain a measure of disagreement. Consensus will be tense.'

- The specific points of tension you have with your peers will vary depending upon your context. Explore whether you think it is possible to come to an agreement on these topics with people who start from different premisses.

- VanderWeele: 'Understanding the physical, mental, social, and spiritual nature of the human person is in some sense the combined task of all academic disciplines. It is the study of the created order as it pertains to the human person and all that affects human persons. Such study can empower the discipline of public health. As we come to better understand what constitutes and contributes to a person's physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being, we will come to a better understanding of how these various dimensions of human well-being can better be promoted.'

Q5: **What are some constructive dispositions or strategies which are helpful in reaching this tense consensus? Can you think of examples where this has occurred in your field or in public affairs?**

Leader prompts:

- This question is about the practicalities of achieving a tense consensus.
- Biggar: 'the manner in which Christian academics argue is quite as important, perhaps even more so, than the content of what they have to say.'
- Biggar lists some academic or intellectual virtues which help with this task: 'humility (regarding the limits of their own knowledge), docility (or the readiness to learn), patience (in discerning the truth), justice (to what other people say), charity (toward unwelcome views), and courage (in asserting unpopular truths).' We will return to these in more detail in the final session.
- Friedrichs on **international relations**: 'In our intellectual quest for the truth, we must go beyond what furthers any particular agenda, including our own. Regarding the war in Ukraine, for instance, we must strive for an even-handed view even in the face of those who would not accept

that any fault might lie on "our" side of the trenches.'

- Spence: 'For the Christian leader there are therefore two challenges. The first is the challenge shared with all Christian academics of living authentically the prophetic witness to which they are called. The second is the challenge to construct (and, uncomfortable though it may be, the process is probably as deliberate as that verb implies) a personal brand that projects a commitment to the Christian epistemic virtues in an environment in which everything that they do is likely to be read in ways fundamentally at odds with the Christian witness to which they are called.'

- Biggar: '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.'

Q6: Wolterstorff suggests that Christian scholars experience two emotions in their work: 'the emotion of *awe* before the intricacy and immensity of God's creation, and before the ability of human beings to understand something of that intricacy and immensity and their ability themselves to create things of supreme worth, and the emotion of *horror* when considering what human beings have done to each other, to God's creation, and to the Creator.' **Have you experienced these reactions, whether in your academic work or in another setting? How do they help align us with God's moral order or motivate our research?**

 Leader prompts:

- **Natural scientists** are often well positioned to experience awe at God's creation in their work.
- Similarly, scholars working in the **arts** may experience awe in relation to the way art depicts God's creation or embodies human creativity. However, as Mahan comments, art can also show us evil in such a way that we move towards empathy rather than turning away from the evil.
- **Social scientists** and **historians** may encounter the horrors that humans have perpetrated or experienced in the course of their work, although those disciplines may also bring scholars into contact with moments of awe. Being confronted with this horror is an important motivating factor for alleviating those injustices or marks of the fall.
- Alexander describes the history of science as marked by awe at God's creation: 'As Newton wrote in his Principia Mathematica (1687): "the most beautiful system of the sun, the planets, and comets, could only proceed from the council and dominion of an Intelligent and powerful being".'
- Mahan writes about the ability of art to cause us to confront the evil, disorder or horror in things

we accept as normal: 'the dissonance we experience when confronting evil inspires a longing for goodness in the face of that disruption,' which ultimately testifies to the divine orderedness of creation.

- Mahan continues: 'But when people, even whole populations or generations of people, suffer horribly from horrors inflicted upon them, we do them a disservice if we do not attempt to inhabit that space with them, to live with them in that order-defying, and often hope-denying, experience. This can be a messy space, full of ambiguities, anger, and grief that diminish one's capacity to perceive the good, the true, and the beautiful. The art that helps us do this by bearing witness to the traumatic suffering of others … provides access for us. Such work enables us to contemplate the dis-order that trauma produces, and to respond with compassion.'

- These reactions show us the goodness or wrongness of whatever it was that prompted the emotion. They are an affirmation of the goodness of God's creation, in the case of awe, or a visceral acknowledgement of how the fall has marred that creation in the case of horror.

Other Questions

- How can we learn from the moral wisdom of people who think differently to us, such as people who do not share the Christian faith?
- How, if at all, are moral goods discerned within your field?
- What ways of discerning moral goods are most salient in our fields?
- Which of the three categories that Biggar names (empirical observation, analytic self-reflection, and special revelation) is used most among your peers? Which do you think is most reliable? What factors hinder our ability to discern moral goods?

In Depth

- O'Donovan asks further questions about how we move from goods to laws.
- Hays problematises the process of moving from observations about the created order to moral laws.
- VanderWeele thinks through the implications of the moral order in the field of public health.
- Kong discusses the differences between divine law and human law.
- Spence provides thoughts on how to reach a tense consensus in university governance contexts.
- Friedrichs gives a worked example of how to keep virtue in mind while disagreeing in an academic context.

For more information

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