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Theology Brief Preview

CREATED ORDER

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In a Christian vision of reality, human beings are born into an environment that God has already created. We exercise moral and creative freedom in a context that is given to us.

From monotheism to a created order.

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deuteronomy 6.4). According to biblical tradition, God is one: That is to say, first, there is one good God, unrivalled by any evil opponent; and second, this God is internally coherent or rational. That is to say, the created world reflects the coherence, the rationality, the beauty, the order of the Creator (Gen 1:3,7). Monotheists, including Christians, have dogmatic reasons for assuming that the world is basically and constantly ordered and so, in principle, intelligible by human minds or ‘rational’. There are truths about reality that can be grasped. This assumption is basic to the natural sciences and should be basic to all academic endeavour.

From monotheism, through created order, to moral law.

The order which the one God impresses on the created world is not merely physical, but value-laden. The biblical Creator is identical with the Redeemer of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, and is assumed to be benevolent, willing what is good.

The Good Accordingly, the creation narrative in the book of Genesis tells us, repeatedly, that what God created was ‘good’ (verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). 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 what causes human beings to flourish. Its components (or ‘goods’) include such things as friendship with God, personal integrity, just relationships, the experience of beauty, and creativity. These goods are prior to the moral principles and rules of right conduct and generates them: right conduct promotes them; wrong conduct detracts from them.

The Moral The body of these principles and rules is the moral law. Monotheists, therefore, are led by the logical 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. The framework consists primarily of

basic goods and secondarily of moral law. (Together the goods and the moral law are often known in Christian, especially Roman Catholic tradition as the 'natural law'. Among Protestants, however, 'created order' is the preferred name.) This is the created, natural law to which St Paul alludes, when he writes that "Gentiles who have not the [revealed] law [of Moses] do by nature what the law requires. They show that what the [Mosaic] law requires is written on their hearts" (Romans 2.14-15a).

Moral order and responsible, creative freedom in the physical, aesthetic, and moral worlds.

Order need not be at odds with freedom. In the *material dimension*, physical laws accommodate quantum randomness. In the *aesthetic dimension*, familiarity with natural patterns and conventional rules is required for successful improvisation. In the *value dimension*, the moral order does not stifle human freedom. On the contrary, it provides a given framework that endows free human choices with meaning. As the (Catholic) philosopher, Charles Taylor, has written: "Even the sense that the significance of my life comes from its being chosen ... depends on the understanding that independent of my will there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life.... Horizons are given" [1]. The application of those principles and rules to particular circumstances remains open for morally responsible human beings to perform by the free and creative use of their reason in making judgements.

Moral law and political order.

According to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), there is neither morality nor justice before humans enter into social contracts; there is only the drive for self-preservation and the war of each against all. This vision of the human condition is fundamentally amoral. In contrast, Christian monotheism posits that even where there is no social contract or positive law or where that law is ineffective—say, in the case of a failed state—the natural moral law remains. And where that commands the consciences of human beings, it has the power to constrain and guide. There is a higher, moral authority to which critics of positive law can appeal, and which can provide moral justification for the defiance of positive law. Thus, from Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) in the 13th century and the Reformers in the 16th century, Christians have affirmed the possibility of morally justified rebellion.

Moral law and international relations.

It follows that, even where there are no contracts between different peoples—where there is no international law—moral law still obtains. Insofar as this law commands the consciences of national leaders, it introduces a measure of order to relations between states. However, Christian doctrine in the form of the concept of universal sin will incline Christians to be alert to the actual fallibility of the fallen human conscience as personal experience and reflection on history tends to confirm. Not every people does what it should; and often peoples do what they should not. Because conscience cannot be relied upon, effective international order requires the additional constraints of international law, whether in the soft form of a consensus of opinion, the harder form of custom, or the hardest form of treaty.

Created order and the academic vocation

The existence of a given, created order—be it physical or aesthetic or moral—implies that academic endeavour is properly about the discovery of the truth of reality as given by God. Of course, academics are sinners, just like everyone else. Consequently, their pursuit of truth can be corrupted by insecurity and the lust to dominate. It can also be corrupted by selfish interests in maintaining economic, political, and social power, as Marxists and some postmodernists remind us. Christian academics, however, at once aware of their creaturely responsibility under God’s created moral order and of their sinful failure to meet it, will be careful to cultivate the virtues of 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), and charity (toward unwelcome views). Above all, Christian academics will remember that an academic career is a vocation to discover the truth in cooperation with others, not an opportunity for the proud and intimidating assertion of the ego.

End Notes

[1] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 39.

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