Global Faculty Initiative

The Faculty Initiative

seeks to promote the integration

of Christian faith and academic disciplines

by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars

across the spectrum of faculties

in research universities

worldwide.

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net

Preview Response

WHAT ABOUT THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF SIN IN THE ACADEMIC SEARCH FOR TRUTH?

Donald Hay

Emeritus Fellow, Jesus College, University of Oxford

The exposition concentrates on just *one* implication of created order - that is, moral order with implications for ethics generally and more specifically political order. For that I found it excellent, and the applications in the last three sections more than compensated for the fairly abstract reasoning of the first three sections. It argues very clearly and succinctly the link between created order and moral order, in a way that I found compelling. [Perhaps the title should be 'Created Order and Moral Order'?]

Nigel Biggar acknowledges the effects of sin by identifying the issue of moral failing - 'fallen human conscience' and people 'cannot be always relied upon to do what moral law obliges'. This could arise from human wilfulness (according to St Paul), from weakness of the will (akrasia), or from ignorance. The last of these does not feature in his exposition, and yet is evidently an important issue. What is missing is what Emil Brunner termed 'the noetic effects of sin' [1] - that is, our inability to understand human passions and behaviour on a purely naturalistic basis. According to Brunner (and Abram Kuyper and the Reformed tradition) without appealing to revelation we may not arrive at the truth where *human nature is central to the phenomena we are seeking to understand*, and that is particularly true of human ethics and responsibility. More generally the argument that Biggar advances is convincing on the existence of a moral order in our universe, but is not so convincing on how we come to comprehend it.

Is there a disconnect between the kind of moral thinking that Biggar has in mind, and the Biblical (OT) emphasis on God's law revealed at Sinai? The Psalms focus on the latter, as for example in Psalm 119, and look to created order as evidence of God's power rather than as a source of moral instruction. As he notes, one NT passage that seems to appeal to natural law comes in the first two chapters of Romans [2]. More generally, the preview is silent on *Biblical* ethics, and what we are to make of the biblical material in relation to moral order. See for example in my own area the excellent exposition by Barrera (Albino Barrera (2013), *Biblical Economic Ethics,* Lexington Books). Are Biblical ethics not relevant to Nigel's exposition? If so, it would be helpful to understand the case for discounting them.

There is a further concern about the 'applications' of moral law in a fallen world. The classic statement comes in Jesus' teaching about divorce, where he notes that the moral law requires marriage to be

indissoluble, but Moses permitted divorce because of ’hardness of heart’. This may be straying too far outside Nigel’s focus in the Preview, but it is for example exactly the kind of moral wrestling that generated the traditions of casuistry.

The final section on ’the academic vocation’ is very helpful in laying out the pitfalls of sinful human motivations in the academic task, and the virtues that are required to counter them. But it does not address the question of *how* we go about ’the discovery of the truth of reality as given by God’. If the ’noetic effects of sin’ as described by Brunner are present, then in the human sciences at least questions of methodology are going to be critically important. Evidently one would not expect Biggar to include a detailed exposition of methodological issues across the disciplines, but it would be good to highlight the problems we face in arriving at the ’truth of reality’.

End Notes

[1] For a very brief introduction to ‘the noetic effects of sin’, see S K Moroney, ’How sin affects scholarship: a new model’, Christian Scholars Review, 28, Spring 1999.

[2] But he does not mention that in 1: 26, 27 the passage (rather uncomfortably to contemporary readers) focuses on homosexual relations

For more information

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net