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Disciplinary Brief

VALUING PROFUSION AND DISORDER IN CREATION, LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

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Nigel Biggar has made a fine statement of the actuality and character of created order, and the way it relates to moral order. His stress on the pervasiveness of morality through creation, and of the way of life which this implies for politics, international relations, and the academy, is both winning and timely.

But first, what is Order? It appears to be a slippery term, skating across a range of categories in Biggar's discussion without tight definition. However, I find myself similarly unrigorous as I reflect on the concept, it is proving difficult to give it substance without tautology. It has to do with structure and pattern and system, terms which are fundamental, for example, in linguists' approaches to language. But I am unsure that this adds much clarity, so at this point I will hope that other parties to this exchange will have the perception to offer a more consistent and compassing definition. I will simply note my sense that we cannot go directly from an idea that 'creation is orderly' to the idea that 'society is orderly'.

1 Profusion

There are two issues I want to raise in relation to Order. Firstly, I believe complementing the principle of 'order' with an awareness of the profusion of creation would yield a fuller understanding of creation. It is possible, it seems to me, to overstate the orderliness of creation. From Genesis onwards, creation is also about profusion as well as about orderliness – and not just because of human sin and failing. So many biblical texts, particularly in the Psalms, testify to the overwhelming, untamed profusion of God's creation. While order may be one basic dimension of creation, abundance - even to excess, even to the extent of *dis*order - is another. That is, I am not sure that we want to end up saying that orderliness is next to godliness. As Biggar observes, creation order includes quantum randomness and artistic improvisation.

1.1 Creation is not all or only rational

As both academics and Christians, we are committed to seeking the orderliness in what we study, but of

course, ultimate answers to that evade us. There is much in creation which is not orderly in any clear sense - and was it ever intended to be so? It is overflowing, messy, abandoned in ways which especially the Old Testament scriptures convey. The a-rationality of David's dance before the Lord, and of the lovers of the Song of Songs, overwhelm notions of orderliness. Too much emphasis on the orderliness of creation, I find, both underestimates God, and risks affirming a modernist, empiricist approach to our understanding of the world. To me, 'rational' is too potentially reductionist a term to want to apply it to creation, or as a characterization of humanity. Rationality is part of our nature, but so also is imagination and its fruits. Perhaps postmodernism's stress on disorder has something to offer our thinking here, however we may wish to challenge other aspects of it.

1.2 Irrepressible creation

Orderliness can too easily be equated with tidiness. There is a certain variegated uncertainty about humanity and creation – and God. The Old Testament, in all its ambiguity, rainbow diversity, paradox and sheer bitsiness conveys an important truth about the God whose creation is beyond ordering. I think God threw some things out there to be wildly manifold and productive like a rainforest or an estuary or a galaxy. That same unfettered variety is a core characteristic of language - that human creation which the prologue to John's Gospel indicates is a reflection of the character of God's creation itself.

Here I am reminded of a passage from C S Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in which the children ask whether Aslan – the Christ-figure – is safe. ' 'Course he isn't safe', comes the answer, 'But he's good' Lewis 1980: 87). Perhaps like Christ the irrepressible Word, creation may be Good without being safely ordered.

1.3 Language as profusion

We can see this idea of profusion-beyond-order in the field of linguistics (Bell 2014). Much – indeed, most – of language is orderly, and can be described and catalogued in its patterns, although our models remain partial and provisional. Whereas most people (including academics in other fields) tend to think of language as primarily words, linguists see it in terms of structures and systems (of grammar, sounds, meanings) – effectively in terms of order. But all of language is rife with exceptions and one-off forms which will never be knocked into neatness by our descriptions. In addition, the infinity of combinations which a language offers within its structures is testament to the boundlessness of the creativity it provides.

Language is a site of continuous flux, it just never stops changing amidst the swirl of linguistic production and creation. It is always spinning new words, structures, dialects, styles, genres, accents – and it is that creative volatility which represents much of the delight of language. If this is so for a human (sub)creation such as language, it holds even more for God's creation as a whole, and the Good which God delights in includes the flux as well as the order of it.

Consider humans' ability to birth new languages out of old ones. In circumstances where diverse speakers are thrown together who share no common language, they will immediately begin to create a new code of communication from the resources available to them. This is the origin of the world's youngest languages, the creoles of the Caribbean and the Pacific. These were born out of the cruelty and exploitation which was the labour and slave trades of the 18th and 19th centuries. Taking their vocabulary from the dominant language, and their grammar from their own languages, these peoples created communicative codes which, within a couple of generations, would develop the structures and usages of a fully-fledged language. Soon children would grow up as native speakers, and some of these codes now serve as national languages - like Bislama in Vanuatu, little more than a century after it came into existence.

Consider also the rife multilingualism of traditional peoples everywhere, with three, four or more languages regularly in play in their communities. And the rampant multilingualism of the contemporary young European, able to speak French, German, English, Spanish or Italian at need. To those of us for whom Anglo-American monolingualism is a default, such variety and facility is bewildering, even alien in its productivity. But it is a reminder that most of the world is and always has been multilingual – including probably Jesus, located at the intersection of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. It is also a reminder that the sin of Babel (Genesis 11) can be understood as the people's refusal to disperse throughout the earth, and that multilingualism was not a curse but a blessing that compelled them to do so and thus to fulfil their creation mandate (Bell 2013).

Lastly, consider the ability of microscopically fine differences in language to index different identities. A single word may place a speaker as from elsewhere, and infinitesimal differences in pronouncing just one vowel may proclaim that I am from a different country or social group. As argued by the Soviet-era thinker Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) – philosopher, linguist, unorthodox Orthodox Christian - language has an unquenchable centrifugal impetus, forever flying apart into variegated forms, each of which has its own linguistic character and social flavour. And the centripetal forces of standardization - academies, dictionaries, pundits, educators - cannot tame that kaleidoscopic fruitfulness. Nor should they, since the productivity of language is simply a reflection of the fertility of creation.

2 Jesus and the disordering of society

Secondly, too much emphasis on order, to my mind, runs the risk of leading to an alignment of Christianity with sociopolitical conservatism. The church has a long and often unfortunate history of co-option to the status quo which is at severe odds with the teaching of the Jesus who is its founder and lord. I think we can justifiably argue that Jesus' mission had a strong strand of disordering built into it. This was prefigured at his conception in the words of Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55, NRSV):

> He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly.

Here social order is inverted, rulers are displaced and the marginalized moved to the centre. Such reversal doesn't happen without some degree of disorder.

2.1 Embracing subversion

To a couple of specifics: Biggar's evaluation of postwar youth rebellion identifies its primary target as traditional Christian sexual morality. The mid-to-late 20th century youth movements have always represented a much broader challenge to established society, and Christians can endorse at least some of that. When 'the times are a-changing', Christians should not be seen to line up automatically against what is new. Calls for integrity in political life, for racial or gender equity, for the waging of peace instead of war are closer to the spirit of the Gospel than are their opposites. You only need to go back to John Osborne's seminal 1956 play *Look Back in Anger* to see that youth rebellion has had deep roots and society-wide targets since its beginnings.

Similarly, the feminisms of the past 60 years, or 40 years of postmodernisms, can be the source of self-critical learning and not just of reaction. Modernism and empiricism – enshrined in mid-20th-century functionalism in the social sciences – needed the challenge which late-20th-century postmodernism addressed to them. The orderliness of those earlier paradigms had less to do with any Christian sense of God's order than with under-examined social conservatism. The tendency of postmodernism to over-balance towards agency in the structure~agency continuum should not mask the over-emphasis on structure which preceded it (Carter & Sealey 2000). The Christian scholar can learn from both.

2.2 Of slavery and COVID

Biggar's long section on social hierarchy invites a question. In the context of a discussion of slavery, he concludes: 'Functional hierarchy is morally unobjectionable, so long as functional superiors regard functional inferiors fraternally'. I am sure Biggar will not want to be heard as reprising the 19th-century arguments against Wilberforce and his companion slavery reformers: 'slavery is fine as long as owners are nice to their slaves'.

We can observe in our time that one of the notable fruits of national Covid lockdowns was that we learned that the really essential workers of our society are those at the bottom of the hierarchy (and the pay scale): shelf stackers, rubbish collectors, cleaners, drivers. Unfortunately that is a lesson we have been quick to unlearn now the lockdowns have passed. How, then, do we value social hierarchy where it matters, in creative tension with the subversive teaching of Jesus and the epistles?

2.3 The fruitfulness of disorder

The good-news-to-the-poor which Jesus announced at the start of his mission has its repercussions for

society as a whole. The blessings of the Beatitudes come, in Luke's telling (6: 20-26, NRSV), at the cost of woes upon the satisfied and the dominant:

> Blessed are you who are poor,
> for yours is the kingdom of God.
> Blessed are you who are hungry now,
> for you will be filled…
>
> But woe to you who are rich,
> for you have received your consolation.
> Woe to you who are full now,
> for you will be hungry.

So many of Jesus' parables bespeak a radical disruption of the established order. And his deliberate and eventually deadly confrontation with the powers of his time and place initiated a transformation which was nothing short of upheaval.

Let us embrace the fruitfulness of disorder as well as of order.

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