



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

THERE IS NO PLACE FOR EGO IN CHRISTIAN SCHOLARLY DIALOGUE

Stewart Gill

Honorary Senior Fellow, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies

Formerly Master of Queen's College, the University of Melbourne

Former Principal of Emmanuel College and founder and former Director of the Emmanuel Centre for the Study of Science, Religion and Society, University of Queensland, Australia

I respond to two valuable insights in Professor Biggar's Preview on Created Order.

On faith and international relations

While many critics have argued that the world is becoming increasingly secular yet, in many of the major conflict zones in the world, religion is at the centre. As the West supposedly becomes more secular it is increasingly difficult for us to understand this. Whereas, in the past, radical elements would have turned to Marxism, in some countries today it is easier to build upon religion as a protest e.g. radical Islam.

Better understanding of international affairs and foreign policy making will help a person of faith comprehend and activate an important public dimension of their personal understanding. Education of government officials engaged in foreign affairs, international commerce and defence in the dual areas of *religion* and *diplomacy* would assist in having a better understanding of conflict resolution, cross-cultural issues and peacemaking.

We ignore at our peril that in the modern "secular" world religion is no longer relevant, or is seen to be relevant. In fact, in the world of politics, economics and social organisations religion is on the rise and greater understanding is necessary.

On Biggar's statement that there is no place "for the proud and intimidating place of the ego amongst Christian academics."

I take the liberty of excerpting my conclusion from a paper I presented some years ago on: "*Rabies Theologorum* and the Lessons of Church History." It asserts for the wider church what might also be applied with value to Christian academics in our dialogues and conversations.

"A few words about the value of discussion. There is no substitute for it in a healthy church. Where there is life there is thinking, a weighing of opinions, talk, and debate. Where these are absent there is cause for concern. They stimulate thinking. The rubbing of minds against each other sharpens as iron sharpens iron. There is wholesome, fraternal discussion which clarifies, instructs, edifies, and gladdens the spirit. This kind of discussion, however, becomes impossible when one or both parties take themselves too seriously, convinced that truth will live or die with them alone; or when there is an inability or unwillingness to admit that one might be wrong. That deplorable condition may be avoided when a few simple rules are put into practice.

1. The first is a need for a broad charitable spirit. Narrow, unloving contentiousness is an objective and a tool of the devil. Nothing serves the "kingdom of darkness" better than a cantankerous churchman or theologian with a passion for debate. I believe that it was CS Lewis who suggested that hell, where noise and discord are perfect, is where such persons will feel most at home. Rather than helping the cause of truth and light, they impede its progress and so poison the atmosphere that fruitful discussion becomes impossible. It was the lack of magnanimity in leaders on both sides in the Arminian controversy that made it a bitter experience in both church and state.
2. A second requirement for fruitful debate, likewise a scriptural virtue, is humility. This means recognition of one's frailty and the possibility that the other person might have a point of view worth considering, indeed, that they might even be right. Knowledge is limited; no finite presence has all truth. Augustine was thinking of that when he said that the first, second, and third rules of the Christian religion were one: humility. Quoting that quip with appreciation, Calvin extolled humility as the only approach to God, rid ourselves of "the disease of self-love and ambition", and get on with life. [1]
3. A third necessity for profitable discussion is honesty. There is no substitute for honesty in debate, particularly theological debate.
4. It is also necessary to try to understand others' points of view. What is it that moves them to take their positions? Calvin strove for such understanding in the eucharistic controversies of his time. There are reasons behind the positions taken, and their discovery may alter opinions. This is why it is difficult to condemn John Wesley's statements on sin and grace; in the light of the antinomianism of his day they make sense.
5. A sense of proportion is invaluable in theological discussion. Trivial matters often become major concerns in the minds of some; slight deviation from a desirable norm is often seen as justification for splitting the church. Calvin had such "capricious separation" in mind when he wrote on the church. [2] It is well to keep in mind the slogan of medieval Schoolmen, *Qui bene distinguit, bene docet* (S/he who distinguishes well, teaches well).

6. A final rule for the theological debate is that the parties stay within the bounds of Scripture in positions taken. Where there is speculation in discussion, as there is bound to be, that fact should be acknowledged. No speculative opinion, however, no “human invention” is permitted “to bind or compel the conscience” in the Church reformed according to the Word of God. Calvin’s warning in his discussion of the Trinity is apropos elsewhere as well: “Let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God extends”. [3] Predilection or logic may tempt one to go beyond these safe boundaries; where they were exceeded in the past, correction and retraction were necessary. As the pillar and ground of truth, the church should not wander in the wilderness of human opinion but abide by the sure words of the prophets and apostles. Its theologians should do likewise.”

End Notes

[1] *Institutes* II,ii,1

[2] *Institutes* IV,i,12

[3] *Institutes* I,xiii,5

For more information

www.globalfacultyinitiative.net