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Preview Response

IS THE NEW TESTAMENT EXEMPLARY FOR DEVELOPING MORAL THEOLOGY?

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Since my own work focuses on New Testament ethics, in both descriptive and prescriptive senses (i.e., what are the ethical convictions of New Testament authors and how should they shape Christian ethics today), this brief—sketching out some of the lines that run between the created order and the moral order—grabbed my attention. The basic progression proposed (from monotheism to the goodness of creation to the grounding of the moral order in the aforementioned goodness of the creation) strikes me as sound. The question that discomfits me somewhat is how to develop thoughts on the moral order via recourse to the created order, precisely because, when New Testament authors do this, they often do so in ways that are problematic, at least from a 21st-century perspective.

On a couple of occasions (1 Cor 11:4-16; Rom 1:20-27; arguably 1 Tim 2:11-14), Paul elaborates moral teachings in part by appealing to the natural law in ways that are influenced by Stoic argumentation. Stoics believed that the rational divine principle, the *Logos*, generated and sustained the created order. They argued that one could derive moral principles from the examination of the created order, insofar as the created order reflects the divine will more accurately than human behavior tends to do (because humans are corrupted by their passions and thus behave in ways contrary to their own divinity-reflecting-rationality). Paul relies upon this sort of argumentation, but (true to his Jewish theological paradigm) connects it with his reading of the Old Testament, for example with the primeval history of Genesis (1 Cor 11:8-9; cf. 1 Tim 2:13-15), insofar as he surmised that the supposed historical veracity of the Genesis creation narratives would align with the created world as he observed it in his own era. He therefore weaves together natural law observations with invocations of the Genesis narrative, to ground his moral-theological injunctions.

The problem, however, is that Paul's observation of the supposed natural order is culturally embedded in sometimes suspect fashions (as when he claims that nature demonstrates that it is degrading for a man to have long hair, whereas it is proper for a woman to have long hair; 1 Cor 11:14-15). Additionally, contrary

to Paul's assumption, there are good reasons to dispute the historicity of the Genesis narratives, which creates problems for the ethical teachings Paul develops on the basis of his reading of those narratives (i.e., his contention that women should wear veils while praying or prophesying, or that women should not teach men).

To take another example, Jesus himself makes moral arguments drawing on the created order in Luke 12:22-30. Pointing out that birds and plants do not prepare for the future, Jesus enjoins his disciples not to worry about securing their future sustenance, arguing that the same God that provides for the birds and the grass will provide for humans. The difficulty with this sort of argument is that humans do in point of fact starve to death (as do animals, come to that), and in that knowledge, modern Christians by and large do not feel compunctions about saving for retirement, for example.

Consequently, I have questions about how to develop Christian moral teaching in ways that draw upon observation of the created order. The clearest New Testament examples of attempting this sort of argumentation do not fare especially well and have not always been taken seriously by the Church (often with good reason). By this, I mean to point out that the New Testament does not readily commend itself as an exemplary model for how to develop moral theology with recourse to the created order. I would, therefore, be keen to read Prof. Biggar's thoughts on an appropriate methodology for moving from the created order to the moral order in relationship to specific contemporary moral questions.

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