

The Meaning and Function of “Order” in the “Creation Order” Debate

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Introductory Comments by *Sophie* editor: In August, 2011, the Foundation for Christian Philosophy² in The Netherlands intends to hold an international symposium on the subject of “Creation Order.” In this essay, Ouweneel gives us a glimpse of what’s ahead. According to him, we must sharply distinguish between, on the one hand, the laws of nature and its norms as God has embedded them in the creation order and, on the other hand, the concrete hypotheses, theories and natural laws and norms that are identified as the result of human research. If this distinction is not observed, we run into two dangers: (1) a conservatism in which the status quo is confused with the creation order, which surfaces in all sorts of debates about gender and marriage relationships; (2) a progressivism that identifies human societal actions with acts of God.

On basis of the Bible, the Christian refers to the law order that God has instituted for all reality as *creation order*, that is to say, as an orderly system that can only be explained by reference to God’s power and will to create. This creation order breaks up or diversifies into numerous creation aspects or orderings. Abraham Kuyper describes these as “the constant will of the omnipresent and omnipotent God, who so determines or arranges it each moment, determines it thus and stipulates that moral order for me.”

God’s will includes the demand for obedience. All creatures are subject to the creation order: the heavenly bodies obey God’s law order, His word, His commandments (Job 38:33; Psalm 119:91; 148:6;

1 Ouweneel, Willem Johannes. “Order in het scheppingsorderdebat.” *Sophie*, June, 2011, pp. 22-25. Ouweneel is a Dutch biologist, philosopher and theologian. He is a well-known Kuyperian writer and speaker among evangelicals in the Netherlands. He is also widely regarded as a skilled debater. It will be noticed from this and succeeding papers in this page that the concerns and thoughts of these Reformed Evangelicals are far removed from the scorn with which Canadian secularists regard Evangelicals. Personally, in view of my doctoral dissertation and in view of the way Abraham Kuyper, the “father” of this Dutch school of thought, distanced himself from them after a brief flirtation, I hesitate to refer to them as “Evangelicals,” preferring to call them by some of their own preferred terms, namely “Reformational” or “(Neo)-Kuyperian.”

2 “Stichting voor Christelijke Filosofie.”

Isaiah 45:12; Jeremiah 31:35; 33:25). Likewise, nature on earth obeys His voice, His commandments, His word (Psalm 104:6ff; 147:15, 18). With reference to day and night, God has established a *covenant* on basis of which His covenant faithfulness day and night succeed each other according to a steady rhythm (Jeremiah 33:20, 25; Psalm 89:3ff, 6, 38).

These law orders must never be regarded in deistic terms, as if these laws were once established by God, Who has arranged them and who then received a kind of “autonomy,” independent from God. Creation is not some sort of gigantic automaton or robot. Over against the idea of creation as a machine or automaton, the Scriptures lay great emphasis on what is called the work of providential preservation. This is the continuous preservation of the creation through God’s providence so that all that takes place in reality and in history can be traced back to the direct action of God. God has not only created all things in, through and for Christ, but all things also exist “in” Christ (Colossians 1:16ff); God the Son preserves all things through the *word* of His power (Hebrews 1:3). God “gives all men life and breath and everything else” and “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:25, 28). In Daniel 5:23, the Prophet addresses the king about “the God who holds in His hand your life and all your ways.”

In addition, we find in Scripture numerous concrete pronouncements about God’s acts in nature. God speaks in the thunder (Psalm 29); He brings the rain and the snow; sends the storm and makes the ice. He commands the day and night and all the heavenly bodies, feeds and leads animals and plants and provides wells in the valleys (Job 37ff; Psalm 104). All of this is God’s activity in nature and all these acts are God’s *miracles* (Job 5:9; 9:10; 37:14, 16; Psalm 139:14). The scholastic distinction between natural and supernatural miracles is foreign to Scripture. We recognize God’s wonderful or miraculous acts in everything. For Him all this is perfectly “natural,” no matter how miraculous His acts may appear to us. The Scripture speaks thus as

much about creation order *for* nature as about God's acts *in* nature. Both of these are aspects of one and the same task.

The Scriptural way of speaking about orderings in which the reality of creation is based, points to the regularity that characterizes the cosmos. We are here talking about God's *law*. Law in the Biblical sense is much more than the "law of Moses" or the "law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2) in its restricted ethical-pistical meaning. In its broadest sense, God's law embraces the entire law order that He established for all His creatures. The heavenly bodies, things, plants, animals and human being are all subjected to God's law in the broadest sense of the term. When we speak of a creation order, we recognize this as a law order. Put in another way, from the very beginning God has subjected His creation to laws--natural laws, norms, principles.

This (natural) *law* is God's *Word* in the same way that the law of Moses and the law of Christ are God's Word. That's the reason Christians regard the cosmic law order as *divine revelation*. God "speaks" in and through this orderly law system. As Gordon Spykman put it so beautifully:

The heavens declare God's glory by revealing how His Word holds for the movement of heavenly bodies. Similarly, the magnetic force of gravity declares God's glory by revealing how God's Word holds for falling objects. Again, the scientific notion of capillary action declares God's glory by revealing how God's Word holds for the life of trees.³

In this connection there are two extremes for which we have to watch out. The one is a kind of "progressivism" that comes to expression, for example, in the idea of *creatio continua* (continuous creation). The other is a "conservatism" that identifies the (supposed, imagined)

³Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A new Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 80-81. Here I quote from Spykman's original English, not from Ouweneel's Dutch translation.

creation order with the status quo. I intend to demonstrate that both of these extremes are fatal for the actual idea of the creation order.

Progressivism: Creatio Continua

***Creatio continua* is a term denoting a continuous work of divine creation within human history, especially the changes in societal structures in our own time. It is a humanistic idea that creation at its deepest level means that “the creator’s creator creates.” In other words, the societal and historical acts of human beings are identified with God’s creative acts. Not God but humanity is the creator and re-creator of the historically determined society. In this scheme, God is at best seen as rendering “assistance,” but the actual acting agent is the autonomous human.**

The above idea has led to, among other things, liberation theology, in which the Christian faith sanctifies the revolution with theological approval, including the weaponry utilized. In this scheme, God renews all things by means of humans who transform their societal structures. The guidelines for such transformations are derived from the “new creation” or from the “kingdom of God” interpreted humanistically, but not out of the unchanging creation order or out of God’s law. Thus God is expected to sanction the autonomous work of humans.

The Biblical truth that God remains faithful to His original creation Word and places all human activity under the unchanging norms of His creating-and-recreating Word is totally perverted. All creation ordering has disappeared. In its place has come the notion that God (re)creates the world, i.e., His Kingdom, through human activity. There is no creation order that is to be maintained and to which humans are subject, but only one that develops through the active work of the human race.

In all kinds of modernistic theology history is divorced in a dualistic manner from this transcendent Root. The entire “salvation history”

now is totally restricted to time and secularized in (semi)Marxist theology, inspired by Bloch; in the so-called Black Theology as in Cone; in the feministic theology as in Daly; in the liberation theology a la Gutierrez; in the theology of hope of Moltman; of labour as in Chenu; of sexuality a la Ringeling; of history as by Pannenberg; and all kinds of theologies.⁴ The notion of a creation order is constantly replaced by the belief that God creates the world by means of humans.

One striking result of this development is that there is no more room for God's sovereign acts *in opposition* to humans. That is to say for His judgement over the norm-disobedient acts of humans, whether in the sense of providence or of the final eternal judgement. If humans themselves determine the norms and constantly adjust them or move the goal posts, then at the end there will be no norms left with which God could turn against them.⁵

Conservatism: The Status Quo

We've now arrived at that other extreme that we must avoid. A major reason the idea of a creation order and its realization in history is generally ignored is the impression many entertain that this notion necessarily means a static, rigid and sterile unchanging situation. The usual next step is to contrast this static situation dualistically to the lively, dynamic change that characterizes history, which is then ascribed to the acts of autonomous mankind. This sort of impression totally misunderstands the fundamental continuous dynamic that is embedded in the creation order itself and that is to be unfolded by humans during the historical opening up process. Immanent-historical

⁴Though I have selected this article for translation and publication on my website because I feel it makes some important points I would like to share, I am not so sure of this almost wholesale condemnation of all these theologies. At any rate, I find myself unprepared and disqualified to defend this very negative depiction.

⁵ Is this really possible? Can a deviant human order disable God from exercising His power and His judgement? I don't believe that is the author's intention.

changes caused by humans take place in obedience or disobedience to the normative structures embedded in the creation order.

In other words, the fixed, constant divine law order does not exclude this historical unfolding process; to the contrary. However, it behooves us to have empathy for the wide-spread theological *angst* of creation orders and their realization in history. The traditional natural theology of creation orders were usually not founded at all on the normative structures embedded in the creation order (on the law side), but, rather, on the concrete, existing societal forms (on the subject side). Time and again natural theology fell into the trap of trying to justify existing societal structures, i.e., the social and political status quo, and to preserve them with a false appeal to the creation orders, or, alternatively, to the “logos” or one or another “natural order,” etc. In reality, it did not appeal to the creation order so much as to the status quo.

An example: Monogamous marriage of a man and woman is without any doubt a creation principle. However, the specific form of any marriage and associated customs as found in the Bible, such as the wedding ceremony, relationship between man and woman, number of wives, divorce procedures, etc., were determined in each period by the concrete cultural-historical context of the day. It would be pure biblicism were we to simply adopt in our own context the specific ways in which the institution of marriage was shaped in the Bible. It is similarly biblicistic to a priorily adopt a negative anti-conception position with an easy reference to the creation order, as does the Pope. He considers artificial insemination with donor semen as “test tube adultery.” Passive suffrage for women or women in office he rejects with a misplaced reference to I Corinthians 14:34ff and I Timothy 2:11ff. Lesbian parenthood is refused because same-sex marriage is wrong and thus homo parenthood as well. I am not concerned here to express an opinion for or against any of these

measures. I am only maintaining that a simple appeal to the creation order in such issues is misplaced.

Normative Beginning Principle

In the creation order God reveals His will as a normative principle. His will is the beginning principle (as in the Latin “*principium*” which means both “beginning” as well as “principle”), the creational point of departure, the dynamic stimulus and the religious guide line that makes human life possible, gives it meaning and directs it to its centre and integration in Jesus Christ. As *principia* God allows wide space for human participation, working it out, and bringing it to its realization but with responsibility to God’s Word. *Respons-ibility* refers to the human response to God’s Word in the working out of the “*principia*” revealed by Him and in this way shape human life and society by bringing the thousands of possibilities up to their potential and to work out all that is embedded in God’s wonderful creation, all to serve Him and His creation.

There is a fundamental difference between the law order as such and the concrete working out of all sorts of laws and norms of nature. We must distinguish sharply between the law of nature and norms as God has anchored them in the creation order on the one hand and the concrete hypotheses, theories, laws of nature and norms that are the result of inevitably deficient human labour of development on the other. But that does not mean that they can be separated as if there were no connection between them at all. To the contrary, development is a divine commandment that came to us in the form of the “cultural mandate.” Every real science, whether natural, social or the humanities, in one way or another gives a concrete theoretical form to these lawful natural or normative principles, no matter how provisional and fumbling. Scientific research is a process of positivizing natural or social principles that find their beginning in God’s creation order.

As the result of sin, this positivising labour has become difficult and deficient in two respects:

- (A) ***Subjective***—because the sinful nature within us rebels against the structural principles that God has prescribed with respect to the manner by which human knowledge about God’s law must be acquired.
- (B) ***Objective***—because sin has also affected the factual knowability of the creation order. That is to say, the structural principles of the creation order always exist in and are only discernable in the concrete experiences of reality in which they are realized and embodied. Put in another way, they are always immanently present in natural phenomena and in human behavior, situations, societal forms and happenings. We can observe the law in concrete “facts,” but the practical problem is that sin always cleaves to these facts. We know God’s laws only out of factual situations that are in many respects *anti-or anormative* ; they disregard God’s laws.

It isn’t as if the creation order itself is affected by sin, for God’s revelation remains transparent and clear, but our knowledge and subjective possibilities of knowing are seriously degenerated, not to say corrupt. However, precisely because the creation order as such remains knowable in principle, God’s call to knowledge stands. He has entrusted His revelation into our hands to explore; His revelation implies the command to try to understand her—the “cultural mandate.”

A little overkill: It is not true that the positivization of creation principles occurs by means of applying Bible verses, as if such positivization could be ignored without consequences when such verses cannot be found. Both the literalistic application of Bible verses

as well as the alleged independence from Scripture when no direct Scriptural declarations are available must be rejected. Occasionally it is possible to make a direct appeal to concrete Bible verses, but not often. This often leads to the misunderstanding that the Scripture has nothing to say about the issue under discussion.

Herman Dooyeweerd said it well: “Are not

the laws that control numerical relations,

the laws for physical and chemical phenomena,

the laws for organic and emotional life,

the laws for our logical thinking and the lingual,

the laws for economic life

and the norms for aesthetics and beauty

without distinction, grounded in God's creation order? And are you able to identify all these orders for their distinguishable aspects of reality in Scripture? If not, would you not then acknowledge that God has mandated humanity to uncover these orders by means of laborious research?”

Not only is a direct appeal to Bible texts usually impossible, but such an attempt, even if it were possible, is misleading, since such texts normally do not provide us with a specific creation *principle*, but only with a concrete positivization of a creation principle in a specific historical context. It is not being true to Scripture to isolate a specific

concrete positivization of a creation order from its Biblical context and then to literally adopt that for our own practical life. Such positivizing is always bound to a time and culture. That is exactly the reason we continue to insist on the useful term “creation order.” However difficult it may be to uncover it, it always retains its urgent, permanent appeal, even when its positivization continually changes.