

**Resurrection and the Moral Order:
An Outline for Evangelical Ethics¹**

by Oliver O'Donovan

Reviewed by David W. Ponter

Resurrecting the moral order? How does one go about resurrecting the moral order? After all, we live in an age of moral chaos. We live in an age of moral darkness (I say this as a Christian). And we live in an age of moral relativism. In this age, there is no shared starting point, no shared *pou sto* between myself and the average unbeliever, let alone the devout antitheist. Long dead and long gone are the days where an Enlightenment categorical imperative obligates men and binds them to an objective moral reality. And even more so, long dead and long gone is the age where Christianity held moral and political sway of countless lives over countless years.

And yet Oliver O'Donovan wants to resurrect a moral order not only, but also a moral basis, a platform, on which to ground this moral order. This review will attempt to delineate some of the "hows" of O'Donovan's project. Yet, in order to understand the "how" of his project, we must understand the epistemological context of this age, the very context that makes his work of resurrection viable. Stated with a simplicity that can be misleading, O'Donovan's undertaking only works at this point in time. It, in my estimation, can only work right now, at this point of epistemological evolution. If O'Donovan had proposed his resurrection 100 years ago, it would have been shouted down as a capitulation to relativism. Thus a brief history of philosophy and epistemology is in order.

While seeking to avoid the danger of sweeping stereotyping which can only serve to devalue any analysis, let me take the risk of painting this picture in broad strokes. It is now favourable to argue that about the 3rd century AD, Christianity changed its character and outward face. No longer was Christianity seen as the minority, the social and theological remnant, as it were, of the Gentile world. It now became the centre of theological and religious life. It was as if being a pagan was not only *passe* but also theologically dangerous. Christianity became the dominant and state endorsed religion. But also, in the course of time and philosophical discourse, there became a need to somehow ground the fundamentals of Christianity within a nest of axioms or premises that were seen as universal and neutral.

It is always the case that culture shapes and determines the church. This is inescapable. Therefore, in the time of the medieval scholastics, there was a need to ground Christian moral claims in a context and nest of the assumptions of the secular culture. To unpack this is no easy feat. It is the case that while it is clear that Thomas Aquinas did not embrace the foundationalism of the later 16th and 17th centuries--for it was not the case for Thomas that Nature grounds Grace, though it, indeed, did become the case for the later 16th and 17th centuries neo-Thomists, and for moderns like Norman Geisler and R.C. Sproul--it is clear that the method of reasoning did become the case for Thomas. That method was the principle of embodying all argumentation in the form of a syllogism. It is needless to remind you that this method was borrowed from Aristotle and the Greeks. Therefore, an argument begins with a universal, the major premise, followed by a particular, the minor premise, which in turn is bound in the conclusion. The classic form of this is such:

- 1, all men are mortal.
- 2, Aristotle is a man.
- 3, therefore Aristotle is mortal.

Thus, in this standard manner, the scholastics framed and posed their arguments. Arguments, therefore, tended to be reduced to a basic universal and axiomatic premise which was either self-attesting, or grounded in something that was. This method, I would argue, laid out the sort of structural argumentative categories of philosophical discourse in western Europe. The need came to be: identify the major premises of all argumentation. Now in a theistic world, such as Thomas' world, sacred scripture served as his self-attesting, self-grounding platform, from which you can only argue from, never to. But as the age "evolved" and as God himself, aged and became epistemologically dotting and irrelevant, what was

¹Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, second edition (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1994).

there to ground the universal premises of moral, philosophical and epistemological argumentation? Of course, we know that what came to the rescue of modern philosophical discourse were those principles of natural law and natural reason. For these were seen as self-attesting and universal. Thus they could supply the universal major premise of philosophical argumentation.

What this meant was that in terms of theories of political and moral obligation, all obligating arguments must be grounded in and only in universal premises. Here the Enlightenment was in its highpoint in such ponderings as Locke's theories of political obligation and Kant's categorical imperative. The Christians of England and America bought into this newer method of thinking. For now, the laws of reason and nature ground theism, from which, once Theism is established, we deduce the universal principles of political and moral obligation. In this way it was eminently rational to be Christianly moral and Christianly political. But with the coming of the deconstruction of the Enlightenment project, specifically from the 1960s onward, the Christian church was thrown into moral upheaval. The first response has been to reassert, with a loud voice mind you, the validity of the universal premises. Yet with even louder rejoinders, society around has shouted down that response.

The salvation of the moral life comes by accepting the realities of postmodernism, for in this is freedom. For in this context can we as Christians really be free to serve, free to love, free to expound the moral life. There is, no longer, any need to fight and shed blood over unsound and unnecessary beach-heads. In the context of narrative, the believer can walk confidently. For now, she no longer needs to feel that compulsion to ground her arguments in universally acceptable and neutral premises--an illusory endeavour in the first place. For now, the believer can return to Thomas' understanding that scripture and all therein cannot be argued to, but only from.

O'Donovan divides his book into an introductory chapter and then 3 parts. Part 1 deals with "The objective reality." This section is sub-divided into 3 chapters: 2, Created order; 3, Eschatology and history; 4, Knowledge in Christ. Part 2, The "subjective reality," is likewise further divided: 5, Freedom and reality; 6, Authority; 7, The authority of Christ; 8, The freedom of the church and the believer. Part 3, "The form of the moral life," similarly: 9, The moral field; 10, The moral subject; 11, The double aspect of the moral life; 12, The end of the moral life.

Due to the limitations of this review, my goal will be to only detail the positive constructions or proposals O'Donovan sets forth, while only skirting over that which is primarily negative and historical. For these are the ideas that O'Donovan bounces off. From the introductory chapter, O'Donovan discusses the core ideas I have presented above. He discusses the *role* of creation ethics which came into vogue in Christianity especially in the light of the Enlightenment project. Creation ethics, as I read O'Donovan, are those ethics derived via the use of natural laws and natural reason, and which are universally knowable and known to be true and rationally obligatory. O'Donovan argues, in essence that this should not have been the case. Rather, he argues that creation ethics pertains, properly speaking, to the pre-fall Adamic community. For the post-fall Adamic community misreads and confuses the ethic witnessed to and through nature and natural reason.² Indeed, in this very misreading, O'Donovan argues therein arises a Voluntarist ethic, which he defines morality as the creation of man's will.³ For at this point, creation ethic becomes separated from Evangelical or Resurrection ethics. The latter becomes compartmentalised and hived off. Rather, O'Donovan wants to present a case where creation ethics is restored and regrounded in and by a Resurrection ethic, that is an ethic grounded on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who in his life and death embodies, as the new Adam, the new head of the Redeemed community, the very ground of creation ethics. Here we see shades of Karl Barth's influence. For Barth, the incarnation is what grounds all redemptive and ethical realities. And it must be said, just because here is a shade of Barth, O'Donovan is not *a priori* wrong. Indeed, given this postmodern context, it seems entirely sound. For now with Calvin, we can really own that though nature testifies to God's glory and existence, man, as it were, needs the scripture, as spectacles, as it were, to read creation aright. For Calvin, creation can only be read aright in the light of inscripturated revelation. Barth merely extends the logic of this, adding that creation can only be read aright in the light of the

²Ibid, p., 19.

³Ibid, p., 16.

inscripturated doctrine of the incarnation.⁴

Chapter 2 discusses the freedom of God. It is not the case that God had to create this world, for to assert such would result, must result in a form of pantheism. O'Donovan adds the correlative thought that a free God is not morally arbitrary, but that within his own freedom we can see moral order and stability. Nor should it be denied that world-history is not teleological. Here he also advances a devastating polemic against Voluntarist concepts of history. For he argues that atheism, with its removal of God from the landscape cannot access the whole, the true universals, and so moral knowledge, along with all other forms of knowledge, must become fragmentary, and unbelieving man only in vain hope can succeed in discovering the true, the just, and the good.⁵ Secondly, he notes atheism cannot account for the point of history. History, the world, and change can have no discernible end-goal.⁶

In chapter 3, O'Donovan further unpacks his ideas regarding history as being teleological. Here he challenges the historicist assumptions of a closed universe, wherein, because there is nothing transcendent to this world-order, there can be, likewise, no transhistorical truths or goods.⁷ Thus, O'Donovan notes, the historicist must reason that history is something shaped by man, something constructed by his will. He cites the example of sexuality, where the atheist, by the act of his will, determines what is sexually meaningful and fulfilling. Chapter 4 takes up the question of knowledge. Here he notes again that given that we, as finite creatures, are within the system, how are we to evaluate the system as a whole? We can never obtain, he asserts, a knowledge-by-transcendence. For sure, we can know the particulars of this world--and here he acknowledges his debt to Torrance--but that is all we can know.⁸ He says well:

Behind this dilemma lies a failure to comprehend how the knowledge of created order, knowledge 'from within,' differs from knowledge of particulars 'from above.' The popular term 'universal' contributes to this misunderstanding, in that it suggests that generic knowledge is simply a quantitatively complete knowledge of particulars.⁹

Merely seeing particulars sequenced before us will not give us true knowledge of the relationships between those sequenced particulars. Further, there can be no true knowledge of historical ends--there can be no end (goal) of history which can be known. The implications then are that either history is just a flux of particulars, so much *noise* impacting our sense of time and space, or that we impose, arbitrarily order and teleology upon history, hence voluntarism. Against this backdrop, O'Donovan argues that only knowledge which is *in Christ* can be knowledge that is truly intelligible, truly meaningful. For in this way, can there only be a knowledge of particulars from above, from outside of the system. And by knowledge in Christ, this knowledge cannot be separated from the incarnation. Here O'Donovan challenges the traditional *logos* idea that all men through creation have a justified natural knowledge (Augustine). From here O'Donovan discusses the issue of moral learning. For though all moral knowledge, like every other form of knowledge, is nested in Christ, it is still the case that complexity, and conflict and compromise are not thereby erased. Importantly, for O'Donovan, what this means is that in terms of society at large, given that knowledge, even moral knowledge, is in Christ, then this knowledge is existential rather than legislative. For it is not an ethical knowledge which has been derived and known from universal principles and premises, but only which has been imbibed by the light of Christ.

Concluding part 1, O'Donovan's aim has been to establish two objective contrasts between Christianity and atheism. For atheism, as O'Donovan demonstrates, cannot provide moral meaning and moral intelligibility. It can only impose, arbitrarily, its own morality upon reality. There can be no transcendent oughts. On the other hand, exactly because Christ has come into this world-system from without, and exactly because he is God-incarnate, we can have transcendent moral oughts. But these oughts must never be divorced from the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. We can never

⁴The classic Barth-Brunner debate brings this out with Barth's categorical *nein* to Brunner.

⁵Ibid., pp., 49-50.

⁶Ibid., p., 52.

⁷Ibid., p., 69.

⁸Ibid., p., 79.

⁹Ibid., p., 81.

pretend that they can be gleaned from nature--as if it is read aright--and so scissored from the person and work of Christ.

In Part 2, O'Donovan changes direction and now begins to discuss the subjective side of the equation. By subjective, O'Donovan means the reality of the Spirit's work within the life of the believer, and how exactly this manifests itself. O'Donovan notes that the Spirit makes the reality of redemption--the work of Christ--present to us. Further, the Spirit makes the reality of redemption, authoritative to us.¹⁰ By authority he means the Spirit imparts to us and through us authority over the created order, supplying us with the means, the frames of reference to correctly judge it, and to transform it.¹¹ Furthermore, argues O'Donovan, the Spirit brings to us *freedom*. For not only does the Spirit bring freedom, that freedom which redemption secures, that is freedom from sin, but likewise, the Spirit evokes a free response, as well as enabling true self-awareness, which communicates a freedom from sin and a freedom to serve. This freeing work of the Spirit also enables a true access to reality. Add to this, he notes, the human conscience is now properly grounded and informed because the human self is now grounded and unified, in the Spirit. If you can imagine the impact of this, then you are able to grasp something of the power of this new reality. Whereas formerly the unbeliever is divided, at odds against himself, bound in sin, alienated from his peers, but now as a believer, these breeches are restored. In this manner can the believer have true confidence, true boldness in this postmodern age.

Chapter 6 takes up the general theme of authority. Here O'Donovan sets the contrast of the atheist's attempts to establish authority via the means of natural laws and the social contract. But this approach in reality blinds and binds us exactly because we as unbelievers cannot perceive reality--the created order--aright. Seen in this way, one can truly see the illusory and deceptive nature of the social contract as a basis of civil government. Chapter 7 takes up the issue of the authority of Christ. At this we begin to come to the heart of O'Donovan's argument. For now we come to the claims of the King, God the Son, in his kingdom. God in Christ, as King of his kingdom, has the authority which is truly transhistorical and transtemporal. His authority opposes the authority of man.¹² His authority imposes, truly imposes, order upon the world. What is more, this authority has for its foundation the resurrection of Christ.¹³ And so, Jesus is the only and true epistemological and ontological authority. For not only, we must add, is he the creator of this world, but the source of true wisdom and knowledge.

At this point, O'Donovan takes a turn that bears heavily on his polemic. For O'Donovan, and building more on the Lutheran concept of the law's function, rather than Calvin's concept of the law's 3rd use, O'Donovan argues that the law, as mediated by and from the hand of Moses is not truly evangelical: "Mosaic law was *not* that summons to fulfilment which is given by God's grace."¹⁴ He says: "Danger arises only when this contrast is forgotten, when attempts are made to reconstruct the 'evangelical law' on the model of the Mosaic, assigning to the Christian community-structure and its institutions a role analogous to that of the community-structure of Israel."¹⁵ It seems to me that what O'Donovan is saying in all that we have surveyed so far comes to this. Christian morality cannot be made to have for a foundation a creation ethic (i.e., natural law and natural reason, summed up under the complex of Nature) which is divorced from the resurrection of Christ and the empowerment of the Spirit, for any attempt to establish ethics on such a base in the end can only lead to a form of idolatry (as Barth would say). Rather, it is Christ and Christ alone who establishes and grounds ethics. Seen this way, the mistake of earlier Christians was to so ground Christian ethics on the platform of Nature. Further, O'Donovan stresses that there is a sense where Christ's ethic is not exactly continuous with the Mosaic ethic, but in a fundamental way collides and crashes into that ethic.

O'Donovan, I think, posits, for example, that Paul's problem was not just with the abusers of the law, but with the law itself. This line of reasoning is contrary to the Scottish and Southern (USA) Presbyterian¹⁶ model of seeing Christ

¹⁰Ibid., pp., 102-3.

¹¹Ibid., p., 104.

¹²Ibid., p., 142.

¹³Ibid., pp., 142, and 143.

¹⁴Ibid., p., 156. [Emph., O'Donovan.]

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶E.g., Rutherford, Cunningham, Dabney, *et al.*

as a more straightforward continuation of the grace of the evangelical law of Moses. This Scottish-Southern Presbyterian model tends to downplay the works *motifs* within the Mosaic Covenant, preferring to emphasise the graciousness of the Mosaic law, deliberately by way of contrast with the Covenant of Works with Adam. Seeing that O'Donovan is not so bound by this covenantal dualism (Adam=works versus Moses-Christ = grace apart from works) he is freer to see the legality of the Mosaic covenant which is abrogated by Christ. What this means, then, for O'Donovan, is that for the Christian community, a decidedly new and decidedly *Christian* ethic must reign, and not a mixture of law and grace.

From this perspective, O'Donovan's discussion in chapter 8 follows logically. Here he notes that under the Mosaic model the church moved from counsel to command, but now the move should be back from command to counsel. In part 3, chapter 9, O'Donovan is then able to discuss the newness of the pluriformity of experiences, which given the newness of the covenant, especially at the point of its existential newness, experiences now will be manifold and diverse, where the law of love rules rather than the letter of the law. Love now expresses itself through wisdom, not so much through a list of dos and don'ts--which O'Donovan, I suspect, invests the Mosaic law with. O'Donovan then well argues that from this vantage point the past and the future can be integrated. We can account for the diversity of past experiences, and we can also, on account of now intelligible regularity, anticipate the future in a meaningful way. Here he also spends some time discussing casuistry, detailing the scholastic attempt, which with some degree of rightness, to map out--by the method of syllogism--in an unambiguous manner, the correct responses to a number of given moral dilemmas. Contrary to this, O'Donovan outlines an approach constrained by wisdom, working its way through the moral ambiguity that daily confronts us, a wisdom, itself, constrained by love. Chapter 10 further unpacks what has been said in chapter 9. After discussing Greek versus Augustinian concepts of virtue, Love, for O'Donovan, is the universal and unifying key that unites all the diverse goods. Love unites the doer and the deeds. Love grounds actions, all moral actions, whether it be temperance, fortitude, justice, or prudence. Love in deeds fulfills the moral law.

Again, now building his polemic in terms of application, whereby he brings together the complex ideas from parts 1 and 2, O'Donovan now brings together the twofold aspect of love, being love to God and love to man (chapter 11). Once again, O'Donovan is keen to stress that love can and must only be grounded in Christ, in the resurrection, in the *kerugma* of the Christian Gospel. Love cannot be grounded in any other foundation, to do so can only lead to idolatry. In the last chapter, O'Donovan brings to bear the relationship of Christ to the world, to mankind. Here his language unambiguously echoes that of Barth. O'Donovan, at this point, targets for attack all forms of self-justification, even those forms, which I may term, secret self-justification. Here he tackles even Protestants who may inadvertently slip into a subtle form of self-justification. O'Donovan declares: "There is no need for us to save the faces of our present selves. All that we need fear in relation to our pasts is that by trying to defend them against the divine 'No,' we may cease here and now to live in the light of the divine 'Yes.'"¹⁷ Justification, then is a resting in Christ's work of justification, and never about deceptive self-legitimizing.

To conclude, what can now be seen is clearer. O'Donovan wants to break with the traditional model that has been mediated to us from the hand of the Enlightenment project. In that schema, Grace was grounded upon Nature.¹⁸ The principles of Grace could be seen as imaged or reflected in Nature. There was seen, therefore, a greater continuity between Grace and Nature, as Grace seemed more a quantitative extension of Nature. The Enlightenment, especially, borrowed the methodological categories of the scholastics and invested in Nature all that was necessary to ground metaphysics, epistemology and morality. Nature, now divested of God, was now invested with self-standing, self-attesting premises (axioms) which allegedly did not presuppose any faith-commitment. The Christians of this time bought into these assumptions. For example, Samuel Rutherford could only write *Lex Rex* exactly because he assumed the Enlightenment's assumptions about natural law and social contract, by reading such ideas back into the Adamic Covenant. What Rutherford did in this regard mirrored what these Christians essentially came to do in all regards, whether apologetics, social contracts, science, education, and morality. But the end result is perversion and idolatry. Scotland or America never was the ideal *Christian* state. O'Donovan, thus, breaks with all this by acknowledging the idolatry invested into Nature. Only a redeemed nature, redeemed by Christ and by Christ alone, can provide a blueprint

¹⁷Ibid., p 256.

¹⁸Again, it must be stressed, this is neo-Thomism, not classic Thomism.

for morality, whether civil or otherwise. The contrast of ideas between that of O'Donovan's and say that of Rutherford's is stark and bare.

Further, in rejecting the claimed continuity of Nature and Grace--their bleeding into one another--he further rejects the attempt to bleed into one another the continuity of the Mosaic law and the New Covenant law. They are not straightforwardly continuous. It is not as if the law of Moses has an evangelical side, argues O'Donovan. Therefore the OT cannot be used as an ethical and social blueprint for the New Covenant community and the post-Resurrection society of man.

For myself, the implications of all this are startling. For what O'Donovan says must be brought to bear on the traditional constructs of the Covenant of Grace which is often severely juxtaposed against the Covenant of Works. This also must impact the traditional Reformed and Puritan conception of the 3rd use of the law. An interesting project would be the attempt to contrast and synthesise O'Donovan's work with the work of Vos, Ridderbos, Kline and his student, Mark Karlberg . Nor can the relationship of the secular state and its role in terms of moral obligation be ignored. For is it the church's role to seek the magisterial enforcement of Christian morality? The traditional Reformed model (from Calvin down through Rutherford's *Lex Rex* down to today, notwithstanding our present ecclesiastical voluntaryism) may need revision. Powerfully, what O'Donovan proposes may relieve (this would hold especially for the South) almost entirely, the very real existential tension between society and its moral drift and the very genuine desire on the part of the Christian for the truly good society.