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Disciplinary Brief

**NOT THE WORLD WE ORDERED: INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS AND THE UKRAINE WAR**

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In his theology brief on *Order* Nigel Biggar shows that, while positive law is man-made or posited, there is no human order without law; that, as Christians, we see the law in the light of revelation, sometimes but not always placing us at odds with those who do not contemplate the law in a similar perspective; that law is a necessary remedy in a fallen world where the created order, willed by God, is not written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33); that moral rules, legal and otherwise, have the purpose of enacting higher goals and the ultimate good, supremely expressed by the vision of God as a Trinitarian community.

All of this is superb, but we may take it further. We may add that the Trinitarian community is a divine community of love. Thus, love comes before all else, not only in a temporal but also in a transcendental sense. Creation itself is an act of love that constitutes time itself. Yet, unfortunately, in this fallen world, we have all been hurt. Perhaps this is why some of us struggle with love more than with morality and order. Nevertheless, let us always remember that what redeems us is not law but love. Biggar explains how the law cascades down from heaven. How much more do we need the same to be true of God's love!

**International Order and the Ukraine War**

For those of us who are not moral theologians, concrete application is both helpful and necessary. Regarding my mother discipline of international relations, Biggar notes:

"If one state should take the liberty of breaking the law and jettisoning its constraints, other states will begin to wonder why they should put up with them. And if a sufficient number of powerful states abandon those constraints, the law's authority will collapse, it will become a dead letter, and international relations will enter a dangerous era of high unpredictability, low trust, and extraordinary susceptibility to armed conflict."

At the time of writing, 15 November 2022, the world is at risk of witnessing precisely such a dangerous era of high unpredictability. The world is reeling from multiple man-made and natural calamities. Trust is low

and there is extraordinary susceptibility to armed conflict. The current war in Ukraine is the most obvious case in point. It started with a Russian attack, in breach of international law and contrary to promises given. The *casus belli*, it seems, was Ukraine's entitlement to join a military alliance perceived as hostile by Russia. Was that, and is that, worth a military conflict that is killing countless people and has dire consequences for world energy and food systems? How certain can we be of the moral superiority of "our" side? Has everything been done to avoid the war, and is everything being done, to end it?

Especially since the end of the East-West conflict, Russia has been involved in fewer military interventions than the USA and other Western countries. Where Russia has invaded a country or region, as in the cases of Crimea and South Ossetia, it was related to the fear of a neighbouring country turning hostile against Russia. While Russia is less powerful than the USA, it is fair to ask if Washington would be any more tolerant of a hostile military alliance extending to its regional neighbourhood in the Western hemisphere. While this is somewhat speculative, we do know that Moscow has hardly been involved in out-of-area interventions in distant parts of the world, at least when compared to Western military interventions.

Regardless, since the outbreak of the Ukraine war in the spring of 2022, propaganda from both sides has become so intense that it is becoming difficult to gain an even-handed understanding of the situation on the ground. There has been open debate on either side about the possibility of using nuclear weapons. The Cold War ended with a consensus that nothing is worth the risk of nuclear war. Indeed, this was one of the reasons why the East-West conflict remained, largely, "cold." There was direct communication with Moscow even under Brezhnev. Today, a dialogue with Putin would be seen by some as treason. How can fundamental lessons of diplomacy and nuclear deterrence be unlearned so quickly?

## Intellectual Virtues in Times of War

From a Christian perspective, there can be no doubt that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). This also means that, in our intellectual quest for the truth, we must go beyond what furthers any particular agenda, including our own. Regarding the war in Ukraine, for instance, we must strive for an even-handed view even in the face of those who would not accept that any fault might lie on "our" side of the trenches. Obviously, this is not to exonerate Russia or any other party from wrongful or criminal conduct.

In the final section of his theology brief on order, Biggar calls for Christian academics to cultivate intellectual virtues. It is helpful to apply this framework to international order and the Ukraine War. At the same time, an application may also clarify the framework.

In a war situation, even-handed views are unpopular, as even academics tend to look at things in black and white. Therefore, **courage** is required. When we fail to roundly condemn one side while exonerating the other, partisan observers will attack us. Their attacks will be one-sided, but this does not disqualify their arguments. We must consider their accusations with **humility**. In a conversation, a colleague accused me of spreading "Kremlin propaganda" when I suggested that the West should be more sensitive

to the concerns expressed by Russia as a humiliated great power. Spreading Kremlin propaganda is not a minor accusation, and I did not feel I deserved it. I found that, in a situation like this, keeping one's **patience** can be challenging. I took a deep breath and tried to explain to my colleague, as humbly and calmly as I could, that my aim was not to side with Russia but to point to something that might have enabled, and might still enable, diplomatic negotiations and peaceful change rather than replicating a conflict that is so hugely damaging.

In my perception, the colleague had accused me unjustly and so I found it difficult to render **justice** to what he was saying. While spreading Kremlin propaganda was clearly not my aim, it surely had to be of concern to me that part of what I had said was overlapping with what a Kremlin speaker might say. It was uncomfortable to accept that, perhaps, my colleague had put his finger on a vulnerable spot and I should take greater care to distance myself. When discussing previous military interventions, my colleague also pointed me to a factual inaccuracy regarding an historical detail. In all honesty, I found it difficult to accept any form of criticism from someone who had just accused me of spreading Kremlin propaganda. Yet, the intellectual virtue of **docility** demanded me to concede the inaccuracy of my historical claim and stand corrected. I had to remember that, ultimately, what unites us is a **search for truth**, and that the truth can only reveal itself in a discursive spirit of give-and-take.

The last two paragraphs cover, in the following order, six of the intellectual virtues listed by Biggar: (1) humility; (2) courage; (3) patience; (4) justice; (5) docility; and (6) search for truth. Professing these virtues is easy in principle, but hard in the heat of a real intellectual encounter. In the exchange with my colleague, I passed the test by the skin of my teeth, but I must confess that many other times I fall short. One reason for this is that, ever since the cardinal virtues of yore, all good things come in sevens. The seventh intellectual virtue is, arguably, only one step away from Christian love. Biggar calls it **charity**. If only we could become a community of brothers and sisters carrying out disagreements in love, alerting one another of the specks of sawdust in our eyes lest they solidify into planks.

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