

## No Return to Eden: O'Donovan's Ethical Approach Applied to Writers

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The highlight of my fall semester is a course I teach called Writing Theory and Ethics. It is a senior-level course enrolled with students who plan on writing creatively and professionally. In my Christian university, most students have been raised as evangelicals, some as fundamentalists, and a few, resisting their backgrounds, have shrugged off conservative thought. In part for ethics, I assign *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, an applicational book.<sup>1</sup> I have searched for a larger overview of Christian ethics with an attractive moral vision, but have been disappointed by many that have an unappealing habit of listing and rejecting the ethical systems of various worldviews, rather than inviting the readers into a comprehensive approach. That is, until I read the Anglican scholar Oliver O'Donovan's classic work *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, followed by his recent series *Ethics as Theology*.<sup>2</sup>

O'Donovan's engagement of creation ethics intersecting with kingdom ethics is of particular appeal to writers raised with a Christian background. Although he does not use the word *narrative*, his trajectory of the moral order of creation appeals to Christian interest in narrative. Secondly, his explanation of Adam's authoritative task of naming transferring to Christians after the resurrection is language that appeals to writers' putting words to paper. Finally, O'Donovan's

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994); Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, *Ethics as Theology 1* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013); Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, *Ethics as Theology 2* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014); Oliver O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, *Ethics as Theology 3* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017).

approach stirs thoughtful reflection on the rightfulness of the restraints within their freedom that writers put on themselves in their work, or that are put on them by their communities.

### *A Narrative-Like Trajectory*

As with other theologians who cite a drama of redemption, O'Donovan describes creation being on a trajectory in *Resurrection and Moral Order*. He does not reduce this trajectory to chart form, but for the sake of my visually oriented students, I have reduced it to the following.

Creation—Fall—Law—Advent (Incarnation and Life)—  
 Cross—Jesus' Resurrection—Pentecost (Gift of Holy Spirit;  
 You and Church)—God's Judgment—Fulfillment of Kingdom

O'Donovan writes that the earth was designed with a telos—an eschatology or destiny for creation. It was not created static; it already had a trajectory. Humankind was “ordered-to-flourish”—set within an order to flourish. This concept of created order is central to O'Donovan. He refers to Psalm 8:5–6: “Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.”<sup>3</sup>

With the incarnation, Jesus was born as the Son of man, “creation restored and renewed.”<sup>4</sup> He was and is transcendent of the creation's moral order. At the cross, false moral knowledge temporarily won.<sup>5</sup> O'Donovan sees Jesus' resurrection as the climax of God's ongoing narrative and the center of Christian ethics. This is God's “vindication” of his creation or created order—our created life: “Creation is restored, and the kingdom dawns.”<sup>6</sup>

According to O'Donovan, morality is “participation in God's created order.” Although O'Donovan avoids the word *narrative* (likely in order to avoid being identified with narrative ethics), the visual of a narrative with resurrection as climax reminds my students of their

<sup>3</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 38, 53–54.

<sup>4</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 143.

<sup>5</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 94–95.

<sup>6</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 13, 15.

holy responsibility in their writing to participate in a story that God is telling.

### *Writers' Roles as Namers*

Writers who are Christians may have already grasped from Genesis 2 that they are called to name, but O'Donovan helps to flesh out this image. At the beginning of creation, Adam was to have authority or dominion as one who "calls things by their proper names." However, Adam lost his authority in the fall. Humankind was given the law: naming was done for them through it, but "the possibility of a deeper understanding of the law itself or of the situations it addressed, was denied" them until the coming of the Holy Spirit after Christ's resurrection.<sup>7</sup> At and after Pentecost, Christ's followers participate fully in the created order, in creation, through the Holy Spirit. Like Adam, Christ's followers are again namers. What does it mean to name?

### *Naming Is Having an Impact*

O'Donovan compares daily work to Adam's work of "naming the beasts": "When we work, we use our intelligence to devise and execute purposes. We understand the power and limits of our material; we conceive and deliberate upon the impact we shall make on it."<sup>8</sup> Writers have both an impact upon their audience but also upon their texts—the words they choose, the way they style sentences and organize paragraphs for a desired effect.

### *Naming Is Truth Telling*

O'Donovan writes that by naming the animals, Adam is "telling the truth."<sup>9</sup> A person, says O'Donovan, "has the authority to designate the character of the reality which he encounters, not merely to adhere to certain designations that have already been made for him."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps no writer is as renowned for breaking out of designations made for her as Flannery O'Connor, who, as Walter Brueggeman notes,

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<sup>7</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 24–25.

<sup>8</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, "Thoughts on Work (Oliver O'Donovan)," *Archbishop of York Symposium*, The Office of the Archbishop of York, <http://www.archbishopofyorksymposium.org/?p=30>.

<sup>9</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, xvii.

<sup>10</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 24.

expressed the prophetic truth by shocking the imagination with what was not ordinary.<sup>11</sup>

*Naming Is Creative and Imaginative*

Repeatedly, O'Donovan describes discernment as "creative and imaginative": "Christian freedom, given by the Holy Spirit, allows man to make moral responses creatively."<sup>12</sup> Whenever people make a moral decision, they are not only naming the now but are imagining the future.

*Naming Implies Being Awake*

O'Donovan describes moral awareness with the metaphor of "awakening."<sup>13</sup> To make moral decisions, people must be able to see the world. To recognize truth, people must be awake, able to attend to their own experience and hear the word or read the word of others. A popular meme shared among writers online is a black-and-white photo of the essayist Susan Sontag with this quotation underneath: "Love words, agonize over sentences. And pay attention to the world."<sup>14</sup>

*Naming Well Implies Loving Well*

Writers cannot do their truth telling in a creative way without love. According to O'Donovan, "Love is the affective recognition of a good; a good is recognized as good in itself and as good for other things."<sup>15</sup> O'Donovan describes love as both *wisdom*—apprehending creation's order—and *delight*—"affective attention to something simply for what it is and for the fact that it is. . . . It [Love] achieves its creativity by being perceptive."<sup>16</sup> The recent death of the poet and author Brian Doyle is a tender reminder of a writer able to love like this. He has been described as "a man filled with a sense of humanity

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), xiv–xv.

<sup>12</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 24–25.

<sup>13</sup> O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 6–9.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, "At the Same Time: The Novelist and Moral Reasoning" in Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Paulo Dilonardo and Anne Jump (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007), 210.

<sup>15</sup> O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 105–106.

<sup>16</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 26.

and wonder, who was interested in everyone's story and who saw everyone's potential."<sup>17</sup>

### *Freedom in Writing*

Of great concern for my students is ethical writing. Writers who are Christians feel restrained, or restrain themselves, in ways that God may not be asking of them in their work. How do they determine their own boundaries for their own contexts? O'Donovan's work is compelling because he does not write only about outward activities but inward transformation. He is concerned that Protestants' emphasis on sanctification separate from justification created "the characteristic tension between a gospel with no concern for life in the world and a concern for life in this world which has lost touch with the gospel."<sup>18</sup> This tension between an inner and outer focus is explained more accessibly for a student audience by O'Donovan's friend N. T. Wright in his book *After You Believe*, who provides two frameworks of the directions many Christians tend to go with their ethics—one inner focused and one outer.<sup>19</sup>

The first ethical framework is focused inwardly:

- The goal is the final bliss of heaven, away from this life of space, time, and matter.
- This goal is achieved for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, which we cling to by faith.
- Christian living in the present consists of anticipating the disembodied, "eternal" state through the practice of a detached spirituality and the avoidance of "worldly" contamination.

Wright says of this framework, "Fortunately, there is enough of the genuine gospel in there for people to live by, but those who take that path will be trying to live 'Christianly' with one hand tied behind their

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<sup>17</sup> Rachel Rippetoe, "Brian Doyle, Author and *Portland Magazine* Editor, Dies at 60," *The Beacon*, May 27, 2017, <http://www.upbeacon.com/article/2017/05/brian-doyle-dies-at-60>.

<sup>18</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 254.

<sup>19</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 66–67.

back.”<sup>20</sup> This echo of inner focus is common among my students raised in highly pietistic backgrounds.

The second framework has an outer focus:

- The goal is to establish God’s kingdom on earth by our own hard work.
- This goal is demonstrated by Jesus in his public career, starting off the process and showing us how to do it.
- Christian living in the present consists of anticipating the final kingdom on earth by working and campaigning for justice, peace, and the alleviation of poverty and distress.

Wright says of this framework, “Here again, there is plenty ‘good news’ by which people can live, though the heart of the matter seems to be strangely missing which is perhaps why the attempts to live by this scheme are never as successful as their proponents hope.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, all the activities are good ones—they are causes many writers support, but if the emphasis has become outer focused, the transformation of the heart may be lost if the external is allowed to overshadow it. However, as a student pointed out to me, this paradigm is still self-focused in that the participants are doing the action themselves.

For writers who are Christians, the inner focus produces writing that avoids sin or the effects of sin. Christians are playing God by passing over sin—either sin or the effects of sin are treated as if they did not exist, or the light must overwhelm the darkness. There must always be a good ending to the story. Despair cannot be left as despair, brokenness as brokenness. The Christian Book Association is known for producing books like this. The author Sharon Cairns Mann blogged that she received guidelines from an unnamed publisher that sold books to CBA stores. The guidelines forbid drinking of alcoholic beverages, playing cards, gambling, Christian characters being “overnight together alone,” “the mention of intimate body parts,” and “lying” by Christian characters—any exceptions had to be approved by an editor. For Mann, a major shortcoming of such fiction “is that it

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<sup>20</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 67.

fails to take the aesthetic dimension of God's creation—including the fall—seriously.”<sup>22</sup>

The second problem, which is reflected in the outer-focused moral framework, is a form of utilitarianism. Literature must become a tool for something else. Texts must be written for social justice or ecological concerns, both valid spheres or themes for writing but not the only valid ones. For both frameworks, I suggest to my students that the participants desire to do as Mann implies: return to Eden. The writers of the first moral frame are dreaming about it and the second moral framework are attempting to re-create it.

Utilitarianism is taken care of by the writers' role as namers. Although called to be truth tellers, writers are also called as namers to love God and others. Therefore, they cannot be mere utilitarians in their creative work. But what of the first problem—the expectation that art does not dwell on sin or the effects of sin? Am I free to do what I want in acknowledging sin and its effects, in acknowledging the darkness of this world? In O'Donovan's mind, to work means to contribute to the “good ordering of the world.”<sup>23</sup> My students are aware that other Christians would claim they are not contributing to that ordering by creating texts they would deem dark. These Christians want to return to Eden, neglecting unconsciously the ongoing redemption of this world, which must acknowledge darkness to acknowledge grace through Christ. O'Donovan's narrative-like trajectory makes a theological statement that participants will *not* return to Eden—that there is a telos for creation. In knowing that, how do writers who are Christians experience their freedom and be ethical about their writing?

### *What Freedom Is*

For young Christians, freedom is a tenuous, confusing topic. Freedom in Christ is *not* doing whatever they want, because then, according to O'Donovan, they are denying that a created order, although affected by the fall, already exists. If they are assuming they

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<sup>22</sup> Sharon Cairns Mann, “The Challenge to Faith Writers: Ante-Up,” *A Good Read*, [http://www.sharoncairnsmann.com/blog-a-good-read/the-challenge-to-faith-writers-ante-up#\\_ftn2](http://www.sharoncairnsmann.com/blog-a-good-read/the-challenge-to-faith-writers-ante-up#_ftn2).

<sup>23</sup> O'Donovan, “Thoughts on Work (Oliver O'Donovan).”

are bringing order where there is none, O'Donovan insists that instead of having "dominion," they will have "domination."<sup>24</sup>

And yet freedom is *not* requiring of oneself a multitude of specific rules. O'Donovan sees moral law as "generic" and not "specific."<sup>25</sup> Participants have an "outline" of moral knowledge, and as time goes on, they begin to see the color and nuances within that outline. Special revelation "discloses" God's moral law—scripture is authoritative.<sup>26</sup> But moral participants do not add to a moral code; instead, participants' understanding of moral law becomes deeper and more complex. If participants do have a simplistic understanding of a moral code, and add multiple applications to it, they will eventually obey what they want but not obey what they do not want—they will compartmentalize.<sup>27</sup>

Freedom is "participation in Christ's authority within the created order."<sup>28</sup> Participants are no longer oppressed by the law because they are no longer confused by it—through the Holy Spirit (and that includes the reading of scripture) they are beginning to see the law well for the first time. O'Donovan writes that "what previously looked like disconnected arbitrary norms come together to form a coherent 'law of Christ,' the love of neighbor as self."<sup>29</sup>

The "love command" of scripture is a basis in O'Donovan's thought—part of his rationale that the moral code is generic. Jesus responds to the lawyer in Matthew 22:37–40 that the greatest commandment is loving God and the second is loving his neighbor. He states, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." O'Donovan believes that all other commands are included in this one.<sup>30</sup> There is no competition between our love for God and our love of neighbor. Out of primary love for God comes secondary love of neighbor. He is Augustinian in thinking that if participants love God and neighbor, other loves become rightly ordered.<sup>31</sup>

Within the moral order, participants are utterly dependent on the creator through Christ's resurrection and the following indwelling

<sup>24</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 225.

<sup>26</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 89.

<sup>27</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 195.

<sup>28</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 24.

<sup>29</sup> O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 201–203.

<sup>31</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 227–228, 239.



of the Holy Spirit to love. This dependency is characterized by the following.

First, they are aware that their moral knowledge is “provisional”—I tell my students that they hold their knowledge in an open-handed way. They see an outline of morality but not all the particulars.<sup>32</sup> They cannot say they know what God is doing in others with certainty. As O'Donovan says: “When we look at others we have to think not only of repentance and transformation that may yet take place, but of that which may possibly have already taken place, though without being disclosed to our view.”<sup>33</sup>

Second, participants are aware that they do not know the future. They do know the “absolute future” is that Jesus will return some day: God will have his judgment when he announces his divine yes of grace to those who have followed him.<sup>34</sup> But O'Donovan is careful to say that participants do not actually know that much about the future—they do not know how history will be fashioned.<sup>35</sup> They do not transcend time in their knowledge.

Finally, this dependency is reflected through the dialogues participants are within. O'Donovan writes that Christian freedom “is grounded in communication. It is discursively engaged, not only with other participants, but in dialogical intimacy with God himself.”<sup>36</sup> In his work, O'Donovan frequently quotes prayer: the Lord's Prayer, liturgical prayers, or the prayers of John Donne's poetry. “At the heart of moral thinking,” he concludes one chapter, “is a prayer for the coming of God to reshape our freedom from within: ‘Come and recreate mee, now growne ruinous.’”<sup>37</sup> He brings up the Holy Spirit frequently: “We pray for the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, illuminating the form of the world and its destiny.”<sup>38</sup> Prayer includes confession and praise. He assumes that this prayer is not just individual but collective. To rightly order love, participants must seek counsel from others. One should ask one or two people for advice, people with a sense of

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<sup>32</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 81.

<sup>33</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 225.

<sup>34</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 253.

<sup>35</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 82–85.

<sup>36</sup> O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 127.

restraint who will lead the asker in considering a moral choice without making moral choices for him or her.<sup>39</sup>

In their dialogue with God and others, participants expose themselves to scripture, but they do not read it by proof texting. O'Donovan insists that scripture be read in a "comprehensive" way: "We must look within it not only for moral bricks, but for indications of the order in which the bricks belong together."<sup>40</sup> He also implies that Christians interpret it within the body of believers. In his mind the most important event of a worship service is the reading of scripture, because it authorizes all the other activities.<sup>41</sup>

What does making a moral decision—exercising one's ethical freedom—look like in writing? Rather than be discouraged that moral decisions differ based on contexts and audiences, writers can be encouraged that they are able to follow Christ's "faithfulness,"<sup>42</sup> given all of the above, especially that writers are given a moral outline with which to explore a situation's specificities. As stated previously, O'Donovan describes love as both wisdom and delight. O'Donovan assumes participants in God's moral order delight, and this delight looks like praise and joy and hope. Rather than agonize over a hard choice, writers' responsibility as moral beings is in O'Donovan's words a "glad responsibility."<sup>43</sup>

### *Student Exercise*

It is one thing to lecture on the above. It is another to ask students to apply the concepts. After I lectured and discussed the above content with my students, I "dropped a bomb on them," as one student said. I passed out copies of an op-ed piece by Daniel Handler, author of the popular Lemony Snicket books, and told them to spend a few minutes reading.<sup>44</sup> Handler's thesis is that if the United States

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<sup>39</sup> O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 40, 42–52.

<sup>40</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 200.

<sup>41</sup> O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 135.

<sup>42</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 96.

<sup>43</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Handler, "Want Teenage Boys to Read? Easy. Give Them Books About Sex," *The New York Times: Sunday Review*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/29/opinion/sunday/want-teenage-boys-to-read-easy-give-them-books-about-sex.html>.

wants teenage boys to read, it must provide young adult literature (YA) containing sexual activity. After they read it, I told them that over the weekend I would like them to pray and talk about it with wise friends—ones who will ask them good questions. Then, when they came back, we would reason together and come to moral decisions about including sexual activity in YA books.

Students returned excited to talk. On a PowerPoint slide I had written two statements: “Consider what scripture teaches us about sex (both positive and negative)” and “Consider the current U.S. context/beliefs about the behavior of teenage boys in relation to sexual activity.” Beginning with the first consideration, a married student brought up the Song of Solomon, and I wrote it on the board, making a note that sexual desire is considered a positive in that book. Someone else noted that in Genesis “the two shall become one flesh.” Others went a more negative route, quoting “flee from sexual temptation.” In the end, we agreed that overall in the scriptures, sexual activity was considered good within marriage and that sexual desire was good in anticipation of marriage and within it. For the very conservative students who may have been tentative about the goodness of sexual desire, I appealed to one of their favorite authors, C. S. Lewis, by describing the last scene of his book *That Hideous Strength*: a couple whose marriage had been disintegrating are about to begin its renewal by having intercourse.

For the second statement, they noted that two contexts existed. In conservative Christianity, it can be taboo to talk about sexual desire. In secular society, sexual intercourse is assumed as part of adult development, may occur sooner, and even at the high school level, there may exist a culture of “hooking up” with few strings attached. In both contexts, teenagers are physiologically experiencing a shift in hormones that may increase sexual desire. Students also resisted some of Handler’s assumptions about boys and his instrumentalist approach to sex as a means to an end.

“So,” I asked, “as writers, do we ever include it in YA novels?” The discussion ramped up, and I sifted through their responses, revealing three different moral decisions:

1. Sexual activity *should not* be incorporated in YA novels. A few students held their ground that a YA novel was an

- inappropriate medium for teenagers to encounter sexual activity. I suspect that they believed that dialogue with parents was the only appropriate medium.
2. Sexual activity *may* be incorporated in YA novels because it was, in the words of the students, a “reality of life.” However, it must be shown in the context of marriage, or if not, it must have negative consequences. The students had earlier read an article that referenced literary critic Wayne C. Booth’s concept of a “pattern of desire” that fiction leads readers in, and they did not want to lead readers in a pattern in which they were desiring something for a character that they viewed as forbidden in scripture.<sup>45</sup>
  3. Sexual activity *should* be incorporated in YA novels as a “reality of life.” This group pointed out that if a YA novel provided only negative consequences for sexual activity outside of marriage, the reader could perceive the novel as “preachy” and “inauthentic.” A work may necessitate sexual activity as driving the narrative.

Both the second and third group did agree on one point: sexual activity in YA novels should *not* include gratuitous details, but these groups also agreed that the members of the class would likely draw different lines for what is gratuitous, while taking into account the developmental stage of the readers. A couple of students also pointed out that an audience of sheltered Christian youth may be developmentally at a different stage than a secular audience of youth.

I believe the discussion was a success. Following O’Donovan’s approach, the students looked at scripture comprehensively and examined multiple factors of context. They avoided an automatic response to a moral decision. Particularly, groups two and three considered the implications of being namers as truth tellers. They loved God and their potential readers in showing wisdom by acknowledging God’s created order, and showed delight in their readers in their attention to them. I reminded them that if we respect O’Donovan’s paradigm, we will hold our moral knowledge provisionally. We will understand that each group was faithful in going through a similar process of moral

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<sup>45</sup> Peter J. Leithart, “Authors, Authority, and the Humble Reader” in Leland Ryken, ed., *The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature*, revised and expanded ed. (Colorado Springs, Colo.: WaterBrook, 2002), 215–216.

deliberation, and therefore, we will be careful not to be dismissive of their decision.

### *Conclusion*

My conclusion for the students was that despite their best work, writers who are Christians may occasionally be excluded for their moral decisions. O'Donovan's encouraging words are that "the path to full participation [in God's created order] lies through being excluded."<sup>46</sup> This is what it means to take up the cross. Writers imitate Christ, who was excluded in a horrible way on the cross. Because of their faith, they give up goods they had freedom to access in order to be shaped more like Jesus. They can look forward to God's future judgement, when God will say yes over them and the works they participated in within his created order.

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<sup>46</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 95.

