Q & A with the Experts: Timothy P. Jackson

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Q: What has been the impact of the Center on your own work?

A: The impact of the Center is I think to make my work what I would call more casuistical, meaning more focused on concrete, practical issues. So we started off with the sex, marriage and family and religions in the book project, and that in my particular work focused me on abortion issues and I ended up writing a chapter in a book for that conference and again looking at very concrete moral issues. I had certainly touched on them before but never written a lot on them. Beyond that one of my contributions was to edit a volume entitled *The Morality of Adoption*. So looking at the ethics of adoption was another sort of focused part.

And just getting to know people in various disciplines across Emory. You know you work with them as colleagues in some contexts but often you don’t really see their work in detail and get a chance to discuss it, and they in turn often don’t get a chance to discuss yours except in this sort of Center context often I’ve found.

Q: What was it like participating in 13 weeks of seminars?

A: Well 13 weeks of the Sex, Marriage and the Family Project's seminars were amazing in that you would have each week somebody responsible for leading off around their own work. You would see the disciplinarity of each of the faculty members and how they have command of a particular field. I mean often there was a lot of edification going on, meaning I learned a lot from someone. I didn’t always feel that I was giving them a lot because they were, you know, in their field the expert, but it was amazing over those weeks to see again your colleagues whose work you might not otherwise really know well come in and present and see how it might all hang together in a volume and in the conference that we ultimately did. And I had thought a lot about issues of sex and abortion and contraception and the like, but to see or hear Abduh An-Na’im talk about Islamic takes on marriage and conception and contraception was powerful, and it certainly did impact my own writing.

Q: Is there a line between promoting religion and studying it?

A: Well I often feel like you can’t fully grasp a tradition unless you have at least some sympathy for the practice of it and for the world of belief that it represents. I do think that having some sort of first order of concern for the truth value of the claims is crucial, that it’s not just an aesthetic exercise and not just an historical or sociological exercise. There are those components
to be sure but one of the things I appreciate about the Center is exactly that there are both scholars and practitioners of the faith there together talking about claims and not just aesthetically, that it does sort of matter whether you believe them true and what sort of practical implications they have. I at least find that very enlivening. Hal Berman, Hal’s own take on the role of divine love in the law in Western civilization quite generally is very reminiscent of my own teacher Paul Ramsey’s take, and so I think Witte and I share a kind of common sense that our mentors, you know, very much wedded scholarship with faith, very much took the question seriously and promoted even somewhat similar answers to some of the origin of faith and the relation again of love and law.

Q: What would you say has been the impact of the Center on scholarship beyond Emory?

A: The impact of the Center beyond Emory, it certainly has brought together a range of scholars that wouldn’t otherwise have congealed so to speak. Nick Wolterstorff is from Yale, Jeff Stout from Princeton, Paul Weithman from the University of Notre Dame, a lot of these figures have come together for more than one conference that I’ve been involved in. So I think the significance of the Center has become clear far and wide and the fact that people keep coming back repeatedly to multiple conferences and I think it’s made their work again more focused, more interdisciplinary. I’ve certainly enjoyed getting to know these people over the years and seeing their work and you do get actually some continuity of issues of conversation. So it’s impacted my scholarship again in making it more casuistical certainly in making me more productive.

One of the great advantages of bringing in people from around the country, even around the world, is it would often be a matter of bringing in a draft of your contribution for the project and talking about it and then, you know, you go back home and you take the conversation you’ve had and try to integrate it into your revised draft. The range of people that I just mentioned -- their work has been significantly expanded and broaden by the contact with the Center.

Q: What issues should the Center address in the future?

A: I think the first issue that comes to mind is the fairly obvious one of religious dialogue, religious tolerance, religious pluralism. To be sure I think the issue of possible conflicts of civilization between the Judeo-Christian West and a Muslim East is pressing.

But one that occurs to me is globalization especially the role of economic globalization in the next quarter century. How do we both appreciate the dynamics of capitalism and the dynamics of the market, and I do believe the market in many cases can be a guarantor of political liberty, can be a sensitive pricing mechanism but also a sort of protector of liberty. But how does one rein that in especially in a global context where there are local, national restraints on abuses of the market or excesses of the market? You know, how do you keep the multi-nationals in line? I think the Center would be ideal to try to bring to bear sociologically, political, legal, and religious insight into that and what are the limits of the market and what are the means that it must be checked both politically and morally, what sort of ethos is required so that simply profit isn’t the great god of us all. So globalization comes to mind.
A third thing that continually interests me is issues around reproduction, both contraception and artificial reproduction. The more we’re capable of in a sense seizing the reigns of evolution and directing it intentionally with technology, I think the more pressing very fundamental questions about the meaning of life, about limits of technological intervention. The religions have always had something to say about procreation both its contraception and conception. Is it possible to generate anything like an emerging consensus across the traditions that might rein in technology? Again I think we need to rein in the market, appreciating it’s virtues but also acknowledging its limits. But the same with technology, the same with scientific innovations that give us great power but may lead us down paths that are in fact quite destructive.

The university has several initiatives underway now relating to both religion and health and religion and science… The power or the prestige of Emory Medicine, Emory Nursing, Emory Public Health, all of these are going to be gathered into these initiatives around religion and science and bring faculty members in a conversation, faculty who know of each other but haven’t really worked together and read each others work carefully, and that’s a great boon. Again we’ll see whether consensus emerges and whether, you know, there’s anything like a genuinely synthetic answer or proposal growing out of it. But at least we’re getting the conversation going.

Q: What stands out for you about your work at the Center?

A: The irreplaceable value of conversation was made manifest to me in those sorts of conversations you don’t get anywhere else than in an interdisciplinary Center. In particular we were talking, all the fellows and invited guests, about adoption…The primary focus was on the right of particular sorts of couples, particular sorts of would-be parents, to adopt without intervention of the government and so on, but there was a sort of epiphany where having heard myself talk in this way it similarly became clear to me that the primary focus really ought to be on the right to be adopted. That the language of the right to adopt, as important as that is and as insightful as comments were from the roundtable participants, that just being involved in the conversation I think everybody finally realized there was a kind of central focus missing. The focus needed to be on the right to be adopted and then, if you will, the need of children rather than the interests of adults became primary. We can see even the language of rights finally is outstripped by the need to talk about love and the need to talk about charity for the needy. But that was something that it was clear even at the time I wouldn’t have gotten any other way than through a Center conversation. It fundamentally changed the shape of that collected volume and my own work subsequently.