



Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative
seeks to promote the integration
of Christian faith and academic disciplines
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars
across the spectrum of faculties
in research universities
worldwide.**

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LEADER GUIDE | CREATED ORDER AND DISORDER

MODULE 1 | WHY ORDER?

Session Objectives

- To introduce questions of order and disorder within the world and the academy.
- To identify the role order plays within our disciplines and scholarly work, and to identify some intersections between our fields and a theology of order. To show how the topic of the created order is salient to every university discipline.

Reading

- Biggar, [Theology Brief Preview](#)
- Biggar, [Theology Brief](#), Introduction and sections 1-3.
- Sánchez-Cañizarez, [‘Is Natural Order Still A Way to Access God?’](#), particularly for natural scientists.
- Look through the ‘Order and Contemporary Issues’ or ‘Disorder’ sections of the [Topical Guide](#) and read one or two entries that interest you.

Questions

Q1: Order can be quite an abstract concept, so to think your way in to the topic it may be helpful to consider its opposite - disorder. **Where in the world do you see chaos, disorder, or anarchy? How do they impact the people, situations, or systems that they touch? What emotional reaction do you have to these sites of chaos?**

Leader prompts:

- In armed conflicts (Ukraine, Israel, Sudan and others) there may be a violation of the international order, the agreed set of norms according to which nations interact with each other (see [Friedrichs](#)).
- The disruption of supply chains or collapse of businesses may put strain on the economic order.
- Social orders may be disrupted through disinformation and social media algorithms which fuel polarisation.
- Experiencing trauma may create a sense of disorder within the self (see [Mahan](#)).

- Discrimination, violence, and other forms of social injustice can cause disorder or harm to people's health and well-being (see [VanderWeele](#)).
- Global warming may disrupt the equilibrium of ecosystems.

Q2: [Biggar](#) begins his Theology Brief by claiming that western culture shies away from 'order', preferring to emphasise freedom, but that this preference is not universal. **Is this the case in your context? What is your initial reaction to the topic of order? Is it positive, negative, or indifferent? What is the typical reaction in your discipline or among your colleagues?**

Leader prompts:

- [Biggar](#) claims that western cultures are less likely to value order than eastern, and particularly Chinese cultures. He identifies the experience of war or anarchy as leading to a preference for order, and having fought for freedom or against oppression or restrictive laws as leading to a preference for freedom. Discuss whether this aligns with your group's experience or perception of the world.
- Encourage participants to compare their own reactions to the topic of order to those of their colleagues, or to the default perspectives assumed within your discipline.

Q3: [Biggar](#) argues that because the world was created by a single, rational and good God, creation has an order to it: 'It is intelligible: there are given structures, patterns and regularities—orders—that are objectively present for rational creatures like human beings to grasp.' **Is discerning order a function of your discipline? Are there 'structures, patterns and regularities' which you seek to discover or analyse? Alternatively, are there structures which your discipline seeks to create?**

Leader prompts:

- **Scientists and mathematicians** are perhaps the most likely to discern orders which are inherent in physical creation (e.g. biological principles, taxonomies, physical laws, chemical equations, mathematical laws).
- **Social scientists** caution that orders in nature and social orders are of a different quality, as social orders are much more constructed by humans and thus subject to error (see [Bell](#)).
- Some disciplines, such as **medicine, public health, and some social sciences**, try to create structures which bring order and thereby flourishing to the world. [VanderWeele](#): the discipline of

public health tries to understand, supplement and support the capacity for healing which God has given the human body. He writes that the task of caring for the environment operates similarly.

- **Engineers and architects** seek to apply knowledge of the natural order to construct new objects, systems, and orders, which are used by humans and support their flourishing.
- According to [VanderWeele](#), the **humanities** ‘discern the nature of human well-being and the spiritual ends of human society.’ **Philosophy** may be seen as an attempt to discern the nature of reality, or at least deconstruct previous attempts to explain reality.
- [Mahan](#) writes that **art** depicts the order and disorder within the world, causing people to see what they would usually turn away from, and helping ‘us appreciate how deeply *disordered* we humans are’. In some forms of art, structure or order (such as poetic meter, musical form, the use of ratios and proportion within visual art) is very important. Other artistic movements resist the strictures of these kinds of order. [/leader_prompt]

Q4: Different disciplines will relate differently to the orders they describe. **What is the purpose of order within your field? Does your discipline seek to discern order, construct it, or resist it?**

Leader prompts:

- In the **sciences**, order is a way of conceptualising or describing the predictability and regularity of nature. [Alexander](#) argues that the assumption of order within the universe is essential for science: scientific discoveries ‘depend on an empirical search for truth that in turn depends on the coherent and rational structure of the created order.’
- The **social sciences** see orders as a set of conventions or laws which regulate society, with the aim of promoting flourishing. The social sciences also seek to identify and challenge parts of existent social structures which lead to injustice or other negative outcomes. For example, in economics: ‘The market economy is an example of a human order in civil society which arises from the desire and willingness of economic actors to trade with each other in goods, services, (etc.) ... but there is no presumption either that the order is always stable and well-functioning, or that the outcomes are always just’ ([Hay and Menzies](#)).
- Similarly, within the **humanities**, scholars use critical theory and feminist and post-colonial methodologies to challenge the social orders assumed by previous generations. They may see appeals to the created order as attempts to justify unjust power structures; in the past, inequities between genders and races have been understood as ‘natural’. See [Biggar’s](#) comments on this topic, which your group may want to critique.
- The **arts** have had conventions about order and harmony, sometimes rooted in mathematics (e.g. the golden ratio, musical harmonics, the structure of a sonnet), though the disciplines now seek to transcend these conventions. See [Chua](#) on music and [Mahan](#) on literature.

Q5: At the end of his Theology Brief, [Biggar](#) writes, ‘the existence of a given, created order—be it physical or aesthetic or moral—implies that academic endeavour is properly about the discovery of the truth of reality as given by God.’ **Do you agree? How does this statement align with or differ from the ways your discipline understands the academic project? What difference would it make to think in this way?**

Leader prompts:

- [Biggar](#) argues that this way of thinking is out of fashion in an academy which regards such an appeal to order as a power play.
- [Hutchinson](#): ‘Academic Vocation these days is rarely articulated as being "the discovery of the truth of reality", let alone "as given by God". Christians might therefore be regarded as quaintly old fashioned to say so.’
- [Alexander](#) argues that this assumption is basic to the **natural sciences**: ‘If one believes in God as author of creation, the one whose will and purposes underlies and sustains all that exists, then it is a perfectly rational step towards believing that we live in a rational universe with properties that can be described using some very rational and elegant mathematics, as well as some very convincing laws.’ He argues that the move away from belief in a creator God has, in some cases, also undermined belief in universal scientific laws.
- [Bell](#) cautions against viewing social or political orders as being given by God in the same way that the natural order is. In the **social sciences**, the way God intends things to be (moral order) is often a challenge or disruption to existent social orders ‘as they are impelled to conform to a higher good’ ([Halliday](#), international law). Halliday describes the discovery of the kinds of social orders which reflect God’s will/promote flourishing as a complex task requiring dialogue between social scientists and theologians.
- [O’Donovan](#) comments, ‘Humanistic disciplines often have to think about *unique* events (e.g. in history), *unique* objects (works of art in music, literature, architecture etc.), *unique* situations (in politics), in ways that bring out the “truth” of their significance, even though they are not mere instances of any larger class.’
- [Mahan](#) observes a trend in **literary studies** to reject any sense of divine order or metanarrative. However, he argues that in depicting evil, art creates a longing for the good, or divine order.
- Your group might want to explore the degree to which we can know ‘the truth of reality’. Does the academic project entail that our discernment of truth will always be provisional and approximate? Distinguishing between ontology (what is) and epistemology (what we can know) may be helpful for this conversation.[/leader_prompt]

Q6: At the end of the first session, give your initial response to these questions: **Where do you see questions of order and chaos within your own scholarship? Which themes within the readings or discussions have resonated with your own research?**

Leader prompts:

- You might find it helpful to use the structure of discerning, constructing, or resisting order from question 4 as you respond to this question.
- Record these observations and take them forward into the next sessions as we explore the topic further.

Other Questions

- Why is the world ordered, and why can we perceive its order?
- How does your discipline account for the fact that science is possible? [Sánchez-Cañizarez](#) claims that an ordered world is much more explicable if there is a monotheistic creator than if the world arose by chance. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- How does sin hinder our ability to discern truth? Can you think of an example that you've seen in your own academic interactions?

In Depth

- [Sánchez-Cañizarez](#) and [Alexander](#) engage with the question of whether the order in creation indicates that there is a Creator.
- [Drossel](#) explores how the orderedness of creation is present even in quantum randomness.
- [Strine](#) comments on how the non-human created order is given agency in the Hebrew Bible.
- [Wolterstorff](#) argues that the created order exists independent of human conception or categorisation of it.
- [Rae's](#) Preview Response complexifies the idea that creation reflects God's attributes.
- [O'Donovan](#) questions how Biggar's account of truth applies to history, especially salvation history.
- [Yeo](#), *The Created Universe and Naturalistic Cosmos*, provides a dialogue between a Confucian and Pauline perspective on the universe, and how these perspectives affect how we live.
- [Chua's](#) Disciplinary Note on Musical Order describes how music brings order and freedom together, and how musical order is understood in different cultures.

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