



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 3 | ORDER, SCHOLARSHIP AND THE ACADEMY

Session Objectives

- To explore how the doctrine of created order can inform the content of our scholarship.
- To explore how the requirements of the created order impact the practices of the university.

Reading

- Biggar, [Theology Brief section 13](#)
- Friedrichs, [Not the World we Ordered: International Relations and the Ukraine War](#)
- Biggar, Postscript [section](#)
- Look at the [Topical Guide](#) and read one or two entries from the 'Created order and Academic practices' or 'Created Order and the Disciplines' sections.

Questions

Q1: What goods should the university promote? How can we act in ways which further these goods?

Leader prompts:

- Consulting the diagrams attached to this session may help with bringing the different functions of the university to mind.
- It may also be helpful for participants to reflect on their own time in the university (whether as a student or an academic) and consider how they have grown through it.
- Discovery of truth, knowledge of the world, knowledge of self, growth in virtue (through perseverance and the attainment of the academic virtues), exchange of ideas, friendship, empathy for others and appreciation of the ways in which they are different from us (in scholarship, particularly in the humanities and social sciences), love of neighbour by attending to that neighbour (whether as colleague or the as the subject of one's research), promoting human flourishing through research outcomes (curing diseases, addressing social problems, technological advancement, etc), training students to be agents of flourishing in their future careers.

- Hopefully identifying these goods will motivate participants in their pursuit of them!

Q2: Imagine an optimally functioning university. **What would be essential elements of this optimal institution so that it can promote the goods discussed in the previous question? What would it take to realise elements of this ideal university order within your own context, albeit imperfectly?**

Leader prompts:

- Helpful categories to consider might be structure, characteristics, and cultural habits. Again, the diagrams of different parts of the academic life will be helpful in answering this question.
- For each domain, ask ‘why is it structured this way? ‘Who decides? Who benefits?’
- Some examples might include equitable admissions and hiring processes; effective and efficient administration; an engaged and diligent student body (who do not use AI to write their essays!); effective teaching which equips students for future study or work; high levels of academic virtues among the faculty; research outcomes which discern truth effectively and contribute to the common good; good work-life or study-life balance; effective pastoral care systems; fair distribution of resources; etc.

Q3: [Biggar](#) states that sin can corrupt our ability to pursue truth. **In what ways have you seen this happen, whether in the university or in wider academic practices? How do we guard against it?**

Leader prompts:

- This question asks participants to explore the flaws or the fallenness of the academic institution and in the scholarly enterprise.
- [Biggar](#) names insecurity, the lust to dominate or maintain social power, the desire to advance one’s career as factors which can hinder the discernment of truth among academics. Sin might prompt us to inflate the significance of our findings or exclude counter-examples so our papers look more impressive. It might prompt us to resist accepting evidence which disproves our theory because we don’t want to admit we were wrong. We might denigrate proponents of a rival theory, or refuse to accept when they have a valid point because we disagree with the rest of their ideas.

Q4: [Biggar's](#) account of the created moral order assumes that Christians will often disagree with their colleagues about ethical questions. He writes that Christians must seek a 'tense consensus' with their non-Christian neighbours. **To what extent do you think we can come to a universal or shared understanding about what is good? How do we find this 'tense consensus'?**

Leader prompts:

- [Biggar](#): 'The created, given, objective moral order, therefore, does offer the possibility of a measure of moral consensus across cultures, and between Christians and non-Christians. However, whatever consensus emerges will be imperfect and tense, containing significant points of disagreement.'
- [Biggar](#): 'Since all human beings exist in the one world of God's creating, subject to the same universal divine order, some consensus about what is good and right is to be expected and can be found. International agreements and institutions and cross-cultural enterprises, therefore, may involve common moral elements. However, Christians' view of the human condition and belief in God's saving activity occasion specific understandings of human goods and virtues, which not everyone will share. Cross-cultural or public agreement, therefore, will always contain a measure of disagreement. Consensus will be tense.'
- [VanderWeele](#): 'Understanding the physical, mental, social, and spiritual nature of the human person is in some sense the combined task of all academic disciplines. It is the study of the created order as it pertains to the human person and all that affects human persons. Such study can empower the discipline of public health. As we come to better understand what constitutes and contributes to a person's physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being, we will come to a better understanding of how these various dimensions of human well-being can better be promoted.'
- [Friedrichs](#) on **international relations**: '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.'
- [Spence](#): 'For the Christian leader there are therefore two challenges. The first is the challenge shared with all Christian academics of living authentically the prophetic witness to which they are called. The second is the challenge to construct (and, uncomfortable though it may be, the process is probably as deliberate as that verb implies) a personal brand that projects a commitment to the Christian epistemic virtues in an environment in which everything that they do is likely to be read in ways fundamentally at odds with the Christian witness to which they are called.'

Q5: Biggar claims that ‘the manner in which Christian academics argue is quite as important, perhaps even more so, than the content of what they have to say.’ He thinks that Christians have an important prophetic role to play in universities by modelling charitable discourse and disagreement. Do you agree? What might it look like to play this role in your context?

Leader prompts:

- Kinds of uncharitable behaviour which we might want to counter: unnecessarily aggressive questioning in seminars or oral examinations; using ad hominem, strawman, or other fallacious arguments; exhibiting cultural tribalism or polarisation; unwillingness to admit one’s mistakes or to have our research challenged; cronyism and nepotism; penalising students who disagree with our positions; treating others as less important than ourselves.
- While making this point, Biggar writes of the need to inculcate and protect a culture of free speech, especially as it is practiced by people with whom we disagree. There might be various perspectives among participants in your group about the degree to which your context permits freedom of speech; you might also be in a context where freedom of expression is not a salient political value. You might wish to explore how these factors influence your answers to the prompts.
- Friedrichs models responding calmly and charitably to a challenge to his academic integrity.
- Encouraging charitable discourse might look like creating spaces where contentious topics can be discussed respectfully, as Gill has modelled. It might also impact our behaviour at conferences and seminars, or be something we demonstrate through our teaching. It may, on occasion, mean correcting a colleague who does not display this charitable behaviour.

Q6: What virtues does Biggar designate as academic virtues? Are there other moral and intellectual virtues that you find particularly helpful for this task? How do they help us model a charitable disagreement?

Leader prompts:

- Biggar’s list includes:
 - Humility – acknowledging accurately the limits of one’s knowledge.
 - Docility – being teachable, or willing to admit to being wrong.
 - Patience – acknowledging that discerning truth takes time, and being gracious with those people and processes which take longer than we would like.

- Justice – being fair in our depiction of others’ views.
- Charity – being generous in our assessment of divergent or unwelcome views; treating people with grace.
- Courage – being willing to assert unpopular truths, or to stand up for people or perspectives which are not treated fairly.
- [Friedrichs](#) gives a worked example of how they operate in practice.
- [Wolterstorff](#) suggests that Christian scholars experience two emotions in their work: ‘the emotion of awe before the intricacy and immensity of God’s creation, and before the ability of human beings to understand something of that intricacy and immensity and their ability themselves to create things of supreme worth, and the emotion of *horror* when considering what human beings have done to each other, to God’s creation, and to the Creator.’

Final thoughts: encourage participants to reflect on the themes of the discussion series.

In Depth

- [Wolterstorff](#) argues that awe and horror help Christian scholars to respond rightly to living in a created but fallen world.
- Working in a psychiatric context, [Peteet](#) argues for the virtue of accountability.
- [Spence](#) considers how his Christian faith impacts his role in university leadership.
- [Yeo](#) explores how practicing the academic virtues can be seen as practices of worship.
- [Roebben](#) focuses on how pedagogical humility imitates Christ’s self-emptying in the incarnation.

For more information

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