



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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Preview Response

CREATED ORDER / SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Nigel Biggar's is a fine statement of the actuality and character of created order, and its relation to moral order. His stress on the pervasiveness of morality through creation, and of the way of life which this implies for politics, international relations, and the academy, is winning and timely.

However, I want to suggest that we would gain a fuller understanding of creation from complementing the principle of 'order' with an awareness of the *profusion* of creation. It is possible, it seems to me, to overstate the orderliness of creation. From Genesis onwards, creation is about profusion, untidiness, jumble as well as about orderliness – and not just because of human sin and failing. So many Old Testament texts, particularly in the Psalms, testify to the overwhelming, untamed profusion of God's creation. While order may be one basic dimension of creation, abundance – even to excess, even to the extent of *disorder* – is another.

As both academics and Christians, we are committed to seeking the orderliness, but of course, ultimate answers to that evade us. There is much in creation which is not orderly in any clear sense, and was never intended to be so. It is overflowing, abundant, abandoned in ways which especially the Old Testament scriptures convey. The a-rationality of David's dance before the Lord, and of the lovers of the Song of Songs, overwhelms notions of orderliness. A too-great emphasis on the orderliness of creation both underestimates God, and risks affirming a modernist, empiricist approach to our understanding of the world. I therefore find 'rational' too potentially reductionist a term to want to apply it to creation. Orderliness can too easily be equated with tidiness. As Biggar observes, creation includes quantum randomness and artistic improvisation.

As a recent affiliate to a theological college, I have realized that theologians are primarily interested in order, in making order out of the revelation of God. By contrast their colleagues in biblical studies, especially of the Old Testament, are much more comfortable with the variegated, untrammelled uncertainty of humanity and creation – and God. The texts of the Old Testament, in all their ambiguity, rainbow diversity, paradox and sheer bitsiness, convey an important truth about the God whose creation is beyond ordering. God threw some things out there to be wildly manifold and productive like the rainforest

or an estuary or a galaxy.

We can see this profusion-beyond-order in the field which I work in, that is, language. Much – indeed, most – of language is orderly, and can be described and catalogued in its patterns, although our models remain partial and provisional. But all of language is rife with exceptions and one-off ‘nonce’ forms which will never be knocked into orderly, rational shape by our descriptions. Language is a site of continuous flux, it just never stops changing amidst the swirl of linguistic production and creation. It is always spinning new words, structures, dialects, styles, genres, accents – and that volatility represents much of the delight of language. If this is so for a human (sub-)creation, it holds even more for God’s creation as a whole, and the Good which God delights in includes the flux as well as the order of it.

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