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by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars
across the spectrum of faculties
in research universities
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Preview Response

FLOURISHING / SOCIAL SCIENCES

Allan Bell

Emeritus Professor of Language & Communication, Auckland University of Technology
Senior Research Fellow at Laidlaw College, Auckland

Thanks to these authors for addressing such a core question of human life, and therefore also a central issue for Christian reflection. 'What should life ideally be like?' is a pivotal matter for consideration by all of us. I offer several thoughts in response:

1. The provocative points in this preview set me thinking: how does Jesus' life line up with these characteristics of flourishing? The Jesus of at least the Synoptic Gospels clearly lived well according to dimension #1, the agential: righteous living, the good conduct of life. But on the other two dimensions, he did not obviously measure up. The circumstances of his life (#2) arguably did not go well – no fixed abode, continuous external opposition, incomprehension and eventually desertion by his closest friends, a criminal's death. We may believe that he triumphed over those circumstances, particularly through his Resurrection, but as they were lived, they were nevertheless often the opposite of anything like life going well. And #3, the emotional dimension of life feeling as it should: there are of course moments of high joy recorded in Jesus' life, but there was a strong quotient of distress, loneliness and questioning.
2. This leads me to reflect that to flourish in life may be to pursue righteousness (1) and experience joy (3) despite whatever adverse circumstance may come our way (2), most obviously for that large proportion of humankind whose life is taken up with day-to-day survival. Circumstances can place real limits on a person's capacity to flourish. Many people's ability to have agency is heavily circumscribed by the structure in which they live, for example by birth (the traditional sociological structure/agency dilemma). As C S Lewis observed after his wife's death - whose effect he compared to losing a leg - he might learn to walk with one leg, but he would never be a biped again.
3. The current Covid pandemic has placed such great limitations on the lives of so much of humankind that we almost need a new conception of what it is to flourish in order to deal with it. In this vein, I find the term 'fulfilment' perhaps preferable, as it seems less tied to untrammelled agency for its outworking.

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4. I also wonder where the community and communal life fits here. If the life of my neighbour or a fellow-believer isn't flourishing, how does that affect or dent the flourishing of my own life? Especially if I may myself bear some responsibility for limiting that person, or at least for not helping lessen some of their limits.
 5. In relation to my own field of language and communication, I would link a theology of flourishing to the concept of Voice. Is my voice being heard? Am I listening to others' voices? Whose voices are being stifled in society? How can I be part of enabling disadvantaged voices to receive an audience? The founding sociolinguist, Dell Hymes, wrote that one way of thinking about the society one might like to live in is to imagine the kinds of voices it would contain. That sounds like a fulfilment worth striving for.

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