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Theology Brief Preview

FLOURISHING

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While the Scriptures do not make direct reference to “flourishing,” related notions of shalom, blessedness, eternal life, and abundant life convey a rich and nuanced understanding of flourishing. Subsequent theological development has likewise provided an understanding of flourishing both in this life and in the life to come. Recent empirical research on flourishing is also now raising new theological awareness.

What is Flourishing?

Flourishing might be defined as “the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives.” Complementing the Volf et al. preview, flourishing is *multi-dimensional.* We may flourish in some ways, but not others. Someone may be struggling with health, but have good relationships; or someone may sacrifice some happiness for the pursuit of an important purpose. Flourishing is an *ideal*, never perfectly attained in this life. Flourishing includes one’s *contexts*, communities, and environments. The community’s well-being is a part of one’s own flourishing, both because the community shapes one’s well-being, but also because of one’s participation in the common good of the community. It is this inclusiveness of context, community, and environment that arguably distinguishes flourishing from well-being. One may attain a certain degree of well-being even within a corrupt community, but one is not fully flourishing if one’s community is not good. The proposed definition of flourishing is oriented to the ideal of the “good.” In the context of a pluralistic society, different religious and cultural traditions may have different understandings of the good, and thus well-developed accounts of flourishing will vary, but the proposed definition itself (allowing varying understandings of the good) is arguably applicable across traditions.

Temporal and Eternal Flourishing

Grounded in a Christian understanding of the good, Aquinas (1274/1948, I.II.1-5) distinguishes between the

imperfect happiness of this life and the perfect happiness of the life to come. Aquinas conceived of happiness as the satisfaction of the will, and perfect happiness as the complete satisfaction of the will. In this life we attain only an imperfect happiness; we are always left unsatisfied to some degree. Perfect happiness is attainable only in relation to God in the life to come.

Accordingly, eternal flourishing is the attainment of the final end of the human person, a communion with God, our complete and highest good. In contrast, temporal flourishing is the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a persons's life, as they pertain to this life, are good, including the contexts in which that person lives. This might include, for example, health, happiness, meaning, character, relationships, and financial-material resources. Spiritual well-being, in this life, is the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good with respect to his or her final end in God. For Christians, such spiritual well-being is the most important aspect of temporal well-being– it is the orientation to one's final end in God. Spiritual well-being and other aspects of temporal flourishing will often, but not always, be consonant with one another. When there is conflict, spiritual well-being is to be prioritized.

Biblical Accounts of Flourishing

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew notion of shalom relates to peace and prosperity for oneself and one's community, with right relations and wholeness with respect to oneself, others, the land, and God. Flourishing is closely tied to obedience and faithfulness to God (Deut. 30:11-20), and to love of God and neighbor (Deut. 6; Lev. 19:1-18), with relations with God established by covenant (Gen. 15, 17; Ex. 19-24). Disobedience and unfaithfulness bring about disorder and decline for individuals and for the community of Israel (Deut. 6:13-17; 30:17-18). Such sin ultimately brings about frailty and death, and a disorderedness in relations with self, others, God, and all creation (Gen. 3)– a lack of flourishing. The prophets envision a restoration, and a new fuller flourishing, enabled by God, empowered by God's spirit, with a new covenant, transforming all that is (e.g. Is. 40, 60-62; Jer. 31:31-34; Ez. 36-37).

Jesus Christ, God himself united to human nature, initiates this new covenant bringing light, grace, and truth (John 1:1-18). He declares that he came that we "may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). He promises eternal life to all who believe in him (John 3:1-21). He teaches about and manifests God's will (John 8:12-30). He embodies a life of perfect love (John 13:1-15; 15:9-12). He has come to bring healing, freedom, release for captives, and good news for the poor (Luke 4:16-21). He has come to serve; in the context of the darkness and fallenness of the world, he gives his life as a "ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45). In union with our humanity, he takes the sins of the world upon himself, and suffers and dies on the cross, doing away with our sin (Rom 6:1-10; Col. 2:11-15), and in his resurrection opens a path to new life with God (1 Cor. 15; Rom 6:1-10). With his ascension to heaven and his sending the Spirit, he creates a new community of the Church, of those who have faith in him (Acts 2; Eph. 2). That community finds healing and new life in Christ, and brings healing and good news of God's salvation to the world (1 Cor. 12; Mark 16:15-20), with authority to do so (Matt. 16:17-19, 28:18-20), carried out through love (Matt. 22:34-40; Rom. 13:8-10). Because of sin and fallenness, there is suffering in this life, as was the case for

Christ, for those who carry out this work of proclamation and reconciliation (1 Pet. 4:12-19); but those who do so, Jesus declares as blessed (Matt. 5:1-12). The witness of Christ himself and the subsequent revelation through the apostles and the Church, points to a fuller and final restoration of all things when Christ returns, in which there will be no more mourning or pain or death, when God will fully dwell with his people, and when all things will be made new (Rev. 21). There will then be a vision of and union with God (1 John 3:1-2)– a full flourishing.

Flourishing and Suffering

Biblical texts also point towards seemingly paradoxical relations between suffering and flourishing. In popular understanding, suffering and flourishing are sometimes taken as opposites, but within the Christian tradition, their relations are more nuanced. Suffering always entails the absence of some aspect of flourishing– that something is not good. But suffering can be a path towards a greater flourishing. Suffering can deepen relationships, clarify purposes, strengthen virtue, and lead us to deeper spiritual life, producing perseverance, character, and hope, grounded in God's love (Rom. 5:1-5; 1 Pet. 4:12-19). Suffering can thus lead to flourishing; suffering can sometimes even be constitutive of flourishing. Sacrifice and the voluntary suffering for the good of others are a part of one's own flourishing. If flourishing includes the well-being of one's community, then one's contribution to others, to one's community, is constitutive of flourishing. Such paradoxical relations are reflected in the beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit... those who mourn... the meek... those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness" (Matthew 5:1-12). It is in service and love, amidst suffering, that we find our fulfilment. Such relations are also manifest in Jesus' life and death. We might ask whether Jesus was flourishing on the cross? If the community's well-being is a part of one's own flourishing, then yes, Jesus was flourishing on the cross. He was suffering; and he was flourishing. His contribution to community –the salvation of the world– was unfathomable; his union with God and contribution to us was his flourishing on the cross. We are called to follow him (Matt. 16:24-26).

Flourishing in Pluralistic Societies

While the Church is to always witness to eternal flourishing found in God, it is called also to love, and serve, and bring healing to all. The Church and its members are to seek to bring a fuller flourishing to all of society, including in the pluralistic religious and cultural contexts in which we live (Lev. 19:34; Jer. 29:7; Matt. 5:43-48; Gal. 6:9-10).

While well-developed understandings of flourishing will vary, there are also commonalities across wisdom traditions, cultures, and religions. We can work together towards that which is shared—goods that include health, happiness, meaning, virtue, and relationships, and which respectively bring fulfillment to various aspects of our physical, affective, cognitive, volitional, and social lives. Each of these goods constitute an important end, and each is nearly universally desired, which may help bring consensus in pluralistic

societies around what to work on together, on what to measure, and where to direct policy efforts. Not only health and economic resources, but also goals of happiness, meaning, character, and relationships might be assessed and made central policy priorities. Educational institutions, businesses, healthcare organizations, and even churches can likewise measure and pursue flourishing.

Since spiritual well-being is valued by most in our world, society should be structured so that there is freedom to pursue spiritual ends, and freedom also for dialogue, sharing, and understanding across different communities. Evangelism, apostolate, and faith-sharing should be welcome in a pluralistic society (and conversely we should be open to hearing out others). All can share their vision of the most ultimate goods and ends, to facilitate understanding, and bring change. We can work together where there is agreement, and better navigate our disagreements when there is not.

All Academic Disciplines and Institutions Can Aim at Flourishing

All disciplines have a role to play in advancing our understanding and pursuit of flourishing. All goods of human life are included, from our interpretative capacities and meaning found in our past and history, our literary and artistic works, our religious and philosophical texts; to the knowledge of our natural world attained through the sciences, and its applications; to the understanding and structuring of our lives and societies and care for our environment in the social sciences, and in the professional, technical and applied disciplines, with empirical measures, and a science of flourishing, enabling us to discern the distribution, causes, and consequences of various facets of flourishing, which itself may merit further theological and humanistic reflection. Each discipline has an essential role to play in our own flourishing, and in our understanding of flourishing.

Academics, and entire academic communities, are to seek a greater flourishing, enabling them to better pursue truth, to shape minds, to form virtuous citizens and leaders, and find their own fulfilment. The goal of forming flourishing academic communities might help reshape university governance, teaching and research practices, academic publishing, grant award systems, scholarly societies, hiring and recruitment, and ultimately the whole life of colleges and universities.

Flourishing might be seen as the north star of our academic pursuits, providing points of connection across disciplines, and towards which all disciplines, in various ways, ought to point, a point of connection that includes, but extends beyond, theology, as we pursue flourishing, both temporal and ultimately eternal.

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