

Studies in Christian Ethics

Guest Editorial Preface

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As most people who have participated in interdisciplinary, ecumenical, and/or multinational conversations know, they are not always easy. There is often a risk that differences will lead to divisions, which can then generate alienation and marginalization. If this happens, rather than creating a fertile environment for learning, participants can succumb to the fear of what they do not understand, and cling to confidence in what is familiar. The challenges facing such diverse conversations can very often prevent them from happening or, at least, moving forward. This is a tragedy. The interactions through which the stranger becomes the friend are often some of the transformative and invaluable ways of learning—and, often, the stranger the stranger, the greater the learning. Among the many benefits, such interactions have an enormous amount to contribute to the task of flourishing together as a society

This symposium has emerged out of a project, and specifically its “Flourish Conference”, which is committed to facilitating such diverse interaction, by bringing together an interdisciplinary, ecumenical, and multinational group of scholars to ask what it means to flourish. Furthermore, it has done so with a particular concern for thinking about how we might support emerging women scholars in a world of a theology that has marginalised them and, very often continues to do so.

While the group came together with a shared commitment to supporting women scholars, and has maintained this commitment, the conversations that emerged from this group grew in a way that reflected the other differences that characterised the group. One of the motivations for this was the major part of each meetings devoted to the Māori practice of *whakawhanaungatanga*, becoming family together. Being in Aotearoa, it was appropriate to establish *tikanga* (protocols) indigenous to this land. Sandy Kerr, the host institution’s *Kaiārahi-Rangahau Māori* (Māori research guide), and Natua Kaa-Morgan (the project administrator), helped to explain these to the team before we met and then led us through our first meeting together. Such practices established our rhythms for every subsequent meeting.

By participating in *whakawhanaungatanga*, the group got to know one another in a much deeper and more profound way than would be normal in an academic gathering—in many respects, we really did experience a process of becoming family. It was this context, and the synergies it created, that inspired so much of what unfolded at the Flourish Conference, and which provides the basis for this symposium. Organically, the more general theme of “Human Flourishing”, which had been proposed, ended up becoming more narrowly focused on a more particular theme, “The Challenge of Flourishing Together.” Each of the essays in this symposium touch upon questions of how we might move beyond obstacles that can undermine the task of flourishing together: e.g. colonization, views of original sin that clash with contemporary science, misunderstanding the stories we participate in, deficit models of neurodiversity, Tall Poppy Syndrome, stigmatizing weakness, theologically undermining human agency, and scientific skepticism about virtue.

Our Māori research guide, Sandy Kerr moved on from Carey Baptist College, where the project is based, but instilled the values and *tikanga* the team needed to carry these on throughout the

rest of the research process. Jordyn Rapana, her former student, became part of the team at that time, picking up a collaborative essay that Andrew Picard and Kerr had begun. Natua Kaa-Morgan also transitioned out of her role to become a mother, but her fingerprints on the research team and the conference are indelible. Gathoni Wang'ombe stepped in to carry on Natua's role and enabled us to create a life-giving conference experience. The conference, while about flourishing, sought to model flourishing as well. The perpetual question behind every decision was: will this help the range of attendees to flourish in their diversity? Consequently, the conference was set up around tables, and on each one sat play-dough and noise-reducing ear buds. A quiet space to get away from excess stimuli or nurse a child sat just off the main room. To recognize that flourishing extends beyond the human to the land itself, we were formally welcomed into the conference space by Māori—those first on this land and who continue to be its stewards. This welcome set the tone for our time together, implicitly highlighting both the challenge and the beauty of flourishing together across cultural differences.

The papers that emerged through this project reflect and embody the challenges of flourishing together even as some of the papers examined those challenges more explicitly. For instance, Andrew Picard and Jordyn Rapana's paper, "Let Justice Roll Down," left the audience deeply moved as they named the ways that theology and science have been used, and continues to be used, to oppress Māori. Their willingness to interrogate this history modelled both flourishing together and the challenges of following that path.

While Picard and Rapana engaged the challenges of flourishing as settler and wāhine Māori, Joanna Leidenhag and Pamela Ebstyn King engaged this challenge across disciplines. Leidenhag, as a theologian and advocate for neurodiverse persons, brought this discipline and passion into dialogue with King's work in positive psychology of human thriving. Through her research, King has become a leading expert on the question of how we can bring about thriving for everyone. Their willingness to press each other's disciplines for greater inclusion of neurodiverse persons is both richly theological and astutely psychological. Again, they model flourishing well together amidst the challenges of talking across disciplines and even pushing against dominant, neurotypical, culture.

Nicola Hoggard Creegan tackled the challenge of engaging anthropology and the doctrine of original sin. As a co-director of New Zealand Christians in Science, Hoggard Creegan is a theologian who has been committed to helping the local church understand what it means to flourish in response to the (sometimes) challenging ways in which contemporary science calls into question certain formulations of original sin.

Joe Bulbulia brought his expertise as a psychologist, and, in particular, his expertise on the New Zealand Attitudes and Values study. This longitudinal study stretches over ten years and is continuing to measure about 1.4% of the entire population of Aotearoa. While recognising the limitations of quantitative analysis for theological reflection, he also argues for the benefits of longitudinal methods that measure large populations over time. These methods produce data that theologians and scholars of religion could use to study the science of virtue and human flourishing.

In our commitment to supporting emerging women scholars, we had the honour of journeying alongside Charissa Nichol and Rebecca Webb. Both women presented at the Flourish conference in the break-out sessions and have expanded their papers to contribute to this symposium. Nichol has focused on the challenge of embracing weakness as part of our flourishing and Webb has focused on the challenge of overcoming the phenomena of Tall Poppy

Syndrome. This social problem can be challenged by humility and Webb makes that case in her essay.

While we (Andrew Torrance and Christa McKirland) did not collaborate on the same essay together, we found our work mutually challenging and reinforcing as we edited each other's work before the conference presentations. The importance of being an agential self even while being part of other people's (especially God's) stories made for rich correspondence and the sharpened final essays you will find herein.

The challenge of flourishing together faces us all. We hope this symposium provides some examples of what that can look like from various cultures, disciplines, and perspectives. By taking up the challenge to flourish together, we believe we will flourish more than when we simply seek to flourish alone.

The John Templeton Foundation funded a project in 2020 entitled: "Theological Anthropology, Fundamental Need, and Human Flourishing: A Women Scholar's Project." The major output for the grant was to host an international conference with both theologians and scientists as researchers and a special focus on supporting emerging women scholars. This symposium is the collection of revised presentations from that conference and we are grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for making this possible.