

Editorial: Flourishing in Religious Communities

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In recent years, the question of what makes for flourishing at the individual and communal levels has risen to a place of prominence in both popular and academic imaginations. One notable example of this can be found in the recent Global Flourishing Study (GFS), a survey which captures health, wellbeing, and moral character data from more than 200,000 people in 22 countries—a sample representing a huge proportion the world’s population given the nature of the study—with the intention of advancing our understanding of the distribution and determinants of flourishing.¹

A second example is the Educating Character Initiative (ECI) at Wake Forest University. Through the support of the Lilly Endowment, ECI has awarded grants to colleges and universities since 2024 to support the moral, civic, and intellectual character of faculty, staff, and students. One of their program emphases is to foster “communities of character” in higher education. In other words, they aspire to channel the results of both the science and philosophy of flourishing into formative classroom practices.

A yet further sample of the growing interest in flourishing communities is an evident, renewed emphasis on civic virtue. Recent books in this area include *The Virtue of Civility* by Andrew Peterson (OUP 2026) and *The Self, Civic Virtue, and Public Life* (Routledge 2024), an interdisciplinary collection edited by Nancy Snow. The latter includes chapters on how virtues impact life in contentious communities and in economically disadvantaged schools. Kristján Kristjánsson also has a new book in

¹ See (VanderWeele et al. 2025) and (Johnson et al. 2025) for an overview of the initial results and the dataset. This effort was jointly funded by the John Templeton Foundation, Templeton Religion Trust, Templeton World Charity Foundation, Well-Being for Planet Earth Foundation, Fetzer Institute, Well Being Trust, Paul L. Foster Family Foundation, and the David and Carol Myers Foundation.

this research area entitled *The Kindly Virtues* (Edward Elgar 2026), which addresses moral virtues of civility.

But, of course, flourishing is not confined merely to one area of human life, for it impinges on all areas of life in one way or another. Researchers with an interest in flourishing, then, have taken a closer look at how flourishing is affected by various different sectors of ordinary life—e.g., education, work, family, and...what's most relevant to this journal issue's theme...religion.

Many of the previously mentioned studies or monographs contain research that is relevant to flourishing in religious communities, but the Institute for Global Human Flourishing at Baylor University is quite explicit about this. In particular, it is a self-described “evidence-based, practical, faith-animated, and inspirational” research institute aiming to examine the “distinctively Christian elements of human flourishing, including faith, hope, love of God and neighbor, and friendship”.² Also at Baylor was a recent grant at the Center for Christian Philosophy and the Institute for Studies of Religion investigating the virtue of accountability in relation to other human goods, such as empathy, humility, and forgiveness. Such projects illustrate well how the relationship between flourishing and religious community belonging is gaining significant traction in the academic world.

We find further evidence of such traction from recent monographs of an interdisciplinary nature. Coming from a theological ethics angle, on the one hand, Jennifer Herdt's *Assuming Responsibility* defends ecstatic *eudaimonism*, examining duty, obligation, and friendship on a Christian *eudaimonic* framework. Tyler VanderWeele's *A Theology of Health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing*, on the other hand, describes from an epidemiologist's perspective how the wholeness of the person and wholeness of the community are deeply related, given our makeup as social creatures. Vanderweele's work has also generated observations about the positive correlation between increased religious service attendance and individual flourishing, as well as interest in exploring how the flourishing of a community might help explain the data.³

Our special issue aims to contribute to and advance these discussions of flourishing in religious communities from various disciplines. It includes articles on a range of topics including virtue and community in Christian flourishing, as well as empirical issues pertaining to measurement and clinical conditions, considerations of injustice and vulnerability in community, and the imperative for

² This description is taken from the “About” section of their website at <https://humanflourishing.web.baylor.edu/about-institute-global-human-flourishing> (accessed 26 May 2026).

³ (Chen et al. 2021).

social action in religious communities. What follows is an overview of the contents of the special issue.

Approaching Communal Flourishing from the Humanities

The first three articles address communal flourishing, drawing on primarily philosophical and theological sources. Together these articles clarify the character, opportunities, and obstacles to the flourishing of religious communities. All three address the Christian church specifically. Together these articles affirm the goodness and beauty of the church, while acknowledging blemishes. They speak in rich ways to normative questions about duty, soulcraft, and moral character.

Jennifer Herdt's contribution is entitled "Flourishing and the Temptations of Epistemic Isolation." Herdt describes religious communities as grounded in the good, true, and beautiful—in shared conceptions about what is most ultimately real. She notes that these communities have a special responsibility in complex and overwhelming circumstances to "sustain narratives that make sense of pain and loss as well as joy and new life." (p. 8)

Herdt writes that religious communities can also become sites of "parochial altruism," where we form strong social bonds and shared identities that isolate us from those outside the community and foster exclusive sociality. She argues that tendencies toward parochial altruism and epistemic isolation are at odds with a religious community's flourishing. Herdt addresses contemporary U.S. Christian evangelicalism as an example of damaging inclusivity, the forging of echo chambers, and the vice of disrespect. She writes that the church cannot participate in Christ's self-giving love and vulnerability while making enemies of others.

Daniel Grasso's contribution is entitled "Going Further Together: The Theological Virtue of Hope and Flourishing in Christian Communities." Like Herdt, he argues that we cannot flourish alone, or without considering the flourishing of others. Unlike Herdt, whose central concern is the church's posture toward those *outside* the community, Grasso's concern is the Christian's posture toward those *within* the community.

Grasso addresses the received view of Christian hope as concerned with a pilgrim's solo journey to a supernatural end, at the cost of others and of the world *here, now*. Drawing on Thomas Aquinas, Grasso challenges the notion of Christian hope as too "solipsistic and otherworldly" to contribute to communal flourishing in this world. Grasso describes how the flourishing of the Christian is bound up in, and fortified by, the flourishing of other believers. He contends that Christian hope is

inherently interpersonal and social, then demonstrates how hope contributes to the flourishing of Christian communities.

Bradley Burroughs' article, "Soulcraft and Social Action: Preliminary Reflections on Christian Flourishing in Eschatological Perspective," draws on Augustine's vision of flourishing as inherently communal yet ultimately eschatological. Like Grasso, Burroughs affirms the idea of the Christian pilgrim, sojourning to the heavenly city, where the Christian is made complete in communion with God. He describes the flourishing church as marked by shared devotion to Christ and an anticipated restoration at the end of time.

What should pilgrims do as they await this complete restoration? Burroughs argues that the Christian community should orient itself toward, and act in light of, the peace and justice of God's kingdom. This means seeking justice, bringing peace, and freeing the oppressed as Jesus did. It also means doing the difficult work of soulcraft to restrain bad actions, cultivate virtue, and build each other up in love. Burroughs' call to virtue and social action clarifies the responsibilities and character of the church to do the "indispensable work" of the coming kingdom that God has called the church to do (p. 61).

Engaging with the Social Science of Flourishing

The last four articles delve into issues pertaining to the measurement and promotion of flourishing from several different disciplinary perspectives.

Harvey Cawdron's "Dissociative Identity Disorder, Friendship, and Christian Flourishing" leads the way by highlighting practical ways in which religious communities can better foster the flourishing of those who are differently abled. In particular, those with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) often face obstacles to full inclusion in religious communities. His proposal turns on the meaningfulness of friendship for the *personalities* of individuals with DID and how such friendship, cultivated by the mediation of the Holy Spirit, can produce not only peace externally for individuals with DID but also internally—i.e., between the various alter personalities.

In "Towards the Measurement of Flourishing in Religious Communities", Katelyn N. G. Long (a sociologist) and Ryan J. Gregg (a theologian) offer reflections on the importance of measurement data—responsibly gathered and interpreted—with which churches might engage and grow thoughtfully. Their reflections are valuable and clarify several misunderstandings—some grounded especially in a skepticism of the value of data for gaining theological insight—before presenting a constructive proposal of how such empirical data might deepen our "pursuit of

truth, humility, and flourishing in our tasks as human beings created in God's image" (p. 90).

The theology of flourishing articulated by Long and Gregg is unavoidably programmatic to some extent. Indeed, a book length project could be done on a number of the considerations they address. In full recognition of this, they helpfully draw attention to future directions—i.e., different virtues of data stewardship—that we ought to aspire to as church data collection becomes more sophisticated and widespread. These include the need to engage with society outside of the church to help interpret data in a way conducive to promoting the common good, to present such understandings in an informed manner through preaching, to reflect on how the mission of the church is either being achieved or undermined with respect to its service to the broader community, to utilize surveys as opportunities for discipleship and reflection, and to ensure that church finances serve the love of neighbor rather than covertly making the church's neighbors serve its love of wealth.

In "Vulnerability, Virtue, and Flourishing in the Rarámuri-Pogótuame", Pablo Galindo Cruz and Jorge Martín Montoya Camacho present an anthropological lens—the indigenous-religious community of the Rarámuri-Pogótuame in Northwestern Mexico—through which we can gain insight into how worldview and communal living can, concretely, result in a flourishing community despite its high degree of vulnerability. In particular, their case study reveals how a culture of recognized interdependence and social virtue—epitomized by the concept of *kórima* (similar to Alasdair MacIntyre's *just generosity*)—counteracts the vulnerabilities faced by communities like the Rarámuri-Pogótuame.

The final paper in this collection is Julius Stefanus Sibagariang and Aeron Prior Sihombing's "Shalom, Ḥesed, and Tsedaqah as Religious Community Pathways to Human Flourishing: An Exploration of Old Testament Theological Virtue complements." It complements Cruz and Camacho well but with an emphasis on a how different concepts from the Hebrew bible—*shalom* (peace), *hesed* (love), and *tsedaqah* (justice)—present flourishing as an outflow of covenant participation in the order of God. In other words, if their readings of various scriptures are correct—Psalm 85, Isaiah 32, and Jeremiah 29—then it is not only the case that an individual's flourishing is constituted by the flourishing of their community, but also that individual's flourishing will be bound up with the moral and spiritual structures that constitute that very community. These virtues of divinely-ordered acknowledged dependence on others, then, are fundamental to the concept of flourishing received through the Hebrew scriptures.

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