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Human Flourishing: Towards Fullness of Life for All Persons and the Entire Ecosystem

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Abstract: Human flourishing is gathering increased interest across disciplines. It is also being explored from different angles within each discipline by scholars who highlight or focus on a specific aspect of flourishing. From a theological outlook, flourishing as wholeness or fullness of life if a gift from God as well as a task to be accomplished. This article integrates and builds on some of the varied aspects of

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flourishing as reflected in the different disciplines of philosophy, psychology, education, anthropology, ecology and spirituality from a feminist theological perspective in order to present a synthesized theological understanding of flourishing as fullness of life for all persons and the entire ecosystem. An integral view of flourishing must take into consideration the context, experiences and the interconnections within and between the self, others, God and all of creation.

Keywords: Human Flourishing, Ecosystem, Virtuous life, Eudaimonism, Agapeic Love

The word 'flourish' comes from the Latin *florire* or *florēre*, the Anglo-French *flurir* or *florir*, and Middle English *florisshen*, which simply means to bloom or flower.[1] When referring to plants and animals it infers a growth that is expanding, increasing and luxuriant; whereas for humans the references are for thriving and prospering. Other overtones of the word include prosperity, wealth, happiness, success, creativity, production, progress, height of development, excelling, well-being, healthy growth and being in one's prime.[2] While there is some association between these different senses of the term, there are also subtle differences. Hence, the implication of flourishing may vary depending on which connotation is chosen and highlighted. Since flourishing involves living one's life in the best way possible, it requires favourable and enabling internal and external conditions. In order to offer an integral, interconnected and inclusive perspective of flourishing that befits all persons and all creation, I integrate some of the different aspects of flourishing across the disciplines of philosophy, positive psychology, sociology, education, sociology, theology and spirituality.

1. Flourishing as a Well-Lived Virtuous Life

There is a renewed interest in human flourishing in the field of philosophy and ethics with contemporary moral and social philosophers reflecting back on the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia* or the well-lived life culminating in virtuous activity or good action.[3] Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* focused on the teleological fulfilment of human nature through rational agency and the cultivation of virtue, which was not for the individual alone but for the good of the society.[4] However, women and slaves were excluded as they were not seen to be capable of rationality. Mary Grey, ecofeminist liberation theologian, acknowledging the philosophical roots of flourishing in Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, sees the need for flourishing to be lifted "out of Aristotle's context", which identified it mainly with rationality, so that it can have significance for all people and the earth.[5]

Douglas Rasmussen, a neo-Aristotelian ethicist, considering the connection between human flourishing and human nature, sees flourishing or human good as "objective, inclusive, individualized, agent-relative, self-directed and social".[6] Rasmussen upholds human flourishing as "a self-directed activity" that involves actualizing one's potentialities through one's own efforts.[7] Flourishing is perceived as universal yet highly personal by Rasmussen, who in continuation with Aristotle stresses the necessity of theoretical and practical wisdom in exercising agency to achieve wholeness. This is because while all human nature has a capacity for flourishing, each person needs to exercise moral virtue, rational agency and practical wisdom to live a meaningful life and reach perfection or excellence.[8] When striving towards perfection, Rasmussen does not discount concern for others, community and culture, but he considers human choice and human good as unique and totally personal. This view of human flourishing seems quite limited and individualistic with its emphasis on self-direction, rational agency, virtuous activity, personal striving, human effort and self-fulfilment. In defending his

position against individualism, Rasmussen highlights the role of practical wisdom in human flourishing, which requires personal discernment in making moral choices for each action depending on every situation.[9] Proper exercise of practical wisdom allows humans to manage their life intelligently, utilizing and enjoying the necessary goods and virtues in a humanly fitting manner.[10] This attention to discernment, choice and pursuit of self-perfection upholds the rational aspects of the individual person but does not consider the social, emotional and spiritual requirements necessary for human flourishing.

Doris Kieser, associate professor of theology and ethics, tracing the history and moral theory of flourishing, incorporates and revises some of the views of Rasmussen on flourishing as self-directed virtuous activity.[11] Though Rasmussen stresses practical wisdom as essential for virtuous living, Kieser thinks that for practical wisdom to be realized fully, a person requires "communal living, maturity, personal integrity, intelligence, and self-awareness".[12] The emphasis for Rasmussen is on individual responsibility and agency, whereas for Kieser flourishing is relational and integrated, involving the individual and community, and dependent on universal and particular experiences of humans.[13] Kieser considers flourishing in relation to people's actual everyday lives within their particular context and community.[14] Kieser also brings in a spiritual component to flourishing as virtuous activity, wherein exercising and striving towards virtuous actions is geared towards union with the divine, where the fullness of human flourishing is one's union with God.[15] God is thus the "ultimate good" and virtuous activity is "seeking to do the good that is God's will".[16]

In her regard of flourishing as union with God, Kieser affirms the view of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who adapted to some extent Aristotle's *eudaimonism*. For Aquinas, the telos to which all humans aspire, consists in "beatitude" which is mystical union with God leading to the ultimate good or

perfection.[17] A virtuous life alone cannot lead to beatitude. For Aquinas, along with virtuous activity humans need God's grace to attain complete happiness.[18] Aquinas therefore connects virtues with the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. The problem with Aquinas arises, however, because he sees virtue as the power of the soul, which is seen as separate from the body.[19] Kieser makes no such distinction between body and soul. For Kieser, God is to be known and loved "as embodied persons - soul in flesh, flesh in soul".[20] Flourishing is not just a desired end or goal for the soul to be united with God, but an ongoing "journey into and with the heart of God".[21] The body with all its sensory experiences is the medium through which the mind can reason and discern the movements of the Spirit. Thus, physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual needs must be considered for flourishing.[22] Kieser's primary concern in exploring flourishing is in the context of sexual flourishing of adolescent girls. Her research focusses on universal virtues, values and moral behaviour in sexuality, which affect the embodied sexual flourishing of girls. Her reflections remain within the realm of natural law and are mainly confined to taking the experiences and contexts of adolescent girls into consideration for sexual flourishing. Nevertheless, Kieser offers a significant contribution to thriving and flourishing, by including the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, ethical, and spiritual requirements for flourishing. These involve fulfilment of one's basic needs for survival, freedom, dignity, relationships, self-esteem, knowledge and meaning in life.[23]

Although flourishing as virtuous activity has been upheld by Rasmussen and Kieser, there are other scholars such as Nicholas Wolterstorff and George Terzis who have certain reservations with this virtue-based view and offer a critique to the *eudaimonist* virtue ethics.[24] Nicholas Wolterstorff, Professor Emeritus of philosophical theology, finds *eudaimonist virtue ethics* to be very narrow and limited. From the different philosophical understandings of flourishing, Wolterstorff observes three ways of perceiving a good life.[25]

The view of a good life from the utilitarian tradition is one that is "experientially satisfying", or one that is good for the individual person.[26] A good life in the *eudaimonist* tradition is the life well-lived wherein a person makes a deliberate choice on the basis of what he/she thinks will allow for living one's life well. This life is oriented towards agency and virtuous activity, whereby the excellence of one's life is the yardstick and not the good or excellence of others. Wolterstorff, judging both these views as inadequate from a Christian perspective of love and justice, considers a third way of a flourishing life which is one that is "both lived well and goes well".[27]

A life that is lived well and goes well, for Wolterstorff, is one in which a person has inherent rights based on one's worth as a human person and hence deserves to be treated well. Thus, flourishing is not only about living a virtuous life but having the right to being respected and treated with dignity by others. Wolterstorff's reflections thus move from individual agency to social relationships defending justice based on rights as prescriptive for good relations between oneself and others.[28] Love and justice, for Wolterstorff, involve caring about the well-being of oneself and others, honouring the rights of all people and treating everyone with due respect on the basis of their worth.[29] This view of flourishing takes into account human worth as stemming first from God's love and not any human capacity or function which then makes one accountable to show love, care and respect for oneself, others and God.

Another critical assessment of the *eudaimonistic* perspective of flourishing is offered by George Terzis, for whom the virtue ethics view of flourishing does not consider an individual's "actual motivational capacities" in pursuing a life suited to one's unique personality.[30] In order to live well and flourish, self-awareness and self-understanding are crucial for humans to discover and develop their core traits.[31] To build on one's strengths in the light of one's core traits, it is

necessary to evaluate which traits are basic to one's nature. Terzis thus favours a "trait-relative" view of flourishing using a psychological framework by which the character traits a person needs to flourish must be in accordance with one's central traits.[32] Thus, flourishing for Terzis, does not consist only in a successful life but a successful way of life specifically motivated in accordance with one's unique core traits.[33] While Terzis makes a shift from general virtues to specific traits, the focus is still very much only on the individual. The positive contribution made by Terzis is the necessity of self-awareness and self-understanding for flourishing, which is also considered important for Kieser.

In considering flourishing as a well-lived life of virtuous activity, the exercise or practice of virtues is essential to live a good life. The insights of Wolterstorff and Kieser offer a wider scope of flourishing from a preoccupation with individual virtuous living for a better life in the future, to living a good life in the present in relation to oneself, others and God.

2. Flourishing as Optimal Well-being

Optimal well-being is the key focus of positive psychology, which integrates virtues, character strengths and traits in considering psychological and social development. Positive psychology tried to shift the focus from mental illness, pathology and disease to positivity, wholeness and capacity building. While strengths and virtues were considered important for happiness by ancient philosophies and religions, it was Martin Seligman, who initiated the positive psychology network in 1999.[34] Seligman opined that much of one's thinking revolved around the wrong or negative, rather than on what is right, leading to unnecessary anxiety and stress.[35]

What matters, for Seligman, is to increase one's strengths and create positive conditions, rather than worry about reducing one's misery or analysing what is going wrong. This does not

mean that Seligman discounts negative circumstances and traumatic events. On the contrary, for Seligman, well-being and flourishing can be reached even in adversity through education and training in becoming more resilient, optimistic and empowered. In countering negativity Seligman emphasizes the need to cultivate and reinforce strengths and virtues rather than try to get rid of the obstacles. In the case of negative emotions, Seligman advocates acquiring knowledge on how to function well in the midst of distress, rather than only minimizing the negative emotion or removing the disabling conditions.[36] Human flourishing, according to Seligman, requires the development of five interconnected elements under the mnemonic *PERMA* – positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.[37] Seligman developed a number of exercises to build the positive and to become aware of one's blessings and gifts.[38] However, these exercises do not offer ways to deal with distress and know how to flourish in adversity. The contribution of Maureen Gaffney on how to achieve well-being when facing adversity, complements this lacuna in Seligman's approach.[39]

For Gaffney, flourishing is neither just about building positive virtues, strengths, traits, emotions and relationships, nor wiping away all the negativity and problems from one's life. Flourishing involves finding "the right balance between the positive and negative" in one's thoughts, emotions, behaviours and relationships, in order to overcome challenges and transform setbacks.[40] The right ratio between the positive and negative, identified by Gaffney, is 5:1, because the negative emotions and reactions are more powerful and have a much greater impact on the flourishing of humans.[41] It is a known fact that one mistake or negative remark is sufficient to wipe out all the good done by persons. In families, communities as well as in organizations, lack of support accompanied by hurtful or discouraging remarks affects one's wellbeing, and therefore it is necessary to build the positive five times more than the negative.[42] The threshold of

flourishing as 5:1 is significant for Gaffney, since normal functioning requires a minimum ratio of 3:1.[43] Anyone having a positive-negative ratio below 3:1 is said to be languishing. Nonetheless, Gaffney thinks that too much positivity can also be problematic, and hence the threshold ratio of positivity to negativity arrived at through empirically tested studies is "between 3:1 and 11:1".[44] Acknowledging Aristotle's perception of flourishing as the teleologically oriented life of excellence, Gaffney sees flourishing as an intrinsic capacity to live currently in the best way possible. Each person, for Gaffney, exhibits "three related but quite distinct 'selves' or modes of being in the world" – the usual ordinary "good but not great self", the "best self" and the "worst self".[45] Humans keep fluctuating daily between these three modes. The main sign of a flourishing life, for Gaffney, is being for most amount of time at one's best self. However, it is difficult to ascertain what being at one's best self really implies and if this is the same for all persons in all contexts.

Gaffney considers four elements essential for the flourishing of any individual – owning and facing challenge; connectivity within and around; autonomy as sufficient control to make significant choices; and using one's special or valued competencies – all of which need to be exercised in combination and proper balance.[46] The deciding factors to determine if one is flourishing require a right combination and proper balance of the four elements. Thus, the more people take responsibility for their lives and choose to live out their roles in freedom to the best of their ability, the more they will be able to deal with the challenges that beset them, which will consequently lead to their flourishing. In the second part of her book on Flourishing, Gaffney outlines ten strategies which focus on nurturing a flourishing life by building one's positivity, resilience, capacity for happiness, meaning and engagement, as well as understanding oneself and setting goals.[47] These tools can help to understand oneself and to be in control of one's thoughts and feelings; but they place the

full responsibility of flourishing on the individual person without considering relationships and the community.

Flourishing as virtuous activity required more of rational agency in practicing the virtues whereas Seligman's and Gaffney's views on wellbeing and flourishing call for awareness and acceptance of feelings and emotions along with the right motivation and appropriate interpretation of one's thoughts, feelings and actions. While Seligman's theory of well-being is descriptive based on empirical findings, Gaffney's work goes deeper into understanding the power of the positive and negative; reflecting on how people think, feel and behave; and evaluating how one can work towards finding the right balance between the positive and negative. Although psychological, intellectual and emotional aspects of flourishing have been considered in this approach of optimal well-being, there is a further need to include the social and spiritual dimensions for the integral development of all persons.

3. Flourishing as Creating Just Opportunities for Human Functioning

The insights of Martha Nussbaum, feminist philosopher and professor of law and ethics, on flourishing move beyond an emphasis on individual striving towards well-being to the necessity of considering the opportunities available to persons in order for them to develop and flourish.[48] What is of prime importance for Nussbaum, is ensuring that all persons, especially women and other marginalized persons, have the basic capabilities or opportunities to function fully as humans. The choices that they then make towards achieving their well-being depends on each individual. Thus, Nussbaum's concern is with providing universal norms to uphold and protect human rights, leaving freedom for humans to make their own choices.[49] Nussbaum finds value in some of Aristotle's political and ethical thoughts and his views on *eudaimonia* as virtuous self-directed action, which she recognizes as one of

the earliest significant sources for the *Human Development* or *Capability Approach*, initiated by Indian economist Amartya Sen and further developed by her.[50] The concepts of justice and freedom assume priority in Nussbaum's approach. Nussbaum's work also incorporates some of the aspects found lacking in the *eudaimonist* virtue ethics such as motivation, emotions, self-understanding and religion. Although Nussbaum considers religion as an important value for people to find ultimate meaning in life, she includes it with the "capabilities of the senses, imagination, and thought", and with "affiliation", as religion does not need to be separately protected by public policy. [51] Thus, religion and spirituality do not have a unique place in the capabilities enlisted by Nussbaum, even though she acknowledges the value of religious traditions as significant sources for defending human rights and ushering social transformation.

Concerning Seligman's views on authentic happiness and flourishing, Nussbaum acknowledges that some of his insights concerning a positive meaningful life of activity, are in keeping with the principle of Aristotle's *eudaimonist* virtue ethics, which aim towards living an active virtuous life of excellence.[52] At the same time, Nussbaum finds Seligman's claim that positive emotions are necessary for flourishing to be misleading.[53] Emotions, for Nussbaum, are neither good nor bad in themselves since they are "conceptually interconnected" and depend on the evaluation of their worth and the beliefs that accompany them.[54] For example, one expresses grief at the death of a loved one, or one could have righteous anger for an injustice or punishment meted out to an innocent person. These are appropriate emotions for Nussbaum, but positive emotions arising out of negative or selfish activities cannot be good in themselves. Nussbaum questions whether privileged persons enjoying a luxurious life can be said to be happy.[55] Hence, while all positive emotions may not necessarily be valuable or virtuous; there could be some negative emotions that have value in themselves if they are appropriate for a good cause. Nussbaum's *Capabilities*

Approach (CA), thus, to some extent, builds on the views of flourishing as virtuous activity and optimal well-being, though she is more concerned with public policy to create opportunities for people to flourish.

Nussbaum is convinced that the *Capabilities Approach* could serve well to respond to the inequalities, deprivation and problems of human life universally, since most of the central concerns, issues and problems are applicable to all people even if they differ in value according to each context. Capabilities for Nussbaum are "not just abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment".[56] In the development of the capabilities, Nussbaum sees the importance of the concept of threshold, which is the "basic social minimum" for each capability, that is required for a person to live a decent human life and that should be made available for all citizens by their governments.[57]

For Nussbaum, flourishing is the basic ability to live fully with dignity and freedom. Although her approach is based on Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, it does not imply living to the best of one's ability or striving towards a life of excellence, as required by Aristotelian virtue ethics. The emphasis for Nussbaum is on the necessary opportunities created for humans to live well, and the freedom they can have to choose what they value or consider best to live well.

Merridy Wilson-Strydom and Melanie Walker, applied some of Nussbaum's central capabilities to the field of higher education to promote greater social and moral consciousness and well-being among university students.[58] Their main concern was to observe whether "students are flourishing within educational environments", and in what way "education enables flourishing in other aspects of life".[59] From among the ten capabilities enlisted by Nussbaum, Wilson-Strydom and Walker consider "Practical Reason" and "Affiliation" to be most important for students.[60] They also

observe a difference in the approaches of positive psychology and the Capabilities Approach (CA) concerning well-being. The emphasis in positive psychology is on individual wellbeing, whereas with the CA, agentic choices are made on the basis of moral judgements and social relationships for the well-being of the individual as well as for the protection of institutions that can nurture morality and relationships.[61]

When evaluating the flourishing of students, one cannot assess it on the basis of academic achievement alone. One must take into consideration the opportunities provided for affiliation and practical reasoning, as well as look at the social structures of race, class and gender, which either limit or enable a student to flourish.[62] Thus, for Wilson-Strydom and Walker, flourishing can be attained by providing opportunities to students for human development, for the formation of moral and social consciousness and for exercising agency.[63]

A positive point in Nussbaum's approach is that it aims at respecting "each person's struggle for flourishing" and treats "each person as an end and as a source of agency and worth in her own right". [64] Nussbaum sees the importance of leaving space for individual choices, considering the socio-cultural and historical context, needs, capacities, obstacles and values of people. For Nussbaum, what matters is the freedom that all persons must have to make choices, without forcing them to act in a particular way, since the context determines one's desires and choices.

4. Flourishing as an Inherent Potential

In the above three views of flourishing that I have identified, namely that of a well-lived life of virtuous activity, well-being and optimal living, and creating just opportunities, flourishing can be perceived as an activity or something that must be achieved. When reading the work of Sandra Levy-Achtemeier, American psychologist, theologian and episcopal

priest, I discovered a significant dimension of flourishing as an inherent potential that all persons possess to grow and flourish. This inborn potential considers humans as recipients of "God's grace-filled Spirit".[65] Influenced by the spirituality of Teilhard de Chardin, Levy-Achtemeier considers the ability of humans to flourish a definitive possibility, with the assurance of God's active presence and grace in persons and in the world. Levy-Achtemeier acknowledges the importance of developing one's strengths and abilities through education and practice, but it is ultimately God who draws humans toward excellence and self-transcendence, and who is fully involved in their flourishing.[66] The initiative to flourish as well as the grace to bring it to fruition is from God, but I firmly believe that this requires an accountability from humans to cooperate with God's grace and collaborate with other creatures on the earth. Flourishing is thus a God-given gift as well as a responsibility requiring faithfulness and some effort from humans.

Since Levy-Achtemeier thinks that the potential to flourish is from God, she is more concerned with understanding human nature and what enables or prevents people from living a flourishing life in receptivity and cooperation with God's grace. For Levy-Achtemeier, persons are created in the image of God and have the power to transcend themselves and engage with others and God.[67] The question then that arises for Levy-Achtemeier is, if all persons are endowed with God's grace and have an innate potential to flourish, why is it that only some flourish and others do not. She posits that people can languish and things can turn out negative and evil because of the human choice to "shut off the Divine call", resulting in the destruction of oneself and society.[68] One's potential for flourishing can thus be thwarted and hampered because of evil inclinations and frailty within humans and also because of destructive forces all around. Thus, Levy-Achtemeier sees the impact of the context and culture, and the support that people receive from their family, communities, social and religious institutions as crucial to grow and live fully.[69] Flourishing,

since it is a God-given potential, is not for oneself alone; rather it is meant for all persons and hence requires responsible living to continue the mission of establishing the reign of God here on earth. The ultimate flourishing for Levy-Achtemeier is not only in this life, but also a future possibility in the resurrected life obtained by Jesus' triumph over death.[70]

Levy-Achtemeier's focus on flourishing as an inherent potential is expressed slightly differently in the work of feminist theologian Serene Jones, who is concerned with the flourishing of women.[71] For Jones, the universal theological assertion that "God wills the flourishing of all persons, including women", is an "already/not-yet" vision.[72] This vision accepts that flourishing is a present reality as well as a future hope in which all pain and oppression will be wiped away. Nevertheless, the realization of the flourishing of women, as Jones sees it, is not just a universal given claim requiring human cooperation. It requires theoretical and theological reflection on the beliefs, assumptions, norms and constructions that contribute to the "oppression and the ultimate flourishing of women".[73] Jones thus recognizes the need for systemic and structural changes to establish right relations and ensure the flourishing of all persons. I agree with Jones' eschatological vision of flourishing, which is not a passive waiting in hope and expectation. Rather, the vision of a renewed humanity challenges people to deal seriously with one's choices, decisions and actions, here and now, in a way that all can experience fullness of life. Women are not only victims of oppression, but "active agents and ever-engaged protagonists" for flourishing.[74] It is necessary for women and others to work together to bring about systemic and structural changes that will enable the flourishing of all persons.

5. Flourishing as the Fruit of Spirituality and Right Relationships

Most of the studies on flourishing do not consider spirituality directly in relation to flourishing. This was observed by the

psychologists Maureen Miner, Martin Dowson and Stuart Devenish, when studying the contribution and significance of spirituality, particularly Christian spirituality, to human flourishing.[75] Miner and Dowson's main concern was to observe if and how Christian spirituality contributes to human flourishing, in contrast to the view of flourishing propagated by the media and popular culture. They make a distinction between a happy successful life of pleasure, and a *flourishing* life which is purposeful, hopeful and well-integrated.[76] They see spirituality as a necessary but not sufficient condition for flourishing, since other dimensions also need to be considered along with spirituality.[77] In looking at maturity in relation to flourishing and spirituality, Miner and Dowson recognize the main dimensions of human functioning as physical or biological, psychological (including the emotional and intellectual dimensions), social and spiritual.[78] The psychological, psychosocial and psychospiritual dimensions at intrapersonal, inter-personal and transpersonal levels need to be connected and integrated for true flourishing of persons.[79]

The emphasis on spirituality as a significant dimension of human life is also considered by Daniel Sulmasy, American medical ethicist, who proposed a "Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model" for the palliative care of patients.[80] This model expands the previous 'biopsychosocial model' to include spiritual needs, which become significantly more important at the end of one's life.[81] In researching the religious and spiritual needs of dying patients, Sulmasy emphasized that the spiritual aspects need to be considered along with the "bio-medical, psychosocial, and ethical aspects" for meaning and wholeness in life.[82] The importance of spirituality for flourishing, is also highlighted by Ursula King, for whom, "spirituality is no longer a luxury of life, of mere interest to religious minorities or mystics, but it now appears as an absolute imperative for human sanity and survival".[83] Spirituality can creatively energize persons, in religious and secular matters, to work towards creating a better world for

all.[84] Besides seeing spirituality as essential for flourishing, King also thinks that human flourishing must be seen as an integral dimension of one's spirituality.

Flourishing, though an inherent potential and the fruit of spirituality, is not for individual well-being alone; it is always in relationship to others and to the whole of creation. This is affirmed by Levy-Achtemeier who sees humans as interdependent, relational and communal. For Kieser, human flourishing is the outcome of a right relationship with God embodied in one's "relationship with others, with self, and with creation."[85] The responsibility for the well-being of all creation is endorsed by Mary Grey, who sees flourishing as an ecological life-giving concept for all people and creatures of the earth.[86] She incorporates the well-being of the earth along with biological, social, psychological and spiritual well-being.

Grey discounts the societal conception of flourishing that promotes the accumulation of wealth and the pursuit of pleasure through addiction to drugs, alcohol, money and sex.[87] Grey presses the need to rediscover the rhythms of nature and honour the sacredness of life. This view of flourishing opens connections between persons, communities, creatures, and the environment, in relation to needs, rights and desires that are interwoven at every stage. It is not only connecting and relating that is important for flourishing but also the kind of connections and relationships that one establishes. It is for this reason, that Grey considers establishing right relationships in society and with all of creation as the vision of feminist liberation theology.[88] In contrast to patriarchal power which is dominating, disconnecting and disordered, the vision of flourishing heralds love, compassion, justice and reconciliation which unite all people and the earth.[89] Thus, while flourishing can be considered the fruit of authentic spirituality, it is important to recognize the essential connection between flourishing and spirituality, which involves right relationships with oneself, others, God, and the earth.

6. Flourishing as Wholeness or Fullness of Life

From a feminist theological perspective, flourishing can be seen as wholeness or fullness of life offered by Jesus as recorded in John 10:10 ("I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"). This was affirmed by St. Irenaeus in his profound statement – 'The glory of God is [hu]man fully alive.' The quest for wholeness and fullness of life has been shared by many humanists, and feminist and liberation theologians although the focus, means, methods and strategies differ. Taking women's lived experiences as the starting point of theological reflection, feminist theologians are interested in the flourishing and well-being of all persons especially women and girls as well as in the flourishing of all creation. Susan Miller, feminist New Testament professor, reflecting on John 10:10 observes that the material imagery and symbols used by Jesus in the Johannine accounts reveal a connection with the earth and earth creatures.[90] Hence the gift of abundant life is not for individuals alone but for the natural world as well.[91] Flourishing from an ecological reading must be seen as the renewal and restoration of relationships with humans, God and the earth.[92] Connections at all levels are significant for flourishing and fullness of life. Thus, according to Miller, an eco-spiritual outlook on John 10:10 rightly emphasises the interconnectedness of all life and the flourishing of the entire earth community.

While Miller looks at flourishing from a Johannine ecological reading, Jonathan Pennington, New Testament scholar, locates flourishing and wholeness in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).[93] The vision of flourishing as exemplified in the exhortations of the Sermon on the Mount are meant for personal, social and structural transformation.[94] This implies that true flourishing, which is a Trinitarian experience of communion with God through Jesus by the Spirit, can be experienced through faithful discipleship following in the footsteps of Jesus.[95] Flourishing, for Pennington, from a faith perspective, is living in accordance

with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.[96] Human flourishing is associated with blessedness, wholeness, peace, prosperity, security, fertility and fullness of life, which, according to Pennington, come from a covenantal relationship with God.[97]

This covenantal relationship is to be lived in relation to oneself, others and all creation. The biblical understanding of wholeness concerns life in the present as well as for the future. God will restore fullness of life at the end of time, but this must also be brought about in this life through good interpersonal relationships, and healthy functioning of all systems and structures.[98] Pennington therefore sees the biblical vision of flourishing as eschatological but also for the present life in the midst of one's suffering and concerns. Flourishing is for the individual yet also other-centred and communal; and is oriented towards a universal mission of the restoration of wholeness for the entire creation.[99] Mary Grey sees the ecological links of flourishing, as life-giving for persons and all creatures, not only in the Bible but also in the sacred texts of all faiths.[100] For Grey, "all the major religions, indigenous and tribal traditions, and new forms of religion emerging from ecofeminism and from the recovery of forgotten traditions, contain dimensions of life-giving processes", which relate with flourishing.[101]

Flourishing as wholeness or fullness of life thus offers an integral view of flourishing incorporating aspects of all the diverse approaches to flourishing. Stephen Pope, Professor of theology, when reflecting on flourishing in relation to Christ notes that there are diverse views among Christians with regard to human flourishing. Some see flourishing as the fruit of unconditional love, exemplified by Jesus Christ, which reaches out to others in compassion and service. Others see the Cross, self-sacrifice and suffering endured by Christ as the true way to flourishing. Pope considers the key Christian concepts of love and suffering from two diverse perspectives - *dialectical* and *humanistic*.[102] The dialectical view of Christianity emphasizes *agapic* or self-denying love whereas

the humanistic perspective stresses the human capacity for empathy, compassion and mutuality.[103] While these two Christian views are distinct, Pope finds them converging on Christian theological principles. Rather than discard some of the ideals, values and theological formulations of Christianity, or opt for an either-or approach, Pope recommends an "incarnational integrationist position" for transformation and wholeness. To clarify his incarnational integrationist position, Pope situates it in the context of three Christian standpoints, that of "the verticalist, the horizontalist, and the integrationist". [104]

The *verticalist* position, held by some Christians and theologians, regards flourishing as eschatological, equating it with eternal life and salvation.[105] From this perception, Christ is seen exclusively as the only Saviour of the world, who took human flesh to save souls. The soul is also considered more important than the body from this position. Salvation only through Christ excludes people of other faiths from being saved. The exclusivist Christian position, for Pope, finds no value in the views of positive psychology and the capabilities approach since they do not consider salvation for flourishing.[106] The *horizontalist* position is more "liberal" in looking at flourishing as love for persons and striving for freedom from oppression.[107] For Pope, those who hold this perception regard Christ as a prophetic leader, like other religious leaders, who came to bring liberation to the captives, the poor and the oppressed. Liberal minded people can accept all views of flourishing that suggest ethical living and working for justice and liberation. The third *integrationist* position attempts to combine the views of the first, which enforce exclusivist positions of Christian theology, and the second humanist position of compassion, freedom and justice. The *integrationist* position considers Christ's offer of fullness of life as God's grace given freely to all persons so that all humans can flourish and grow in relationship with God and others.[108] For Pope, human flourishing from the incarnational integrationist position views flourishing as material, spiritual,

social, moral, historical and eternal, and can be witnessed in love of God and neighbour.[109] While acknowledging the eschatological view of flourishing as eternal life, this position accepts the incarnational vision of temporal flourishing in this present life.[110] It understands the necessity of human effort for flourishing but also recognizes the importance of God's grace for transformation and wholeness. Thus, flourishing or fullness of life, for Pope is not exercised in a "separate sphere called the 'sacred' but in and through every part of our daily lives", which involve "right relationships to God, one another, oneself, and all of creation".[111] When using Christ as the standard for flourishing, it is important to also engage with other perspectives that are genuinely concerned with the well-being of humans and the earth.

Concluding Remarks

Integrating the positive aspects of the different perspectives on flourishing as well as revising or reframing some of the limitations can offer an integral inclusive incarnational approach to flourishing. The emphasis in flourishing as a well-lived life of virtuous activity and as equated with well-being and optimal living, is on individual and personal well-being. In creating just opportunities for people to flourish, importance is given to ensuring conducive social and political structures for personal and social well-being. The communitarian and relational dimension in flourishing is accentuated in the view of flourishing as the fruit of right relationships and spirituality. This outlook, while taking into consideration emotional, intellectual, psychological and spiritual well-being of individuals, stresses right and just relationships with persons, God and the earth. These perspectives of flourishing are end or goal-directed, involving a process of effort and determination, physically, emotionally, intellectually, psychologically and spiritually, towards flourishing as the final outcome. Flourishing as an inherent potential, underscores the innate God-given ability to all

persons to flourish irrespective of one's class, caste, culture, religion, gender, race and ethnicity.

The perception of flourishing as wholeness or fullness of life takes all the aspects of flourishing into consideration to offer a critical constructive response for the flourishing of all persons and the earth. Flourishing is considered as a gift and grace offered by the Lord to all persons in the present, as well as a future hope and goal to be reached through personal and communitarian efforts. It also takes into account the experiences of the poor and marginalized, in advocating for just socio-cultural, political and economic structures to ensure their flourishing. All these diverse aspects of flourishing taken together offer an integral understanding of human flourishing that favours the flourishing of all persons, inclusive of those on the margins, with respecting the rhythm and requirements of the entire ecosystem. They herald an urgent theological consciousness among people, so as to think through and challenge the beliefs, myths, narratives, symbols and rhetoric preserved by the dominant cultures and traditions to maintain and perpetuate the oppression and dehumanization of the weakest and poorest. The concrete realization of fullness of life for all persons and the ecosystem requires sensitivity to each context, culture and needs, as well as connectedness and collaboration with people of all faiths for the well-being of all creation.

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[1] Cf. Frank R Abate, "Flourishing," *The Oxford Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus American Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jonathan Crowther Oxford, "Flourishing," *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[2] Cf. Abate, "Flourishing," 296; Oxford, "Flourishing," 450; J. A Simpson and E.S.C, "Flourishing," *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1989), 1087–88.

[3] Cf. Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013, accessed January 26,

2017, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/; Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, and Jeffrey Paul, eds., "Introduction," in *Human Flourishing* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), vii–xiv.

[4] Cf. "Aristotle's Ethics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed April 10, 2018, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/.

[5] Mary C. Grey, "The Shape of the Human Home - A Response to Professor T. Gorringe," *Political Theology* 2, no. 1 (2000): 95–103.

[6] Rasmussen, "Human Flourishing and the Appeal to Human Nature," 3.

[7] Ibid., 10.

[8] Cf. ibid., 42.

[9] Cf. ibid., 16–17.

[10] Cf. ibid., 17.

[11] Cf. Doris Kieser, *Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls: Embodied Flourishing* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015).

[12] Ibid., 12.

[13] Ibid., 11.

[14] Ibid., 13.

[15] Cf. ibid., 14.

[16] Ibid., 14.

[17] Ibid., 13, 24, 25, 26.

[18] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica (Complete and Unabridged)*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Claremont, CA: Coyote Canyon Press, 2010), 12, 35, 49, 55.

[19] Aquinas, sec. I–II, QQ.55.

[20] Kieser, *Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls*, 14.

[21] Ibid., 22.

[22] Cf. ibid., 2.

[23] Ibid., 9–10.

[24] Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God's Power and Human Flourishing," The God and Human Flourishing Program (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for Faith and Culture at Yale

Divinity School), accessed April 15, 2018, https://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/nicholas_wolterstorff_-_ gods_ power_ and_ human_flourishing_0_0.pdf.; George N. Terzis, "Human Flourishing: A Psychological Critique of Virtue Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (1994): 333–42.

[25] Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 145; See also Wolterstorff, "God's Power and Human Flourishing."

[26] Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 145.

[27] Ibid., 145.

[28] Cf. ibid., 4, 263.

[29] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: William. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 101.

[30] Terzis, "Human Flourishing," 333.

[31] Cf. ibid., 336–37.

[32] Ibid., 340.

[33] Ibid., 340.

[34] Martin Seligman is the director of the Positive Psychology Centre at the University of Pennsylvania and founder of positive psychology. Cf. Shane J. Lopez and C. R. Snyder, *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7–8.

[35] Cf. Seligman, *Flourish*, 33.

[36] Cf. ibid., 51.

[37] Cf. ibid., 16–24.

[38] For instance, the "Kindness Exercise"; "The Gratitude Visit"; "What-Went-Well Exercise (Also called 'Three Blessings')"; "Signature Strengths Exercise". Cf. ibid, 20, 30, 33, 38.

[39] Cf. Maureen Gaffney, *Flourishing: How to Achieve a Deeper Sense of Well-Being, Meaning and Purpose – Even When Facing Adversity*, Kindle ed. (Dublin: Penguin, 2011).

[40] Ibid. x, xi.

[41] Cf. ibid., 25, 43.

[42] Cf. ibid., 77.

[43] Cf. ibid., 24–43.

[44] Ibid., 39–41.
[45] Ibid., 3–4.
[46] Cf. ibid., 6.
[47] Cf. ibid.
[48] Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
[49] Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York, NY - Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 106.
[50] Cf. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 17-20, 23.
[51] Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 179.
[52] Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Who Is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy Poses Questions to Psychology," *Journal of Legal Studies* 37, no. S2 (2008): S88-92; Cf. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*.
[53] Cf. Ibid., "Who Is the Happy Warrior?"
[54] Ibid., S94.
[55] Ibid., S98.
[56] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 20.
[57] Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 12, 75.
[58] Cf. Merridy Wilson-Strydom and Melanie Walker, "A Capabilities-Friendly Conceptualization of Flourishing in and through Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 44, no. 3 (2015): 310–24. Merridy Wilson-Strydom is associate professor of Higher Education Studies and Melanie Walker is the Director of the Centre for Research on Higher Education and Development.
[59] Ibid., 311.
[60] Ibid., 312.
[61] Cf. Ibid., 312, 313.
[62] Cf. ibid., 315.
[63] Agency for Wilson-Strydom and Walker is "about having opportunities and choices as well as the autonomy to be able to make one's own decisions." See ibid., 314.
[64] Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 69–70.
[65] Sandra M. Levy-Achtemeier, *Flourishing Life: Now and in the Time to Come*, Kindle ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), nn. 235, 1446.
[66] Cf. Levy-Achtemeier, *Flourishing Life*, nn. 205–214.

[67] Cf. Ibid., n. 133.
[68] Ibid., nn. 237–238.
[69] Cf. ibid., nn. 355–366.
[70] Cf. ibid., n. 2139.
[71] Cf. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).
[72] Ibid., 108.
[73] Ibid., 4.
[74] Ibid., 6.
[75] Cf. Maureen Miner, Martin Dowson, and Stuart Devenish, eds., *Beyond Well-Being: Spirituality and Human Flourishing* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2012).
[76] Cf. Maureen Miner, Martin Dowson, and Stuart Devenish, eds., "Foreword," in *Beyond Well-Being: Spirituality and Human Flourishing*, vii.
[77] Cf. Martin Dowson and Maureen Miner, "Towards a Theory of Personal Maturity: Links to Spirituality and Human Flourishing," in *Beyond Well-Being: Spirituality and Human Flourishing*, 127–49.
[78] Cf. ibid., 129.
[79] Ibid., 135, 139.
[80] Cf. Daniel P. Sulmasy, "A Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model for the Care of Patients at the End of Life," *The Gerontologist* 42, no. Special Issue III (2002): 24–33.
[81] Cf. Daniel P. Sulmasy, "Spiritual Issues in the Care of Dying Patients ' . . . It's Okay Between Me and God,'" *JAMA* 296, no. 11 (2006): 1385–92.
[82] Ibid., 1386.
[83] Ursula King, The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life (London - Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), 56.
[84] Cf. ibid., 54.
[85] Kieser, *Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls*, 2, 15.
[86] Cf. Mary C. Grey, "Survive or Thrive? A Theology of Flourishing for the Next Millennium," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 88, no. 352 (1999): 402; Cf. Mary C. Grey, "It All Began with Miriam. Feminist Theology's Journey from Liberation to Reconciliation," *Feminist Theology* 20, no. 3 (2012): 228.

[87] Cf. Grey, "Survive or Thrive?," 404.
[88] Cf. Grey, "It All Began with Miriam," 228.
[89] Ibid., 228–29.
[90] Cf. Susan Miller, "'I Came That They May Have Life, and Have It Abundantly' (John 10:10): An Ecological Reading of John's Gospel," *The Expository Times* 124, no. 2 (2012): 71.
[91] Ibid., 68, 69.
[92] Ibid., 71.
[93] Cf. Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017).
[94] Cf. ibid., 15.
[95] Cf. ibid., 14–15.
[96] Ibid., 289.
[97] Cf. Ibid., 14, 43.
[98] Ibid., 72.
[99] Cf. Ibid., 296–97.
[100] Cf. Grey, "Survive or Thrive?," 402–3.
[101] Ibid., 404.
[102] Cf. Stephen J. Pope, "Jesus Christ and Human Flourishing: An Incarnational Perspective," The God and Human Flourishing Program (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for Faith and Culture at Yale Divinity School), accessed April 15, 2018, https://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pope_christ_and_flourishing.pdf.
[103] Ibid., 2.
[104] Ibid., 16.
[105] Cf. ibid.
[106] Cf. ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Cf. ibid., 17.
[109] Ibid., 17, 22.
[110] Cf. ibid., 17.
[111] Ibid., 19, 23.

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