

Science and theology for human flourishing

Lessons and perspectives on the dialogue between science and theology in Latin America

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Towards a mission paradigm for human flourishing

Alejandra Ortiz

Jesus and John the Baptist (Luke 7:18-28, NIV)

¹⁸ John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹ he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

²⁰ When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

²¹ At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²² So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^[a] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ²³ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

²⁴ After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ²⁵ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. ²⁶ But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'^[b]

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

Introduction

The mission at universities is not new, but each generation faces new challenges. A couple of decades ago, big questions were being asked in the face of the uncertainty brought about by the crisis of modernity and the death of the meta-narratives of progress and the future. Having ready answers to difficult questions about God, the Bible and other controversial issues was very attractive and a way of trying to answer questions about faith. Today, the questions in universities are different, while inhabiting a plurality of histories ranging from the pre-modern to the post-modern to the post-colonial.

The Logos and Cosmos Initiative (LCI) of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) began during the pandemic. A time when uncertainty, suffering and injustice became even more noticeable. As the work with students in IFES Latin America has always picked up the questions of a changing context, on this occasion, an effort was also made to listen, understand and engage better with university realities. By asking honest and courageous questions, acknowledging doubts and mystery, and walking a path travelled in friendly community, a way of doing university mission emerged from humble trust, active listening and dignifying compassion.

By working with projects aimed at fostering dialogue between science and faith, we aimed to respond to the questions that arise at the university. We wanted the dialogue to reflect our missionary commitment in the footsteps of Jesus. As an LCI team in Latin America, the indirect dialogue between John the Baptist and Jesus - described in Luke 7 - provided us with an everyday scene to highlight key elements for doing mission today in universities. These elements range from naming (making visible) the reality of prison and a bleak context, to asking questions related to the nature of the Kingdom of God and its implications. Like John the Baptist, we at the LCI articulate profound questions about Jesus himself. We seek to embrace the mystery and wrestle with the implications of the reversal of the Kingdom of God, which operates for the flourishing of all creation, and we reflect on the role of friendship and community in bearing witness.

What is the Kingdom about?

Students, teachers and staff members of the IFES student movements do not stop bearing witness to Jesus. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God carries on, and many are still becoming acquainted with Him. At the same time, violence, corruption, authoritarian regimes and inequality persist, and do not seem to diminish.

Likewise, the Kingdom of God is present and has come in Christ Jesus. But its prophet, the one who prepared the way of the Lord, is still imprisoned. He is behind bars because commitment to the Kingdom of God does not necessarily immediately change social realities or people in a still imperfect world. But the Kingdom of God does provide another framework, another perspective, for seeing, dreaming and imagining the future, because the Kingdom of God grows progressively. That is why we take up the experience of John the Baptist to frame our own experiences of commitment to His Kingdom and to the realities we face today in the universities and countries of Latin America. We too need to take a good look at the context, ask honest questions, dialogue with transparency and allow ourselves to be helped, so that we can deepen our commitment to the Kingdom of God.

In Luke 7, Jesus is doing miracles and making himself known among the people of Galilee. But John the Baptist is in prison. The Kingdom of God is being announced, a kingdom

different from the Roman and other kingdoms of history, but John is confused. Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another? John's question has many layers. John baptized Jesus and announced the good news, calling people to repentance. John recognized Jesus as the Messiah and is imprisoned for denouncing Herod. So, what is this Kingdom that has come in Jesus all about?

The risk of dissociation between faith and reality is tremendous. We need a John the Baptist to name the dissonance. John seems confused and disappointed. Just before this scene, Jesus had taught about the Kingdom of God and healed the servant of a Roman centurion, setting an example of the centurion's faith and showing that the Kingdom of God is no one's monopoly or concession. Then Jesus raises a widow's son from the dead. Luke says that Jesus' heart was moved with pity for her. He puts an end to her pain and then does something unexpected and unsolicited: He touches the coffin and gives life to the son! Because the Kingdom of God has to do with compassion, life and human flourishing! Jesus's disciples, who witnessed the healing and resurrection, are in awe of Jesus and recognize that God is among them. How could they not! In parallel, John hears about these things from his disciples, and asks them to return to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for someone else?"

What is John trying to understand? What led John to ask this question? If there was anyone who understood the nature of the Kingdom of God, it was John, but he still asks the question.

Messengers with questions and doubts

Like John, students and staff members ask questions. Having the courage to articulate them requires knowing a God who is generous with our humanity and willing to lovingly correct and guide. Taking on our questions and deep doubts brings us closer to others in the university, to people who also have questions and with whom we can build bridges. At the LCI, we gathered questions, queries and needs from the social reality of the university: issues such as the apparent incompatibility between science and faith, gender-based violence, the environmental crisis, ethical dilemmas in bioengineering, food injustice and mental health problems among students. These issues and more have a place in the Kingdom of God and are part of what God has reconciled in Christ, through the cross. The challenge is to discern and use all available resources to live as ambassadors of reconciliation, participating in bringing sight to the blind, promoting healing, active listening, holistic lives and hope.

The difficulty is that this call to follow Jesus and live under the reality of the Kingdom of God has its mystery. John is in prison because of the Kingdom and because of the truth. John's question comes from his own experience in prison. Jesus does not release him from prison, although his mission is also one of liberation. Jesus is bringing life, healing and freedom, but John remains there, isolated from God's action. We are faced with a paradox and it is there that we dwell, a paradox where we have discovered that the arts and humanities are resources of grace to dwell in the interstices and in mystery. It is in the cultivation of the dialogue between science and faith that we discover more about the mystery of God and his Kingdom.

The Kingdom beyond expectations

Jesus' response to John is beautiful, gracious and generous. Jesus does not scold John. In fact, he performs all kinds of signs and miracles to confirm that he is the one he was waiting for. He who John announced is the one who fulfils the prophecies. He is the Messiah and the one

who brings the Kingdom of God, even though he is not what John expected. John is affirmed in the identity of Jesus and the nature of the Kingdom of God, but his prison circumstances do not change.

We see the Kingdom of God in circumstances and places we did not expect. Not from the imposition of ideas or the force of power, but from the wonder of healing, liberation and good news for all. This is where projects for the promotion of dialogue between science and faith have opened us to new forms and ways. By collecting questions and curiosity, we have discovered ways in which the Kingdom of God is present in unimagined places. Through the projects of the catalysts and the community witness of the Logos and Cosmos Initiative in IFES Latin America a more comprehensive and colorful picture of the Kingdom emerges, with manifestations in areas of knowledge in which it is difficult to imagine God present, or in subjects where shadows and doubts about God seem to impose themselves.

The development of various projects led catalysts to present the positive results of the science and faith dialogue initiatives, which contribute to human flourishing, in various academic spaces. These projects bear witness to the relevance of the Christian faith in times of upheaval and hopelessness. For students, teachers and researchers, connecting their academic discipline with their own Christian faith and with issues or needs that arise from the university context, allowed personal faith, the witness to the university and the imagination of the present Kingdom to grow exponentially in all of us who have participated in the LCI.

In a similar sense to John's experience, Jesus' work in unexpected ways, operating on the social margins and even reaching out to those in power (or as it is in our case, in the universities), renewed their hope in the Kingdom and in Jesus. There is a reversal of the Kingdom when Jesus says that all who believe in Jesus and do not stumble at who he is, are the 'elders' in the Kingdom. For it was the Pharisees and religious officials who stumbled at Jesus and His Kingdom, which did not fit into their limited framework. Neither were they willing or humble enough to know Him. Unlike them, the work in the LCI during these years led us to cultivate the virtues of humility and curiosity, to ask questions that would allow us to welcome the mystery and thus to see the Kingdom where we least expected it.

A witnessing community

John's passage in his dialogue with Jesus is mediated by John's disciples. It is through them that John raises the question about Jesus' identity, and John's disciples are the ones who bring the question before Jesus. We thus observe a community of friends accompanying and sustaining doubts as well as communicating joys. Likewise, in the LCI, mentoring was a key part of our work. The organisational foundation was a friendship developed in a shared commitment to our mission at university, in the awareness of the Kingdom of God as an agent of reconciliation and flourishing for all creation, together with accompaniment for life.

In Luke 7, when Jesus finishes showing the signs and wonders of the Kingdom, he says to John's disciples, " Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ²³ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

We do not know how John receives these words and can only speculate. But John will receive witness to who Jesus is from his own disciples. The importance of community in John's experience is as described by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954, p.23):

Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, [...] He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.

We need the Christian community that announces the good news of the Kingdom of God. This is what has been constituted through the work in the LCI, at various levels: from the executive team in the region, through the community of catalysts and the encounters that they themselves have generated from their projects. It has all been an experience of the Kingdom of God at the frontiers of academic work; in the community of friends that has accompanied and in the articulation of new ways of seeing God, in the face of complex situations that bring science and faith into dialogue, for human flourishing.

To conclude this chapter, I encourage you to go through the whole book in your hands. Through the personal experiences and projects of the catalysts, you will find inspiration for an honest journey in following Jesus and his Kingdom. You will see that many projects start with questions and doubts and are driven by curiosity lived as an inherent aspect of faith. There are beautiful surprises in the ways in which the Kingdom of God is present in the academic disciplines of the catalysts, and in projects with complex and challenging themes that aim at human flourishing. I also hope that this book will be a communal witness to the manifold grace of God and that you will find in the authors friends who inspire you in your spiritual journey.

References

Bonhoeffer, D. (1954). *Life Together*. HarperOne.