



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

An interview with Luke Glanville

Terry:

How did the idea of a scholarly Circle get started?

Luke

Cecilia Jacob, a colleague in the Department of International Relations here at ANU, and I discovered each other as fellow Christians a few years ago. We then discovered a Christian PhD student in our department. So about four years ago we started meeting every month or two to read and discuss an article or book chapter on political theology that related to international relations (IR). Was there an emerging subfield at the intersection of political theology and IR? We were trying to find this out and figure out what this might look like. Around the same time I met you, Terry. I told you about this. You encouraged us to keep going and to look for others. We found two other PhD students who were Christians who came on board.

Terry:

So you began informally reading the work of others?

Luke:

Yes. We discussed others' work. We wanted to think about ways theology might shape future research projects, individually or collaboratively. We weren't thinking yet about the theological shaping of our current research. We already had long term projects, though we shared a concern to develop ways of talking about our projects to Christian audiences.

Terry

Where did the impetus come from to share with Christian audiences?

Luke:

Just conversations with each other. For me personally I have spoken to church groups on questions about the ethics of war and peace and the just war tradition. Those well-known issues of IR have Christian roots. And these are questions that Christians seem to like to think about. But I was beginning to feel that just war thinking is an easy target, an easy thing to get people interested, and it wasn't drawing on the heart of what I actually do as a researcher. And it wasn't addressing issues that matter just as much as the ethics of war. E.g., foreign aid, refugee issues, how to think about global justice, international law – the kind of things churches don't usually grapple with. But Christian IR scholars think they are important and we have expertise in

them. So how do we think more explicitly christianly about that research ourselves? How do we rethink our research as Christians? And how do we relate that thinking to others? I feel that many of us just unreflectively write in a secular mode. That could be enriched if I were more consciously grounding my thinking in what Christianity gives me. This doesn't mean that I need to explicitly defend the faith or write about it explicitly in my scholarly work, but it may influence the questions I ask or how I think about those questions.

Terry

What brought about this shift in your own research?

Luke

It arose out of discussions with you, Terry. I recall that a few of us, faculty and PhD students, gathered together for lunch at ANU to get to know each other and discuss our research. From that beginning we began to think about whether we might do something collectively. So we planned almost a year ahead to have a more formal day long discussion of our work. We wrote extended abstracts—a max of 3 pages—we circulated to each other, then met outside the university at a nearby Hyatt. We each presented for 10 minutes or so our research and faith without too much structure. We reflected together on intersections with faith themes. That worked well, so we decided to meet the following year and take our discussions a step further. This time we presented short written papers and brought in three theologians from St. Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra to give us feedback.

Terry

Did this logic of development, these cycles from the informal to the discussions of abstracts amongst the sociologists and political scientists, to the longer papers and involvement of outside participation by theologians, make sense?

Luke

Yes, it worked very well. It has been a really good way to give us all time to mull over things, to think through issues between meetings, to build up trust, to be willing to be vulnerable in front of each other, given that none of us are theologians. It has also been challenging because we are aware that we are being called upon to talk about things we don't know at all well.

Terry

Well, we know well our fields, presumably. In fact, we may be experts on given topics. But do you mean we don't know well how to think theologically?

Luke

I am aware I don't have the same well-developed language on the theology side as when I am writing in a secular mode. It is a bit embarrassing, really. When it comes to the mode of thinking and talking that is much more important and dear to me, then finding the words is more challenging.

Terry

Were there Christian groups on campus that might have been an alternative forum for this theological engagement with politics?

Luke

I think our group is a really rich and rare thing. It is a reasonably good sized group of people who do quite similar research and who are all Christians. Even our research interests intersect. That has a big strength. I don't think many of us have engaged more than once or twice with other groups of Christian post-grad or faculty groups on campus, partly because we don't have more in common with them than with our existing bible study groups in our own churches. I don't feel I have more to give or gain by meeting with Christians working in the hard sciences than in regular church groups. Perhaps I have put that too strongly. After all, the person who I rely on most heavily for academic career advice from a Christian perspective is a physicist, Ross McKenzie, at the University of Queensland. Our IR group is really special. We are really on the same page about big disciplinary assumptions. I have wrestled with this for a decade or so – there always seem to be good post-grad & faculty Christian groups on campuses, but they always seem to be mostly made up of people in the hard sciences, engineers, computer science. It is rare to find a good number of Christians in the social sciences and humanities.

Terry

How do you handle the theological deficit most scholars confront?

Luke

It depends on what we are trying to do. If we are trying to write for peer-reviewed theological outlets we need to learn that literature or language reasonably well. That is a difficult task. Even when I read a political theologian and then turn to writing in that mode, I find the words don't come to me in the same way. When I offer an example or draw a parallel from my field, the words flow again. But, we are not all called to do this kind of theological writing, I don't think. We perhaps need merely to be more reflective about our scholarship, about ways our faith might inform our research agenda and scholarship.

Terry

So, are you saying that there are two different ways to go? In one, faith informs scholarship without being explicit. In another, theology is infused explicitly into the writing itself.

Luke

Yes. So it is really a learning experience. We strive to be reflective about our scholarship, to talk to others about how our ideas might need to be channeled in different ways because of our Christian beliefs. We can read more widely and become more aware. Talking to theologians can be wonderfully useful.

Terry

Where did you hold the conferences? Inside the university? Does it make a difference where they were held?

Luke

It was good to get out of the IR department's building, getting away from colleagues and students we constantly bump into and chat to, and to be able to focus all day on this.

Terry

Some other Christian initiatives in universities place a high value on holding this kind of event within the university. What is your reaction to that approach?

Luke

Yes, I can understand that choice. However, I can also see why groups might not want to do that – at least at first. We were well supported by our department. In other contexts I can imagine there might be much more tension in doing this on a secular university campus. So I can understand groups feeling safer off campus, to relax and talk openly.

Ultimately it would be ideal to meet on campus and perhaps even to do it publicly and invite an audience. But there would be lots of situations where that wouldn't work.

Terry

I found it remarkable that the International Relations Department actually paid the costs of meeting off campus. Did your department chair know that this was an event that brought IR and theology into engagement?

Luke

Our department doesn't have a strong ideological bent. And partly because those involved in our group of Christian scholars have good reputations as committed researchers and good colleagues there is trust in us that we would do the right thing by the department.

Terry

So the fact that this involved "theology" or "Christian" didn't faze the department chair at all?

Luke

No. I think the sense was that we were good, reliable scholars who were interested in doing this and the department had money available for workshops, so why not?

The chair did say prior to the most recent annual meeting that we should make sure that this is more than a talk-fest. He wants us to do something with it – produce some kind of tangible academic output.

Terry

What administrative or infrastructural conditions were necessary to make this work?

Luke

It's been very straightforward. I just kept after people until they sent papers. We booked a room at the Hyatt. I emailed some theologians and invited them to read the papers and come along to give feedback. It didn't take much time administratively.

Terry

Were there financial costs? What were they?

Luke

The only cost was about \$1500 to book the Hyatt for the day, with catering. We could have done it for nothing, actually, somewhere else in the university. But the money was available, the Hyatt had a good conference room, and being off-campus seemed right at this stage.

Terry

Were there other challenges you faced?

Luke

For me, the main challenge was writing my paper. I found that I had a few ideas that I could write about – arguments that I had been making in my scholarship that were grounded in particular Christian concepts or insights. It was reasonably easy to reproduce those arguments for my paper for our workshop, and to lay them out in a straightforward way that theologians could understand, but I found that as soon as I tried to explain the Christians concepts or insights (in this case, some ideas from Leibniz) in political-theological terms (rather than merely hinting at them as I had done in some earlier work for general scholarly audiences), my writing would grind to a halt. It was useful to get feedback from the theologians at our workshop about the extent to which I succeeded in spelling out these theological concepts in a coherent way.

Terry

Where does the IR Scholarly Circle go from here? What's the endgame?

Luke

Good question! I think there is a sense in which it has already achieved its basic goal, which is to get us all thinking and talking about what we are trying to do as Christian scholars, why we are asking the questions we are asking, how we are going about answering them, and how our faith and our beliefs should inform our research. Our annual meetings are a wonderful opportunity for us all to get together to re-focus on this and to take a step back from the daily grind of academia and think and talk about the big picture aspects of our work. But, just as important, I think, is the fact that these meetings and the existence of this group has quite quickly helped us to develop deeper understanding of each other's work and interests and also to develop mutual bonds and trust so that we can chat with each other about our faith and our scholarship and encourage each other in this, day to day, in and around our department.

Terry

What goals/hopes do you have, whether as a scholar or as a mentor of graduate students, for this scholarly circle?

Luke

I think it is already playing out exactly as I had hoped. Ben Day, formerly a doctoral student and now a faculty member, is now in the office next to me. We are talking 20-30 minutes every day about big questions of political theology and about how our faith informs our thinking and research. It is wonderful. I think we are all much more conscious of trying to do our research

christianly. We are making claims, developing arguments, doing fieldwork in ways consistent with our understanding of a Christian worldview and God's vision of a good and just society; consistent with God's desire for the care of the vulnerable, the oppressed. It has made me – and I think all of us – think hard about what we are doing with our lives and our precious research hours; it is pushing us to strive to do research that matters and that is consistent with God's desires and designs, rather than just unreflectively churning out research, pursuing career goals or prestige or reputation. That has been the big impact on me. And others, too, I think.

Can you imagine scholarly circles in other fields?

Absolutely!

What advice would you give people who wanted to try something like this?

I suppose I would just tell them what has worked for us. We have proceeded quite slowly and gently, from casual lunches to informal meetings to formal workshops, with as much as a year in between each. We have of course had many conversations with each other in between, but these organized events have been well spaced out. I suspect this patient approach has helped solidify bonds and trust within the group. But I'm sure it would be possible for other groups to speed up this process.

For those sparks to catch fire, what would it need?

One particularly useful thing about our approach has been that our focus has always been on thinking christianly about our research, rather than trying to do new and different "Christian" projects separate from and in addition to our research. I think we have all found it useful and exciting to think hard about and to talk about the research that we are doing and to mull over the place of our faith in that research. Perhaps some of us over time will pursue very different research projects in the future as a result of our meeting and thinking together – that could be wonderful – but I think it has been a good thing that we have focused for now on thinking anew about the research that we already do, and encouraging and helping each other to do that well. That has been key to the health and sustainability of our group, I suspect.

I understand the IR circle had members ranging from doctoral dissertation students to younger and mid-career faculty through to senior faculty. Did this spread of academic "ranks" help or hinder your community of theological and scholarly engagement?

I think it has been a wonderful reminder of how unimportant these academic "ranks" are! I have been one of the more senior members of the group, in terms of my academic position, but it has been very clear to me from the beginning of this group that each of us are simply Christians trying to figure out God's will for our lives and to pursue it. Some of us have more Bible-knowledge than others. Some have done more reading of political theology or more thinking about Christian ethics than others. But those differences tend to have little relation to differences of academic rank and there doesn't seem to be any sense in which junior folk feel a need to defer to senior folk or that the ideas of senior folk trump those of others. I'm in awe of some of our PhD students who have given so much thought to how and why as Christians they are doing the work that they do and making the arguments that they are making. It's been a great experience.

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