

On Good and Bad Theology

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Abstract

Despite the challenges posed by contextual relativism, it is both possible and necessary to distinguish between better and worse theologies — and doing so matters academically, ecclesially, and in the political and ethical life of the world. This article acknowledges the postmodern challenge before identifying two forms of technical failure: theology that violates rational discourse, and theology severed from its own recognised sources. Beyond the technical, good theology is characterised by humility and openness to questioning and correction; any theology that forecloses such questioning is, by that fact, impoverished. Bad theology can be identified by its effects — its tendency to harm, to serve existing power structures uncritically, and to silence other voices. Reflexivity is proposed as a key criterion of adequacy. Finally, the article develops the concept of productive theology: rooted in Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, oriented towards human flourishing, and generative of genuine questions — a matter primarily of method and attitude, and thus compatible with deep faithfulness to the tradition.

Keywords

Theology; relativism; reflexivity; productive; flourishing

The Problem of Judgement in a Postmodern Context

In a postmodern context, the cultural and intellectual air we breathe, to say that something is good or bad is to invite an immediate challenge: ‘In your opinion.’ And it is true that my judgement on, for example, whether a particular novel is good or bad is necessarily shaped by my context and my preferences. Similarly, my conviction that an action or a position is good or bad can be argued to be a function of where I stand, whether I benefit from it or suffer because of it, whether it aligns with my values or challenges them. And since, as is now widely presumed, my values are themselves the product of my context, a broadly postmodern account would suggest that objective standards

become very difficult to ground — though this inference has been challenged by philosophers including Charles Taylor, Hilary Putnam, and Alasdair MacIntyre, whose work deserves engagement here.¹

This argument is especially powerful when we are considering issues that are themselves highly contested, about which there is very little general agreement, and into this category, we must place theology. In many Western European contexts, survey data suggests declining engagement with theological discourse as a meaningful framework — though the picture varies considerably between, say, Poland and Sweden.² The historical impact of theology may be important, and its effects on culture, architecture, and music can be discussed. But any discussion of doctrine, of God, of faith and of its demands and results, is, on this account, without grounding in anything substantive. By one reckoning at least, any engagement with theology in those terms is simply ‘bad’.

But for those of us for whom these terms do have meaning, those of us who have a content to give to the word ‘God’, and who have an existential stake in the impact of faith, its demands and its results, and a direct and personal connection to the history and culture that theology has shaped, theology is something we value. About theology we can, therefore, make value judgements: it matters to us whether the theology we are exploring, being offered, or ourselves producing is good or bad. And we want it to be good.

Why the Question Is Not Simple

My starting point was to note that such judgements are generally considered personal and contextual. In considering theology, we might therefore begin by saying that a theology I agree with is good, while one

¹ See for example, Simon Susen, ‘From Modern to Postmodern Epistemology? The “Relativist Turn”’, in *The Postmodern Turn in the Social Sciences*, by Susen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 40–63 (p. 40).

² See, for example Grace Davie, ‘Revisiting Secularization in Light of Growing Diversity: The European Case’, *Religions*, 14:9 (2023), 1119, doi:10.3390/rel14091119.

I disagree with is bad. That is, at least, somewhere to start. But it leaves several fundamental questions unanswered.

Why, for instance, do I agree or disagree? On what basis am I making this judgement? There are several possible answers. The theology I am considering might appear to me to contradict Scripture and/or tradition, and on those grounds, I might judge it to be bad. But the question immediately arises: On what basis am I reading and interpreting Scripture and tradition? The consideration of these sources is itself a theological act. Our hermeneutical principles will have a theological basis, even if that basis is unexamined. The tradition through which we read and by which we are formed will itself be drawing on a theology and practice which may be so deeply ingrained that we struggle to identify it as a tradition at all, rather than a self-evident way of seeing things. Thus, my judgement on whether a theology is good or bad is already theological, and how am I to judge whether the theological position from which I am making that judgement is itself good or bad?

Underlying all of this remains the question of how we are going to define 'good' and 'bad' at all. Is it simply a matter of preference? Or is there the possibility of something more, something that will actually give us tools to use in a world of violence, fear, beauty, and longing, where we want to be able to live authentically faithful lives, and to bless and serve our neighbours?

Now, it may be that the best we can do in our time and context is accept that there is no objective standard for good and bad, especially in theology, but only better or worse arguments within our communities of discourse; that a good theology is one that we are comfortable with, or one that emerges as a consensus among a community which we trust, or that enables such a community to function, while a bad theology is one that, for example, creates discord within such a community, or one that violates the basic assumptions of the community.

While there may be strengths in such a position, especially in a postmodern world, it does still leave open the question of how communities with differing theologies can converse in any way that is fruitful, and is not limited to slinging slogans at each other, or shunning each other as purveyors of bad theology.

Such shunning or avoidance may be our only option. But for the sake of this discussion, and in order to have a discussion at all, I am going to attempt to negotiate another path, and to suggest that there might be some trans-contextual criteria; that is, criteria that are more than simply within a community of discourse, that we can use to make tentative judgements on whether a theology is good or bad, or at the very least better or worse.

Two Ways a Theology Can Be Technically Bad

Having attempted to show why the question is not simple, I now want to identify two ways in which we can say, fairly quickly, that a theology is bad.

First, I suggest we can argue that a theology that does not abide by the rules of rational discourse and academic discussion is bad, which is to say ‘technically bad’. A theology that simply asserts ‘this is true because I believe it’, or ‘this is true because I read it in this text’, or that employs the method known as proof-texting (making an assertion and then quoting isolated biblical phrases or verses in support of it) is, at the very least in academic terms, a bad theology. It does not abide by the norms and conventions of theological discussion and debate. At this point, this is not to make any affirmation about whether such a theology is true or untrue; that is a further question. But it is bad theology in the sense that it cannot take its place in theological discussion: it cannot be argued with, tested, or developed. A theology that depends on unfounded assertion, on the distortion of texts, or that is in itself a refusal of discussion is ‘bad’ in the sense of being academically unacceptable.

The assertion that it should be possible to discuss theology using the techniques of rational discourse is itself, of course, a theological judgement. It is based on the theological conviction that our rationality enables us to think about the divine in ways that can be communicated, debated, and explored. Not all will agree with this, and there are theological traditions that reject the place of rationality. There are also serious theological objections to the limiting of theology to rational

discourse, and it is important to acknowledge these if rational discourse is to be pursued as one of the signs of a good theology. So, it is important that I make it clear that while I am valuing the capacity for rationality as one of the signs of a good theology, or rather, am suggesting that the rejection of rationality is one of the markers of a bad theology, this must be taken in concert with much else, and is not enough in and of itself. As I will say below, any attempt we make to speak of the divine is necessarily limited, and so rationality while a necessary condition, is not sufficient on its own.

Second, a theology, or, to be more precise, a Christian theology, that refuses to engage with the traditionally recognised sources can be judged bad, or faulty, because it is cut off from that which it is supposed to be exploring. Those sources, broadly speaking, are Scripture, the tradition of the church in its widest sense, the experience of Christian believers, and the human capacity to reason. Note that this definition of ‘bad’ is not based on using the sources in a way I personally agree with, or arriving at conclusions that match my own. Rather, such a theology is isolated from any consideration of those sources altogether. A theology not rooted in these sources, which is not the same as using them in ways I would endorse, or reaching my preferred conclusions, is, again, technically bad. It does not meet the criteria of ‘theology’ as generally understood in academic discourse, or indeed, and more importantly, in the life of the church.

Theology in the Life of the Church

Placing theology not only in academic discourse but also in the life of the church asks us more detailed questions about what makes a theology good or bad. Having outlined two ways in which we might consider a theology to be technically bad, particularly in an academic context, I now want to consider theology within the church context as well.

There is an important and fruitful academic discipline dedicated to exploring the works of great dramatists. The conversations around and exploration of the depths of Shakespeare’s texts, for instance, are important for understanding what he wrote, how he wrote it, the

connections with other writers, and the influence on those who followed. But if such discussions never engage with the actual production of the script on stage, by actors, in front of an audience, a vital dimension of the texts' meaning is lost.

This is a metaphor that cannot be pushed too far, but it does illuminate something important about theology. If theological discussion, even technically good discussion that is well constructed, rooted in the sources, and engaged with the continuing debates, is never, at some point and in some way, connected with the life of the Christian community in its variety, complexity, and intention to engage with the lives of actual people, then something vital is missing.

Thus, even before we ask what it means for theology to be connected to the life of the church or to individual believers, we have another criterion: a theology that is cut off not only from considering the experience of believers (as noted above) but from interacting with the lived experience of faith communities might also fairly be considered faulty. And lest this begins to sound like special pleading — as though theology can only be judged within a closed circle of academic and church discourse — I want to insist that theology is not simply an academic or ecclesiastical consideration.

There was a time, not so long ago, when it was confidently argued that religion would fade from public and private life, and therefore have no influence on society beyond the private interest of a few enthusiasts. It has become clear that this is not the case. The picture is uneven: while some regions display remarkable religious resurgence in public life, others — much of Western Europe, for instance — have continued to secularise, complicating the simple secularisation narrative.³ The impact of a particular form of Christian theology on the politics of the United States, the role and power of particular configurations of Islamic theology in several nations, and the rise of a blend of Hindu theology and nationalism in India, to name only the

³ The secularisation thesis is classically stated in Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday, 1967). Berger himself later substantially revised his position: see *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. by Peter Berger (Eerdmans, 1999).

most obvious, remind us that how people think and speak about the Transcendent matters not as some esoteric study, but in corridors of power and on streets and battlefields. Questions of good and bad theology matter not only in lecture rooms and pulpits, but as we seek to live together in a world facing a remarkable convergence of challenges. Good or bad theology has an impact on politics, economics, and matters of war and peace. I am writing this in a week when we have heard threats that ‘a great civilisation is going to be bombed out of existence’, and a so-called theological justification. There are theological justifications (to do with a particular understanding of the end of the world) being offered for this. Regardless of whether we judge this ‘good’ or ‘bad’, this is theology having an impact in the world. I suggest, therefore, that if theology is having life or death impacts, then it must be as good as we can make it.

This is, of course, nothing new, and I want to turn to a historical illustration of how such a judgement might be made, drawn from English history in the seventeenth century and, in a more accessible register, from a twentieth-century cartoon (Figure 1).

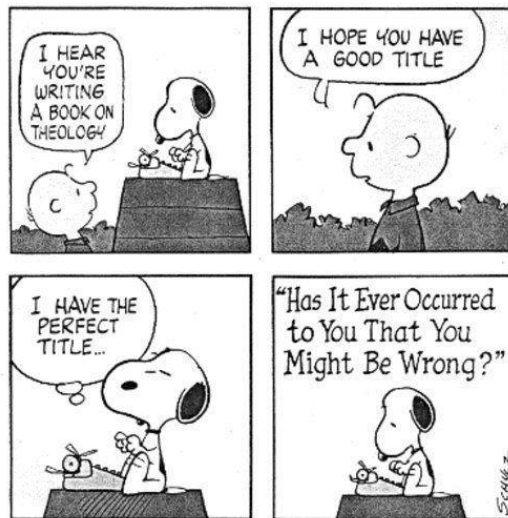


Figure 1. Peanuts cartoon strip by Charles Schulz. First published 9 August 1976.

Oliver Cromwell, writing to the church leaders of Scotland in 1650, said, 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.'⁴

James McClendon, as well as many others, begins a consideration of what it means to do theology with the importance of humility: the recognition that, as we attempt speech about God, we might be wrong in what we are affirming, or indeed in what we are denying. Cromwell, who it must be admitted was not himself well known for his humility, uses this phrase in an attempt to persuade the leaders of the Scottish Kirk that the position they have taken is wrong, is bad theology, and among the reasons he cites is the possibility that their position may cause others to stumble, and that it may exhibit what he calls 'carnal confidence upon misunderstood and misapplied precepts, which may be called spiritual drunkenness'. Their theology may, though Cromwell is careful to avoid saying it is what they intend, cause the downfall of some and an increase in their own pride. That is, the theology they are presenting has two flaws: it may harm others, and it is, Cromwell suggests, an expression of pride.⁵

Taking the latter point first: here is a criterion by which we may judge whether a theology is good or bad; can it be challenged? I have mentioned this briefly above, but I want to explore it more fully here, because it is less a flaw in the purely technical sense discussed earlier, and more a matter of attitude.

One influential model of scientific investigation, developed for example by Karl Popper, is the notion of hypothesis: an idea is explored by testing it, challenging it, asking questions of it, and allowing it to develop as new data, new possibilities, and new ways of looking emerge. This approach is humble, in that it does not begin from a conviction of

⁴ Cromwell to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 3 August 1650. Reprinted in, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, ed. by Thomas Carlyle, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1845), pp. 167–169.

⁵ James Wm. McClendon Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Abingdon Press, 1986; rev. edn 2002), esp. ch. 1.

being absolutely right. The researcher is led not by the hypothesis, but by what is being studied; before it, she or he stands in wonder and tentativeness.⁶

I suggest that if this is one way we investigate creation, it might offer a model for how we investigate the Transcendent. The recognition that we are smaller than that about which we are attempting to speak, that our ideas are precisely that, our ideas, and that our capacity to understand will always be exceeded by that which we seek to understand, must mean that any statement we make, any affirmation we dare, and any action we take on the basis of those affirmations must always remain open to question, correction, and development. From within a tradition that values ongoing inquiry, any theology that claims to be the last word, or that denies further contribution, is problematic — though it should be acknowledged that traditions with strong doctrines of revealed truth will frame this very differently, on theological rather than merely stubborn grounds. We could argue that it is bad because it makes that which theology attempts to explore too small.

This invitation to consider that we might be wrong in our theology is not simply a matter of academic disputation. It is not a way of saying ‘I disagree with you, please consider that you might be mistaken’, for that would be to fall into precisely the trap we are trying to describe. Rather, it is the recognition that all theology is too limited, too small, and too circumscribed to be complete, because that which we are attempting to speak of is, in its fullness, beyond us by very definition. There may be degrees of better and worse in what we do theologically, but this recognition involves accepting that no theology is complete and absolute.

We can say, therefore, that any theology which cannot be questioned, which cannot be developed, or which demands acceptance as total and final is a bad theology. This is not primarily a matter of

⁶ For the Popperian account see Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Hutchinson, 1959). See also the EBSCO website, ‘The Logic of Scientific Discovery’, ebsco, 2022 <<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/logic-scientific-discovery-karl-popper>> [accessed 23 May 2026].

content or method; it is a matter of the attitude with which we do theology, and the attitude to which it leads. Good theology is and must be rooted in humility, and will in some way lead to greater humility and openness, because it will always lead to a greater apprehension of the divine and a deeper concern to understand our relationship to God.

Theology That Harms

Cromwell's second concern deserves more extended consideration. He suggests that a theology rooted in pride and leading to further pride will cause the downfall of other believers. This is a serious charge, and one we need to consider carefully. We can find, all too easily, instances in which theology is used as a weapon and as a means of asserting control. But if we take the call to humility seriously, then a theology that is used to harm another, or that carries the potential to harm another, has drifted far from that starting point. For the possibility of harming somebody else, whether in their own search to speak of the divine, in their capacity to live well, or by creating a context in which another is put at risk by our theology, does not emerge from a stance of humility. It emerges from a stance of pride; from a way of seeing in which other people's wellbeing matters less than our convictions or assumptions. To regard our convictions or assumptions as more significant than a human being is a disordering of priorities, particularly for a Christian theologian working with concepts of creation as image-bearing, and with the place of incarnation in understanding the nature of God.

But I suggest we can take this further. Bad theology is not only that which actively harms another. We can also consider a theology to be bad if it proceeds from, or occupies, a position of unexamined power and does not question that position. Critical traditions — from Marxist ideology critique to feminist and postcolonial theory — have made the question 'Who is being served here?' central to intellectual inquiry, and postmodern thinking has helped bring this into theological discourse.⁷

⁷ See, for example, A. Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (Bloomsbury, 2011).

The interrogation of whose power is being protected, and who is being silenced, has become an important practice in exploring the world, and is one of the tools we might use to reflect on the difference between better and worse theologies.

Theology is the attempt to speak of God and will inevitably reflect an understanding of the relationship between the divine, especially in Christian theology a divine creator and redeemer, and the ordering of the world. The God of Christian theology is regularly spoken of as exercising power. This is also, however, the God whose story centres on a man executed by the powers-that-be for subversion. This, at the very least, problematises the place of power in theology, and the relationship between theology and the structures of power in the world.

It becomes important, therefore, to ask whose power is being served by this theology, and how? A theology that aligns with or serves the interests of those whose power is already secure is one about which we need to ask searching questions. Of course, the whole issue of power is contested, and we also need to ask questions about a theology that refuses to engage with power, or that declines to accept the responsibilities that come with access to it through position or history. But perhaps we can suggest, as a broadly humane approach and with the proviso that we might ourselves be wrong, that a theology which reinforces the power of the already powerful, especially those empowered through inherited position or historical advantage, needs to be examined carefully.

We are moving here from the question of what bad theology is towards the question of what makes a theology go bad, and I suggest one of the answers is an approach that affirms existing positional and inherited power rather than questioning it.

We might look for example at the theology that was used to justify apartheid in South Africa, or slavery during the eighteenth century. The relationship between theology and power has always been contested; we can see it already in the questions to Jesus about the payment of tax, and in Paul's discussions of the powers that be in Romans 13, and the ongoing debates about this.

Perhaps one of the gifts of our postmodern generation is the space to ask this new question: In what ways might theology help us problematise and question assumptions about power in ways that lead to greater freedom, wellbeing, and flourishing? To move in this direction is to begin to ask what makes a theology good, and I will pause that discussion here in order to continue it later, after further exploring the dangers that power poses to theology.

The primary danger, I suggest, is that theology can be used to confirm my own power and support my assumption of centrality; a direct challenge, again, to the posture of humility I have been advocating. But the danger extends further. The question of the relationship between believers and the powers of the state is deeply contested. There are theologies on all sides of the debate, and indeed the whole debate is itself conducted in theological terms. Since the debate continues without resolution, we might fairly say there is no easy answer — and possibly no single, permanent answer.

However, I do believe we can distinguish between better and worse theologies in this debate, and that doing so will help us further explore the relationship between theology and power. The question remains: Whose interests are being served? Living and working in a postmodern context requires us, at the very least, to reflect on the relationship between the theology we are considering and the power structures of our society, and of our churches in particular. If the theology is secondary to those power structures and if it cannot bring critical questions to bear upon them, then we might reasonably assume it is deeply entangled with them. This may or may not make it a bad theology, but it opens up a territory worth exploring before a final judgement is made. This is not a simple question to answer; who is being served by any theology. But it is an important one to keep asking as we explore or develop a theological position.

Reflexivity and the Question of Voice

Such questioning brings us to another area of consideration: reflexivity. It is a given of theology that we speak from where we stand. We do all

our thinking, reading, reflecting, and speaking in the context in which we are formed and in which we live. It is also clear that particularly in the modern Western academy since the Enlightenment, theology has been dominated by privileged, Western, educated, and male voices, and their power in defining the canon has been overwhelmingly influential. Of course, there have always been other voices, but they have struggled to be heard.

In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with such a voice. The problem arises when it is taken to be, or asserts itself as, the only voice. While it is a valid voice, it is one voice among many. When it becomes the voice that silences other voices, it is claiming too much for itself.

It is relatively easy for someone in my position, a woman doing theology, to recognise at least some of the context in which she does it, and to know that this context is not shared by all, precisely because I am not the historic norm. I know that in speaking of God, I am not speaking as a white educated Western male. I am, rather, a white educated Western female; a small difference, but a real one. I suspect it is harder for those whose own voice coincides with the dominant voice to recognise that their voice is also contextual, just as everyone else's is. But such reflexivity matters. A theology that does not reflect on its own positionality, and does not allow itself to be open to other voices, experiences, and contexts, risks becoming so partial as to be damaged, and possibly damaging.

Even more significantly, where a theology, of any context, uses its claim to absolute truth to silence or exclude other voices, we are in the realm of bad theology: a theology that justifies treating the voice of its announcer as superior to, or of more worth than, other voices. Certain strands of masculinist theology that silence women, or white supremacist theology that silences voices from other ethnicities, are examples of this.

A theology that recognises its own position, claims its validity as a perspective from which to do theology, and also makes room for other voices and contexts is, by contrast, a theology that offers genuine possibility and vitality of discourse.

Towards Good Theology: Flourishing and Productivity

Here we begin to move from asking what makes a theology bad to asking what might constitute a good theology. I have already outlined part of an answer: a theology rooted in an attitude of humility is a necessary starting point. And I have hinted at another criterion I believe to be important: the promotion of wellbeing and flourishing.

This is perhaps best understood as the positive counterpart to the danger I outlined above — the danger of theology that harms. To consider it is to begin thinking about the actual content of theology, rather than just its form or impact.

Theology as practised by Christians is attempting to speak of the God encountered in Scripture and revealed in Jesus, however that encounter and that revelation are understood; the working out of what they mean is precisely the task of theology, and I am therefore trying not to prejudge what conclusions might be reached. There is, I believe, substantial, though, of course, not universal, agreement within the broad ecumenical mainstream that the intention of God in Scripture is for the good of creation, and that the ministry of Christ is oriented towards human flourishing however that is defined. I suggest therefore that we can take this as an important element in any consideration of the divine. And if it is important in that consideration, we are justified in expecting it to be important in the outcomes of that consideration. A theology can be considered good, therefore, if it contributes to human welfare and flourishing, however defined, and bad if it does not.

This leaves open the question of what human welfare and flourishing concretely look like, though the analysis of power above may be one place to begin thinking this through. We could reasonably turn, for example, to Miroslav Volf to see what this might look like. His work *Exclusion and Embrace* takes questions of suffering, pain, anger, and forgiveness, and works with them not in order to produce a closed system with all the answers, but to consider and explore positions of violence, of peace, and of the nuances of living in a broken world. It is not a book that answers everything, but it is a book that opens up new questions that are of vital importance in learning to live well with

difference.⁸ Another example, particularly in the area of decolonisation and how that might shape how we live in a world scarred by that, is the work of Graham Adams, in particular his book *Holy Anarchy*, in which he asks questions about how the church can be disruptively renewing, and how that might change the faith. He does not present a definitive answer, but in asking the questions posed by approaching theology with the question, ‘What questions of our world does the Kingdom of God prompt us to ask?’⁹ he can then open up new possibilities in the affirmations we might make about the kingdom.

There are all sorts of ways into this discussion, and that is the point; a good theology is one that opens possibility, and possibility is not to be defined beforehand. And it gives us a starting point for asking what good theology looks like. Good theology is theology that helps people become what people are meant to be. The content of that answer will itself be determined theologically; but asking the question is an indispensable part of the theological task. Will the ways I am understanding God, speaking of the things of God, of faith, and of humanity, contribute to human wellbeing, or will they damage people? We saw above how Cromwell argued that bad theology would damage people, not least in their faith. By the same logic, good theology will enable people to grow in faith, in what it means to be human, and in human community.

Productive Theology: Creativity and the Image of God

This consideration of flourishing opens the door to asking whether a theology is productive, another criterion by which a theology might be judged good. A productive theology is one that moves us forward: in understanding, in faith, in service, and in the things we consider, theologically, to be good.

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996). Volf was the winner of the Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion, 2002 for this work.

⁹ Graham Adams, *Holy Anarchy: Dismantling Domination, Embodying Community, Loving Strangeness* (SCM Press, 2022).

For Christians, the God whom we worship, and therefore about whom we are attempting to speak, is God the Creator and Redeemer. A significant part of our account of this God is the claim that we are made in the image of God (*imago Dei*), and that salvation is, in part, the recovering of that image, and the recognition of it in each other. We can expect, therefore, that creativity is part of who and how we are, and this must shape any attempt we make to speak about God.

By this I do not mean that we simply ‘invent’ things to say about God and call it theology. We work with our foundational texts in Scripture, and with our tradition, as the community of faith has explored over centuries what can and cannot be said while remaining faithful to both Scripture and the wider church.

That said, and as already noted, a theology that closes in on itself and that leaves no room for exploration and that treats questions and wondering as threats, is a theology drifting into dangerous territory. This brings us back to the criterion of humility: if our theology is claiming that everything that can be said has already been said, we are not approaching God with openness or with readiness to discover more of the wonder and glory that God is.

But more than humility is at stake. The question is also whether our theology leads us somewhere, or simply leaves us where we already are, confirming our convictions, supporting our power structures, and hearing our own voice. What I am calling a productive theology is one that generates further questions and opens up new possibilities.

Productivity, in this sense, is not a claim about conclusions. It is not an argument for novelty, or for the restless replacement of one doctrinal position with another simply because it is new, or even because it feels more adequate to contemporary sensibilities. A theology can be innovative in its conclusions and entirely unproductive in its method; if it simply substitutes one closed system for another, it has not moved us forward in any meaningful sense. Conversely, a theology can work with deeply traditional material and still be productive if it brings that material into genuine engagement with questions it has not previously been

asked to address, and discovers in the process something it had not seen before.

The distinction, then, is primarily one of method and attitude. A productive theology is one that treats its sources — Scripture, tradition, reason, experience — not as a closed archive to be defended, but as a living body of wisdom to be inhabited and explored. To return to the theatrical metaphor briefly mentioned above, any production of a well-known and well-loved text has a choice; it can attempt to reproduce what has gone before without exploring new meanings or new resonances, or it can, without necessarily introducing gimmicks or materially altering the text, allow the text to speak differently, with new significance and new depth because of the context and the approach. Concretely, Shakespeare's play *Henry the Fifth* had one set of resonances and connections when seen by an original audience in 1599, when a previous play with a very different approach was well known, when there was trouble in Ireland, and when there were soldiers not being paid, and another set when filmed in 1944, when the country was unsure about whether it would survive the threat from the Nazis. The script is the same, but the exploration of that script and the presentation of it work differently. Similarly, we can treat our sources with appropriate care, not changing, discounting or distorting them, but, with humility and expectation, coming to them and discovering new things, and things that open up new understanding and new ways of acting. It would have been possible, and perhaps comforting and reassuring, in 1944 to present a form of *Henry the Fifth* in ways that were fixed and 'traditional', but by choosing a new approach, new ideas and new impetus to remain faithful was found.

This framing draws on what Hans-Georg Gadamer described as the fusion of horizons; the moment in interpretation when the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader genuinely meet, and something new is understood that neither could have reached alone. Theology, on this account, is not a process of extracting fixed meanings from fixed texts, but of allowing those texts to speak into new situations, and allowing those situations to ask new questions of the texts. The tradition

is not diminished by this process; it is, in fact, the only way in which a tradition remains genuinely alive rather than becoming a museum of itself.¹⁰

We could argue, for example, that the reformers in the sixteenth century took this approach. They challenged the way in which certain resources had been used, most notably that of tradition, but they also asked new questions of existing ideas and structures, and developed new approaches and opened new possibilities as a result. Zwingli's challenge to the received understanding of the relationship between the church and the civil community took a particular shape because he was living in what was a relatively new urban environment, where previous patterns of existence were changing, with the rise of the mercantile class, and the relative independence of the city states. Within that, the emergent Anabaptists took his new approach of reading Scripture using the new humanist tools, and themselves asked new questions about the nature of the church and of the relationship between believers. The productivity of these theologies is shown in the way new things emerged as a result, both in the ways in which people understood church and themselves as church, and in the ways in which the roots of what we now call freedom of conscience and pluralistic societies began to emerge.

The emergence of liberation theology in Latin America in the late twentieth century is another. What Gustavo Gutiérrez and those who followed him did was not simply to apply existing theology to a new context. They brought the experience of the poor as a place from which God can be seen and spoken of into engagement with the tradition, and in doing so they asked questions of that tradition which it had not previously been required to answer with any seriousness. The result was not a replacement theology, but a productive expansion of what theology could see and say. Questions about the preferential option for the poor, about the structural dimensions of sin, and about whose experience counts as theologically formative did not dissolve the

¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Mohr Siebeck, 1960); English translation: *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. edn (Continuum, 1989), esp. pp. 301–307 on the ‘fusion of horizons’ (Horizontverschmelzung).

tradition; they enriched and challenged it, and sent interpreters back to the sources with new eyes. They also offered new ways of conceiving of how society should function, and thus raised new possibilities of human well-being and flourishing.¹¹

Of course, we must note that, if handled carelessly, this approach becomes a self-serving one, validating whatever a theologian happens to find generative, interesting, or timely, and dismissing whatever feels settled or constraining as mere closure. This would be a serious misapplication. Productivity is not restlessness, and the generation of questions is not valuable in itself. The questions a productive theology generates must be genuine questions; ones that arise from honest engagement with the sources, with the community, and with the world rather than questions manufactured to justify a position already held.

The safeguard here is precisely the other criteria I have been exploring here. A productive theology is one that generates questions in humility, and always remains open to the possibility that the questions themselves may be wrongly posed. It generates questions in community, accountable to the wider body of the tradition and the church, rather than simply to the individual theologian's interests. And it generates questions oriented towards flourishing, that is questions that, in their very asking, serve the wellbeing of people rather than merely the advancement of an argument.

Held together, these criteria of technical rigour, rootedness in the sources, humility, accountability to the community of faith, a concern for flourishing and for the just distribution of theological voice, and this quality of productive openness begin to describe not a checklist, but an orientation. Good theology is less a set of correct conclusions than a way of standing before the mystery it is attempting to speak of: in honesty, in openness, in care for those whose lives its words will touch, and in the recognition that the God of whom it speaks is always, in the end, greater than anything it manages to say.

¹¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (SCM Press, 2005); Bonino Jose Miguez, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Fortress Press, 1976).