

THEMATIC QUESTION 1: How do the psychological sciences help Christians understand the antecedents, experiences, and consequences of human suffering?

The question of how Christians should respond to human suffering is as old as Christianity itself. Yet, the context in which we experience suffering, the meanings we attribute to suffering, and the various kinds of suffering we attend to is ever-changing. Within many modern Christian theologies, suffering is discussed alongside “theodicy,” or how to understand the reality of evil in the world. As some contemporary theologians suggest, however, a rush to theodicy, which attempts to explain evil, can silence the laments of the suffering. In other words, theoretical discussions of the presence of evil and suffering do little to relieve suffering. If contemporary Christians wish to respond well to the suffering of others, they need to appreciate not only various theologies of suffering, but the differing ways people experience suffering today. The psychological sciences can help Christian theologians discern, categorize, and potentially even respond to sufferings experienced by different people in different situations.

Theologians may be aided by the psychological sciences in understanding the experience of suffering in at least two broad areas: *suffering caused by structural injustice and suffering caused by life limiting illness.*

With the rise of contextual theologies (e.g., feminist, womanist, black, and disability theologies) has come a renewed attention on the ways particular communities and those non-normative bodies experience suffering. Structural realities, including systematic injustice, render some people more vulnerable to harm because of their race, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. Discussions of structural sin have been prevalent in contemporary theology, but their connection to forms of suffering is less often discussed and, therefore, many do not know how to respond to such suffering. Theologians may wish to consider how particular marginalized communities experience suffering, if that suffering is generalizable or particular, how such sufferings are related to a person’s beliefs or communal practices, and what relief of that suffering may entail. Extant psychological theory and research on the effects of stigma, prejudice, and social rejection is highly relevant to such questions, and additional data are needed to specify the ways spiritual and religious psychological constructs interplay with current theory.

For example, disability advocates have long argued that the suffering experienced by persons with disabilities is more often caused by the social environment (e.g., barriers to access, attitudes, stigma) than individual bodies or biology. Using the psychological sciences, disability theologians might learn to better describe how disabled people experience suffering alongside their spiritual and theological beliefs. This is especially imperative as many disability theologians contend that such suffering can originate from, or be exacerbated by, Christian practices and theologies. Furthermore, theologians who write about how the church can be more accommodating to people with disabilities may benefit from working with the psychological sciences to better understand what factors contribute to well-being for disabled persons.

Alternatively, theologians may wish to understand the suffering that emerges in the context of ageing, illness, and new technologies. Christians have long considered what it means to “die well,” but as our population ages and medical technologies advance, the question has taken on renewed resonance. Physician Lydia Dugdale (2020) argues modern medicine not only medicalizes death, but it also extends the suffering that many experience at the end of life and fails to appreciate important death rituals. Dugdale argues we must revive the medieval Christian *ars morendi* for our contemporary context. Theologians may wish to put Dugdale’s assertion to the test to ask: do particular rituals help ease suffering at the end of life? Is there anything

particularly healing about Christian death rituals? Alternatively, theologians may wonder why religiosity (particularly for Christians) is correlated with aggressive and often painful end of life care and a lack of advance care planning? What sorts of thought process or experiences lead Christians to request aggressive, sometimes futile end of life care? Furthermore, according to anecdotal evidence from theologians working in healthcare, Christians are more likely than other groups to make end of life medical decisions expecting God to perform a miracle. What are the psychological benefits or pitfalls of the belief in miracles at the end of life?

Theologians may also consider how to attend to the spiritual lives and suffering of people with life limiting illnesses. For example, John Swinton as written eloquently on the spiritual lives of people with dementia. Swinton attempts to redescribe dementia as a holy experience, rather than a condition worse than death, using individual counter-stories that challenge stereotypes about dementia. Engaging the psychological sciences, theologians could learn best practices for describing and analyzing the travails and joys of people living with dementia and other illnesses. The psychological sciences may help theologians capture more nuanced illness-experiences that can serve as a well for “deep insights into the nature and character of God and human beings” ([Swinton 2012, 24](#)).

THEMATIC QUESTION 2: How do the psychological sciences help Christians understand Christian virtues and the role of faith practices in developing these virtues?

Spiritual growth is fundamental to the Christian life—indeed Christian scripture suggests that, in a life of faith, our inner person is being “renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). Christian ethicists and pastors often write about becoming the new self in terms of developing virtues like charity, temperance, and justice. Virtues are dispositions of character that give rise to appropriate emotions, beliefs, and actions in accordance with right reason. Historically, many Christian theologians in the West embraced an ethics of virtue, familiar from Greco-Roman philosophy—an ethics according to which what matters most for human flourishing is being a certain kind of person, rather than following rules or discharging duties. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the list of virtues in Christian theology often bear striking similarity to their Greco-Roman antecedents with a few theological or infused virtues tacked on.

Some scholars, however, have raised pressing objections to traditional Greco-Roman lists of virtues because of their exclusivity. Some virtues on these lists, and their Christian counterparts, require power, status, or material conditions that would make them unattainable for people living under oppression. Christian theologians have argued that this is particularly problematic when proposed under the guise of Christian spiritual wisdom. It obscures Christ’s solidarity with the oppressed and so-called outsiders; it implies, pace Christ’s sermon on the mount, that happy are the rich and powerful. It is imperative for Christian theologians to disentangle claims about Christian virtues produced by privilege, eurocentrism, and white male supremacy from those that genuinely embody Christian teaching.

Leading Christian theologians have argued for an inversion of the list of Christian virtues. For example, Willie Jennings suggests that certain dispositions forwarded by white male self-sufficiency should be supplanted by genuine Christian virtues such as humility and dependence ([Jennings 2021](#)). Christian theologians can partner with psychologists to reimagine what character dispositions might contribute to human flourishing in social and economic contexts where virtues have been under-theorized in the tradition. Together with psychologists,

theologians may also develop skills to deepen their understanding of processes of Christian virtue formation and environmental factors that facilitate or hinder it. The psychological sciences may help Christians understand whether virtues are best cultivated in communities with certain features, as well as which virtues help individuals become good leaders.

Intersectional work with the psychological sciences might also shed light on areas where certain dispositions Christian theologians have claimed are virtues are actually maladaptive in certain contexts. For instance, if gratitude correlates highly with bad outcomes for people in oppressive relationships, might a form of righteous anger better contribute to living a flourishing Christian life for such people and thus deserve to count as a Christian virtue? Is gratitude to God for certain types of trauma an inhibitor or predictive of aspects of wellbeing or post-traumatic growth?

Further, Christian theologians can learn from psychologists how to evaluate systematically whether certain religious practices do in fact contribute to growth in Christian virtue. The psychological sciences can be of service for theologians to better understand what practices are effective at different life stages—for instance, whether fasting promotes virtue in adolescents less than in adults. The psychological exploration of moral emotions, emotional regulation, adolescent developmental processes, and healthy coping skills might deepen theologian's understanding of processes of Christian virtue formation. The psychological sciences may help Christians understand whether virtues are best cultivated in communities with certain features, through spiritual mentorship, or individually as well as which virtues help individuals become good leaders. Psychologists may also help Christians distinguish how they display virtues toward those who are like them as well as toward those who are different from themselves.

In short, together, psychologists and Christian theologians might challenge fruitfully preconceived notions of what “count” as virtues and generate new wisdom about what practices foster distinctively Christian virtues for various kinds of people in different kinds of communities.

THEMATIC QUESTION 3: How can the psychological sciences help Christians understand the role of art, artifacts, and aesthetics in understanding, imagining, and perceiving the divine?

Art and aesthetics are central to theological work, not only in the branches of theology with titles that advert to their importance in the name (e.g., theology and the arts and theological aesthetics) but also in less obvious places, like feminist theology, Black theology, liturgical theology, and Orthodox theology. In all these theological branches, the importance of art and aesthetics to understanding God is theologically elaborated, theoretically defended, or implicitly assumed, but it has not been established by data, nor is the precise nature of their importance known. Cross-training in the psychological sciences could help theologians interested in these fields make progress in several important conversations clustered around three central subthemes: *hegemony and the imagination, art and affect, and aesthetics and sacrality.*

First, theologians may ask how art might assist in breaking beyond hegemonic understandings of God to promote new imaginations of the divine. For example, many theologians point out that in Christianity, White supremacy has been bolstered and solidified by visual images of Christ and Mary as white. Theologians are beginning to ask, can sustained exposure to non-white images of religious figures shift how people perceive God, themselves, and individuals raced otherwise than themselves? Similarly, Marian piety has been linked to

lower status for women. There is even a word in it in Latin America: *Marianismo*. However, recent work has also emphasized the significance of the Virgin of Guadalupe image in particular as a politically potent symbol for Latinx and women ([Flores 2021](#), [Murphy 2019](#)). In churches and communities with strong Guadalupana cults, do congregants perceive women as more fit for leadership? Recognizing that battles for gender equality are fought and won in the symbolic imagination, many in feminist theology have taken up more creative forms of writing. Is theology that is aesthetically and affectively engaged more likely to shift how a reader perceives God or who someone perceives God to be than theology that is less aesthetically and affectively invested? These are the types of questions for which extant psychological theory and research in social cognition and evolutionary psychology as well as new empirical data would be illuminating.

Related to this subtheme of the hegemonic imagination, theologians may press an older question regarding church aesthetics and the poor. When Pope Francis ascended to the papacy, he adopted a simple style of dress meant to communicate solidarity with the poor, a clear departure from the ornate dress of his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI, who dressed to reflect and arouse desire for the glory of God. Whereas Pope Benedict's style represents the commitments of the New Evangelization—a movement that sees beautiful aesthetics as a means of witnessing to God—Pope Francis's style is continuous with the tradition of the Pact of the Catacombs, bishops and priests gathered to pledge forms of church ornament and dress that worked against social hierarchies rather than solidifying them. The divergent styles reflect an age-old tension in the church, traceable to the divergent medieval positions of Bernard of Clairvaux and Abbot Suger: does luxurious ornamentation detract from giving to the poor? Or might it facilitate such giving? When the faithful gather to worship in churches with luxurious ornamentation, or when pilgrims visit such churches, what occupies their mental states and what attitudes do they have toward those who live in poverty? Again, research from the psychological sciences on embodied cognition alongside understanding of debates in emotion and cognition theory would be especially useful for theologians addressing such questions.

Second, theologians may wish to explore the relations between art and affect. They might, for example, investigate the affective power of liturgies, spaces, objects, and words. Affect theory has recently entered Christian theological discourse as a way of extending and nuancing older conversations in the field about embodiment and emotion ([Zahl 2020](#)). In so doing, it has renewed theological attention to the forms of knowing elicited by our material being in the world and suggested the possibility that words may also operate at non-rational as well as rational levels. What affects, emotions, and thoughts do particular liturgies and worship spaces elicit? Do those affective responses linger in the imaginary beyond the immediate experience? For example, does the art of a community give rise to different experiences of the divine? Alternatively, theologians are also beginning to ask if a focus on words can create affective experiences. Whereas Catholic worship has traditionally demanded bodily involvement (genuflecting, bowing, kneeling, standing) and material objects (relics, statuary, icons), Protestant worship has centered more on the word. Is the word just as affectively laden as material encounters? What kind of affective response can researchers track in response to particular prayers, Scriptures, homilies, and doctrines that are deemed particularly affectively laden? Does that affective response leave any medium or long-term residue?

Third, theologians might consider questions relating to aesthetics and sacrality by inquiring into the ways people experience the sacred through their senses. Within the Christian tradition, the sacred has often been treated as a matter of ineffability and as intimate with

aesthetics. While most theologians do not want to reduce the sacred to aesthetics, the sacred does seem to show up as intimate with aesthetics in various ways. For example, icons are understood by many Eastern Orthodox theologians as doorways to the divine ([Oupensky 1978](#)). Traditional religious reflection of the icon has emphasized the icon's content and the theology of the icon as what is significant about the icon's role in prayer and contemplation. But more recent work has insisted on the aesthetics of the icon as what is significant ([Tsakiridou 2013](#)). Not all icons are equally aesthetically compelling; does that matter for how they conduce to a state of contemplation? Alternatively, can exposure to art that itself expresses this sacramental way of seeing the world help a person begin to see the world differently, or to perceive God's presence as nearer? Or does art itself cultivate a symbolic imagination akin to a sacramental imagination?