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# *A Cry for Wisdom*
## *Theology for the Twenty-first Century*

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Christian theology is thinking about questions raised by and about Christian faith and practice. That thinking is almost unavoidable in some form by anyone who tries to live a Christian life or who for some other reason is interested in Christianity. Theology by this broad definition is open to all and is part of ordinary life whenever any of a vast range of questions is raised. It is also many other things, but this manifesto is mainly concerned with the quality of theologies that, directly or indirectly, feed the minds and hearts of millions of people and are of interest to many more. That is why its key word for the goal of theology is wisdom, which unites understanding with practice and is concerned to engage with the whole of life.

The search for wisdom is the passion of this manifesto. It leads through the Bible and Christian history; into the depths, heights, and varieties of human life – past, present, and future; into engagement with communities, cultures, academic disciplines, public life, and other faiths besides Christianity; and into the ways a Christian theologian might be formed today. It is driven by questioning and drawn by the desire for God and God's wisdom.

At its core, theological wisdom is about the discernment of cries. In Proverbs, personified wisdom herself cries out:

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> Wisdom cries out in the street;
> in the squares she raises her voice.
> At the busiest corner she cries out;
> at the entrance of the city gates she speaks …
> Does not wisdom call,
> and does not understanding raise her voice?
> On the heights, beside the way,
> at the crossroads she takes her stand;
> Beside the gates, in front of the town,
> at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
> "To you, O people, I call,
> and my cry is to all that live …
> Take my instruction instead of silver,
> and knowledge rather than choice gold;
> For wisdom is better than jewels,
> and all that you may desire
> cannot compare with her."
> (Proverbs 1:20–21, 8:1–4, 10–11)

That is a manifesto. Wisdom is often thought of as a rather "cool" concept, associated with slow deliberation and reflective distance. But the poetry of Proverbs shows wisdom's passionate intensity and urgency, represented by a mature, attractive woman. She does not by any means do away with patience, reflection, and deliberation, but opens up the heart of wisdom as a hot, energetic passion for clear discernment, accurate knowledge, good judgment, right living, and far-sighted decision-making. She is also passionately against fools and foolishness. She is wholeheartedly committed to the public realm and the shaping of families, friendships, neighborhoods, and societies, as well as individuals. She wants to attract as many as possible to devote themselves to her:

> "Come, eat of my bread
> and drink of the wine I have mixed.
> Lay aside immaturity, and live,
> and walk in the way of insight."
> (Proverbs 9:5–6)

The cries of wisdom are meant to stimulate us to cry out for her too. If nothing else we desire can compare with her, then we need to relate our desire for wisdom to our other desires. In the midst of all the cries – longings, appeals, and demands that come from within us and from all around us – how are we to shape a wise life? Desiring wisdom means seeking to test and discern the cries, learning how to respond to them. The Bible and life are full of cries: of suffering, joy, wonder, thanks, praise, victory, defeat, fear, faith, despair, hope, remorse, petition, and much else. These are the intensities and urgencies that can call forth a "hot" wisdom. Theology seeks wisdom through this engagement, relating to all that we cry out for – love, food, peace, security, freedom, health, hope, truth, joy, and God.[1]

A classic description of wisdom-seeking in the midst of intense pressure and suffering is the book of Job.[2] It is one of the most perceptive and devastating interrogations of God and of human existence ever. In the first chapter comes the fundamental question of the book: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). "Fearing God" is basic to wisdom in the Bible. It is a "right fear," the sort appropriate to a relationship of love and trust, where the main thing to be feared is the damage or loss of the relationship through unwise behavior. But this fear has the further, awesome, dimension of the involvement of God who creates and judges. The quality of Job's fear in relationship to God is tested drastically through the events of the book. Is he in this relationship for the sake of wealth, health, family, reputation, or religious satisfaction? All those are taken from him and he is traumatized. He despairingly faces the evaporation of the meaning of his life, and cries out in anguish again and again. His friends offer traditional, "packaged" theological interpretations, such as that he is somehow to blame for his own situation, or that God runs the world according to a simple rule of repaying good for good, evil for evil. But their wisdom does not discern the key issue in Job's cries: that Job is being tested and searched, and in response he is rightly questioning and searching. The urgency and radicality of his searching is a model for all theology. New, overwhelming challenges require fresh wrestling with God and reality together.

What is at stake is whether Job is relating to God for what he gets out of it or "for nothing,' for the sake of who God is, for God's sake – a typical biblical idiom is "for his name's sake," echoed in the first, embracing petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Hallowed be your name." The Greek translation of "for nothing" is *dorean*, "as a gift." The wisdom Job learnt in the time of his virtuous prosperity was not enough, but he also finds that the most terrible affliction does not have the last word: God does. His eyes are eventually opened to this: "Now my eye sees you!" (Job 42:5). He is proved right over against his friends because he persisted in crying out to God and for God, even when there seemed no point in doing so. He is shown as wanting above all to have God for God's sake.

Who is God? This God is one who lets his name be at stake in the risky openness of life. Why? The most adequate answer for the book of Job, worked out through taking the rest of the Bible into account, seems to be: because of the preciousness to God of the relationship with Job. God does this for the sake of a "for its own sake" relationship. It is beyond manipulation, coercion, self-interest, threat, or retribution, pointing to the deepest wisdom of a relationship of passionate love. And part of this love is a passion for searching out understanding, for questioning beyond the limits of what has been thought so far, for relating all reality to God and God's purposes – that is, a passion for *theological wisdom*. The scope of Job's searching is unlimited: personal and social life; the whole creation; and God.

In the New Testament, perhaps the most influential short passage in the history of Christian theology is the Prologue of the Gospel of John,[3] which has a similar scope to the book of Job. It is daringly innovative in its interpretation of scripture (for John, that meant the Hebrew scriptures or the Greek translation of them, the Septuagint, later called by Christians the Old Testament); in its reconception of creation and of God in relation to Jesus Christ as the Word; in its concern for "all things" and "all people"; in its picture of loving intimacy in God (v.18); and in its weaving together of these themes around the pivotal statement:

> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

John set a standard for later theology in terms of interpretation of scripture, the whole of creation as horizon, utter involvement in history and the contemporary world, and the centrality of God.

John also sowed the seeds of continual theological creativity through his Gospel's teaching of Jesus about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is probably the most exciting, disturbing, and uncertain topic in Christian theology. The New Testament announcement that, since Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, God's own Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, has been poured out "upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28–9) is stupendous – and it may be early days yet for adequate realization of its implications. Throughout Christian history, the Holy Spirit (and such closely related topics as holiness, grace, gifts, freedom, power, authority, inspiration, blessing, and all sorts of innovations) has time and again been an occasion for movements that have expanded and renewed Christian communities, often impelling them into internal and external conflict or confrontation. It is as if all efforts to domesticate the Spirit fail, and the wild imagery of fire and wind is actualized in events. It happened in Paul's churches in the first century CE, in the Montanist movement, in Augustine's controversies over grace, in the great schism between the Eastern and Western Christian churches at the end of the first millennium, in many medieval movements, in the Reformation and its radical offshoots, in Quakerism, Methodism, and popular "awakenings" and "revivals." But the twentieth century saw the most amazing development of all. In 1906, in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, the worldwide Pentecostal and Charismatic movement began. This became probably the fastest-growing religious movement in world history, with perhaps as many as 300 hundred million people involved within a century. Its main appeal was to signs of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. It now has numerous educational institutions, scholars, and thinkers, and one of the most important things to look for in the present century is how they

work out their theological wisdom. It is vital to recognize how deeply the Spirit is related to the seeking of theological wisdom. The cry, "Come, Holy Spirit!" is a daily precondition for thinking theologically. But the Spirit also needs to be thought about and appreciated more fully if theology is to be lively and true. John draws together and interprets much in the other Gospels and the early Church. It is one of the first theological syntheses. Here the Spirit is given not in wind and fire but quietly, through the risen Jesus communicating it to his disciples face to face, by breathing on them (John 20:22).

Earlier in the Gospel he had already interpreted what this meant, the most important statement for future theology being: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). That is a promise that John himself sought to enter into in his innovative Prologue and throughout his Gospel. It is the core challenge to Christian theology down the centuries: can theologians be guided with others into "all the truth," both the wisdom that has already been learned by others and the fresh wisdom needed to discern the distinctive cries of the present time? Job's friends could only offer the wisdom of the past, but failed to discern the meaning of the cries they were hearing. Job too knew and practiced the wisdom of his tradition: "There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 1:8). But he was also willing to search for fresh wisdom, inseparable from wrestling with God in a new situation.

The new situation John found himself in was that of trying to make sense of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In order to do so, he practiced what might be called "wise and creative theology," as in his Prologue – trying to do justice to scripture and tradition while also exploring new ways of conceiving the truth. In every generation and situation since then theology has had to come to terms with its past in fresh situations, trying to discern how best to be faithful, loving, and hopeful, and praying for the Holy Spirit as it does so. To cry out for the Spirit is to seek

wisdom for God's sake and to be open to following both trodden and untrodden ways.

So twenty-first century Christian theology inherits vast riches from the past but can never simply repeat them. What, then, are the key elements in wise and creative theology? I will try to answer that question by reflections that draw heavily on the experience of editing a textbook on twentieth-century Christian theology, *The Modern Theologians*,[4] now in its third edition.

## From the Twentieth to the Twenty-first Century: Theological Abundance and Variety

Was the twentieth century the most theologically productive and creative in Christian history? There is a strong case to be made for this.

It was certainly productive, in two main ways: there was the sheer abundance of it; and there was the generation of new varieties. Each of these has important consequences for the twenty-first century. There are two main reasons for the amount of theology produced in the twentieth century.

The first was the global spread of Christianity. This had accelerated during the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century was massively boosted by Pentecostalism and various forms of Evangelicalism, while Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Anglican and Protestant churches also grew.[5] This increased demand for what one might call ordinary, basic theology. In general, this meant two things: education for the teachers, preachers, pastors, priests, catechists, writers, broadcasters, and other communicators; and, largely through them, more widespread popular Christian teaching.

The second factor was the spread of education at all levels. There was an explosion of primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions all over the world, and a vast expansion of publishing and other communications media. By the end of the century it was normal to talk of the "information age," "knowledge economy," and "learning societies." The synergies of all this with the global spread of Christianity helped to generate large quantities of theology.

Twentieth-century theology was unprecedented not only in quantity, but also in variety. German-language theology, both Protestant and Catholic, was for much of the century the leading academic tradition, and five of the six individuals[6] who might, from the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, be seen as "classics," were formed within that. It is a tradition shaped through commitments both to a range of academic disciplines and to church life (often in some tension with each other), and tested through the century's political and other traumas. Above all, it faced the challenges of Western modernity, producing a range of Christian responses to it. The thoroughness with which these were grounded,[7] thought through, and debated means that classics from this tradition must be on the curriculum of any theologian who does not wish to reinvent the wheel. It is not clear yet what promise this tradition holds for fresh twenty-first century theology – it may be that its most creative successors will not be in its homelands of Germany and Switzerland.

In the rest of Europe and America, most leading theologians and movements were in continuity or continuous dialogue with German theology, but there were also other strands not so indebted to that – Anglican, Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, revisionist, and liberal theologies, and a range of philosophical theologies and philosophies of religion more influenced by Anglo-American or French philosophers than by Germans. There was also a blossoming of other types: postmodern theologies; an array of "theology and …" (race and ethnicity; the physical, biological, and social sciences; literature; the visual arts; music; film; spirituality; etc.); and, above all, feminist, womanist, and other gender-related theologies. Of these, the one that most profoundly affected theological consciousness was feminism. In retrospect, this is likely to be seen as a fundamental shift in the twentieth century, as the theological voices of half the world's Christians began to be heard in new ways. In historical perspective, we are also probably still in the early days of theological thinking on gender, and the same goes for the other types mentioned, especially the "theology and …" list. The implication for twenty-first century theology is clear: this work must be taken much further.

The presence of women's voices in theology is, like many of the new twentieth-century developments, a global matter. The same is true of the theologies of the global churches and communions (Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed), and of movements such as Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. All of these have been increasingly shaped by theological thinking from beyond Europe and North America. The grip of certain sorts of American theology on Evangelicals and Pentecostals elsewhere in the world (partly enabled by the Americans' capacity to fund those they agree with) now seems to be loosening due to a double pressure. On the one hand, within America there is a blossoming of new theologies within these churches; on the other hand, there is a new theological confidence elsewhere, especially in Asia, Africa, and South America.

Some of the other churches have also been trying to think together in new ways. The Christian ecumenical movement is unique in world history in having led many religious bodies from situations of confrontation and even conflict to conversation and collaboration with each other. It is mostly a twentieth-century phenomenon. Explicitly ecumenical theology, and the agreed documents emerging from ecumenical dialogues, are only the tip of the iceberg of its influence on theology. As with feminism, there has been a profound shift in consciousness in many churches, opening them to fellow-Christians in ways unimaginable in 1900. Yet, unlike gender-related theologies, ecumenism and its associated theology have not flourished in the years surrounding the turn of the second millennium. One hopeful sign is the birth of "receptive ecumenism," a theological program determined to make the most of ecumenical progress so far and to deepen and enrich the churches through learning from each other in many spheres.[8] This is a minimal requirement for Christian churches this century if they are not to lose the momentum of what has been one of the most healing and transformative movements in Christian history.

The global character of twentieth-century theology lay not just in types that had a global reach and participation, but also in the range of theologies that were often highly specific in their

orientation or local in context. In the third edition of *The Modern Theologians* some of these are labeled "Particularizing Theologies," including black theology of liberation; Latin American liberation theology; African, South Asian, and East Asian theologies; and postcolonial biblical interpretation. The list could have gone on almost indefinitely, and new types are constantly arising. Indeed, one safe prediction for the coming century is that such particularizing theologies will multiply as more and more "niches" in the complex religious, cultural, and environmental ecosystem of our world discover the desirability of theological wisdom. There is also a feedback effect on other theologies that might not have seen themselves as "particularist." Just as feminist critiques made us aware how masculine much theology is, so classic German and other European and American theologians now seem far more a part of their own time, place, and tradition.

In a sense, we are all particularist now, encouraged to be more aware of what has shaped us, such as origins, contexts, interests, perspectives, and limitations. This is a common postmodern or late modern emphasis, whose danger is fragmentation, as particulars disconnected from each other develop their identities and put their cases. A tempting response is to attempt a new "modern" integration or overview, or to absolutize a particular identity. In our century at present religion is the favorite candidate for this, but one can see others – Americans and Chinese, for example, who are tempted by global hegemony, complexly combining elements of ideology (religious and secular), politics, economics, and civilization. This manifesto takes particulars with radical seriousness, as seen especially in the retrieval of religious traditions without syncretism or denial of their universal claims. Its response to the terrible dangers is not a new totality, integration, or hegemony, but a diverse ecology of wisdom-seeking, in which the connections are not maintained by conformity within one overview but by partnerships of difference.[9]

Within theology, this is found in the best practices of ecumenical theology – the "receptive ecumenism" just mentioned is a form of hospitable wisdom-seeking in engagement with other churches

than one's own. It is also well exemplified in many varieties of "theology and . . .' These often draw together people with diverse theological convictions into conversation around a common concern. As suggested above, many of the growing points of Christian theology this century come under this broad heading. I would especially highlight four.

First, "theology and poetry" is a matter of deep concern to theology as it tries to shape its language more richly, imaginatively, and effectively. Poetry is "maximal speech," the most condensed and intense use of language in premodernity, modernity, and today. It not only draws listeners and readers into the depths of the Bible and of Christian liturgy, poetry, hymns, and culture; it also gives access to analogous depths in other faiths, civilizations, and cultures, including secular ones. Second, "theology and the sciences," both human and natural, offers a critical set of test cases for the engagement of theology with modernity (whether early, middle, or late), as well as understandings vital for discerning how to shape twenty-first century education and living. Third, "theology and public life" has become of increasing importance in dealing with the fresh prominence of religions in the public sphere, both internationally and in many particular zones of conflict. Fourth, "theology and the religions" is perhaps the most comprehensive challenge of our century. It will be the subject of a case study in chapter 8 of this volume, but some remarks now are relevant.

The reason why other religions are such a comprehensive challenge is that they are analogous to Christianity in their particularity and universality. They are irrevocably particular in that they shape a whole way of life and thought, and one cannot simultaneously participate fully in more than one. They are universal in the scope of their horizons, affirmations, and questions.

Christian thinking about other religious traditions goes back to its origins, but the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have given it a new impetus. As the great secular ideologies of the past century either faded as credible contenders for hegemony (fascism, communism), or lost much of their attractiveness in the face of failures, inadequacies, and crises (socialism, capitalism), religions

re-emerged in the public sphere. This has been highly ambivalent, accompanied by much violence and other bad news. It has also been a realization of something that in the secular twentieth century had been a largely unrecognized fact (especially among Western media and educated people): that perhaps four to five billion of the world's population are directly involved with one or other of the major religions.

The religions' new prominence has not only highlighted their problems and pathologies, but has also stimulated them to engage afresh with each other. Can they be partners in difference? Do they have the resources to serve the common good together? What about all the conflicts, bad histories, missionary aggression, passionate rejections, contradictory convictions, and other incompatibilities? The present century not only unavoidably presents those sharp questions to the religions; it is also already testing the resources and qualities of each faith as the questions are ignored, rejected, or tackled. Inter-faith theology is perhaps the analogy to feminism and ecumenism in the twentieth century, inviting Christians into a change of consciousness regarding many millions of their fellow human beings.

So Christian theology of the past century has been both abundant and diverse, and some of its varieties are likely to be of special significance for the coming century. But what about theological quality?

## Four Elements of Wise Creativity

The case for the unprecedented creativity of twentieth-century theology is more speculative than for its quantity and variety. It is difficult to compare instances of creativity (however defined) in general terms. As Patrick Kavanagh said about recognizing good poetry, "... but I know the beast when I see it." I will use four categories to consider the matter, while acknowledging that judgments of quality within each of them are highly contestable. For brevity's sake, my examples will mostly be from six "classic" twentieth-century

theologians in the continental European tradition: Barth, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, de Lubac, Rahner, and von Balthasar.[10] The main aim of the exercise is not just to help in identifying wisdom and creativity, but also to offer an exemplary pattern to those inspired to attempt it.

### *1. Wise and creative retrieval*

Christian theology must deal with the past, discerning how best to relate to it so as to resource the present and future. It is what French Roman Catholic theology of the early twentieth century called *ressourcement*, a return to sources that can nourish theology and life now, and the term became a watchword of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) in its renewal of Catholicism.

Some of its leading exponents were French, such as Henri de Lubac. The variety and historical breadth and depth of his retrievals were remarkable. He was especially perceptive in showing how vital earlier meanings can be lost, impoverished, or distorted with serious consequences, and how their recovery can involve radical change in the present. He did this not only with key figures in the tradition, such as Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa, and with core practices such as Eucharistic worship, the exercise of authority in the church, and patristic and medieval exegesis of scripture; he also discerned Archimedean points of leverage in the tradition centered on fundamental terms and concepts, including "the supernatural," "nature and grace," "the vision of God," "the body of Christ," and "the senses of scripture." His retrievals (for which he endured a good deal of official opposition) contributed substantially to the transformation of Roman Catholic sensibility that made the Second Vatican Council possible and influenced its deliberations and documents.

What is the secret of such creative retrieval? There is no formula for genius, and the only adequate way to appreciate it is to follow carefully how he actually does it. But his mixture of ingredients is instructive. There is intensive attention to texts as well as to contexts and historical events, amounting to an ability to inhabit the past in a scholarly yet imaginative way. There is the discernment of

pivotal moments, especially of loss or change of meaning. There is also a comparable effort to discern what is most significant in the present – de Lubac wrote on evolution and other scientific topics, on atheistic humanism, on art and literature, and on Buddhism. He is fully involved with the past for the sake of the present and future, with the result that the Christian tradition becomes habitable in a fresh, relevant, and challenging way. In theological terms it might be described as an achievement of prophetic wisdom.

Yet this very prophetic dimension also runs great risks. De Lubac can be accused of distorting the past in order to make his case, and of reading present concerns into earlier periods. Any creative retrieval will open up such debates. For a theology that wants to be genuinely connected with the past it is not an option to avoid the problems that de Lubac faced: the challenge is, if possible, to do better.

A generation after de Lubac's death, his own work too requires the labor of retrieval and renewed reception. One of those who interpreted him in his lifetime was another classic thinker, Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose own efforts of retrieval are on an even larger scale than de Lubac's, and include far more on the direct interpretation of scripture – the task that might be seen as the core of all Christian retrieval. Von Balthasar learnt much from his older Protestant contemporary, Karl Barth, whose major work, the six million-word *Church Dogmatics*,[11] is pervaded with excursuses on one after another past thinker, topic, or debate. The Bible is his prime focus, as it is that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in contrast with the concerns of Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich, who in very different ways concentrate more on past theological and philosophical ideas. So the modes of retrieval practiced by such thinkers vary, and are one of the principal indicators of their theological interests, passions, and strategies.

Looking at others, alongside continental European theologians, it is also clear how formative have been discernments about where the focus on retrieval should be. These have ranged through colonial history and missions; the pervasiveness of patriarchal structures and practices; specific denominational, regional, racial, or

ethnic histories; or some formative period (the favorites being New Testament, early church, Middle Ages, Reformation, and the nineteenth century). Such judgments on the significance and relevance of the past will continue to be essential to substantial theological wisdom and creativity.

### *2. Wise and creative engagement with God, church, and world*

Alongside *ressourcement*, the other main watchword of the Second Vatican Council was *aggiornamento* – "bringing up to date." It nicely expresses the most essential accompaniment of retrieval: engagement with the present. The double immersion in past and present for the sake of the future is a mark of wise and creative theologians.

The first, incomparable, present engagement is with God. This pervades all other engagements but is above all "for God's sake" – the great commandment is to love God with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). Our six classic theologians all sought to follow that, practicing prayer and worship in diverse ways. The Catholics were Jesuits (De Lubac, Rahner, Von Balthasar for a while before founding a lay institute), the Protestants were Reformed (Barth) and Lutheran (Bonhoeffer, Tillich). Each in his own way offers a theocentric theology that attempts to engage with God and with everything else in relation to God.

Each was also deeply involved with both the church and the world. De Lubac not only wrote on contemporary science and other topics of current interest but was wounded in the First World War, was active in resistance to French Nazi sympathizers in church and state during the Second World War, and for long periods was the subject of controversy in the Catholic Church. Rahner's and von Balthasar's involvements were mostly intellectual, cultural, and ecclesial. Barth was a far more public prophetic figure both in the church and in politics, championing workers' rights, denouncing European domestication and compromising of Christianity, insistently opposing the Nazis, and challenging the American public theologian Reinhold Niebuhr over his support of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West. Tillich

had to leave Nazi Germany where he had been very active politically; in America he taught in a leading seminary, and eventually appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine as one of the most influential public intellectuals in the United States.

Bonhoeffer is a prime example of engaged theology. His retrievals ranged widely, the main concentration being on the Bible, the early church, the Reformation, and modernity, and the many volumes of his collected works[12] show the depth and range of his theological writings. But throughout his adult life till his execution by the Nazis in 1945 at the age of thirty-nine he was passionately engaged in many spheres of life. As an academic in the University of Berlin he rallied anti-Nazi students and taught confirmation classes in working-class Berlin, while also being active in the international ecumenical movement. With Hitler in power, he helped to found the Confessing Church in opposition to the German Christians who supported the Nazis, and then headed their seminary until the Gestapo shut it down. When he was writing his *Ethics*[13] he took part in a network of resistance that eventually made a failed attempt on Hitler's life. The *Letters and Papers from Prison*[14] that he wrote after his arrest became a theological classic, and display an intense concern simultaneously for Christian faith and secular reality. In the decades after his death Bonhoeffer was to be an inspiration for theology marked by political resistance, especially in West and East Germany, other Eastern European Communist countries, and South Africa.

That theme which preoccupied Bonhoeffer during his months in prison, is another way of describing a most significant engagement of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian theology that continues into the present century: facing the challenges posed by the broad array of developments in all spheres of life that might be summed up as "modernity." In the present century the agenda is changing, so much so that some describe our situation as postmodern. This term is acceptable as long as its emphasis on the discontinuities is accompanied by the recognition of so many continuities that it is also justifiable to call our period "late modern." There is considerable wisdom to be gained from retrieving and developing twentieth-century theological engagements with modernity. This

manifesto places alongside those the huge importance for our century of theological engagements with other religions. What are the forms of Christian theology that can respond wisely and creatively to both the secular and religious realities of our world, while being true to the depths of Christian faith? That is perhaps the most important question for a contemporary theology.

### *3. Wise and creative thinking*

Thinking goes on in all four aspects of theological wisdom-seeking and creativity. Some of it is what might be termed basic intellectual good practice: asking appropriate questions, thinking logically, using experience and evidence appropriately, ordering arguments clearly, seeking and testing insights, recognizing the variety of ways in which different discourses can be developed, and acknowledging who are the models of good practice to whom appeal can be made. In relation to each of those practices there are debates and conflicting positions, and these lead into large questions of ontology (dealing with the basic character of reality), epistemology (questions to do with knowing that reality), aesthetics (on perception and beauty), and ethics (dealing with appropriate decision-making and right action).

Later chapters will discuss the role of philosophy (which is the discipline where such issues are most fully studied) in theology, concluding that the main aim should be to be sure-footed: it is wise for theologians to have their minds trained in such practices and to be aware of the issues that need to be faced in them, but they do not necessarily need to be able to contribute to technical philosophical discussions of them. Our six classic twentieth-century theologians are highly diverse in their relations to philosophy. Barth was well educated in it but deeply suspicious of its tendencies to dictate inappropriately to theology – above all, by offering a framework of understanding within which God's existence or character could be known. Bonhoeffer was sympathetic to Barth but much more fully immersed in dialogue with philosophy and sociology, and his *Act and Being* is a *tour de force* of thinking through basic

concepts in thorough engagement with both philosophy and theology. Tillich and Rahner are perhaps the most technically philosophical throughout their work, while von Balthasar attempts a massive synthesis of logic, ontology, epistemology, and aesthetics.

What of their creativity? This might be seen as what is sometimes named "abduction."[15] It is the imaginative and inventive side of reasoning that conceives new possibilities. Coleridge connects this with people being led to God by God (abduction comes from the Latin: *ab* – by; and *ductus/ducta* – led). We are being attracted to God, "drawn toward the true center,"[16] through particularity (Jesus Christ) and its relating universally (Holy Spirit).[17] Christian theology can be led into the truth (John 16:13), which means stretching the mind and imagination – and often the will too, since some truth is only known through action, above all through loving. It is as theologians open themselves to the attraction of theological truth, in thought that is inseparable from prayer, that their creativity is given.

This can take many forms. In Barth, one thinks of his deep dissatisfaction with classic Christian teaching that God predestines some to salvation and many to damnation. His proposal does not give up God's power, freedom, and foreknowledge in choosing (election), and it also affirms the reality of rejection by God. But he identifies Jesus Christ as the one (and the only one of whom we actually know) who is both rejected and elected. In his crucifixion he is rejected on behalf of all; in his resurrection, his election on behalf of all is shown.[18] In von Balthasar there is an original exploration of the same dilemma by thinking through the meaning of Holy Saturday, the day (between Good Friday and Easter Sunday) when Jesus Christ was dead.[19]

It is not surprising that some of the most creative theological thought is about how human and divine freedom and action might be related to each other. De Lubac wrestled with this through interpreting a range of thinkers on nature and grace, culminating in his conception of the vision of God. Tillich and Rahner drew on different conceptualities to arrive at what Tillich called "theonomy,"[20] and Rahner called the direct, not inverse, ratio of human to divine

freedom – in other words, there is no competition between them, but human freedom flourishes and increases the more it is involved with the God who created it.[21] Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics* attempts to resolve this issue, which had been less satisfactorily dealt with in his previous works, by transposing it into temporal terms with his concept of the penultimate and ultimate. The penultimate (nature, human action inspired by God) can prepare for, and can be oriented toward, the gift of the divine ultimate, but does not bring it about or necessitate it.[22]

The many forms of theological creativity include reinterpretation of scripture; conceptual innovation and improvisation; fresh and persuasive arguments; critique of where other theologies have gone wrong; bringing theology into fruitful dialogue with other disciplines, cultures, religions, events, and experiences; and the production of liturgies, prayers, hymns, novels, dramas, films, paintings, and other works of art. "Thinking" is a vague term for the different ways minds are engaged in such creativity in conjunction with many human capacities. We will return to creative thinking (along with the other three elements) in later chapters, but for now it is worth noting the challenge of what might be termed the "architectonics" of theology.

Every theologian takes decisions about the form in which his or her theology is presented. Different periods and traditions in theology tend to favor particular forms, though some, such as commentary on scripture, sermons, catechesis, letters, polemics, and liturgies, tend to be more popular and widespread. Some theologians are content to use conventional forms without much innovation – Rahner mostly uses theological essays; Bonhoeffer after his two academic dissertations wrote scriptural commentary, sermons, letters, and much else, including various types of literature (see below), but was well aware of not attempting a major systematic work; de Lubac mostly uses usual scholarly and theological forms. But Tillich, von Balthasar, and Barth undertake major works that are structured in original ways. Perhaps the most original is Barth's incomplete *Church Dogmatics*, conceived as five volumes on the Word of God, God, Creation, Reconciliation, and Redemption, and including

within it the architectonic *coup* of the first three parts of Volume IV on Reconciliation. There he achieves an integration of several doctrines – on Christ, sin, salvation, Church, and faith/love/hope – treated from three different angles in the course of three movements that correlate with God as Father, Son, and Spirit. It is a structure that manages to communicate key theological messages through its pattern and juxtapositions, and also, by its irreducible threefoldness, resists any systematic overview of its subject matter. The form is one appropriate to a mystery that one needs to approach afresh repeatedly, always drawn further into the depths of each part and into its dynamic interrelations with other parts.

### *4. Wise and creative expression*

Theology often does not read well. This does not disqualify it as creative theology by the other three criteria, but yet its purpose is not fulfilled unless it is made as accessible as possible. For this, appropriate genres, structures, and forms are needed, together with attractive language. Many academic theologians are not gifted in this respect, and very few are good at more than one or two of the wide range of arts ideally required to communicate theology as widely and effectively as possible. This calls for writers, artists, composers, program-makers, film-makers, and others. Even within academic theology, wider dissemination than within a small circle of specialists is often better achieved by collaboration with a colleague who is a better writer.

Whether with a colleague, or with someone more fully engaged in communication, finding the right words for ideas is not just about appropriate verbal packaging for concepts separable from the wrapping. Form and content are far more complexly interrelated than that. Whether within one person, or between collaborators, bringing something to its best expression is not just a one-way process of moving from ideas or images to words. The ideas and images are already enmeshed in language, and writing is itself a creative task, in which fresh theological

insights can occur. So good theology can become better theology through being expressed better.

In the light of that, it is no surprise that even among the six classic theologians who are our main points of reference in this chapter the quality of expression varies. De Lubac's French is both meticulous and heavily rhetorical, and not easy to translate into the customarily sparser English theological style.[23] Rahner is perhaps the most conceptually dense and difficult, and the majority of his constructive theology is contained in essays, which leave it to readers to interconnect them within a larger coherence. Tillich has a fairly heavy style in German and English, though his sermons and shorter works can move lightly and communicate vividly. Barth and von Balthasar allow an instructive comparison. Despite writing a great deal about beauty and aesthetics, von Balthasar is rather verbose and loose in the structuring of his writing. Barth, who writes far less about aesthetics, won an Erasmus prize for the quality of his prose.

Bonhoeffer is probably the most diverse and effective communicator of all, and in several genres. His two doctoral dissertations (especially the second, *Act and Being*[24]) are comparable in density and difficulty to anything in the other five thinkers. The more popular books published during his lifetime, *Life Together*[25] and *The Cost of Discipleship*,[26] are eloquent and accessible, and the felicitous union of form and content in *Life Together* has helped make it the best-selling of all his works. He left his *Ethics*[27] in unedited fragments, yet its vigorous, concise directness has enabled a wide impact. Finally, there is his *Letters and Papers from Prison*,[28] mostly made up of short papers, poems, and pieces of fiction, together with letters to his friend Eberhard Bethge. It is a feast of genres and of energetic, passionate writing. It retrieves and offers insights into a wide range of texts and thinkers. It is utterly involved with his contemporary world and with looking beyond it to the post-war situation. It is also shot through with seminal creative thinking that continues to inspire theologians and others. In short, it exemplifies all the elements of theological creativity. And in its range of genres it points to their importance, especially of poetry, drama, and fiction, for theological thinking.

## Conclusion

The quantity, variety, and creativity of twentieth-century theology has been seen to offer lessons and inspiration for Christian theology of the future. This theology above all desires wisdom, primarily for God's sake. It is a wisdom that is sought in many ways, especially through the discernment of cries – the cries of God to humanity, and of humanity and the rest of creation to God and to each other. The cries are set within the complex, many-stranded drama of God's involvement with creation for its good. The next two chapters set the search for theological wisdom within that drama and describe its basic character in terms of core cries and responses.