

For the Life of the World

Theology That Makes a Difference

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For our daughters,
Mira Frances and Junia Ruth

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Introduction

Why Theology Matters—To Us

Though written in a style of an invitation, this book is a manifesto. Before we begin, we should tell you, each in our own voice, why and how theology has come to matter to us, and then, together, we should sketch the main thesis of the book: academic theology ought to be, but today largely isn't, about what matters the most—the true life in the presence of God. The failure of theology to attend to its purpose is a loss for the church and for the world, for theology is uniquely qualified to explore what matters the most. And this is a loss for theology itself—for theology will either refocus itself on what matters the most or gradually cease to matter at all.

Volf: I grew up in a place and at a time when we, a small group of teenagers who knew no better, thought that no intellectual endeavor could possibly matter more than doing theology. The time was the early 1970s. The place was Tito's Yugoslavia and, for me specifically, a house in Novi Sad at the end of a dirt road—in fact, two small rooms that my father, a confectioner-turned-Pentecostal-minister, had built in its courtyard with his own hands. From its windows, through low-hanging branches of a cherry tree, I had a fine view of an electrical substation at the edge of a swamp.

A few years after I ceased to guiltily delight in the sound of the swamp's large and unsuspecting toads exploding and then going belly up when hit by the stone from my slingshot, I started spending days and nights in one of these two makeshift rooms reading the Bible, C. S. Lewis, Plato, Bertrand Russell (yes, go figure!), and, later, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Simone Weil, and Joseph Ratzinger—and teaching myself English and Greek in the process. I was part of a small group of young theological enthusiasts. Except for its oldest and most zealous member, who had read the entire Bible, cover to cover, thirteen times in the first year of his faith journey, all of us were, roughly, halfway through high school.

For us, theology was about the unbreakable tie between human transcendent longing and our mundane strivings, about the power of Jesus Christ, the Word of God and the Lamb of God, which stood in irreconcilable contrast to the power of soldiers, ideologues, bureaucrats, and secret service agents; it was about the right of persons—about *our* right, too, of course—to determine the shape and the direction of their individual and social lives, rather than, like some wound-up tin soldiers, to simply march in unison to the drumbeat of a failing revolution. Theology was about a new world coming from God and in God's way, a new social order whose creation and survival wouldn't demand thousands on thousands of dead as did the order in which we were born—my own father having come a hair's breadth from becoming one of them. In short, theology was about the truth and beauty of human existence in a world of justice, peace, and joy. For us, no endeavor could matter more than doing good theology—though for me personally getting hold of a pair of US-made Levi's bell-bottom jeans, Italian platform shoes, and a tight-fitting Indian gauze shirt wasn't far behind in importance.

As we spent our days and nights (yes, lots of long nights) reading and arguing about all matters theological, we had no idea that out in the wide world of Western academies, where we all wanted to study, theology was in a serious crisis.

Volf and Croasmun: Like disoriented and impoverished descendants of a monarch long deposed, some of us theologians

live under a cloud of doom and futility, nostalgic for the glory and power of our ancestors but hopeless about the future. Theology had its time, but that time is no more. It would have been better, we think, had we given up long ago on the untimely endeavor and devoted our energies to more reputable academic pursuits or some more useful activity.

Others among us feel like impoverished but proud aristocrats, with fraying clothes and crumbling dwellings but a soaring sense of self-importance. We continue to do well what theologians have always done—what we *feel* theologians have always done—but we do so with a big chip on our shoulders. If only other academics or the general public would recognize our greatness and pay attention to the fruits of our wisdom, ancient wisdom, God’s wisdom! If only some rich heiress would fall in love with us and return the proper luster to our clothes and dwellings!

Still other theologians, perhaps the majority of us, have acquired democratic sensibilities and settled into daily routines as “knowledge producers” employed by institutions that compete in global markets. We teach our courses and write reviews, scholarly articles, and an occasional book. We work hard to accomplish what it takes to get tenure (and nervously bite our nails through the process). We have a job, and we want to do it well: to add our own grain of intellectual sand to the vast metropolis of knowledge and to instruct students about a tradition that we aren’t sure is truly alive anymore.

In one way or another, theologians seem to have lost theological *eros*, our sense of divine calling to grapple with the ultimate questions of human existence and of the world’s destiny.

Volf: By now I have been a student of theology for forty-five years, thirty-five of them as a teacher. In a sense, I wrote this book to give myself a reason to keep faith with the dream of the teenager-theologian I once was. But my concern isn’t primarily autobiographical integrity; after all, platform shoes or their current equivalents don’t matter to me nearly as much now as they did then. My concern is the self-marginalizing and self-defeating response of theologians to the obsession with acquisition of

resources and entertainment in the broader culture and especially to the dominance of the sciences in modern universities. Along with other scholars in the humanities, we theologians have sought to recast our discipline so as to acquire a legitimate home in the great edifice of science, but instead we have “dug a hole and pitched [ourselves] to its bottom.”¹ The price we paid for the right to make at best marginal additions to the storehouse of knowledge was the loss of the ability to address the most profound and important questions of human existence, which the sciences, by the very nature of their methodologies, are unable even to take up, let alone to answer. I became a student of theology in search of true life in the midst of a false one; I am a theologian now for that same reason. This book explains why and invites others to join the endeavor.

Croasmun: The most theological thing I have ever done was to plant a church—a community in which Bible scholars, ethicists, philosophers, and, yes, a stray “theologian” proper, have *done* theology as we have *lived* theologically. A community in which graphic designers, poets, musicians, sociologists, and even lawyers and medical doctors have become “accidental theologians.” It began almost imperceptibly and quite by accident. We should have known something theological was afoot when we found ourselves spending evenings on a back porch listening to a friend—a Christian Nietzsche scholar perched, with not a hint of ironic self-consciousness, on a stump in the backyard—call us to live lives that amounted to more than a never-ending quest for ever-greater degrees of comfort. I remember waking up at 3:30 a.m. to walk with that friend three miles across town to the train station—simply because walking was more life-giving than driving and the conversation along the way was worth the effort. Summer evenings were spent poring over Karl Barth, Søren Kierkegaard, C. S. Lewis, Kwame Bediako, Marilynne Robinson, and, yes, Nietzsche, with

1. Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 139.

the visceral sense that our lives depended on the words on the pages.

The questions of life were theological because theology was the question of life. Where to live—and with whom—was a theological question. We bought houses together; we shared cars. How and whether to own at all was a theological question. Rhythms of work and rest were a matter of deep theological reflection. Art and beauty were perhaps among the most theological questions of all. Theology was a question about the nature of the life we were living *together*. We read 1 Corinthians as if it were addressed to us as we wondered how to be a community that functioned collectively to discern the voice of God. The transgressive nature of the kingdom in the life and teaching of Jesus led our small, evangelical church to cross religious boundaries and discern God’s voice speaking to us—*teaching* us—through our Muslim and secular humanist neighbors. Galatians became a field manual for navigating questions of difference as we struggled with what it meant to become in actuality the multiethnic community we had always wanted to be. When the white leaders of our church handed over senior leadership to a black man, whom God clearly called to be our pastor, Jonathan’s words in 1 Samuel explained what our white leaders experienced: “I will be second,” said Jonathan (1 Sam. 23:17)—and we have been blessed to be so. Theology mattered.

Whether the *scholarship* we did every day mattered the same way was less clear. Those of us who were doctoral students at the time were being trained to become knowledge-workers rather than wisdom-seekers. Theology that gave life could only be whispered in the margins. True life in academia seemed to require, if not misdirection, at least *indirection*—and the fact that most of us were aiming at theology only indirectly (through biblical studies or history or philosophy) suggests we had already learned our lessons well. These other fields promised the chance to generate real knowledge, which was certainly more reliable professional capital than true life. Respectable theology was something quite separate from true life—in fact, it might make true life impossible. Early on in my program I was told what to expect during my studies:

after two years of coursework, amid taking exams, teaching, and writing the dissertation prospectus, usually, if one was married, there then followed *divorce*. Gallows humor, no doubt, but even clever gallows kill.

This book is a chance, early in my professional life, to make a case for the guild I'm joining to set its eyes on theology that yields beautiful, abundant, transgressive, and reconciling *life*. Not that guild theology should naively become church theology. But perhaps guild theology would benefit from being tugged toward church theology's *telos*. And, even more, given the love that my "respectable theology" (biblical studies) has given me for the humanities of the modern pluralistic university, my hope between the lines in this book is that guild theology might call the university to become a place where we learn to discern the good life together across important and enduring lines of difference.

Volf and Croasmun: As an intellectual endeavor, theology matters because it is about what matters the most for human life. Theology worth its name is about what we ought to desire above all things for ourselves and for the world, about what we should desire in all the things that we desire (whether our desire is effective economic systems and just political orders, livable cities and deep friendships, possessions or lack thereof, healthy bodies and joyous progeny, or even those bell-bottom jeans and Indian gauze shirts). Theology matters because it is about the true life of the world.

The first two books of the Hebrew Bible draw an arc from the creation of the world, over the abyss of the world's self-destructive sin and Israel's forced labor in Egypt, to the establishment of God's covenant and of God's dwelling place among the people called to be a "royal priesthood." The New Testament, from its first book to its last, redraws that arc to include at its endpoint humanity and the world in their entirety: with the birth of Jesus Christ, a descendant of David and the seed of Abraham, God has come to dwell among humans so as to make "all things new" and turn the entire world into God's home and our home in one (Rev. 21:3, 5). This book is a call to those of us who see ourselves as theologians—academic theologians, church theologians, lay

theologians, accidental theologians, any kind of theologian—to dare to believe that “God’s home” is the ultimate goal of human striving and the ultimate object of human rejoicing and therefore to make God’s home and the world’s journey to it the main focus of our most rigorous thinking and honest truth-seeking.

Humanity today faces many challenges: the risks of an unprecedented pace of technological development; seemingly irreversible ecological degradation; immense discrepancies in wealth, knowledge, and power among individuals and the peoples of the world; an inability to live in peace given our manifold differences; and more. As we write this, the symbolic Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* is set on two minutes before midnight. But the first step toward ecological, economic, and political health is conversion—reaffirmation or rediscovery of our human purpose and setting ourselves on a journey toward it. Even if it were true, as dystopian literature and some scientific predictions suggest, that humanity is entering a valley of dry bones of our own making—desolate landscapes, cities in ruin, people at war over basic resources—we will be able to live with dignity in that valley, too, only if we know who we are and what our purpose is. And we’ll need that same knowledge inscribed into the very character of our souls in order to get out of that valley.

We have nothing against writing treatises—even long ones, in multiple tomes—but this book is not a treatise. It is a manifesto. In writing it, we implicitly request not simply that you “take and read.” Instead, we ask you to “do something”: change the way you do theology and help change the way others do it as well. Of course, we want you to read the book and read it carefully; we want you to debate its contents and debate them vigorously. But as you do, keep in mind that it is a manifesto, written in a style that proceeds in large steps over vast intellectual spaces. Every sentence, even every clause, could have been a page, with equally long footnotes. Whether you find yourself agreeing, disagreeing, qualifying, or doing a bit of all three, keep moving along. By the

time you have reached the end, we'd like to see you committed to doing theology for the life of the world. Theology practiced as a specialized vocation is a means—an important, even an indispensable means, but a means nonetheless. We will have reached our goal in writing the book if it generates serious discussion about how doing theology fits into the grand goal of God: fashioning each human and the entire world into God's home and our true home as well.

The structure of the book speaks for itself. We start by arguing that the true, good, or flourishing life is the fundamental human question, neglected today but more urgent than ever (chap. 1). We then propose that the current crisis of theology—a discipline that over the centuries placed the question of the flourishing life at the center of its concern—stems largely from its failure, especially in recent decades, to wrestle confidently with this question (chap. 2). In chapter 3, the center of the book, we call theologians to make this the main purpose of theology: discerning, articulating, and commending accounts of the true life, summed up for us in the image of “God's home among humans.” In chapter 4 we show how a theology of flourishing life that claims to be true for all human beings should neither exacerbate social conflict in pluralistic societies nor suppress the particularities of individual persons. To do such theology well, we argue in chapter 5, theologians need to align their lives with the basic vision of life whose shape they are discerning, articulating, and commending. The book ends with a sketch of an account of flourishing that draws on the writings of the first Christian theologian, the apostle Paul (chap. 6).

The kind of theology we are proposing requires a corresponding pedagogy. To give an account of Christian pedagogy would require another book; this one paves the way for it by sketching a vision of the goal of such a pedagogy. Theological education comes in many forms—from elementary Sunday school and confirmation classes to courses offered in Christian secondary schools and colleges to seminary training in all its varieties to the doctoral and postdoctoral educations of academic theologians. As we see it, a common aim unites these forms of theological education. Theological

education is a dimension of Christian education, and it therefore shares in its goal: forming human beings according the pattern of Christ, such that each person and community is able to improvise the way of Christ in the flow of time in anticipation of becoming, along with the entire creation, the home of God.

1

The Human Quest

Christian theology has lost its way because it has neglected its purpose. We believe the purpose of theology is to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life in light of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The flourishing of human beings and all God’s creatures in the presence of God is God’s foremost concern for creation and should therefore be the central purpose of theology. With this manifesto we aim to return theology to itself so it can better serve communities of Christian conviction and participate in truth-seeking cultural conversation about flourishing life for all.

The theology that has lost its way is above all professional, academic theology, which is only a subset of Christian theology as a whole. In an important sense, all Christians are theologians. As Christians, we seek to think and speak plausibly about our journeys with Christ into our own and the world’s fullness, to make the practice of faith coherent.¹ Call this “everyday theology.”² From

1. See Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xii.

2. To claim that Christian theology is integrally related to the practice of the faith is not to discount the contributions non-Christians make to Christian

the beginning, in the very earliest Christian communities, however, doing theology was not only a general practice but also a special calling. The apostles and teachers were the first theologians. Call this “church theology.” In the course of the history of Christianity, theologians were gradually distinguished from teachers, and, in more recent centuries, theology became an academic discipline, even a disciplinary specialization (as when “theologians” are distinguished from biblical scholars, church historians, or ethicists). People who engage in such specialized activity are “professional” or more narrowly “academic” theologians. It is about them and their activity—it is about us and our activity, as both writers are theologians in this sense—that we are primarily concerned in this book. We use “theology” primarily to designate this special calling to understand the practice of faith.³

In the second chapter, we describe the contemporary crisis of theology. Starting with the third chapter, we offer a proposal for its renewal, arguing for the version of theology whose purpose is to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life. In

theology—scholars working in religious studies, philosophy, history, anthropology, and the like, and sometimes on the faculties of Christian theological schools themselves. Their work is crucial to understanding Christianity and the world more broadly, and, like any good interlocutor, serves to inform the descriptive and normative claims that Christian theologians make. We live in a pluralistic world, and Christian theology is, as we argue, one among many contending sets of voices that articulate and commend a vision of flourishing life. Those who advocate alternative visions and offer critiques of, or friendly amendments to, Christian visions play fruitful roles in this contestation about the nature of the *true life*.

3. Those called to be theologians—church theologians and academic theologians—should pay special attention to theological work going on among Christian intellectuals who would not ordinarily call themselves theologians. Some Christians are extraordinary thinkers—philosophers, historians, writers, transdisciplinary intellectuals, scientists, and more—and they often bring their thinking to bear on the Christian way of life. Leaning on the work of Elizabeth Dreyer (*Accidental Theologians: Four Women Who Shaped Christianity* [Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2014]), Christian Wiman calls these Christians “accidental theologians” and includes among them figures such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Simone Weil, and Vincent van Gogh; Wiman himself is an exceptionally good accidental theologian! See above all *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

this chapter, we explain in broad and formal terms what we mean by “flourishing life” and why and how the question of flourishing life matters today. This is a book about the future of Christian theology, but Christian theology is about an issue that concerns all human beings in a fundamental way.

Why “Flourishing Life”?

By “flourishing life” we mean the good toward which humans are meant to strive. It names not so much any number of things we desire, but the ultimate goal of our striving along with the values that determine what is truly worth desiring. We use the term more or less interchangeably with “true life,” “good life,” “life worth living,” “human fullness,” “life that truly is life,” and more. Though “the good life” is a technical term in classical philosophy and in the Christian theology that developed in conversation with it, we prefer “flourishing life” because it is universal in scope, tying the good life of humans to the good life of all God’s creatures, and because it avoids the popular connotations of “good life” that evoke images of extravagant consumption.⁴ Granted, “flourishing” can conjure visions of life aloof from hardship and oppression, so we will sometimes use “true life” to make space for the arduous forms that the best of human lives will often have to take on this side of the full realization of God’s new creation and under the conditions of sin. Each of these terms has its own intellectual

4. As far as we can tell, the term “human flourishing” was coined by Elizabeth Anscombe in something akin to the sense we use here in her landmark essay “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (January 1958): 1–19. Forty years later, Mary Grey proposed “a theology of flourishing for the next millennium” in “Survive or Thrive? A Theology of Flourishing for the Next Millennium,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 88, no. 352 (Winter 1999): 396–407, writing in an ecofeminist tradition that included the philosophical work of Chris J. Cuomo, *Feminism and Ecological Communities: An Ethic of Flourishing* (New York: Routledge, 1998), and the theological work of Grace M. Jantzen, “Feminism and Flourishing: Gender and Metaphor in Feminist Theology,” *Feminist Theology* 4, no. 10 (September 1, 1995): 81–101.

pedigree in the broad tradition of reflection on human nature, destiny, and place in the world. For us, the Christian faith and not the intellectual pedigree of the term decisively shapes the character of flourishing life.

Sometimes visions of flourishing are like vivid images we are able to see and describe, but more often they are like a lens through which we see everything—the tacit “background” against which we live our lives, as Charles Taylor puts it.⁵ If they are only implicit, we need to tease them out, make them explicit. In either case, it is our human responsibility to reflect on their function, origin, content, and existential or intellectual adequacy because they define our world and our very selves. We can switch from one vision to another, but if we do so in reality and not just in imagination, we become a “new person”: we come to experience ourselves and our world in a different way, and our lives take a new turn.

A Centuries-Long Concern

For much of humanity’s early history, human beings saw their ultimate good in natural forms of well-being: health, wealth, fertility, and longevity. During what some philosophers and sociologists have described as “axial transformations,” a sense of the inadequacy of such natural accounts of human flourishing crystallized.⁶ Today’s world religions emerged out of these transformations. Each stands for an alternative to the idea that the ultimate good consists

5. Charles Taylor takes up the language of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Polanyi. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 13–14.

6. Karl Jaspers, in *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zürich: Artemis, 1949), introduced the idea of axiality—he used the term “axial age”—to public discussion after World War II. We prefer the language of “axial transformations” (so also many authors in the collection of essays *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, ed. Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012]) to indicate that we are after a heuristic distinction between preaxial and postaxial societies, without implying some of Jaspers’s historical claims about an axial age. Our invocation of this language is close to Charles Taylor’s (*Secular Age*, 792n9). For an English translation of Jaspers’s work, see Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

in forms of natural well-being. Each in its own way distinguishes between mundane and transcendent realms, and each in its own way claims that the ultimate human good consists in alignment of self (and, for some traditions, the world) with the transcendent order. At the heart of the great world religions lies an answer to the question of the true life, the good life, the genuinely flourishing life.

World religions provide the most enduring, most widespread, and, arguably, still most potent visions of human flourishing. But religions are not the only source of such visions. For many great philosophers, an articulation of the good life is a central concern,⁷ either the pivot around which their philosophies turn or an indispensable theme of their philosophies. This is true, for instance, of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Mill, Nietzsche, Murdoch, and Weil. In recent centuries, some philosophers have come to advocate modern and secular versions of the preaxial account of the human good centered on health, wealth, fertility, and longevity.⁸ Nietzsche might be the most radical among them, as he contests all forms of the distinction between mundane and transcendent realms,⁹ whether the distinction is drawn between sensible and supersensible worlds (as in Plato and monotheistic religions, for instance) or within the sensible world (as in Karl Marx and some forms of secular

7. In their own way, many great writers have pursued the same project. Referring to Dostoevsky, and indirectly to himself, David Foster Wallace wrote, “His concern was always what it means to be a human being.” David Foster Wallace, “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” in *Consider the Lobster, and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006), 255–74, here 265. On Wallace and the question of the good life, see Nathan Ballantyne and Justin Tosi, “David Foster Wallace on the Good Life,” in *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 133–64.

8. For a recent example of taking up the question of meaningful life that finds inspiration in preaxial forms of thought, see Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 58–87, 190–223.

9. On Nietzsche’s rejection of “two worlds,” see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), 507.

humanism, for instance). Still, he too had a vision of the kinds of human beings he wanted to see “bred.”¹⁰

Though the world’s religions and philosophers offer diverse visions of the flourishing life, these visions, we propose, share three formal features—that is, flourishing life has a tripartite structure.¹¹ Each world religion or philosophy gives an account of life going well, life led well, and life feeling as it should. Life going well refers to the “circumstantial” dimension of the flourishing life, to the desirable circumstances of life—be they natural (like fertile, uncontaminated land), social (like a just political order or a good reputation), or personal (like health and longevity). Life led well refers to the “agential” dimension of the flourishing life, to the good conduct of life—from right thoughts of the heart and right acts to right habits and virtues. Life feeling as it should is about the “affective” dimension of the flourishing life, about states of “happiness” (contentment, joy) and empathy. Each of the three features has its own integrity, but each is not like a leg of some “good-life stool” bearing separately the weight. Instead, each is also tied to the others, both influencing them and being influenced by them.

This, then, is what we mean by a vision of flourishing life: a set of explicit or implicit convictions about what it means for us to lead life well, for our life to go well, and for it to feel right, convictions that guide—or should guide—all our desires and efforts. The Christian faith, centered as it is on the divine Word become flesh in Jesus Christ as the true life and light of the world, is such a vision. Or, rather, it is a large and often quarrelsome family of such visions. Christian theology ought to be, above all, about critically discerning, articulating, and commending this vision. With this goal, theologians ought to enter the centuries-long and global conversation in which religious and nonreligious thinkers

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, in “*The Anti-Christ*,” “*Ecce Homo*,” “*Twilight of the Idols*,” and *Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), §3, p. 4.

11. For one Christian account of the tripartite structure of the flourishing life—that of the apostle Paul—see chap. 6.

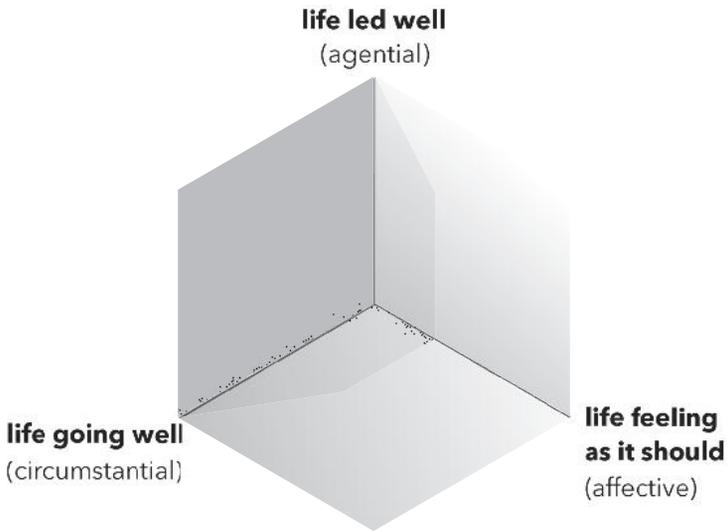


Figure 1.1 The tripartite formal structure of flourishing life.

wrestle with the most important human question: What is the true, flourishing life, and how can we live it?

But why? Aren't there other issues we ought to attend to, both more pressing and perhaps more manageable than this biggest of all big questions, like various forms of exclusion or exploitation? Or can't we just assume a Christian vision of flourishing as given and go on with the endeavor of living it?

A Pearl of Great Price

Some dismiss exploration of the good life as a luxury, a matter of "extra credit" we can take up if so inclined after the necessities of life—food, shelter, and safety—have been secured, and secured for all. It is a mistake, however, to suppose that the satisfaction of basic needs can be separated from the meaning and goodness of life. Basic needs are famously difficult to pin down. Beyond the resources human beings require as biological organisms, the very determination of what constitutes a basic human need depends not

just on the social standing of a person but decisively also on the kind of life we find worth desiring.¹² Moreover, cultural, economic, and political struggle against deprivation and oppression will fail if a positive vision of flourishing life doesn't guide it. That's why, according to the Gospels, Jesus didn't just feed the poor and heal the sick, although he did that and stated explicitly that he came to do that; more importantly, he called them to reorient their entire lives around seeking God and God's righteousness.¹³

We insult the humanity of the languishing when we suggest that concern with the basic character and direction of their lives is somehow beyond their reach, that they have to progress on the hierarchy of needs—from food, shelter, and safety to community to self-esteem—until they are finally capable of reflecting on the meaning and puzzling out the shape of true life. An eight-year-old girl getting up before dawn to take the one family cow to pasture before going to school (like Miroslav's mother did as a child) can ask it no less than can a respected scientist working in an industry

12. On “necessities” as a social category, Adam Smith says the following:
By necessities I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad luck. (Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* 5.2.2.4, ed. Edwin Cannan [New York: Random House, 1994], 938–39)

For a contemporary approach, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

13. Cf. Matt. 6:33. Working within Marxist tradition, many years ago Paulo Freire made a compelling argument that a positive vision of human fullness is indispensable for liberation. Without grabbing hold of a vision of a “new man” or a “fuller humanity,” the liberated oppressed are likely to become “sub-oppressors”: “Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity.” Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 45–47.

(like Matt's father did). Those wracked by pain because of illness, suffering under the yoke of oppression, or worrying about their next meal need—and often *feel* the need for—visions of human fullness at least as much as and sometimes more than those who are healthy, unconstrained, and well fed.¹⁴ Many originators of great, ancient visions of human flourishing as well as the majority of those who embraced them through the centuries lived in circumstances most people in economically developed nations today would describe as dire. Suffering of one kind or another and the indignities that accompany it have been historically and continue to be presently the main motor for both the search for a vision of life that is truly worthy of human beings and for the struggle, personal and social, to turn that vision into reality.

A compelling vision of flourishing life is not a luxury, a cozy reading room for a middle-class home that already has a kitchen, bathroom, living space, and bedrooms. It is a basic need for a being who does not and cannot live by bread alone. All human beings in all cultures, each in their own way, aspire to genuine flourishing, their own and that of those they care for. First, we are inescapably oriented toward some good—toward things, states of affairs, practices, and emotions we perceive as good. Second, we are reflective and moral beings. We want to know that the good we strive toward is in fact desirable. Finally, aware as we are of living in time, we gather our past in memory and our future in anticipation, and we want to be assured of the goodness or rightness of our whole life. Unless the speed and noise of life are unrelenting and entertainment beguilingly captivating, we will occasionally survey our life—past, present, and future—and ask what it would mean for the entirety to be “good.”

Truly flourishing life is the most important concern of our lives, the pearl for which it's worth selling everything else we might have—wealth, power, fame, or pleasure (Matt. 13:45–46). With that pearl, we receive back improved many of the goods we've sold to acquire it; without that pearl, we ourselves are diminished

14. See Grey, “Survive or Thrive?,” 402–3.

and lost, and none of the goods we refused to sell in order to acquire it can make up for the damage. But like the swine of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:6), many of us, ordinary people and intellectuals alike, and especially those in the affluent West, trample that pearl under our feet, seeing in it nothing fit to satisfy our wayward hunger.

Choosing a Vision for Life

Today, more than at any previous time in history, the character of flourishing life is a pressing concern, especially, perhaps, when we fail to experience it as such. Though the issue is ancient and basic, as we have seen, we now ask it and have to answer it in a new way. In ages past as in some traditional cultures today, a vision of the good life was largely inscribed into the objective conditions of lived lives—in the perceived givenness of the cosmic and social orders, in accepted religious rituals and traditions, in how communities engaged in the cultural, economic, and political reproduction of life. Even individuals' vocations were mostly passed from mother to daughter and from father to son. Though they often sensed the need to discern the specific shape of their particular life, most people believed that the ultimate direction of life and the "tables of values" (to borrow a phrase from Friedrich Nietzsche) from which their lives gained shape and significance were pre-given, perhaps even "natural." For a large and increasing portion of the world's population, this is no longer the case.

Free to Choose, Forced to Choose

In cultures shaped by modernity, we have come to live "disembodied" lives.¹⁵ No longer experiencing ourselves as constituents of a meaningful cosmos and members of a social body, we modern

15. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 146–58. Taylor describes *both* disembedding that has happened as part of axial transformations *and* modern disembedding that is

human beings imagine ourselves and act first and foremost as individuals, ideally sovereign owners of ourselves and our actions. We can no longer “read off” meaning from our social and cosmic locations. Nothing has claim to our allegiance until we first choose to give it our allegiance. We live under what many years ago Peter Berger described as a “heretical imperative”: we are not just free to choose but are forced to do so.¹⁶ As a consequence, what counts as flourishing life and what it means specifically for each person to flourish require from us intentional deliberation.¹⁷

As we will see shortly, we tend not to spend much time on the matter but either float along in a Lazy River or paddle madly in the boulder-riddled rapids to beat others to the finish line.¹⁸ Still, we float and paddle in a cultural river with many currents and crosscurrents. When we become reflective about our lives, we must contend with those diverse currents, and we are forced to choose or reconfirm the choices we have made. Even a birth into a rich tradition that initially defines the flourishing life for us doesn’t relieve us from choice. Instead of simply taking on and living out a preset vision of flourishing—perhaps struggling but failing to live it or chafing against it—we are pushed to always engage afresh the question of *which* life is, in fact, good.

Let’s remind ourselves of the nature of the choice we are talking about. To choose here is not so much to pick one among many of more or less desirable things. It is to opt for the direction of our entire life, either to confirm the course we are on—which we enact

in some sense an extension of the axial of disembedding, especially its Christian form.

16. Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979). See also Charles Taylor, *Secular Age*; Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

17. For the importance of “meaning,” “an essentially modern predicament,” see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 10, 16–19.

18. We take the metaphor of the Lazy River from Zadie Smith, “The Lazy River,” *New Yorker*, December 18 and 25, 2017, 94–97, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/18/the-lazy-river>.

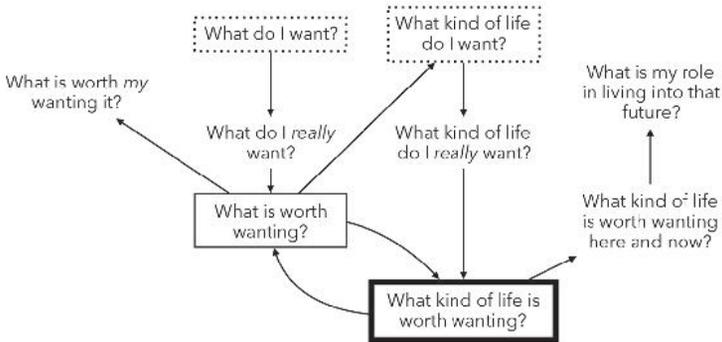


Figure 1.2 Our presenting questions about particular desires (“What do I want?”) and our desires for the shape of our life as a whole (“What kind of life do I want?”) ultimately lead us to the fundamental question of the good life (“What kind of life is worth wanting?”) and return to us more refined versions of our presenting questions.

without much thought in the myriad daily choices we make—or to change the course of our lives. Put more abstractly, we are deciding among candidates for the character and purpose of our lives and for the tables of values or “reflexive standards” by which we evaluate our ordinary choices.¹⁹ We are deciding what kind of human being it is worth being and what kind of world it is worth inhabiting.

For a century and a half or so, many in the West were convinced that, when it comes to a vision of flourishing life, the main choice in the West, and increasingly around the globe, was between some form of religious faith and secularism. Secularism seemed to be winning, in fact. But the situation has proven more complicated. Globally, religions, particularly Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, continue to grow in absolute and relative terms, shape the private and public lives of billions, and spread throughout the world.²⁰ For most people today, the choice is not between religious faith and lack of it; it is among many forms of religious faith and

19. Hans Joas, *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence*, trans. Alex Skinner (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008), 29.

20. See Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 61–62.

nonreligious philosophies of life. Multiple visions of flourishing life—mutually contending though rarely completely incompatible and each explicitly or implicitly claiming to stand for the true life—vie for the allegiance of all. We are choosing in a postsecular and pluralistic world.

Free to choose and at the same time saddled with the necessity of doing so, we are also faced with the choice between a meaningful life and life bereft of meaning. Many who see themselves as living in the shadow of what Nietzsche called “the death of God”²¹ embrace the idea, with either resignation or courage, that they can give no better reasons for their basic choices than their preference itself.²² But to choose something just because we want to is to empty our choice of significance. Any meaning that we give we can take away as well; and any choice we make then seems as good as any other.²³ In some versions of the world in which preferences are kings and queens, irreligious choices become as good as religious ones, and life cannot be rescued from the threat of arbitrariness.²⁴ The possibility of meaninglessness, too, and not just multiple offers of visions of true and meaningful life, keeps us searching and choosing.

21. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), §§108, 125, 343, pp. 167, 181, 279. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), 200–201.

22. Most atheists don’t think that without God we are doomed to the emptiness of a meaningless existence. In *Religion without God*, for instance, Ronald Dworkin develops a “religious” form of atheism, marked by the gratitude for the gift of being, the sacredness of human life, and the objective beauty and goodness of nature. Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

23. For a recent version of such a reading of our predicament and a secular suggestion about how to overcome it, see Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*.

24. This arbitrariness is Charles Taylor’s concern in rebutting the views of naive “boosters” of the authenticity ethic. Without some horizon of significance, “choice” (the lone hyper-good on this facile account of authenticity) is evacuated of all meaning and thereby fails to function as a hyper-good. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 31–42.

Follow Your Dream!

With multiple competing accounts of flourishing life vying for our allegiance while each tries to ward off nihilism, the question of the flourishing life is now more open—and more pressing—than ever. Yet just at this moment, serious engagement with this question is ebbing.

For one, our lives seem too crowded—too busy, we might say, were it not that after long hours of work we let entertainment and various addictions gobble up a good portion of the remaining time—to allow us to give sustained attention to the challenge of discerning the life truly worth living. David Foster Wallace describes well the predicament of people living in modern, fast-paced, and entertainment-saturated societies. It’s not just that we don’t know how to live meaningful lives, he says. “We don’t even seem to be able to focus for very long on the question.”²⁵

On the rare occasions when we do focus, we are confronted with our lack of knowledge and skill to articulate for ourselves a vision of the good life. In the Life Worth Living course we teach at Yale College, a student, exasperated with the predicament in which he found himself, remarked, “The world’s greatest traditions have been trying to answer this question for 3,000+ years. And now I’m supposed to work out my own answer—in my spare time?!” With neither skills nor tools to tackle the question, we resort to the habits we have learned in making consumer choices: we consult our gut feelings and some “life projects” equivalent of consumer reports, and we decide—provisionally, for the most part, always keeping our options open. Too often our hearts, which simply want what they want and are persuaded that they would wrong themselves if they didn’t get it, make the decision for us. Our only master seems to be our taste, supposedly authentically ours and yet consistently mirroring what is around us.²⁶

25. Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 30, citing a Charlie Rose interview of David Foster Wallace (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm94gUBCih8>).

26. On taste, see Tom Vanderbilt, *You May Also Like: Taste in an Age of Endless Choice* (New York: Knopf, 2016).

But it isn't just that we are too busy and inept to take on the responsibility for the direction of our lives. In the course of modernity, the notion of the good life has been privatized. "If a kid asks what to do with his or her life," writes Hartmut Rosa, "teachers, friends, and family will be sure to offer their advice, but they will almost inevitably rush to add: 'Just find out for yourself, listen to your heart, come to know your talents and your yearnings.' Thus, the good life has become the most intimately private matter."²⁷ The gist of the advice is simple: "Follow your dream!" We believe that we ought to decide for ourselves how to live. More, we are convinced that the vision of life that is good for us is encoded in our particular character as individuals; an inviolable criterion of the good life is that it is authentically ours. Our choice about the matter is worthy of respect just because it is ours and resonates with who we perceive ourselves to be.

Not so long ago, we considered the founders of religions and great philosophers who thought deeply about the question of life worth living as medical doctors and nutritionists of our humanity: we expected them to tell us what human wholeness is and what's good for achieving it and why, and if we disagreed, we argued back, telling them where and why they were wrong. Now we relate to them as we do to waiters in a restaurant, whom we count on to describe each dish but not to tell us what would be good for us to order, let alone what true health is and how the meal we are about to order relates to it; in fact, we half expect them to praise any choice we make, for every choice is by definition good—as long as we like the dish! No religious figure, no philosopher, no scientist can know what kind of life is good—certainly not good for us. We alone are the true experts of how our talents and yearnings conjoin to give birth to our dreams, which legitimize our striving.

27. Hartmut Rosa, "Two Versions of the Good Life and Two Forms of Fear: Dynamic Stabilization and Resonance Conception of the Good Life," paper presented at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture conference on Joy, Security, and Fear, New Haven, CT, November 8–9, 2017, 6.

The Resources for Living Your Dream

Though silent about the nature of the good life, modern cultures are very clear, even strident, about the preconditions for the life each of us considers to be good: “Secure the resources you might need for living your dream (whatever that might be)!” Hartmut Rosa calls this the “overruling rational imperative of modernity.”²⁸ Whatever you end up choosing as your good in the course of life, you will be better off if you accumulate economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and bodily capital—in other words, if you are rich, emotionally intelligent, educated, well connected, and good looking.²⁹ We invest most of our time and energy securing these resources; they make it possible for us to pursue our dreams, not just today but also tomorrow, when we, our world, and our dreams might be very different from today. Rosa offers an image of our situation: “In a way, we moderns resemble a painter who is forever concerned about improving his materials—the colors and brushes, the air condition and lighting, the canvas and easel, etc.—but never really starts to paint.”³⁰ The means have become ends.

Perhaps another image is apt as well: when the means for life have become the ends of life, the dog has started chasing its tail.³¹ To chase one’s tail is bad enough; to have to chase it faster than anyone else verges on madness, yet this seems to be our situation. The resources we think we need to live the good life are competi-

28. Rosa, “Two Versions,” 7.

29. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).

30. Rosa, “Two Versions,” 7.

31. On the phenomenon of means becoming ends, see John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism,” in *On Liberty, and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 170–71. On money as means-become-ends see Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 109–11; Karl Marx, “The General Formula for Money,” in *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 247–57. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II.2.1: “For wealth . . . is sought for the sake of something else. . . . Consequently it cannot be man’s last end.”

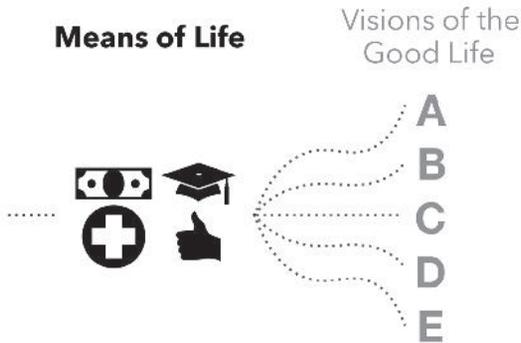


Figure 1.3 We tend to let the means of life, required to realize any vision of the flourishing life, become the purpose of our lives.

tive goods. It is not just that it is better to have more of them than to have less; we need to have more of them than our competitors do: more wealth, better education, more fame, better looks, more . . . We are like a painter obsessed with having better tools for her trade than any of her colleagues because she, madly, believes that superior tools themselves make her a greater painter.

In the course of modernity, we have made it our chief goal (and the main purpose of our major institutions—the state, the market, science and technology, education, and even religion) to secure the resources we think we need to live the life we want. The task of securing resources keeps us busy; we work more today than we ever have before.³² Work is not all we do, of course. We enjoy the pleasures of life as well. For many, these pleasures are the purpose of work and of life itself. But when pleasure becomes our goal, we are in danger of becoming Nietzsche’s “last men,” beings “weary of all great striving and obsessed with comfort and safety, dreaming petty dreams and enjoying unsubtle pleasures, entertaining ourselves to idiocy while imagining ourselves as the

32. On the increase of weekly hours devoted to work notwithstanding all the work-saving technological advances, see Benjamin M. Friedman, “Work and Consumption in an Era of Unbalanced Technological Advance,” *Journal of Evolutionary Economics* 27, no. 2 (April 2017): 221–37.

measure of humanity.”³³ If we are more into competition than comfort, then we treat enjoyments as a resource; we compete in the sophistication and expense of pleasures, and if we do better than most in our comparison group, then we increase our reputational capital. Yet in work with all its achievements and in leisure with all its pleasures, we languish. That busy languishing closes our ears to the cries of the oppressed and our eyes to destruction of earth’s ecological systems—and reinforces our disdain for the pearl of great price.

Private and Public Costs

With taste in charge of the direction of our lives and reason employed mainly for creation of resources for life, we are left vulnerable to a sneaking suspicion of the arbitrariness of our lives. When during a lull in activities or in a moment of crisis the little demon appears on our shoulders whispering into our ears that our work and our pleasures don’t matter at all, we don’t know how to get rid of it. It’s not necessarily that we are committed to convictions that entail the meaninglessness of life. Worse yet, we are unaware of compelling options and have neither the wherewithal to explore them nor the intellectual and moral tools to adjudicate among them. The way we have been habituated to make choices

33. This quotation is from Volf, *Flourishing*, 199. It functions there as a summary of Nietzsche’s famous text about the “last men” from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the type of human beings he feared would be the end result of the development of Western civilization:

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. . . . “We have invented happiness,” say the last men, and they blink. . . . A little poison now and then: that makes for pleasant dreams. And much poison at the end for a pleasant death. One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion. No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same. . . . “Formerly, all the world was mad,” say the most refined, and they blink. . . . One has one’s little pleasure for the day and a little pleasure for the night, but one has regard for health. “We have invented happiness”—say the last men, and they blink. (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 17–18)

about flourishing life almost guarantees that deeper meaning will escape us—and that, if we should stumble on it, we wouldn't even know how to recognize it.

Creeping meaninglessness is a private cost of making the nature of the flourishing life a mere matter of taste. There is public cost as well: cultural “dialogue” about the meaning of human life and about the corresponding “tables of value” ends up looking like the shouting talking heads of cable news. We are unable to reason with—or even speak with—one another about this most important project of our lives, let alone formulate a vision of flourishing life that encompasses all of humanity and all creatures, a pressing concern in a highly interconnected and interdependent world. As a result, many prefer the disengaged individualism of lives built on unreflective soft relativism (your vision is true for you, my vision is true for me) to lives invested in the truth of our common humanity but bereft of any responsible means of contending for it or forging a common bond to it.³⁴

Neglected Quest

What truly flourishing life is and how to achieve it is the most important human question. For centuries, it was at the center of great religions and philosophies. Modern ways of living both free us to live as we see fit and place pressure on us to answer always afresh for ourselves what kind of life is worth living. These same modern ways of living, however, undermine our drive and ability to consider in a serious way the question of flourishing life. This is a quick summary of the gray picture we have painted so far. To

34. Martha Nussbaum's summary of humanity's collective plight very much resonates with our own: “If the real clash of civilizations is, as I believe, a clash within the individual soul, as greed and narcissism contend against respect and love, all modern societies are rapidly losing the battle, as they feed the forces that lead to violence and dehumanization and fail to feed the forces that lead to cultures of equity and respect.” Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 143.

complete it, we need to add two dark lines. Two institutions we would expect to educate us in critically exploring and answering this question no longer seem to be taking it seriously.

Universities and the Meaning of Life

One might think that colleges and universities would be the places for sober explorations of the nature of flourishing life, pushing against the deadening effect of the work-and-fun loop we don't know how to escape. Perhaps in an early season of their lives, young people would learn to think intelligently and critically not merely about how to succeed in one or another of their endeavors, but about how to "succeed" in the endeavor that is their life itself. After all, from its beginnings, whether we trace these to Socrates or to the founding of modern universities in the Middle Ages, and throughout most of its history up to the mid-twentieth century, higher education has centered on the question of the meaningful life, true life. The American idea of "college" was invented more or less precisely as a space in which one could ask and answer the big questions of life.³⁵

But the great invention has lost much of its original purpose. Our colleges and universities have largely "given up on the meaning of life," to use the phrase that occurs in the subtitle of Anthony Kronman's book about higher education, *Education's End*.³⁶ Incremental increase in knowledge of the world and in the advances of technological know-how are valued over truth-seeking explorations of meaning and purpose. Especially in an age in which education needs to justify itself in economic terms, whatever accounts are offered of "the value of education" center on instrumental reason and technical skill, not on the goals of human life as a whole and ways to achieve them—not on the character of a life worthy of being called human. Even courses that are about

35. Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1, 34.

36. Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

life, like Stanford's *Design Your Life* or Yale's *Psychology and the Good Life*, are more about helping students live the kind of life they want than about discerning the kind of life that is worth wanting. In sum, our educational institutions serve primarily to equip students with skills to be able to generate resources for any kind of life they may decide they want to live.

Churches and the True Life

If we can no longer count on colleges and universities for help in exploring the flourishing life, one might think that religious communities—churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples—would center their activities and explorations on this question. We are not qualified to speak for religions other than Christianity, so we'll limit ourselves to discussing what happens in ecclesial communities. Churches often take up this question—witness the popularity of Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*.³⁷ But it is increasingly common to employ the Christian faith primarily as a set of “skills”—resources!—to manage a life whose course is preset by the demands of success in education and work and by cultural habits formed around leisure and entertainment.

In our private lives, we have a morning coffee, exercise a bit and stretch, and, if we are pious, we have a moment for a devotional reading from the Bible or Oswald Chambers, and off we go to do things whose place in the flourishing life we have never considered in light of our professed faith. Sunday worship services are too frequently no more than a communal version of such energy-boosting, performance-enhancing, or get-well morning exercises. Many churches, of course, do much better, and to the extent they do, they are important schools of the flourishing life.

In two traditional sites of sustained reflection on the flourishing life—the institutions of higher learning and the houses of worship—interest in exploration of the most important question

37. Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) has sold more than thirty million copies and is the second-most-translated book in the world after the Bible.

of human existence is waning. This in itself constitutes a cultural crisis of major proportions, partly because it underpins or exacerbates many other crises. Many have sensed the resulting cultural vacuum and attempted to fill it. Important philosophers have taken up the issue of the “true life,” sometimes with the goal of rescuing it from religious captivity and bringing it back to philosophy and to the center of university concerns.³⁸ Psychologists have done the same, especially those associated with positive psychology,³⁹ though often with a problematic conflation of scientific knowledge and moral judgment.⁴⁰ Religious thinkers from diverse religious traditions wrestle with the issue as well, of course, though often with little awareness of the changed conditions under which the question of flourishing life presents itself to people today. But all this is bucking the trend. Much work remains to reverse it.

A Challenge for Theology

We need to revive a sustained truth-seeking cultural conversation about the flourishing life. We live in a globalized world where partly overlapping and partly contradictory visions of flourishing life coexist in the same public space. People of many diverse perspectives, religious and nonreligious, will need to participate in that conversation. Christian theology ought to become one such voice. If it does, it may be able to help both religious and educational institutions to make the true life their central concern.

Along with philosophy in its ancient mode, for centuries Christian theology served the West as the intellectual space for articulating visions of the flourishing life and sorting out contested

38. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970); Dworkin, *Religion without God*; Kronman, *Education's End*; Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*.

39. Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 5–14.

40. See Tamsin Shaw, “The Psychologists Take Power,” *New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/02/25/the-psychologists-take-power>.

questions of value. The great church father Augustine placed the problem of the “happy life” at the heart of his theology.⁴¹ In one way or another, all great theologians did the same. With conceptualities appropriate to their contexts, they echoed the orientation of the Christian faith itself toward “the kingdom of God,” “life abundant,” “new creation,” “seeing God,” the “new Jerusalem,” or—as we argue in chapter 3—toward the establishment of “God’s home among humans.” Today, too, theology has an indispensable contribution to make in countering taste-driven, individualized, unreflective ways of living and helping people articulate, embrace, and pursue a compelling vision of flourishing life for themselves and all creation.

Theology has a contribution to make, and theology *must make* that contribution if it is to remain true to its purpose, which is the same as the goal of Jesus’s mission. One way to see this mission is to look at what Jesus rejected during his temptations immediately before embarking on his mission. The first temptation was the most fundamental. “Turn these stones into bread,” the tempter taunted Jesus, who was famished after a forty-day fast in the wilderness. Jesus resisted, responding,

One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.
(Matt. 4:4)

41. Soon after converting, Augustine penned *The Happy Life* (in “*The Happy Life*,” *Answer to Skeptics*,” “*Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil*,” “*Soliloquies*,” *The Fathers of the Church* 5, ed. Ludwig Schopp [1948; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010]). As Gareth Matthews notes, the topic is a key concern through the rest of Augustine’s career. See especially Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 10.20–23; Augustine, *The City of God*, books 11–22, trans. William Babcock, in *Works of Saint Augustine* I/7 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013), 19.1–11; Gareth Matthews, “Happiness,” in *Augustine* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 134. See also John Bussanich, “Happiness, Eudaimonism,” in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 413–14; Ragnar Holte, “La béatitude et le Bien suprême,” *Béatitude et sagesse: saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l’homme dans la philosophie ancienne* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1962), 207–20.

Jesus is quoting the Hebrew Bible here. These words came first to the children of Israel as a summary of the main lesson they were to have learned in the course of their forty years of wandering in the wilderness before entering the promised land. Bread was what they needed in the wilderness. That much was never in doubt; that truth, as insistent as a growling stomach, they didn't need to learn. But they needed more than "bread," and that truth, not as obvious as physical hunger but as real as the possibility of missing their human purpose, they did need to learn. All humans do, perhaps especially we moderns. We have made our greatest temptation into the chief goal of our lives and the main purpose of our major institutions: to create and enjoy ever more sophisticated varieties of "bread."⁴²

Living by bread alone, we fail our humanity. When our theology does not provide us with a compelling alternative vision of the good life, it betrays its purpose. This is the tragedy of academic theology today: at the moment when theology's tools are most needed to answer the most pressing question of our lives and to serve the common good, they are found stacked in a corner, dusty and neglected—even or especially by those charged with keeping them sharp. Theology is in crisis, largely because it has lost its nerve and forgotten its purpose to help discern, articulate, and commend compelling visions of flourishing life in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

42. See Miroslav Volf, "What Will Save the World? Caring for the World We Cannot Save," in *A Calling to Care*, ed. T. W. Herrman (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, forthcoming).