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Research Program Title:

Mediating Good life[⊕]

Key words/Phrases:

Good Life, Christian Theology, Ultimate Perspective, Fragility

Abstract

Mediating Good Life[⊕] is an interdisciplinary theological research program of the Protestant Theological University that critically studies how salvation and good life is mediated, realized, and embodied in the lives of communities and individuals, in church and society. The program examines the consequences of a transcendent or ultimate perspective on the good life and is particularly focused on how good life can be shaped in a world in which on the one hand we find abundance, support, care and enjoyment, while on the other hand vulnerability, fragility and crisis mark our individual lives and (the future of) our natural and social environments. The program interacts with visions and practices of the good life in a wide range of societal and cultural contexts. From various disciplinary fields of theology participants of the program will examine the central research question: What do Christian theological visions and practices of good life contribute to a constructive and critical engagement with contemporary understandings and practices of good life within the church and in society at large?

Introduction

‘Good life’ has a wide range of meanings both in popular parlance and in critical philosophical and theological language. A stand of popular magazines in a supermarket will show the relevance of the theme of Mediating Good Life. Magazines about business, health, travel, sports and luxury hobbies represent visions of good life. Some magazines like *Happiness*, *Psychologie* and *Flow* explicitly tell stories and counter stories of what good life might entail. Research with children shows that they define good life with enjoying life and feeling contented, having supportive family and friends and having basic needs met. In these and other views, it may also refer to life that offers good physical and/or mental health, satisfaction, comfort and affluency, but also to morally good life, i.e. to moral rules, as well as to moral life that is geared towards the support and wellbeing of others. Good life may be used in general to those characteristics that make life worth living, and that contribute to flourishing, coping with poverty, vulnerability, fragility, hardships and suffering. It is applied in contexts of care and ageing, in communities that deal with disaster, and in response to ecological challenges. Often, it will be connected to living a meaningful life.

In the concept of ‘Good Life’ we can determine the following aspects:

- *psychological*, related to feeling accepted, understood, valued, respected, acknowledged, and finding meaning in living;
- *sociological*, related to social cohesion, relationships, and social capital;
- *moral*, related to rules of conduct;

- *philosophical* , articulated in different intellectual traditions;
- *political*, related to ideologies or political models, such as environmentalism, liberalism, neo-liberalism, socialism, feminism, conservatism and the like.

‘Good life’, in a *theological perspective*, can only be understood with reference to transcendent and ultimate reality. Theology asks questions about the nature, possibility and conditions of ultimate and penultimate human flourishing.¹ Christian biblical, systematic, ethical and practical theologians refer to divine presence and intervention, to God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Theology examines the responsive and fundamentally relational and spiritual character of these practices, in which participants may open themselves up to God’s presence and prepare themselves for receiving divine gifts. They examine the grand narratives from the Christian tradition, as they interact with other intellectual traditions and their historical development.

Theologians, from various disciplinary fields, open up a vision of the good life that is characterized by creation, being created in the image of God, the ten commandments, salvation, reconciliation, liberation, grace, discipleship, love, service, mission, responsibility, compassion, community and, what has been called, eschatological imagination. Ethical theologians reflect on the commandments, duties and moral rules, virtues and the relationship between divine law and human law. Practical theologians observe, describe and evaluate how beliefs, norms and values, shape the practices of individuals and faith communities and the missional, diaconal, liturgical, homiletic, educational, and artistic practices through which these communities share what they have received with the wider world. They also acquire knowledge as to what people consider sacred, worth living for or what they aspire and hope for. With regard to the good life, a Christian theological perspective recognizes the tension between on the one hand a sharp distinctiveness of Christian beliefs, norms, values and practices, and, on the other hand a continuity with secular and/or other religious perspectives. Christian visions and practices are in different ways related to and interact with the common pursuit of a good life. Finally, and importantly, a theological perspective explicitly takes into account the realities of evil, alienation, fragility, meaninglessness, oppression, crisis, suffering and death. In our program therefore, these realities are paramount.

‘Mediating’ refers to our assumption that salvation, grace, compassion, in short, good life in Christ, is given and received. Good life is only accessible *via* or *through* sacred texts, beliefs, ethical behaviour and practices of faith, in the past and the present. Following the protestant principle (Tillich), mediation also implies that what is given or transmitted needs to be discovered, interpreted, imagined, articulated, and embodied time and again in ever-changing contexts. Contemporary experiences, imaginaries, and articulations of the good life, in various kinds of artistic expressions (prose, poetry, photo’s, film etc.), but also in verbal expressions, documentaries and philosophical reflections, may question, sharpen and enrich Christian visions and practices and vice versa.

What is the problem the research program seeks to address? Today, the question what characterizes a good life comes to the fore in different contexts and situations. Different actual developments point to an intense interest in what makes life good and to the need to study and question the dominant models of good life that are on the market. *First*, our societies offer experiences of happiness, joy, care, and mutual support, while there are also

¹ Cf. Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World. Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019).

wide-spread experiences of meaninglessness and lack of purpose and identity. Psychologists such as Oliver James² and Dirk de Wachter³ have pointed out that the focus on happiness and affluence comes at a cost not only for those who are *not* able to do well in terms of social expectations, but even for those who *do* very well according to such standards. *Second*, experiences of the good life exclude many, because they cannot keep up with the pace, since they have no access to crucial resources, or because their cheap labour is needed to support the affluence of others. Social philosophers, reflecting on the good life, state that it is time to dissolve the link between economic growth and the good life. *Third*, some dominant visions of good life are lived at the expense of a fragile ecosystem that can no longer support this lifestyle. *Fourth*, particular in times of personal and social crisis, when life is under threat or highly insecure, the meaning of good life for all and how it is mediated becomes more important. *Fifth*, certain visions of good life take the reality of vulnerability, failure, brokenness, and death insufficiently into account. *Sixth*, from a Christian perspective, certain dominant approaches to good life lack a transcendent perspective on the place of the relationship with God in living well and flourishing, on the possibilities of salvation that transcend human possibilities both within this life and beyond death. *Seventh*, there is a dominance of marketplace thinking, a strong steering influence of businesses and an increasingly purposive calculating orientation of acting individuals. *Eighth*, several social philosophers point out that Christian visions of the good life can, albeit in translation, find recognition by secular philosophy and by all who participate in conversation on the good life in the public domain. They provide ‘innovative impulses’ for reflection. It is important to make these intuitions accessible to all.⁴

As an *academic* project, the MGL[⊕] research program relates critically and constructively to both the visions and practices of society and culture and to the sources, beliefs, norms, values and practices related to good life within the Christian community. Critical voices are not only raised in academy, but also in government en non-government associations, as well as in social movements. They concern issues of human flourishing vis-a-vis the flourishing of our planet, both in our immediate environment and worldwide. Hence, our theme is related to the *common* pursuit of a good life.

The ⊕-sign of the ringed cross at the end of the title of the program is an ancient Christian symbol that occurs in several parts of the world (e.g. the Celtic cross). It refers to the cross in the cosmos as essential for the Christian understanding of the good life both in its encompassing nature (the cosmos) and the reality of brokenness and divine interruption (the cross).

Research purposes

In the modern Western world, questions concerning the nature of good life and what contributes to human flourishing have been pushed, in a complex historical process, to leave the margins of academic study.⁵ In this vein, MGL[⊕] brings this human and social concern centre stage. The program analyses, interprets and evaluates how Christian visions, projects and practices of good life interact consciously and unconsciously, critically and

² Oliver James, *Affluenza: How to Be Successful and Stay Sane* (London: Vermilion, 2007).

³ Dirk De Wachter, *De kunst van het ongelukkig zijn* (Leuven: Lannoo Campus, 2019).

⁴ “This created nature of the image of God expresses an intuition which in the present context may even speak to those who are tone-deaf to religious connotations,” Jürgen Habermas, Peace Price Lecture 2001, 11 (Original: Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen. Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2001).

⁵ F.ex. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

constructively with everyday life, with the secular world, and with other religious traditions. Thus, it seeks to contribute to the understanding and practices of good life in the relationship between the ultimate good life (eternal life, salvation, grace, the Kingdom of God in its fullness, the new creation) and the penultimate forms of flourishing to which one can strive in one's life here and now.⁶

As a research programme, MGL[®] intends to constructively and critically engage with the wider society, public debates and policy-makers, both where the search for good life is explicitly on the table and where the question is neglected and overtaken by pragmatic interests. This deepening and widening of the understandings and practices with regard to the good life also intends to support Christian individuals, communities, organizations and professionals. What understandings of good life are expressed and lived in their practices and can these understandings and practices be brought in critical conversation with resources from the Scriptures, Christian traditions and the Church worldwide? As such, the program seeks to acquire knowledge, insight, and engagement in both constructive and critical dialogue with a view to serve 'the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7) and support the church in its calling to serve the flourishing of individuals, communities and the fragile planet on which they live.

Relevance to society

In its research programs, PThU strives to strengthen the link between academic theology, church communities, and society. The program Mediating Good Life starts from the conviction that theology in its own particular way can and should contribute to the analysis of burning societal issues and to the search for solutions. Committed to this endeavor, we believe that academic theology can offer a positive and structural contribution on good life to a global knowledge society, to the dialogue and collaboration with other scientific disciplines, to the dialogue and collaboration with other religions and philosophies of life, to the sectors of education, care, government, culture, and media, and to the vitality of Christian communities and their mission in context. Cross-pollination between the academy and practice, and increasingly, collaborative research of practitioners and researchers, is important for our University. Being located at the academy, the program complies with epistemic values such as freedom of inquiry and methodological transparency.

Main research question

What do Christian theological visions and practices of good life, from different biblical, historical, and social and cultural contexts contribute to a constructive and critical engagement with contemporary understandings and practices of good life within the church and in society at large?

⁶ Cf. on the difference and relationship between ultimate and penultimate flourishing Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 154ff.