

Theology and Design¹

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THEOLOGY AS CONCEPTUAL DESIGN?

*What can theology – understood as a practice –
learn from design?*

When we hear the term “design,” we might think of architecture, or every-day objects, or of software. As a working definition, we could say that design is *the structuring and reshaping of given materials for an intended purpose, discovering and attending to material, agential, contextual, and ecological possibilities and constraints in the process*. Design creates patterns that allow for, invite to, discourage, or prevent particular uses, make objects accessible or inaccessible, helpful or harmful for particular uses and to particular users. The artifacts we design are expressions of care and world-making: Design is oriented to make the world more inhabitable for humans, to accommodate bodies, intentions, and needs better. In short, design is materialized ethics.

A broad definition such as the one above might already help us see that architectural structures, objects of mass consumption, technologies and media products are by no means the only things that are subject to design processes. We might argue that ideas and concepts are just as much artifacts in this sense as material objects: They are crafted with specific intentions and purposes, make use of existent materials and attend to their constraints, and they respond to contextually articulated needs and requirements in their fitting.

Metaphorically, theological systems have often been likened to cathedrals; we all know of cases when doctrines have been wielded like weapons, and some talk about theological grammars in ways that are not so different from a kind of software. What if we took these resonances between material design and the work of theology seriously? What would happen if we understood the doing of theology as a kind of design, not of physical objects, but of ideas and notions and language, a design of conceptual objects, to better fit their theological purpose?

Design allows for a bridging between the world of ideas and the world of things, the world of meaning and the world of facts. It prompts a wide-tent realism in which ideas *matter*, but matter also ideates. A theology that is committed to the incarnation should be willing to learn from that.

Design is a form of communication, its structuring conveys to users what actions they may perform or how they can inhabit a space. Similarly, all theology is at its root practical and communicative: It does not only intellectually reflect on, but ultimately also communicates the gospel, as it prepares for, supports, and reflects on the church's proclamation. While theology can *happen* in purely academic modes, *better* versions of theology attend not just to their potential rhetorical and material effects, but also their inherent pastoral function. Like design, theology works on putting ideas in relationship with one another to craft coherent and cohesive, sustainable and livable structures.

Like design, theology does not start in empty air, but with given materials – scripture, creeds, confessional statements, liturgical and diaconic practice, religious experiences of people past and present, and somewhere behind it all: God. Good design knows that material is not inert and cannot simply be shaped and molded randomly. Materials always have a character of their own and good design (including

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good theological design) will be attentive to the specific quality of its materials, their character, their previous use, their possibilities and their breaking points.

Like design, theology does not create, and it cannot impose itself on its material, it can only humbly restructure and order its materials towards its purposes – the glory of God, the life of the church and the world, or faith seeking understanding.

Like design, theology has to exercise great care and attentiveness to details, not just with regard to its materials, but also to the requirements of its contexts, the capabilities of its users – all of these variables have to be taken into account. Like design, theology deals with complexities that may not have the one unequivocal solution that is true for all times, but is in intense negotiation with contexts and cultures to discern how to express truth in a form that is adequate to the time.

THE THEOLOGIAN: FROM PARAMEDIC TO REDESIGNER

Bad theology kills, is the title of a recent book by Kevin Garcia that captures the urgency of this need.² Ideas *matter* – they not only conceptualize lived realities, they also in turn have material effects. We know that. Theological ideas have been no exception. Even as some of the key ideas that theologians talk about are grace, redemption, reconciliation, salvation, and healing, we are also acutely aware that theological ideas can kill, hurt, and inflict harm on people. Mark Jordan, who recently retired from Harvard Divinity School, sometimes reflected that his job as a theologian resembled that of a paramedic: removing the theological bullets that have been shot into people and patching them up as best as possible. Working with students, especially with students who are queer, who are women, who are Black, or who come

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from formerly colonized places, I too find it hard to overlook that theology has not always been nor is it presently always life-giving and liberating, but more often than not has inflicted deep wounds, created suspicions, and torn people apart.

Theology *matters*, for better or worse, and as academic theologians, our job is often remedial: damage control of the ways in which theology can go wrong. Bad theology kills, and as theologians, we need to develop reflexive structures to take accountability for that, but even more importantly, in a world that is filled with all sorts of bad theology, we need to do *better*. So my pitch to think of theology as a work of conceptual design is not primarily about methodological innovation, but a searching motion: Can design theory offer a way to envision both such accountability and open up ways to think about doing *better*?

As theology is now already coming to stand on both sides of the conflict (inflicting wounds and patching up wounds), we might as well take a step back in reflection and ask, what is the *purpose* to which theology ought to be directed? Is there something like a right use of theology? And are there ways to design theological concepts in such a way that the purposes to which they are put more closely resemble the realities they talk about?

To concretize the image a bit, we might turn to Scripture: “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”³ We know that historically, the word of God has been wielded to kill, to excise, and to cut, and that Christian theology has been used to wage wars and justify genocides, to enable slavery, patriarchy, settler colonialism, and ecological devastation – to name but a few evils. The word of God, then, wielded by humans, certainly is *as sharp as a sword* – but does that necessarily

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make it a *sword*? Is a two-edged blade necessarily an instrument for killing? Could it also be, say, a plowshare? And how would we know the difference?

Both are instruments with sharp blades, both intervene in their environment, breaking things apart and breaking them open. Their affordances, what they invite the user to do with them, are remarkably similar, and while swords and plowshares cannot simply be used interchangeably, they can easily be transformed into one another. This is a matter of design and redesign. The prophetic passages in the Bible which specifically speak of the transformation of swords into plowshares, and in one incident, the transformation of plowshares into swords, are well known. Could that not be a worthwhile vision of theological work: not just removing theological bullets, but discerning what theology is *for* and then transforming theological instruments of war into theological instruments of peace?

But wait, you might say, theology is not about *use* at all, it is about truth. *Yes, of course*, it can be used one way or the other, but that is not its responsibility, its responsibility is to the truth, even ultimate truth, eternal truths, the many atrocities that have been done with theological sanction are horrifying, but ultimately they are not the theologian's responsibility...? I have heard these objections many times, and to me they sound like the freedom-loving people of the NRA when they say, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Of course, it is true that guns are not intelligent agents who are capable of choosing to kill and executing such a decision on their own. At best, they might be proximate causes while people are ultimate causes in the killing. However, guns certainly allow for killing or even invite to use them for killing. Not only is it *possible* to use them for killing (which is also true about baseball bats or castiron frying pans), but guns make killing

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efficient, easy, and effortless – they are designed to “afford” killing. You can also use a gun to stir a pot or as a paperweight, but other objects lend themselves more readily to these kinds of purposes. Killing is the purpose guns lend themselves to, it is their design.

What uses does theology lend itself to? Are its affordances those of a gun or those of a frying pan, those of a sword or those of a plowshare? And how do we discern the right use? Is the question of use and effects really a secondary concern, is it not a fundamentally theological question itself?

Hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere (To know Christ is to know Christ’s benefits), writes Philip Melancthon in the *Loci communes*, arguably the first work of Systematic Theology proper, in its technical sense.⁴ We know Christ, Melancthon argues, because we experience Christ’s grace. If theology is about the knowledge of God, where does such knowledge come from if not from experiences of grace? And if that is the case, can theology really *have* true knowledge of God if it does not *communicate* such benefits itself? This is, I want to argue, what design is about: not only aesthetics, materiality, or epistemology, but their intertwinement in the transformation of a situation by making certain uses accessible and communicating them effectively.

REPURPOSING AND REDESIGNING

A blade called election

What happens when we look at theology as design? Maybe it is helpful to study a few examples.

I have already compared theology to a blade (a designed object!) that could be used as a sword or a plowshare. I have recently argued

that the doctrine of election functions much the same way.⁵ Like a blade, the doctrine of election can be put to different, and seemingly contradictory uses. It can be used, and historically has been used, both as an instrument of exclusion, segregation, supremacy, settler colonialism and apartheid, and it can be used as an instrument of grace, mercy, and “hope for even the most wretched.”⁶ In sum, it can be used as an instrument of war or an instrument of shalom.

If, as I assume most of us will agree, one of these uses is more adequate, because it more closely reflects the benefits of Christ than the other, then the design lens allows us to pose new and different questions for the theologian: What prompted one use or the other? What affordances and signals have we embedded into the design of the doctrine that communicate to the user to use them this way or the other? While design can never ultimately prevent all misuse, Don Norman postulates that it is too easy and insufficient to blame the user. Especially in cases of recurrent “misuse,” it is the responsibility of the designer to find ways to embed clearer signals in the design as to how it is supposed to be used, to make misuse more difficult, more improbable, and where it happens, limit its effects.⁷

The design lens allows us to make the uses to which the doctrine is put, at least to some degree, the responsibility of the theologian. It thus reorients us, and it extends the range of criteria theologians have to take into account. Conceptual work then does not only have to be in keeping with scripture and tradition, it does not only have to be coherent and cohesive, but it also has to consider practical, ethical, political, as well as pedagogic and communicative questions. How might we similarly design the doctrine of election in such a way that it is *easier* to use it for hope than for exclusion? What affordances and signals can we incorporate into the design that would allow the user how to use it *rightly*?

Similar questions about the use of doctrine and the affordances certain doctrines develop might be posed to a whole number of doctrines: We might consider the Lordship of Christ or the Fatherhood of God, the doctrine of sin or the *imago dei* with the question in mind, what uses has this doctrine historically afforded, and do these uses, in our understanding, adequately reflect the realities these doctrines talk *about*? How might they be redesigned to achieve their theological purpose more effectively, how might we minimize the possibility of misuse, accidents, and harm?

Theological Norman Doors?

Effectively, this is how a lot of Feminist Theologies and Liberation Theologies have operated all along: They have re-appropriated traditional doctrinal material that has proven harmful in the past and they have reformulated it constructively towards better ends. They have thus redesigned them, deploying the tools that used to serve their oppression, creatively and sometimes subversively as tools for liberative, lifegiving purposes. In short, the design lens allows us to recognize the work constructive theologies have been doing all along as one of faithful redesign instead of novelty or even heresy, and it invites us in theological work at large to an expanded and more rigorous investigation into the *adequatio intellectus ad rem* that includes an ethics of material effects and practical uses.

Design also allows us to rethink the question of accountability. Feminist and Liberationist critiques of doctrine have often been dismissed by those who felt wrongly faulted for bad uses of theology. The doctrine of election had been *abused* in settler colonialism and apartheid, such apologists might argue, but that did not take away from its doctrinal truth. The doctrine of God the Father was not intentionally *designed* to enable patriarchy and should not be blamed for it, and so on. The ensuing debates about the guilt and innocence of theological concepts (or the historical figures, movements, and institutions standing behind them) often get ugly. But design might deflate them helpfully without taking off their critical edge: Design is utterly uninterested in questions of good or bad intentions, even as it offers helpful tools to conceptualize the politics of artifacts, first and foremost among them the notion of affordances.

An affordance, according to Don Norman, who popularized the concept, is “a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used.”⁸ Design choices are never neutral; they always *do* something or other. They facilitate certain kinds of use more than others, make some courses of actions more plausible than others, enable some bodies more than others. Affordances are the perceived action possibilities of an object, features of the design that suggest to the potential user how the object can be interacted with and to what ends it can be used. Importantly, an

“affordance is not a property. An affordance is a relationship. Whether an affordance exists depends upon the properties of both the object and the agent.”⁹

In this function, Norman teaches us, affordances are typically invisible – as long as they work, or as long as they work as intended. The power of affordances in fact is that they make the use of an object seem natural and self-evident. A well-designed object minimizes the cognitive load for the user, it just *works* without us having to consciously engage the object, without having to know the intentions of the designer, and without having to understand the philosophy or aesthetic theory behind it to know how to use it. Affordances make up the implicit pedagogy of the designed object, and they constitute the value and meaning of the object, produced by way of its design. Affordances help us rethink value and meaning from the user end: the way an object is used and what meaning it acquires in the world is not accidental or secondary to its design, but is what constitutes that design. Design thus becomes not only concerned with pedagogy, but with ethics.

At the same time, affordances also clarify that the use of things is not something the designer can conclusively determine in advance. Affordances do not constitute self-contained qualities of the object thus designed. They pertain to the relationship between the designed object and the person who interacts with it. Affordances are thus typically projected by the designer, but also discovered along the way by those who use the object (or fail trying). This is when they typically become visible: when they *do not work* or do not work *for us*. Have you ever walked into a door convinced that it would open when you pushed against it until it did not? You have discovered affordances, and so did Don Norman, who developed the concept of affordance in the context of his famous study of doors (“Norman doors”).

Centrally, Don Norman pointed out that when different people regularly make the same “mistakes” in the same environment of objects, then this is not the users’ fault; it means that the objects are *badly designed*. Regardless of the good or bad intentions of the designer, if the created objects do not effectively communicate how they can and should be used to the actual users, then their design has failed. This often happens, Norman observed, when designers do not sufficiently take into account how real people *tick*, but abstractly design things for idealized human beings. (Does that sound like something that might at times happen in theology?) A good designer will be first of all a good observer of human beings and take into account how they actually move and tick, and subsequently design a door in such a way that people are subtly prompted by a bar to push or by a handle to pull. What would theology look like if it was first and foremost an acute observer of how real human beings tick, before offering conceptual solutions to existential questions?

Norman doors are a very particular failure of design, a failure not in the affordance, but in its communication, a failure in signaling: The door handle in the first illustration might explicitly instruct you that it is designed to open when you “push,” but the shape of the handle affords grasping and pulling and thus communicate to the average user, long before we consciously read the sign, that the door is for pulling. Chances are we will use it intuitively, and wrongly. Putting a sign on the door will not fix the design.

Some theological designs may be Norman doors. Maybe the doctrine of election is once more an example. On one level, the doctrine is very clearly articulated as a consequence of divine grace and does not talk about an innerhuman difference. But as clear as that may be theoretically, on another level the doctrine tends to communicate a subdivision of human beings into elect and non-elect, and affords a hierarchical distinction between them. The lengths to which theologians have gone historically to distinguish single from double predestination may be read as the hapless, and ultimately ineffective attempt of the designer to attach a “push” sign to this badly designed door. If the handle is not for pulling, the handle should be differently designed rather than fixed with a label. If the theology of election is not for subdivision, maybe it should be differently designed rather than given lengthy explanations. Would there be a better way to go back and redesign the doctrine, one that testifies to the sovereign grace it was meant to communicate all along?

C O N S T R U C T I V E M I S F I T T I N G : H A R D B E N C H E S & A T O N E M E N T T H E O L O G Y

The Norman door sends conflicting signals about its use, but it is very obviously a design flaw, as, I hope we can agree, are supersessionist readings of the doctrine of election. In other cases, it will be less clear

where the mistake lies, and whether a given affordance or disaffordance is a “bug” or a “feature,” to now speak in the idiom of a software design.

If you look at the second illustration, you will see a bench designed for a public space, such as a park, or maybe in front of a church. The bench sends two very clear signals about its affordances. I assume that the first one you noticed would have been the paint. Indeed, a bench is for sitting, and what could be expressing this invitation more loudly than the colorful stripes of the rainbow, a symbol of the LGBTQ advocacy, that exclaims, “All are welcome.”

But *are* “all” welcome on this bench? At a second glance, another design feature might come to view: the bars that are installed to break up the bench’s surface. While the bench affords sitting, it disaffords lying down for all but the smallest body shapes. It makes it possible to sit here and look over the park, but it makes it virtually impossible to sleep on it.

Apparently, whoever designed the bench did not perceive these two messages as contradictory. Maybe they explicitly envisioned a nice gay couple kissing on this bench while equally explicitly being tasked with preventing use by the homeless population. The irony, of course, is that LGBTQ youth are disproportionately at risk of experiencing homelessness.¹⁰ Rejection by their family is compounded by the harassment and abuse queer youth experience in many homeless shelters. Other intersectional factors like race, class, drug use, and sex work further exacerbate these findings.

What message is this bench, then, sending to the queer or transgender homeless youth? Hardly one of welcome. If this is not a design flaw but the intended effect, then it is highly cynical to clothe this message in the colors of the rainbow.

While some theological designs might be Norman doors – sending contradictory signals and thus leading to user error – other theological designs might be rainbow-painted anti-homeless benches, where the “official” message belies the implicit effect of the design, where the intention and the actual use tell two different stories, and where this only becomes apparent when we complicate our analysis of affordances by innerhuman intersectional difference.

In their relational quality, affordances do not only speak to incongruities between intended and factual use, but also to incongruities between intended and factual user. Design is a process of communication, and as in

every act of communication, it is directed to someone. You can be addressed by a design, and the design will tell you something about the intended user. It will be enabling people with certain characteristics to use it while denying access to and disabling others.¹¹

Which affordances are available might thus change, and change significantly, with the characteristics of the person using a design at a given point of time. A door may afford opening only to people of a specific height or physical strength, maybe even intentionally, to afford certain forms of security. A bench might afford support for those who are seeking a romantic scene for kissing, but not for those who sorely need a place for the night.

In theology as in design, the imagined users often look much like the designers. This is not altogether surprising. But it brings to the fore the crucial epistemological importance of misfits to reveal the ways in which a design *doesn't work*. “Misfitting” is a notion from disability and crip studies to highlight that it is not certain bodies who fail to conform to the designed environment. Rather, “misfits” are produced by the design when it “does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it.”¹² It is the design that enables or disables different users in different ways, but only when diverse bodies start using it might this fact come to our attention. In the case of our bench, it is quite conceivable (although not necessary) that the designer is a queer person, but it is highly unlikely that they have ever experienced homelessness. If you have never experienced homelessness, it is even possible that you never noticed the conflicting signals of the bench – simply because there was no conflicting message, no disaffordance *for you*. Not needing to understand an affordance is a privilege.

“Ask an architect about their work, and you may learn more about the style, form, materials, structure, and cost of a building than the bodies or minds meant to inhabit it. Examine any doorway, window, toilet, chair, or desk in that building, however, and you will find the outline of the body meant to use it.”¹³ Ask, in turn, a disabled user or another user disafforded access by the design, and they will be able to tell you about both the kinds of things the design afford as well as of its particular disaffordances that remain invisible to the privileged. The homeless person knows more about this bench than someone who just rested on it on a walk.

As Sarah Ahmed says, “Those who are not quite at home – in a body, a discipline, a world – have much to teach us about how things are built”¹⁴ – that is one of the major insight from Feminist Standpoint Epistemology about the epistemic privilege of subjugated knowledge. Knowing and access are thus interwoven: Being disafforded access affords its own unique kind of knowledge of how an affordance works, and knowing allows to create

different kinds of affordances for access. Epistemic activism might both guide the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of better knowledge at the same time. No design is universal, that is true for the conceptual design of theology as much as for material design. Like every designer, theologians have to actively make a decision which voices, experiences, and needs to privilege in our conceptual design. The designer knows that attending to the excluded, marginalized, misfitting voices is both a matter of justice and of epistemology. It makes for “better knowledge” in both senses.

There are many rainbow-colored anti-homeless benches in theology, many cases where the official message and the implicit effects it creates are at odds with one another, and which becomes apparent especially once people start engaging this theology who were not part of its design process – whether because they come from historically marginalized communities, or whether they simply are the everyday religious person rather than the vocational theological professional. Doing theology through a design lens would make such conflicts legible and addressable in a different way, and it allows us to understand the hostile concepts we find in theology as flawed designs that can be improved, rather than as cynicism.

Consider Womanist critiques of atonement theology. Atonement theology maintains that Christ suffered for us at the cross, in the double sense of “in our stead” and “for our benefit”: this suffering is what became redemptive and reconciled humankind with God. Like the homeless queer kid might scoff at the bench and point that its “all are welcome” obviously did not include them, so some Womanist theologians like Delores Williams have scoffed at the doctrine of atonement and pointed out that the “in our stead” surely did not translate into “our benefit” for them. Delores Williams draws out how notions of vicarious suffering have not only not alleviated Black women’s plights, but even further reinforced their own vicarious suffering in diverse roles, both under slavery and after it: The Black liberationist claim that redemptive suffering could be liberative certainly did not apply to them.¹⁵

We see effects of (conceptual) misfitting here: A doctrine that was supposedly designed to convey comfort and consolation, meets bodies for whom it was not designed and for whom, it turns out, it does not afford such uses but actively bars them. Of course it might be possible to argue that the doctrine was never benevolent in the first place, but always served to justify suffering and submission, as histories of martyrdom and monasticism might testify. But let’s leave that line of reasoning aside for a moment. A charitable reading might discern that what the doctrine is about is comfort, the limitation of punishment, the limitation of suffering, and the liberation of the believer from these burdens: It is supposed to be a door, not a wall. It is supposed to be a tree

of life, not a cross. It is supposed to be a bench that affords resting, and not just to some, but to all.

The critique of womanist theologians like Williams thus amounts to a critique of the design in light of its failure to achieve the intended purpose – pointing out that this doctrine does not afford Black women the function of comfort, consolation, edification, and liberation; that this door does not afford access, this bench is welcoming, this tree of life has once more become a cross. This critique is an apt exemplification of what Thomson-Garland calls “misfitting,” revealing the systemic discriminatory effects of a design that obtain because the design was modeled after a specific, and implicit, model of human existence and thus not only neglected non-normative bodies and experiences but actively discriminates against them in a way that perpetuates the discrimination and violence they already experience from society at large. Design, including theological design, then does not merely become a matter of ethics, but of justice.

Some theologians would dismiss such a Womanist critique of atonement theologies as unorthodox or even heretical. The design lens instead allows us to view it as constructively reclaiming the promised purpose of Christology: one of redemption, consolation, and reconciliation, rather than the perpetuation of unjust suffering. We might thus read Williams’ critique as pointing to a similar design incongruity and intersectionally discriminatory effects as we have seen them in the queer anti-homeless bench, and their counterproposals as constructive redesigns of Christology to afford the promised kinds of purposes for the specificities of these users. In this sense, Womanist Christologies that draw on Jesus’ ministerial vision and his life rather than his suffering and death are a form of what designers call “user-lead innovation,” where users faithfully stick with the original product but, knowing their own needs better than the designer did, adapt and develop the design further to meet them more precisely.¹⁶

USABILITY AS A THEOLOGICAL CRITERION

Theology might learn from design that to achieve its purpose, i.e.: to be effective, design is (almost) by necessity user-centered and make usability a primary goal. Designed objects have to be fitted such that users are naturally and easily able to use them, rather than having to accommodate and compromise (or even just to have to think too hard!) in order to be able to access their use.¹⁷

This means that the experience of the user will become more central for the assessment of a design than the intentions of the designer. If the designer intends for this house to allow for community, but people find that

the layout of the rooms space them in a way that they cannot meaningfully interact with each other, then it is not the designer's job to provide elaborate manuals that will tell people how they actually *can* use this space to interact. The designer needs to go back and redesign the house. This also leads to the necessity of iterative practices of observation and ideation, design and redesign: You cannot expect to get it right the first time. The rubber needs to hit the road. Designers cannot possibly anticipate all the different forces of the environment that will act upon their designed form, but good designers will spend much time in observation, dedicating themselves to critical and creative reflection about the subtle clues their design sends or fails to send, and be willing to go back again and revise. Should not theology be ready to do the same?

The demand of fit and usability, however, does not indicate in any way that design is simply *determined* by subjective or contextual demands. Quite the contrary, design is always an active response to a given condition, an intervention that materially alters the environment in order to reorient behavior. On the other hand, the designer also cannot simply *invent* uses artificially. They will be attentive to the dynamics of the particular environment they are forming the materials *for*. While it is always conceivable that theologians' conceptual designs will simply reflect their own intentions, experiences, and interests, those theologians among us who are trying to do *better* will look for *fit* with users' needs and requirements as much as aspiring to let their *intervention* align the existing reality with the reality of God.

The Womanist critique of the disaffordances of atonement theology also raises the question of the conditions of theological knowledge production: We learn things about its historical designers and intended users as well as about its limitations, and we gain insight into how a change in the production of theological knowledge might result in quite different designs. Design theory allows us to understand different users not only as recipients of our conceptual designs, but as collaborators and irreplaceable experts in the process – especially those who are in some salient aspect of their experience different from the “us” of academic theologians. Theology will be in need of the critical feedback of “outsiders” and “misfits” – those whom our traditional designs did not take into account and whose bodies and lives we fail by it, who find no use in it, and who are all but disabled by it. Their “misfitting” with regard to traditional theological notions does not mean that they have not understood them properly (“let’s hand them a user’s manual”), or that they are hostile against them. We would do better to read such critiques as revealing to us the previously invisible limits or even failures of the theological designs we inhabit, as “bug reports” that invite us to go back to the drawing board and design our theological notions *better*. What would a theology look like that developed structurally maintained practices of recursive publics to facilitate such reports rather than penalize them?

“If as theologians, we are not content with simply mitigating the damage wreaked by bad theologies, if we also aspire to make theology better – to be a truer witness to the reality of God, then we will be intent to let this truth transform reality accordingly, then we will attempt to better take into account the complexities of contextual and user-related requirements.”

Design allows for strong normativities that nevertheless do not become deterministic. It makes room for individual agency and for structural effects of power. Materials are always open to different interpretations. Use can never be completely predicted or dictated. Design is always open to the future and all manner of complexities, at the same time, design is highly sensitive to structural effects, material politics and ethics. It addresses materiality with a social lens. It crosses between objective and subjective or objective and relational, between material and psychological, between aesthetic and political dimensions. Design is as counterfactual as it is responsive to its environment. It needs to be strictly realistic about what is possible, yet is also always imagining worlds that are just out of reach. It maintains a reflective orientation, that is as pragmatic as it is utopian and which cultivates practices that are ambitiously down-to-earth.

Theology could learn a lot from such practices. Obviously, I am not claiming that the task of theology is reducible to the task of design or that everything that applies to design applies to theology. I am merely suggesting that looking at theological conceptual work through the lens of design theory might be generative and insightful. It might allow us to see new and hitherto unnoticed features of our knowledge production and their conditions, it might allow us to read contemporary theological debates in less antagonistic and more constructive light, and it might allow us to expand the range of criteria that we employ to do theology *better* in particular ways. If as theologians, we are not content with simply mitigating the damage wreaked by bad theologies, if we also aspire to make theology *better* – to be a truer witness to the reality of God, then we will be intent to let this truth transform reality accordingly, then we will attempt to *better* take into account the complexities of contextual and user-related requirements, questions of ethics, politics and justice of theological design as part of the *adequatio*

ad rem to which theology aspires, and, finally, will work to develop concrete structures that foster recursive publics and the cultures and institutions that support them.

Designers know that, “no solution is ever perfect, regardless of the criteria, and design can be seen as a permanent *striving toward*, an ongoing process of ideation, iteration, and revision toward the ideal.”¹⁸ Theologians might take this as a reminder of what we, too, know all too well, that *theologia semper reformanda est* – for the love of God to God’s creatures, and to the glory of God in them.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This piece presents thoughts that I am developing at greater length in my upcoming book (Hanna Reichel, *After Method: Queer Grace, Conceptual Design, and the Possibility of Theology* (Westminster John Knox, 2023).
- 2 Kevin Garcia, *Bad Theology Kills: Undoing Toxic Belief & Reclaiming Your Spiritual Authority* (Independently published, 2020).
- 3 Hebrews 4:12.
- 4 Phillip Melancthon, *Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia. Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider (ed.)* (Halle: Schwetschke, 1834).
- 5 Hanna Reichel, "Swords to plowshares: On doing election," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 8, no. 1 (2022), pp. 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2022.v8n1.ad1>.
- 6 Dirk Smit, "Hope Even for the Most Wretched? The 2018 Annie Kinkead Warfield Lectures" (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2018).
- 7 Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*. Rev and Exp ed. (New York: Basic, 2013).
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 For the US context, see Bianca D.M. Wilson, Soon Kyu Choi, Gary W. Harper, Marguerita Lightfoot, Stephen Russell and Ilan H. Meyer, "Homelessness Among LGBT Adults in the US" (UCLA School of Law, Williams Institute, 2020) <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-homelessness-us/>.
- 11 Cf. Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- 12 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A feminist materialist disability concept," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011), pp. 594. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x>.
- 13 Hamraie, 2017, p. 19.
- 14 Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 19.
- 15 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).
- 16 Eric von Hippel "Sources of Innovation." SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 2877276 (Rochester: Social Science Research Network, 2016) <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2877276>.
- 17 Steve Krug, *Don't Make Me Think, Revisited: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2014).
- 18 Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (Cambridge: MIT, 2020), p. 202.



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