

Occupational hazard: Theology can be dangerous

by [Ellen T. Charry](#) in the [October 16, 2007](#) issue

It was the last concert of the season and I had a seat from which I could clearly see the hands of the young Israeli pianist as she played Edvard Grieg's piano concerto. The guest conductor was Norwegian (like Grieg himself). He was taking the place that evening of the principle conductor, an Estonian. The rest of the orchestra included many Asians and several African Americans in addition to an assortment of Anglos. Ah, I thought, music does bring people together!

Then I was struck by another thought: my own field, theology, tends to drive people apart, not bring them together. Indeed, not only does theology divide people, it's mostly *intended* to divide people. What is wrong with this picture? What is wrong is that in the apparently innocent effort to arrive at truth, theology inculcates pride, the very vice that Christians claim is the consummate sin.

Theology has always been a polemical enterprise, one often undertaken in anger. Already in the second century Irenaeus (whose name means peaceful) was polemicizing for his view of truth. The underside of the patristic debates involves political intrigue, exile, manipulation and violence. The need to be right and declare other people wrong became so intense that in the Middle Ages the church declared war (literally) on those who disagreed (heretics). Christians only stopped killing one another for theological reasons in the 17th century with the creation of denominationalism and eventually the separation of church from state.

One of the expectations that people have of me as a theology teacher in a Protestant seminary is that I will induct my students into the 16th-century theological debates so that future ministers will keep the disagreements sharp.

So I am led to ask myself: If polemical theology is morally flawed, at least from the perspective of the highest Christian values, what is theology's purpose and how should it be undertaken? Is there an alternative to polemical theology?

Before suggesting an answer, I should note the most important objection to the question. Although Christianity values love and reconciliation above all, it also calls for correcting one's brothers and sisters. Ostensibly, theological polemic is aimed not at promoting smugness on the part of theologians but at correcting wrong beliefs and practices, persuading the errant of the falseness of their ways so that they may repent and be saved. Indeed, this was the hope of the Inquisition. So smugness, it might be said, is an occupational hazard of an essential Christian activity intended to keep the church on the right path.

I once had a bumper sticker that offered a good slogan for polemical theology: "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." And so it is. Without intellectual scrutiny, religious belief and practice are vulnerable to corruption. This is why an educated clergy is a good idea. This is why theological schools cultivate an ethos (traditional, progressive, denominational, etc.) and hire scholars who indoctrinate students into that ethos. Without a clear ethos, a sense of what is the main thing, students are confused and faculties are dysfunctional.

But too narrow an ethos is suffocating. Smugness arises when the appropriate desire to defend the faith or even to correct it becomes the core of a school's ethos.

Lest any reader think that I am hypocritically offering a polemic against polemic, my point is not to undermine theological argument or argue that we ought not engage in it, but simply to point out a problem: polemical theology may be spiritually harmful. Those given to smugness generally are not helping themselves spiritually by engaging in theological polemic; only those who are spiritually strong may do it without damage to themselves.

The principle here comes from 1 Corinthians 8, where Paul teaches that whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols is not what matters; what matters is supporting one another in our walk with God. Christian practice should be spiritually helpful.

Theology is a Christian practice, and it should be spiritually helpful too. Theology should serve the spiritual welfare of Christians, including the theologian herself. The basic task of theology is to help people know, love and enjoy God better. Polemical theology focuses on the first of these activities—knowing. Some would limit the task of theology to this epistemic activity and exclude the moral task of loving God. But before Christianity was a set of ideas it was a way of life.

So it is perfectly legitimate to think that theology should help people love God better. And for explanations of the doctrines of the Christian tradition—God, creation, sin, salvation, sacrament, eschatology and so on—not only to inform but also to help, theologians must be psychologically attuned to how explanations are received, that is, how they work or, to put it sharply, what they enable people to become.

So, for example, if sin is explained in such a way that people are paralyzed, the explanation is not very helpful. Or if salvation is described in such a way that people take themselves to be members of an elite club that will play polo in heaven, the effort may not be spiritually helpful.

If Christians believe that God loves well, they should be able to explain God and the things of God to one another so that they become better at loving God and one another.