

The Theological Rhetoric of Well-being: A Primer¹

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Abstract

How do theologians define and interpret the concept of well-being? What are some of the limitations and critique, but also possibilities and potential, for employing the rhetoric of well-being in theological discourses on human flourishing, thriving, and happiness? This paper offers a theological and rhetorical analysis of well-being in the work of theologians – including Jürgen Moltmann, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, David Kelsey, Puleng LenkaBula, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Mercy Oduyoye, and Ellen Charry; together representing diverse contexts, interests, specialities, and priorities – in response to these questions. It is argued that well-being is both critically received (here the close but problematic alliance with notions of health and wealth is a key concern) and constructively engaged (here the notion of being well is closely linked to living well) in the work of contemporary theologians, particularly in response to the World Health Organisation’s definitions of health and well-being.

Keywords: Well-being; Flourishing; Happiness; Thriving; Salvation

Introduction

Well-being is a positive state experienced by individuals and societies... [It] encompasses quality of life, as well as the ability of people to contribute to the world in accordance with a sense of meaning and purpose.

This is (part of) the World Health Organization’s definition of well-being (Maçaneiro and Von Sinner, 2021:186; WHO, 2021:10).² Contemporary theologians, including South African theologians, are evidently interested in the language of well-being and how it is defined in international discourses such as those informed by the World Health

¹ Edited version of paper read at a REET/FVT/SU online colloquium theme of “Care for Creation and Eco-diakonia: Challenges for the Ecumenical Movement in the Face of the Global Civilizational and Environmental Crisis”, October 2022.

² The full definition of well-being reads as follows: “Well-being is a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life, as well as the ability of people to contribute to the world in accordance with a sense of meaning and purpose. Focusing on well-being supports the tracking of the equitable distribution of resources, overall thriving, and sustainability. A society’s well-being can be observed by the extent to which they are resilient, build capacity for action, and are prepared to transcend challenges” (WHO 2021:10).

Organization. It may, moreover, be of interest to note that notions of well-being – more particularly, “good living” (*buen vivir*) and “living well” (*vivir bien*) – are included in the constitutions of countries like Ecuador and Bolivia, respectively³; and that theologians are interested in how emerging concepts like these are interpreted and leveraged today.⁴ Lastly, it may be an important element in conversations on eco-diakonia and creation care, including conversations hosted by the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical organisations, since a careful consideration of the language of well-being may potentially shape a public theological response to the environmental crisis.

Yet theologians do not typically offer a clear and explicit definition of well-being themselves, even if they do engage notions of being well, living well, and good living within political and public discourses, and even where the concept of well-being forms a central part of theologies of flourishing. It is therefore worth exploring in greater depth and detail how theologians respond to this question themselves: what is well-being?⁵

Theological critique of the rhetoric of well-being

Theologians have often been critical – even suspicious – of the concept of well-being. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann would, for instance, critique the World Health Organization’s definition of health – as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being”⁶ – because it proclaims, in his view, a utopia: a place that does not exist (Moltmann 1993:272).⁷ Health is presented as an ideal, he argues, but very few people will be considered healthy if measured against this ideal (Moltmann 1993:270–271). Moreover, not only is it unlikely that a great many people will be considered healthy according to this definition of health, but it needs also to be asked whether the

³ My thanks to Professor Rudolf von Sinner for a truly insightful conversation about how the concept of well-being features in Latin American theologians’ conversations, including the central role that this plays in the political rhetoric of certain countries (like Ecuador).

⁴ Marcial Marçaneiro and Rudolf von Sinner make it clear, for instance, that while the English translation of *buen vivir* and *vivir bien* as well-being or feeling good “might evoke an idea of (individual) wellness... the Andean concept is far remote from such an idea. To the contrary, it has a strong social and collective component” (2021:186).

⁵ This is a general question, but theologians formulate this question in several ways. The South African theologian Puleng LenkaBula asks, for instance, what well-being is within the context of Africa in the 21st century – since well-being is deeply contextual, as she points out: “What is wellness and wellbeing in the context of Africa in the 21st century? What constitutes a comprehensive, practical theological and ethical notion of wellness and wellbeing in the context of poverty, ecological degradation and massive levels of wealth by a few people and or [sic] institutions in Africa? What does the notion of wellness and wellbeing constitute for a continent that is described as poor, marginal and which is perceived in international relations as a lost cause?” (LenkaBula 2008:239)

⁶ The definition that Moltmann cites reads as follows: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of sickness and handicaps” (Moltmann 1993:271). The most recently available glossary of terms keeps to this definition of health, which is the definition included in its 1948 Constitution (WHO 2021:3). The latter part of the definition is slightly updated, replacing the concepts ‘sickness’ with ‘disease’ and ‘handicaps’ with ‘infirmity’, but (apart from these two substitutions) remain exactly as quoted by Moltmann (WHO 2012:3).

⁷ Moltmann writes that health “as an ideal of the undisturbed functioning of the physical organs, an existence free of conflict, and a state of general well-being, is a utopia, and not a particularly humane utopia at that. It is the utopia of a life without suffering, happiness without pain, and a community without conflicts.” (1993:271–272) The utopia that this state of well-being assumes is closely aligned with what he describes as “the ancient utopia of the immortal, eternal life” since “only a life of that kind could logically be thought of as a ‘state’ of well-being like this.” (272)

assumptions behind this view of health are themselves healthy (Moltmann 1993:271).⁸ He is unconvinced that health could or should be described as a state, including a state of well-being.

In his attempt to outline a more human (and humane) view of health, Moltmann (1993:272) distinguishes between ‘health A’ and ‘health B’. ‘Health A’ aligns with the WHO’s definition, insofar as it is “an objectively ascertainable state of the human being’s physical, mental and social well-being.” ‘Health B’, however, pushes back against elements of the WHO definition of health, as “a subjectively ascertainable attitude on the part of the person concerned with his [sic] fluctuating condition.” (272) Whereas ‘health A is a state, ‘health B’ is an attitude – and for Moltmann this distinction is crucial, as is evident in his italicisation of these two words in the (English) text. In short, he prefers to speak of health as “the strength to be human” (health B), by which he means “not the absence of malfunctionings” (pain, sickness, death) but “the strength to live with them” (273).⁹

The problem, for Moltmann, is that being human is equated with being healthy within the WHO definition (health A). (273)¹⁰ If health is instead defined as the strength to be human (health B), then “we make being human more important than the state of being healthy.” (283)¹¹

The German theologian Günther Thomas echoes Jürgen Moltmann’s critique of the WHO definition of health – as one of “unbounded optimism” about health and healthcare – in his recently published book *Chaos and Mercy* (2024).¹² In this volume, he is interested in how human illness, health, and well-being should be understood theologically (Thomas 2024:13). Thomas (2024:37–39) explores Karl Barth’s definition of health as the strength or “the power of being human”¹³ and argues that, based on this understanding, illness and health are not “absolute opposites” but rather “areas on a continuum of more or less strength.” (Thomas 2024:38) Yet Barth resists the temptation

⁸ Indeed, “[t]he understanding of what counts as ‘healthy’... reflects the system of received values in the society in question and serves the adaptation of the human body to the demands of that society. But that does not mean that these ideas of ‘health’ are necessarily healthy in themselves... ‘Health’ must be defined in several different dimensions if the concept of health is to be conducive to the life of human beings. It must find its definition in the flux of the history between person and society, society and nature, past and future, immanence and transcendence.” (Moltmann 1993:271)

⁹ Stated somewhat differently, “[t]he strength to be human is displayed in the person’s capacity for happiness and suffering, in his [sic] acceptance of life’s joy and the grief of death.” (Moltmann 1993: 273 –emphasis in original)

¹⁰ The reason why this is problematic, for Moltmann, is that this “leads to the suppression of illness in the individual life and means that the sick are pushed out of the life of society and kept out of the public eye. To turn the idea of health into an ideal in this way is to rob the human being of the true strength of humanity. Every serious illness which he has to suffer plunges him into a catastrophe, robs him of his confidence in life, and destroys his sense of his own value” (Moltmann 1993:273).

¹¹ Health, then, “is not the meaning of human life. Only what can stand up to both health and sickness, and ultimately to living and dying, can count as a valid definition of what it means to be human” (Moltmann 1993:273).

¹² Thomas cites the same WHO definition for health, as included in its glossary of terms, as does Moltmann, namely that “‘Health is the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’” (Thomas 2024:157). His quote includes, however, the latter part of the definition as well, which reads as follows: “The attainment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction as to race, religion, political opinion, economic or social status.” (157)

¹³ See also Barth 1951: 406.

to “deify life itself” – which “is so powerful in the present,” writes Thomas – since neither the concept of health nor the concept of illness is tied “to a strong concept of life.” (Thomas 2024:157) Insofar as life is not presented as a soteriological concept, neither are health or illness (Thomas 2024:157) – which means that illness needs to be dealt with pastorally, not soteriologically.¹⁴

The American theologian David Kelsey is also critical of the concept of well-being – specifically in the context of his attempt to develop a theocentric account of human flourishing. (Kelsey 2008:8) For Kelsey (2009:315), like Barth and Moltmann, “health, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, social, or cultural, is at best a problematic metaphor for what is meant theologically by human flourishing.” Human life is “always a life toward death”, “[l]ife lived on borrowed breath”, and therefore “dying life”, argues Kelsey (2009:315). The radical finitude of human life cannot be ignored or sidelined in a theological account of human flourishing, and therefore assumptions of (maximal good) health – that may be operative not only in using the concept of well-being, but also in the concepts of thriving and blossoming (Kelsey 2009:315) – does not fit with his description of human flourishing as “the flourishing of dying life.” (Kelsey 2009:315)

Kelsey (2008:14) has no problem with defining ‘well-being’ in terms of ‘health,’ and even in affirming that “well-being as health is surely part of the content of a theological account of human flourishing.” Yet how health and well-being relate to human flourishing needs to be carefully considered, he argues, since “it is a good deal more problematic theologically to define human *flourishing* as human well-being understood as ‘health’.” (Kelsey 2008:15) He argues that the criteria or significance for a *theocentric* account of human flourishing “lie in the dynamics of human beings’ relations to God and God’s relations to them.” (Kelsey 2008:15) For Kelsey (2008:19-20), the fundamental difference is this: human well-being (“understood as various kinds of health”) is not necessarily defined in relation to God (although it is defined in relation to everything else: “themselves, to fellow creatures, and to their shared social and natural contexts”), whereas human flourishing is defined only in relation to God (which includes both “God’s relations to human beings” and “human beings’ relation to God”) in his project.

For Kelsey, relation to God is key within a theocentric anthropology. As such, “human flourishing ought to be understood in relation to God,” he argues (Kelsey 2009:317). Human beings flourish when they express God’s glory, he suggests – and this means that “expressing God’s glory... is the index of human flourishing.” (Kelsey 2009:317) This provides an alternative to indices of human flourishing wherein human flourishing is characterised as being happy, healthy, self-fulfilled, self-realised, or self-actualised.¹⁵ The (theological) problem with these indices of human flourishing is the assumption of health, and as Kelsey (2009:317) explains, health “is problematic as an index of a human

¹⁴ The experience of serious illness may signal “the onset of chaos” (Thomas uses the image of the collapse of a world), since in illness the world is perceived as being “threatened and fragile” (Thomas 2024:111).

¹⁵ Kelsey (2008:10) explains that “[t]hese culturally accepted informal indices of biological, psychosomatic, psychosocial, societal, and cultural “well-being” are widely adopted as definitive of human flourishing, Christianly understood. These indices are analysed more formally by scientific biological, psychological, social scientific inquiries that theorize the health of biological, psychological, social, and cultural dynamic systems in terms of the systems’ capacity both to function internally and to adapt to their larger contexts in ways that maximally satisfy their needs and preserve their homeostasis as dynamic systems.”

flourishing (theologically understood) because ‘health’ and ‘unhealth’ are usually understood functionally” and self-referentially.¹⁶

Feminist theologians are particularly critical of the World Health Organization’s definition of health as being free of illness or disease – and seek a redefinition of health itself. The German feminist theologian Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel (2000:106), for instance, describes the WHO definition as “a mechanistic understanding of health” and proposes instead that friendship with the body – which may include learning the art of suffering – be pursued. She writes that this does not mean a retreat into “mysticism” or “masochism” (her words), but rather involves “understanding with the body”, by which she means

becoming aware of the mobility and liveliness of what happens in the body... [which is to say] experiencing a friendship with my body which flourishes in the ups and downs, in closeness and distance, in pain and pleasure. (Moltmann-Wendel 2000:106)

Yet some potentially damaging and unrealistic views of health are not the only problematic rhetorical associations with the concept of well-being. Wealth and achievement, as expressions of well-being, may also merit closer inspection. Here David Kelsey (2009:315) again warns against definitive metaphors for human flourishing that may be merely functional or self-referential (Kelsey 2009:315). For him, the well-being of the quotidian – of everyday, ordinary living – needs to be pursued for its own sake, so that the integrity of human beings (but not only human beings – also all living beings, natural resources, and the earth) may be protected from violation and exploitation. (320–321)

It is not strange for contemporary theologians – including South African theologians – to associate the language of well-being with problematic notions of wealth, and more specifically, how wealth is acquired and distributed. Theologians are often (remarkably) positive about constructively employing and redefining this concept to reflect contextual realities and theological commitments, but at the same time warn against a superficial and acontextual understanding of well-being that may do more harm than good.

For South African ethicist and theologian Puleng Lenkabula (2008:240), the notion of well-being should be situated in “the discussions on poverty, wealth and ecology”, since “wellness and wellbeing refer to modes of being and feeling which are interlinked and interwoven with the context”. As such, any constructive engagement with the language of well-being – within the context of South Africa – needs to take seriously “the role of apartheid in the allocation of resources and wealth of South Africa”, since apartheid has shaped how poverty and wealth look in South Africa today, and therefore also what well-being is (Lenkabula 2008:242, 244). Lenkabula (2008:247) is highly critical of what she calls “mainstream studies on wellbeing and wellness” that do not take seriously how political and economic power is distributed.¹⁷ For Lenkabula

¹⁶ As Kelsey (2009:317) points out, “[a] self-referential index to human flourishing is problematic in an anthropology that seeks to understand human persons, not finally in relation to themselves and their proximate contexts, but excentrically, in relation to God as the center of their reality and value ‘outside’ themselves”.

¹⁷ The full quote reads as follows: “The socio-historical and political power and might, which have shaped and will continue to shape the wealth of the nations of the north, as well as the excessive acquisition of capital,

(2008:244–254), well-being and wellness is not only undermined by poverty and economic injustice, but also mutually exclusive since – stated positively – well-being is considered a ‘fundamental element’ of “the foundation of human economic and ecological justice” (and perhaps also eco-diakonia and creation care). Herein,

theological and ethical attention to the question of wealth ought to be central to the quest of justice, meaning, wellness and wellbeing in Africa in order to transform the world to a better life for all humanity and the flourishing of God’s creation. (Lenkabula 2009:257)

For South African ecofeminist Annalet van Schalkwyk (2012:100), it is likewise important to gain a clearer understanding of well-being, particularly within the context of care for creation and, possibly, eco-diakonia. She argues that the concept of well-being is rhetorically proximate to the concepts of welfare and shalom. She is interested in ‘expanding the traditional understanding of well-being’, which she defines – in the context of her work – as “the fulfillment of people’s potential, needs and desires – for individual people, for human communities and for people-in-relation-to-God... [as well as] the whole earth community.” (van Schalkwyk 2012:100) Like Lenkabula, however, she is also very aware of how the language of well-being is shaped by South Africa’s apartheid past and its enduring legacy of economic disparity. (van Schalkwyk 2012:101) No simple extraction of the rhetoric of well-being from this contextualisation is possible. With this in mind, Van Schalkwyk (2012:101–105) opts to redefine the concepts of welfare and well-being in the light of the theological *oikos*¹⁸, as embedded in “the interdependence (or the network of care) of living beings within smaller and greater ecosystems.” Well-being, for her, finds its best theological parallel in the Hebrew concept of shalom. (van Schalkwyk 2012:100)¹⁹

The Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez – also widely known as the father of liberation theology – is also critical of the concept of ‘well-being’, especially insofar as well-being is equated with ‘progress’ and increased wealth (Gutiérrez 1973:24–25)²⁰.

assets and resources by individuals, higher than whole nations or regions (for example the 100 richest people in the world) are not questioned in mainstream studies on wellbeing and wellness. The questions of reparations, distributive justice, the ecological debt owed to countries of the south, including African countries, resulting from the extractive and exploitative practices during slavery, colonialism and the neo-colonial era, and how countries of the north have acquired the status of ‘wealth/rich/affluence’ do not continue to form theological critique, evaluation or analyses by theologians of the north as well as mainstream social and human sciences or discourses and sadly, even by communities and/or institutions such as churches” (Lenkabula 2008:247).

- ¹⁸ Van Schalkwyk (2012:117) writes that this requires building and caring for “the *oikos* as a household of freedom... defined by care, justice, balance, the interdependency of living beings, the recognition of diversity, power as power-with and power-in-relation, the right relations between humans and other-than-humans... in which there is freedom, abundance, health, wholeness and wellbeing for everyone to share; and which is infused and enfolded by a caring and just God”.
- ¹⁹ Van Schalkwyk (2012:104 footnote 17) defines shalom as “the Old Testament word for completeness, soundness and well-being... [that] embraces all aspects of the restored and human condition brought together: righteousness, truth, fellowship, communication, peace and so forth.” As such, shalom is “a social happening, an event in inter-human relations, a venture of co-humanity... [and simultaneously] the welfare of the whole cosmos and especially of the earth as the *oikos* or Household of God”.
- ²⁰ Gutiérrez is highly suspicious of wealth, because attachment to money creates “the possibilities it creates of exploiting others” (Gutiérrez, 1991:60). He argues that “[w]hen human beings place all their hopes on money, they leave no room for others” – and this is problematic because it excludes the rich from the beatitudes

This is problematic because it is embedded in development thinking instead of a commitment to liberation (and in his theology of liberation, he makes a clear choice against development and for liberation). He therefore prefers to speak of ‘happiness’, since he associates this concept with “the defense of the rights of the poor, punishment of the oppressors, a life free from the fear of being enslaved by others, the liberation of the oppressed.” (Gutiérrez 1973:167) For Gutiérrez, human flourishing is deeply social, since being well is only possible in communion with God and fellow human beings.

For theologians, health and wealth are the two key associations with the concept of well-being – and as metaphors for human flourishing, both can be problematic, depending on how these are defined in relation to well-being. These are rarely viewed entirely positively, and more often critiqued as metaphors for human flourishing.

Increasingly, however, theologians also appear to engage constructively with the concept of well-being. This includes the Ghanaian theologian Mercy Oduyoye – widely regarded as the mother of African women’s theology – for whom health and healing is inseparable from human well-being and wholeness (Oduyoye 2001:21; 2002:162). Oduyoye defines health broadly, however: as not only inclusive of the physical, emotional, and psychological – but also the relational. For her, health is not only also relational, but above all relational, and therefore,

... healthy living includes not only the absence of disease but the presence of good relations with all as well as positive and abundant living that is seen in having visible well-being, symbolized by bodily strength, wealth and people; especially children and by being honoured by one’s fellow citizens. This visible wellbeing is seen as evidence of being at peace with the spirit world, for that world too is an integral part of our reality. (Oduyoye 1995:118)

Alafia, the Yoruba (Nigerian) word for well-being, implies “all that makes for fullness of life” (Oduyoye 2001:34). This includes (“for most of Africa,” she adds) both health and wealth (Oduyoye 2005:xx). Yet it is important to understand that Oduyoye’s notion of health is defined much more broadly than the WHO’s definition of health. Wealth and prosperity are contentious issues in Oduyoye’s portrayal of well-being, for she is very critical of gospels of prosperity (preached in the midst of widespread poverty) (Oduyoye 2001:34) while at the same time appreciating prosperity if there is abundance among all (but especially the poor) (Oduyoye 2001:51). For Oduyoye, the choice to include health and wealth in definitions of well-being depends on how we define (the scope of) health and wealth. In other words, well-being, for her, is synonymous with affirmation of life, and therefore conceptions of wealth and health need to (also) be life-giving, life-loving, life-seeking, and life-promoting (Oduyoye 2001:68–72).

Theologians are clearly therefore not only critical of but also cautiously sympathetic to the concept of well-being. Especially among women theologians – like Mercy Oduyoye – the rhetoric of well-being features (positively), with constructive attempts to employ and (where deemed necessary) redefine well-being as a theological concept. The

(“since their source of security and joy is money and not God”) (Gutiérrez 1991:60). Moreover, attachment to wealth is nothing less than idolatry, and the idolatry of money is the opposite of worship of God (Gutiérrez 1991:60).

American theologian Ellen Charry, for instance, employs well-being as an expression of salvation, as flowing forth from

[t]he longing to be well / whole / elected / repaired / liberated / transformed / released / redeemed / shriven / forgiven/ restored / justified / sanctified / glorified / blessed is based on the observation that all is not well – with us, that is. We want it to be, but cannot make it so, perhaps cannot even imagine what being ‘well’ would look like. (Charry 2004:291)

For her, salvation is expressed in both being well and living well. Health and healing are central to her understanding of God’s grace and love. Firstly, God’s grace describes that which soothes, comforts, calms, and relieves our anxieties, fear, and hurt. (Charry 2004:292–293) She calls this “a psychological vision of salvation” (Charry 2004:292). Well-being, or being well, means living with hope in the resurrection (which is an antidote to the fear of death) (Charry 2004:203). Secondly, God’s love transforms human beings’ everyday living and restores personal integrity and strength (Charry 2004:293). Herein love describes that which heals our illnesses and disorientation so that we may become better and stronger by the power of God at work in us (Charry 2004:294). This could be called ‘a therapeutic vision of salvation’ or an “illness-to-health model of salvation” (Charry 2004:294). Well-being is a partial expression of salvation, which has in view both to ‘bring hope’ (be well) and ‘cure souls’ (live well) (Charry 2004:294). Being well and living well thereby become central ideas in Charry’s portrayal of human flourishing.

How should theologians engage the concept of well-being, and particularly the associations with health and wealth, in the quest for a language of human flourishing? Is well-being limited to living an illness-free and pain-free life? If so, flourishing will rarely be possible and will probably be more a matter of chance (being lucky enough not to get sick or experience health challenges) and access to wealth (being fortunate enough to earn a decent wage or salary, and therefore also able to afford medical insurance and quality medical care). Moreover, is well-being limited to living prosperously? If so, flourishing is simply not available to the poor and will remain the prerogative of the rich.

These are the kinds of questions and concerns that theologians raise in their engagement with the concept of well-being. It is therefore understandable that well-being, especially as it has come to be defined by the World Health Organization (in its Glossary of Terms) as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies” (WHO 2021:10),²¹ could raise some concerns among theologians (and especially feminist theologians, ecological theologians, African theologians, and liberation theologians) about the rhetorical proximity between the language of positivity and the language of well-being.

²¹ The full definition reads as follows: “Well-being is a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life, as well as the ability of people to contribute to the world in accordance with a sense of meaning and purpose. Focusing on well-being supports the tracking of the equitable distribution of resources, overall thriving, and sustainability. A society’s well-being can be observed by the extent to which they are resilient, build capacity for action, and are prepared to transcend challenges.” (WHO, 2021:10)

It would appear as if contemporary theologians who explicitly engage the concept of well-being (such as Jürgen Moltmann, David Kelsey, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Puleng Lenkabula, Annalet van Schalkwyk, Mercy Oduyoye, Ellen Charry; together representing diverse contexts, interests, specialties, and priorities) do so on a conceptual level, with a primary interest in definitions of well-being. This may be of interest for interdisciplinary conversations – such as in exchanges between theology and psychological science²² – wherein the priorities and direction of the conversation itself may be definitively shaped by how the concept or construct of well-being is defined.

Conclusion

For many contemporary theologians – including Moltmann, Barth, Thomas, Moltmann-Wendel, and Kelsey – a major concern with the rhetoric of well-being has to do with theodicy: can we be well in illness? Is it possible to flourish while sick and dying?

For many others – including Lenkabula, Van Schalkwyk, and Gutiérrez – a major concern with the rhetoric of well-being has to do with justice: can we be well while living in an unjust society? Is it possible to flourish when the poor and the rich live worlds apart?

Yet contemporary theologians are not *only* critical of the concept of well-being. More recently, and especially among women theologians (including Oduyoye and Charry), a genuine curiosity and interest in what well-being is and how this concept may feature in theologies of human flourishing has developed.

These constructive engagements with the concept of well-being typically seek out ways to speak meaningfully about human flourishing – in a manner that is both life-giving and coherent – and attempt to draw upon the best that the Christian faith tradition may have to offer while also remaining open to new rhetorical and theological ways of defining well-being. It may also have important implications for how we think about well-being in caring for creation. Herein rhetorical clarity regarding the assumptions behind the use of the concept of well-being is important, since well-being is not regarded as a stand-alone concept but as rhetorically and contextually embedded and therefore conceptually proximate to related terms like flourishing, happiness, and thriving.

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²² It may be of interest to note that in the 15 years since Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's published introduction to positive psychology (in 2000) and Martin Seligman's presidential address at the American Psychological Association (APA) (in 1999) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000), the call for peer-reviewed scientific publications on topics in positive psychology has been answered (with more than 1300 such publications, of which 750 include empirical tests) (see Donaldson et al. 2015). Herein well-being was "by far the most investigated topic ($n = 339$, 24.4%)" (Donaldson et al. 2023:80) and "one of the most cited constructs" (measured by at least 39 scales) (Ackerman et al. 2008:6; see also Donaldson et al. 2023:80).

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