



BRILL

RELIGION & THEOLOGY 32 (2025) 129–147

*Religion
& Theology*
brill.com/rt

Public Theology and Human Dignity

Critique, New Directions and Methodological Considerations

Christiaan Hermans | ORCID: 0000-0001-9416-3924

Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands;

Research Associate, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

chris.hermans@ru.nl

Received 13 March 2025 | Accepted 3 June 2025 |

Published online 23 June 2025

Abstract

How can we discuss human dignity in public theology while acknowledging the associated challenges? The author agrees with Kim and Day that public theology must transcend the boundaries of different groups, disciplines, and languages in order to establish itself as a credible and accessible voice open to critique based on publicly available criteria and evidence. Next, the theological concept of human dignity as presented in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is discussed alongside reflections on the challenges associated with discussing dignity in public discourse as presented by Kim and Day. Three new approaches to human dignity are then presented: the “moral excellence approach,” the “capability approach,” and the “resilience approach.” These approaches can rise to the challenge of public theology. The article concludes with methodological considerations for empirical religious research into human dignity.

Keywords

public theology – human dignity – catholic social teaching – moral excellence approach – capability approach – resilience approach – practice-oriented research

1 Introduction

The idea of human dignity has become a central organising principle in the promotion and advancement of universal human rights. The preamble of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* opens with the words: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”¹ At the same time, human dignity is a central notion in religions. This is not just an idea of theologians, religious people, churches/mosques but also a secular scholar like Jürgen Habermas is an advocate of the idea that “[r]eligious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life.”²

In this article, I will reflect theologically on the concept of human dignity from the perspective of public theology. Public theology is a relatively new discipline, and the purpose and methodology of public debate and the public domain are still being discussed. Therefore, I will begin by providing a definition of public theology and outlining the defining features of this discipline, offering an overview of the current state of the debate on public theology (section 2). Next, I will provide an example of a theological conceptualisation of human dignity within Catholic Social Teaching (CST), particularly in papal texts (Section 2). Finally, I will provide a critical reflection on this type of conceptualisation of human dignity, using the defining markers or criteria of public theology outlined in section two. Using these criteria, I conclude that the concept of human dignity in Catholic Social Teaching is contested, reflecting the difficulty of talking about dignity.

How should one talk about human dignity while acknowledging the difficulty of doing so? Three approaches that address this issue and align with the criteria of public theology, as formulated by Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, are presented: the “moral excellence approach,” the “capability approach,” and the “resilience approach.” In conclusion, methodological considerations are presented for empirical research into human dignity that align with the criteria of public theology. I reflect on the formulation of research questions, an ontology of contingency, the decentring of the researcher, and the use of practice-oriented research methodology.

1 The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was proclaimed and adopted on 10 December 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 217 (III) “International Bill of Human Rights, A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>.

2 Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x>

2 Public Theology: A Definition and Defining Markers

What is public theology? I will use the introduction to *A Companion to Public Theology* by Sebastian Kim and Katie Day as a frame of reference. The authors aim to provide a balanced and structured overview of public theology as a field. To understand the argument of this article, it is helpful to know the current state of the debate on public theology. I do not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of discussions between different authors in this field. Instead, the departure point will be the excellent presentation of Kim and Day of the current state of public theology, in which they formulate five defining markers of public theology. The authors begin their overview by defining public theology as set out by Harold Breitenberg:

Public theology is thus theologically informed public discourse about public issues, addressed to the church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other religious body, as well as the larger public or publics, argued in ways that can be evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants and criteria.³

Breitenberg constructed this definition based on his survey of three sources of insight, intended goals, audiences, and methods of argumentation of public theology, which are different from other types of theology. The first source is a long tradition of theological literature within the church that argues why and how theology should give guidance for the institutions and interactions of our public life.⁴ The second source is literature which explores the life and scholarship of theologians that was formed in a public context such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Beyers Naude. Their theological writing cannot be abstracted from their activism and social engagement.⁵ To put it differently, the process of doing public theology is inextricable from the content of public theology. The third genre of public theology is called constructive public theology by Breitenberg.⁶ Characteristic for this genre is the use of language which is “accessible and credible to both the faith community as well as those with expertise and influence

3 Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, “Introduction,” in *A Companion to Public Theology*, eds. Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, Brill’s Companions to Modern Theology 1 (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2017), 4, citing E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr., “To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up,” in *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 2 (2003): 55–96, here 66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23561835>.

4 Breitenberg, “To Tell the Truth,” 64.

5 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 5.

6 Breitenberg, “To Tell the Truth,” 64.

in policy formulation.”⁷ Instead of speaking to society from a moral privilege, public theology regards the public as informed citizens in civil society, playing a role in the construction of the common good.⁸

A second marker of public theology is a definition of “public” which is different from community. Where in community the stress is on commonality, the emphasis of public is on difference and social spaces where people exchange arguments and different views.⁹ The concept of publics and public sphere has led to a development where the secular and sacred has become more porous, interactive, and co-productive. Theological reasoning in the public sphere or public theology, “aims primarily at making visible the ethical implications and the ultimate destination of the secular.”¹⁰ Public theology, according to Hübenthal, has to enlighten the secular about itself, that is, “to make visible and to enforce its intrinsic ethical normativity wherever possible; and to break open its immanentism by reasonably disclosing its orientation towards an ultimate destination.”¹¹

A third distinguishing marker of public theology is interdisciplinarity: “In order to access relevant publics, theology draws on the resources of social sciences (including history, sociology and anthropology) to more deeply understand human experience.”¹² And not only other academic voices, but prophetic and public voices that are based on a criticism of experience and survival in which the voices and needs of the voiceless will be heard.¹³

The fourth marker of public theology is that it is essentially and truly dialogical, which incorporates multiple characteristics “critical to the production and reproduction of public theology: self-critique, transparency, accountability and

7 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 6.

8 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 6.

9 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 12.

10 Christoph Hübenthal, “The Theological Significance of the Secular,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 4 (2019): 455, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946819868094>.

11 Hübenthal, “The Theological Significance of the Secular,” 469.

12 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 13.

13 There is an extended discussion in the field of public theology on the concept of public. The concept of communicative rationality of Habermas plays a core role in this debate; see Jaco S. Dreyer and Hennie J.C. Pieterse, “Religion in the Public Sphere: What Can Public Theology Learn from Habermas’s Latest Work?,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (2010), Art. # 798, 7 pages, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.798>. An important voice in the context of South Africa is Dirkie Smit who stresses the need to ground this rationality on experience of vulnerable people and survival. Public theology should utter a prophetic voice of hope to people in South Africa. See Christina Landman, “Talking Hope – Dirkie Smit and Public Theology,” *NGTT* 54, no. 3–4, Supplement 2 (2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5952/54-0-354>.

the construction of authority.”¹⁴ The absence of these characteristics of theological discourse contributes to a public perception of its insularity, and therefore irrelevance. Self-critique refers to a critical reflection on the coherence and consistency of theological thinking, which is publicly accessible. “Within confessional theology, the authority comes from transcendent sources – revelation. For public discourse, authority is a social construction, mediated through social processes.”¹⁵ In the public forum, theology must be prepared to argue in a manner informed by publicly available sources and criteria. The values and perspectives adopted by public theology must be accessible in terms of language (bilingualism) and demonstrably remain open to evaluation and critique.¹⁶

The fifth marker of public theology is its global perspective. Christian theology affirms that all human beings are related in a manner that transcends all boundaries and markers of identity, like gender or race. What is considered to be the “common good” from a certain perspective, needs to be expanded by public theologians by widening horizons and dialogue partners.¹⁷

The final distinguishing marker of public theology is that it is not just expressed in publications, but also is performed. There is no line of demarcation between reflection and action on the common good. For theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Beyers Naude and many others, their theology is not only expressed in articles but also in activism within civil society. Their writing and their activism are inseparable and co-productive.¹⁸

3 Human Dignity

Do theological reflections and presentations of human dignity in public discussions about human rights meet the criteria formulated by Day and Kim? Does this contribution to the public debate cross the boundaries of public spheres and disciplines? Is it performed as a credible voice? Is it accessible and open to critique based on publicly available criteria and warrants? I will use the presentation of human dignity in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) as an example, specifically in papal texts. Three characteristics of the discourse on human dignity in papal texts in the public debate are formulated. Next, I will argue that

14 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 14.

15 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 15.

16 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 15.

17 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 15.

18 Day and Kim, “Introduction,” 17.

the concept of dignity as presented in Catholic Social Teaching is contested based on the criteria presented by Day and Kim. Finally, three directions are presented in the study of human dignity that align with the markers of public theology as presented by Day and Kim (Section 3.3).

3.1 *Dignity as Core Principle in CST*

In CST the idea of human dignity is one of the core principles.¹⁹ Social encyclicals, papal addresses and letters offer a powerful articulation of dignity as a foundational social principle. I follow the analysis of Anna Rowlands, who mentions three features of the idea of dignity that emerges in papal texts.²⁰

The first feature is that the founding texts of the modern social encyclical tradition tended to focus slightly more on economic than on political concerns.²¹ In the wartime period the attention shifts toward freedom and justice in the context of nation states and democratic systems. In the same period, the Catholic Church shifts from a merely negative view on constitutionally liberal states towards a more positive view of this kind of social and political order.²² At the same time, emphasis is placed on the social nature of the person as a rational free agent within a Catholic conception of personhood: "Reason, self-determination and intellect become means through which we are invited to receive and enact the good, which is freely offered and communicated by God in creation."²³

A second feature of human dignity which emerges in papal texts is a combination of corporate and personalist aspects. This dual focus is not given in such earlier encyclicals as *Rerum novarum* and *Quadragesimo anno*. Dignity relates primarily to the nature of work, craft, and family and the corporate nature of being human. From the 1940s, CST develops a more consciously personalist account of human dignity. Rowland refers to the teachings of Pius XII and the emerging fascism and the war which shifted the perspective towards the political. The core argument for dignity discerned from Scripture is the call to communion planted in the human soul. "The human person is created in and for interpersonal communion, with liberty inclined towards the good but

19 Karen Shields Wright, "The Principles of Catholic Social Teaching: A Guide for Decision Making from Daily Clinical Encounters to National Policy-Making," *The Linacre Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2017): 10–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00243639.2016.1274629>.

20 Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2021).

21 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 63.

22 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 63.

23 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 54.

mysteriously also towards falling away into evil.”²⁴ More recently His Holiness Pope Francis in *Laudato sí* expands dignity to the human species as a whole. The basis for dignity and social transformation is closeness to all living beings who suffer and direct encounter between – increasingly estranged – human persons and the suffering of animals.²⁵

A third striking feature of the teaching on dignity is that in the encyclicals the categories of dignity and rights are mutually intersecting categories, from Pius XII's message onwards. In encyclicals, rights language and dignity tend to go side by side and are concerned with a world of mutual obligations, positive liberties, and gift exchange. To the extent that rights can function as a social contract, dignity can be seen as foundation of rights. According to Rowland, it is important to understand, that rights discourse in CST is grounded on the ontological status of the human person.²⁶ This is not to deny the possibility or function of a social contract, but human rights are not founded on a social contract. Rights are founded on human dignity, and dignity refers to the ontological status of the person.

3.2 *A Contested Concept*

Despite the increased attention given to human dignity in both secular and theological debates, the concept of human dignity is highly contested. This critique concerns not only the use of dignity in CST, but also its use in different public spheres and disciplines. From the perspective of public theology presented at the start of this article, this makes the concept of dignity problematic. In line with the defining markers of public theology as developed by Day and Kim, the question is whether this contribution to the public debate, which crosses the boundaries of publics and disciplines and is performed as a credible voice, is accessible and open to critique by publicly available warrants and criteria.

What are the major points of critique?

1. First, dignity “is criticized as an idea that lacks a single core meaning and whose vagueness leads either to a social idea with no real bite or to an idea which ends up being filled up and co-opted by a range of (potentially troubling) ideological positions.”²⁷ Examples are the appeals to dignity by authoritarian regimes in Austria, Portugal, and Vichy France which emphasised the social obligations of the individual to the social whole

24 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 59.

25 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 62.

26 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 64–65.

27 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 65.

and neglected the personalist dimension of dignity. If human dignity is considered to be the founding value of human rights, the vagueness of the concept of human rights would challenge their wide acceptance. "Human rights are free standing instruments that articulate basis requirements of agency or individual liberty."²⁸ A solid standpoint on human dignity is essential if we are to establish its role as a foundation for human rights.²⁹ The relative vagueness of human dignity can be seen as a strength as it refers to a collective awareness of human fragility and action constraints derived from recognition of the special worth or status of humans.³⁰

2. Secondly, questions are also raised about the extent to which dignity can function as a universal, trans-contextual principle, which is one of the criteria of public theology. According to Łuków, talking about dignity in an abstract and metaphysical sense often misses the significance of negotiating dignity in concrete historical and societal terms.³¹ Dignity is inevitably particular, i.e., a particular perspective of what it means to be human, human worth and the human good.³²
3. Other scholars argue that the features of dignity "are so well aligned with another application of another concept that dignity is in fact reducible to that concept."³³ The strongest example of this reductionist position is the claim that dignity is nothing else than autonomy because "it amounts to treating people in the way that they want to be treated."³⁴
4. Next, there is the critique of what is considered to be an essentialist approach of dignity which defines a fundamental core of human dignity. A well-known example is the idea that dignity has a minimum core in the

28 Paweł Łuków, "A Difficult Legacy: Human Dignity as the Founding Value of Human Rights," *Human Rights Review* 19, no. 3 (2018): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-018-0500-z>.

29 Łuków, "A Difficult Legacy," 226.

30 Łuków, "A Difficult Legacy," 325.

31 Łuków, "A Difficult Legacy," 325.

32 All our accounts of human dignity reflect the dynamics of power and powerlessness, selective interest and exclusion. The core question in validating our account of human worth and human good especially relates to people who are vulnerable or excluded from the common good. See Darlene Fozard Weaver, "Dignity: A Catholic Perspective," in *Value and Vulnerability: An Interfaith Dialogue on Human Dignity*, eds. Matthew R. Petrussek and Jonathan Rothchild (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19m64x1.6>. The experience of suffering and injustice will play a core role in understanding the meaning of dignity in the life of people in a specific context (see section 3.3).

33 Leslie Meltzer Henry, "The Jurisprudence of Dignity," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 160, no. 1 (2011): 182, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41308486>.

34 Henry, "The Jurisprudence of Dignity," 182.

recognition of an intrinsic worth which every human being possesses.³⁵ The problem with an essentialist conception of dignity is that it does not provide sufficient support to deal with the complexity of actual cases.³⁶ This goes against the demand of Day and Kim that public theology should be formulated as a credible voice, referring to a context in which the questions and the reflections change as well.

5. A final point of critique is whether the idea of dignity is performed as a credible voice, accessible, open to critique by publicly available warrants and criteria. According to Rowlands, the “lure” of social encyclicals is to lead us into an abstract theory of an ontological status of personhood. In order to be a credible voice, it needs to be embodied in social movements and charismatic individuals “who are able through the power of repetition in particular contexts to use language as a potent force to shape history.”³⁷

3.3 *New Directions to Human Dignity*

In light of this critique, rather than searching for the foundation of the concept of dignity, we need to address the question of dignity from a different perspective. I present three directions in reformulating the approach of human dignity in theological and philosophical research, namely “the moral excellence approach,” the “capability approach,” and the “resilience approach.”

A first direction is offered by the philosopher Michel Rosen. He proposes that we should ask the question, “Why is the idea of dignity so deeply morally entrenched?”³⁸ Dignity remains something of a theoretical mystery, but it keeps us focused on the moral significance of being human and human beings. The value of the continued use of dignity is a way of begging the question of suffering and injustice as a loss of the goods and excellences we seek. It calls attention to a quality of being human, despite the metaphysical and political ambiguities of dignity.

This experience of suffering and injustice forces a constructive response “to become a beginning-in-the-middle in understanding human dignity rather than an end of the ecclesial or civic conversation.”³⁹ This reminds us of one of the characteristics of public theology (see section 2), namely that there is

35 Henry, “The Jurisprudence of Dignity,” 182.

36 Henry, “The Jurisprudence of Dignity,” 186.

37 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 68.

38 Michael Rosen, “Dignity: The Case Against,” in *Understanding Human Dignity*, ed. Christopher McCrudden, Proceedings of the British Academy 192 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 153, <https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197265642.003.0007>.

39 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 71.

no boundary between action and reflection on human dignity. "These features of dignity can impel us into the space of political love: deliberative, plural spaces through which we can wrestle with our commitments and responsibilities towards taking up the task of human relating. These need to be spaces in which we can talk of the affective side of human relations, the relations of love, loss and friendship which enable us to give content to the idea of dignity."⁴⁰ Where this commitment is performed, we will find answers on the meaning and foundation of human dignity. The answers that we will find, remain incomplete, tentative because history is open and incomplete and because the history of dignity requires us to lose ourselves in the complexities of the conditions of life and ambiguities of neighbour love.⁴¹

A second direction is given in the question, "What are people actually capable to do and to be?"⁴² What real opportunities are available to them? This line of thinking is represented by Martha Nussbaum and the Capability Approach.⁴³ "The Capabilities Approach can be provisionally defined as an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment and to theorizing about basic social justice."⁴⁴

A life of human dignity refers to the quality of life that is fully human.⁴⁵ A meaningful human life is not equal to economic growth but takes the human person as end and their struggle to choose and act according to what this person is able to do and to be. For Nussbaum, this implies formulating policies that promote a wide range of human capacities and opportunities that are fundamental to a fully human life.⁴⁶ Dignity is for Nussbaum an intuitive notion which needs to be given content in relation to a set of opportunities for persons to choose and to act. Opportunities (or freedom to act) do not only reside inside persons but are also created by a combination of personal abilities and the political social and economic environment. Opportunities referring to thoughts, emotions, willing, dreams are called internal capabilities. "Combined capabilities are the totality of the opportunities ... for choice and action in ...

40 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 71.

41 Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 70–71.

42 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach and Its Implementation," *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 212, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01053.x>.

43 Nussbaum, "Creating Capabilities." See also Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

44 Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 18.

45 Nussbaum, "Creating Capabilities," 211.

46 Nussbaum, "Creating Capabilities," 212.

specific political, social, and economic situation.”⁴⁷ “In general, then, the Capabilities Approach, in my version, focuses on the protection of areas of freedom so central that their removal makes a life not worthy of human dignity.”⁴⁸

Capability is the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations. “Social, political, familial, and economic conditions may prevent people from choosing to function in accordance with a developed internal capability” and opportunities of the political, social, and economic environment.⁴⁹ Nussbaum formulates ten central capabilities: 1 Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; 2 Bodily health; 3 Bodily integrity; 4 Senses, imagination, and thought; 5 Emotions; 6. Practical reasoning; 7 Affiliation (A) living with and towards others, (B) social basis of self-respect and non-humiliation; 8 concern for other species; 9 Control; and 10 Control over ones environment (A) political; (b) material.⁵⁰

There are other typologies of capabilities within moral and political philosophy.⁵¹ Here I mention a typology given by Paul Ricoeur where innate capacities interact with acquired moral capacities which suggest that the first direction on human dignity intersects with the second.⁵² The first three abilities are being able to say, being able to act, and being able to narrate. Next, he distinguishes two moral capacities: the act of imputability and of promising.⁵³ Imputability make the agent capable of ascribing to themselves some of the consequences of action, for example, when harm is done to others. A second characteristic of the typology of Ricoeur is that becoming capable calls forth a counterpart of being recognised. Becoming capable is enacted in a social space with others who reply or questioning what I say, who help or hinder what I do, who make us responsible for others, especially the weak and vulnerable and who are witness of my promise and pledge to keep our word.

A third direction to ask a different question is developed in the book *Resilient Religion*.⁵⁴ The core question which I formulate in this book is: “What processes

47 Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 21.

48 Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 31.

49 Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 30.

50 Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 33–34.

51 For an overview see Ingrid Robeyns and Morten Fibieger Byskov, “The Capability Approach,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2025/entries/capability-approach/>

52 Paul Ricoeur, “Devenir capable, être reconnu” (Eng: Becoming Capable, Being Recognised), *Esprit* 316, no. 7 (2005): 125–129, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24470071>.

53 Ricoeur, “Devenir capable, être reconnu.”

54 C. Hermans and W.J. Schoeman, “Practice-Oriented Research in Service of Designing Interventions,” *Acta Theologica*, Supplement 22 (2015): 26–44, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v21i1.4S>

of resilience help people deal with heartbreaking diversity associated with the absence of the ultimate good with, and for others?"⁵⁵ There is a disproportionality between the infinite possibility of human dignity (human purpose) and the limitations of our character. Human beings can fall short in our openness to human dignity. "My character and my humanity together make of my freedom an unlimited possibility and a constituted partiality."⁵⁶ Character refers to our limitedness as human agents and humanity to treating others with the human dignity which they deserve. The synthesis of our character (limitation) and the human dignity of the other (as unlimitedness) may not come about. This is why human beings need processes of resilience that connect experiences of the self to the good in life events, i.e., to new beginnings of the good life with and for others in just institutions and a sustainable society.

Our openness in thinking about the world is a finite openness. "Primal finitude consists in *perspective* or *point of view*. It affects our primary relation to the world, which is to 'receive' objects and not to create them."⁵⁷ There is a disproportionality between taking perspective on the one hand and the truth (unlimitedness) of the object of our thinking on the other hand, and the synthesis between perspective and truth.

The disproportionality which defines human feeling lies in finite pleasure on the one hand, and the unlimitedness of infinite joy or happiness on the other hand. One can experience pleasure in singing, which gives vitality to life. But pleasure ends as soon as one stops singing. Ricoeur calls happiness that is fulfilling and unlimitedness, a spiritual joy,⁵⁸ and the "Joy of YES!"⁵⁹

4 Methodological Considerations for Empirical Research

With regard to the question how to study human dignity empirically in line with the markers of public theology (section 3.1), I focus first on the kind of research questions that give direction to an empirical approach to research human dignity in public theology. Next, I elaborate that our theory building needs to be built on an ontology of contingency and demands a decentring of

55 Chris Hermans, "Processes of Resilience," in *Resilient Religion and Heartbreaking Adversity*, eds. Chris A.M. Hermans and Kobus Schoeman, International Practical Theology 24 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2022), 31.

56 Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, rev. trans. Charles A. Kelbley, intro. Walter J. Lows (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1986), 61.

57 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 24.

58 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 92.

59 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 110.

the researcher as all-knowing subject. Finally, arguments are given for using a practice-oriented research methodology.

In section 3.3, three approaches are distinguished in the study of human dignity that seek new ways to study human dignity. All approaches are sensitive in talking about dignity (i.e., preserving the mystery), yet also reflect the need to talk about human dignity. What they have in common is that they do not start from a foundational concept of dignity but understand human dignity as a heuristic concept for aspects of humanness which emerges in living with and for others. Human dignity is emerging in situations of fragility, loss of freedom, not being recognised by others or (unjust) institutions which evoke the absence of the good (moral excellence) as the purpose of humanness. It forces itself upon us without being able to grasp it because it is greater than what humans can understand in thought, action, and feeling. Following Ricoeur, it cannot be grasped because of the disproportionality between the limitedness of our character and the unlimitedness of the moral good.

The so called “moral excellence approach” (Rosen) focuses on the question of suffering and injustice as context of research of the loss of the moral goods and excellences we seek. We need to study spaces in which we talk about our commitments and responsibilities in relations of love, loss and friendship which enable us to give content to the idea of dignity. There is the so-called “capability approach” (Nussbaum, Ricoeur), where dignity is an intuitive notion which needs to be given content in relation to a set of opportunities persons have to choose and to act. Opportunities (thoughts, emotions, willing, dreams) refer to internal capabilities in connection to the political social and economic environment which create a freedom to act as expression of being human and human beings. This process of becoming capable in a specific context calls forth a counterpart of being recognised by other persons and just institutions (Ricoeur). Finally, in the “resilience approach” the disproportionality in human beings and in our experience of freedom between our character and humanity is at the centre. Our character (i.e., our givenness in time and space) refers to a limitedness in thinking, acting, and feeling. Our humanity refers to an unlimitedness in thinking (ultimate meaning), acting (the good life), and feeling (infinite joy). Resilience refers to the ability of a synthesis of both elements in human existence as a contingent possibility (see below).

In line with the formulated directions, three main research questions in studying human dignity in public theology are formulated:

1. What moral commitments and responsibilities appear in relationships of love, loss and friendship which enable us to give content to the idea of dignity? (moral excellence approach)

2. What are people actually capable to do and to be? What opportunities (as freedom to act) are available to them in the social space of acting with and for others? (capability approach)
3. What processes of resilience (i.e., new beginnings of the good life) keeps alive in human actions with and for others in just institutions the focus on human dignity? (resilience approach)

A first recommendation in formulating an empirical research project would be to formulate research questions in line with the new directions as formulated above. The three new directions are not considered as mutually exclusive. If that is the case, I suggest also to consider formulating research questions which combine the different approaches.

A second recommendation would be that our theory-building needs to be grounded in the concept of contingency. I believe the principle of contingency aligns with the development of public theology as outlined by Day and Kim (Section 2). In short, we need to move away from an ontology of essentialism and embrace an ontology of contingency that recognises alterity and the transformation of the given towards new possibilities of humanity. In the following, I first define contingency, then demonstrate how it can provide access to meaningfulness, purpose, and transcendence.

First, what do we mean with contingency? Contingency is a possible certainty which is neither necessary nor impossible, yet actual.⁶⁰ An ontology of contingency is about new beginnings. By suspending a first ground, contingency opens up a space for the possibility (event) of that which is totally other, and which cannot be foreseen, mastered, or calculated.⁶¹ According to the Dutch philosopher Ezra Delahaye, the concept of contingency and the rejection of essentialisation are interconnected but different perspectives on the same paradigmatic shift.⁶² The rejection of essentialisation implies a rejection that some markers of reality are final (absolute).

Non-identity denotes the fact that Pauline subjectivity is not an identity marker that is applied to a subject. Rather, the transformation in sub-

60 Kurt Wuchterl, *Kontingenz oder das Andere der Vernunft: Zum Verhältnis von Theologie, Naturwissenschaft und Religion* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011).

61 Chris Hermans, "Processes of Resilience," in *Resilient Religion and Heartbreaking Adversity*, eds. Chris A.M. Hermans and Kobus Schoeman, *International Practical Theology* 24 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2022b), 179.

62 Ezra Delahaye, "It Is no Longer I who Lives: Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben on Subjectivity in the Letters of Saint Paul" (PhD diss., Radboud University, 2018), 221.

jectivity revokes every identity. Pauline subjectivity always eludes every attempt to be solidified in a static identity.⁶³

Second, contingency refers to the moment when a possibility appears in reality, and the essence of this appearance is that it is unexpected: “what is” (a relationship, a healthy body, harmony with nature, a job) is no longer there, and “what is not” unexpectedly appears as a possibility (a relationship, a healthy body, freedom. etc.).⁶⁴ Contingency which prioritises the possible – in contrast to the necessity of the given – embraces difference, alterity, contextuality, human freedom.

Contingency can be an access point to meaningfulness, purpose, and transcendence. Acknowledging (or accepting) contingency refers to the experience of the unexpectedness of an event – in the sense of “possible,” but not necessarily “rational.” Acknowledging contingency *eo ipso* implies acknowledging the limits of reason and accepting the possibility of “the Other of Reason.”⁶⁵ For Wuchterl, this Other need not only be religious. “For Kant it is things in themselves (Dinge an sich), for agnostics it is the unknown, and for Christians the religious dimension of the encounter with God.”⁶⁶

Third, an empirical study of human dignity which is in line with the demands of public theology implies a decentring the researcher as all-knowing subject and the knowledge base of theory that exist in the community of researchers as a privileged source of knowledge. The argument for this shift is deeply connected to the concept of contingency. As formulated above, contingency refers to the moment when a possibility appears in reality, and the essence of this appearance is that it is unexpected. The new knowledge (theory) expresses contingent certainty, unlike the theories of science by which we predict reality. We do not know what new possibilities want to emerge in the lives of people in poverty, without any education and means to survive. The researcher needs to move out of the centre of knowing and become watchmen for the new world to come (Rev 21:1). Empirical research in an age of contingency is a risk: where are new opportunities, new beginnings, human freedom emerging in conditions of suffering, injustice, absence of neighbourly love? From a theological perspective, it is a risk in the Name of God whose future is emerging in our world.

63 Delahaye, “It Is no Longer I who Lives,” 22.

64 Hermans, “Processes of Resilience.”

65 Kurt Wuchterl, “Religious-Philosophical Contingency and Empirical Theology,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 32, no. 2 (2019): 167–187, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15709256-12341390>.

66 Wuchterl, “Religious-Philosophical Contingency,” 175.

Fourth, in line with the recommendations above, I advocate practice-oriented research as research methodology into the topic of human dignity. The essence of an ontology of contingency is the event of “new beginning.” This beginning is a possibility of something completely different, something that cannot be foreseen, controlled, or calculated. “[T]he event concerns the singular occurrence by which our world changes, since it *interrupts* something in our world or *interjects* something new in it.”⁶⁷ Characteristic of an event is the possibility of an actuality that was not foreseen, nor can be traced back to given facts.

In practice-oriented research,⁶⁸ the research problem does not stem from theory, and the knowledge created in the research is not valued because it contributes to theory. It is valued because it contributes to the improvement of the practice that is considered to be problematic in the sense that the dignity of human beings or humanness is absent. In practice-oriented research, the *explanandum* is the process by which change has emerged in the desired direction (“what ought to be”).⁶⁹ The event which changed the actual situation into the desired situation is not given in theory but emerges in the practical reasoning of the researched (see below). Also, the action problem is not what the researcher defines, but it reflects the understanding of the problem owner. A problem-owner is a person (for example, people living in extreme poverty), or a group of people (for example, a policy body within congregation), or an organisation that is the “stakeholder” of an action problem.⁷⁰ The problem-owner need not be part of the action problem. There are three markers of ownership:

- Owners identify with the issues of others, who are suffering from an absence of opportunities, freedom, being treated with dignity.
- Their role is to guarantee that the project is collaborative, well connected to the interests and problems of the problem-owner and use-oriented. Is it helping the people involved to change towards the desired?
- They accept responsibility for the action problem and therefore accept responsibility for improving the situation.

67 Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2014), 17, emphasis in the original.

68 For arguments of the development of practical theology towards practice-oriented theology, see Chris Hermans, “From Practical Theology to Practice-Oriented Theology. The Study of Lived Spirituality and Lived Religion in Late Modernity,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18, no. 1 (2014): 113–126, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2014-0009>.

69 Chris Hermans, “Theology in an Age of Contingency,” in *Theology in an Age of Contingency*. Edited by Chris A.M. Hermans and Kobus Schoeman, *International Practical Theology* 21 (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2019), 26.

70 Hermans and Schoeman, “Practice-Oriented Research,” 28.

Practical reasoning is a process of deliberation in action and on action. The focus of practice-oriented research is to study the practical reasoning which emerges in the discrepancy between the actual situation (“what is”) and the desired (“what is not”). An action problem (not knowing what to feel, what to do, or what to think?) can only emerge if there is an awareness that the actual situation is not what it should be. The desired state is what people consider humanness as what they consider to be human dignity. Practical reasoning refers to the reasons (how? why? what?) and rules for acting and suffering as belonging to a certain community of knowledge which share a certain background knowledge.

Bibliography

- Breitenberg, Jr., E. Harold. “To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up.” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 2 (2003): 55–96. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23561835>.
- Day, Katie, and Sebastian Kim. “Introduction.” Pages 1–21 in *A Companion to Public Theology*. Edited by Sebastian Kim and Katie Day. Brill’s Companions to Modern Theology 1. Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2017.
- Delahaye, Ezra. “It Is no Longer I who Lives: Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben on Subjectivity in the Letters of Saint Paul.” PhD diss., Radboud University, 2018.
- Dreyer, Jaco S., and Hennie J.C. Pieterse. “Religion in the Public Sphere: What Can Public Theology Learn from Habermas’s Latest Work?” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (2010). Art. # 798, 7 pages. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.798>.
- Habermas, Jürgen. “Religion in the Public Sphere.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x>.
- Harvey, Barry. “A Hard Habit to Break: Re-Imaging Public Theology in a World After Christendom.” *The Bonhoeffer Legacy. An International Journal* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1oh9f24.4>.
- Henry, Leslie Meltzer. “The Jurisprudence of Dignity.” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 160, no. 1 (2011): 169–233. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41308486>.
- Hermans, C., and W.J. Schoeman. “Practice-Oriented Research in Service of Designing Interventions.” *Acta Theologica*, Supplement 22 (2015): 26–44. <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v21i1.4S>
- Hermans, Chris. “From Practical Theology to Practice-Oriented Theology. The Study of Lived Spirituality and Lived Religion in Late Modernity.” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18, no. 1 (2014): 113–126. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2014-0009>.
- Hermans, Chris. “Human Experiences of Heartbreaking Adversity.” Pages 13–30 in *Resil-*

- ient Religion and Heartbreaking Adversity*. Edited by Chris A.M. Hermans and Kobus Schoeman. International Practical Theology 24. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2022.
- Hermans, Chris. "Processes of Resilience." Pages 31–46 in *Resilient Religion and Heartbreaking Adversity*. Edited by Chris A.M. Hermans and Kobus Schoeman. International Practical Theology 24. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2022.
- Hermans, Chris. "Resilient Religion." Pages 47–66 in *Resilient Religion and Heartbreaking Adversity*. Edited by Chris A.M. Hermans and Kobus Schoeman. International Practical Theology 24. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2022.
- Hermans, Chris. "Theology in an Age of Contingency." Pages 7–30 in *Theology in an Age of Contingency*. Edited by Chris A.M. Hermans and Kobus Schoeman, International Practical Theology 21. Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2019.
- Hübenthal, Christoph. "The Theological Significance of the Secular." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 4: (2019): 455–469. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946819868094>.
- Landman, Christina. "Talking Hope – Dirkie Smit and Public Theology." *NGTT* 54, no. 3–4, Supplement 2 (2013): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5952/54-0-354>.
- Łuków, Paweł. "A Difficult Legacy: Human Dignity as the Founding Value of Human Rights." *Human Rights Review* 19, no. 3 (2018): 313–329. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-018-0500-z>.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. "Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach and Its Implementation." *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 211–215. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01053.x>.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Devenir capable, être reconnu." (Eng: Becoming Capable, Being Recognised). *Esprit* 316, no. 7 (2005): 125–129. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24470071>.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Fallible Man*. Revised translation by Charles A. Kelbley. Introduced by Walter J. Lows. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1986.
- Robeyns, Ingrid, and Morten Fibieger Byskov. "The Capability Approach." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2025). Edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2025/entries/capability-approach/>.
- Rosen, Michael. "Dignity: The Case Against." Pages 143–154 in *Understanding Human Dignity*. Edited by Christopher McCrudden. Proceedings of the British Academy 192. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197265642.003.0007>.
- Rowlands, Anna. *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*. London; New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2021.
- United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 2021 (1948). <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>.
- van der Heiden, Gert-Jan. *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2014.

- Weaver, Darlene Fozard. "Dignity: A Catholic Perspective." Pages 31–54 in *Value and Vulnerability: An Interfaith Dialogue on Human Dignity*. Edited by Matthew R. Petrusek and Jonathan Rothchild. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19m64x1.6>.
- Wright, Karen Shields. "The Principles of Catholic Social Teaching: A Guide for Decision Making from Daily Clinical Encounters to National Policy-Making." *The Linacre Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2017): 10–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00243639.2016.1274629>.
- Wuchterl, Kurt. *Kontingenz oder das Andere der Vernunft: Zum Verhältnis von Theologie, Naturwissenschaft und Religion*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011.
- Wuchterl, Kurt. "Religious-Philosophical Contingency and Empirical Theology." *Journal of Empirical Theology* 32, no. 2 (2019): 167–187. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15709256-12341390>.