

Reflection

A Reflection Upon Theological Reflection

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The process of theological reflection, more than any other factor, sets supervision for ministerial formation apart from other forms of supervision. Whilst support and the maintenance of professional standards are part of the purpose of supervision in ministry, the primary purpose is education – theological education – and the centre-piece of supervision as theological education is theological reflection.

The Purpose of Theological Reflection

The purpose of theological reflection is to seek to understand a given situation, as far as is possible, in the totality of its meanings (psychological, sociological, cultural, theological) in a way that will lead to a more informed response by the Minister-In-Training in the future. Theological reflection recognizes that every human being functions in a religious and cultural environment with values and beliefs that are both explicit and implicit, and that these values and beliefs lead to interpretations of experience that may or may not align with the Christian Gospel. Theological reflection in a Christian context places both objective experience and subjective interpretation under the scrutiny of the faith community using the resources of the Christian tradition to seek a truly Christian interpretation and response to a given situation.

The starting point of theological reflection is lived experience, in our context an experience in which the Minister-In-Training has been an active participant. The Minister-In-Training will have come to this experience with presuppositions about the structures of human existence and the ways in which God interacts with human history.¹ Because all of our presuppositions and perceptions are a blend of reality and illusion, truth and fiction, one of the functions of theological reflection in supervision must be to help the Minister-In-Training identify and own his own “operational theology.”²

It is important to bear in mind that theological reflection is not an individual, introspective exercise.³ God’s self-revelation may come through an individual, but it is for the education, encouragement and growth of the whole community of faith.⁴ In most faith communities the role of the minister is pivotal in leading and encouraging the community in an intentional process of theological reflection. Just as individuals have “operational theologies” which need to be identified and affirmed or challenged, so do communities, and the minister can be a critical resource for facilitating this process. For this reason, if no other, the modelling of the process of theological reflection whilst the minister is in training is of great importance.

Some Models of Theological Reflection

It should be becoming evident that what is proposed in theological reflection is not just a method, but a way of doing theology that is quite unique. Most approaches to theological reflection, whether described as experiential theology or operational theology, have their origins in the theological method of correlation articulated by Paul Tillich. This approach to theological reflection lies within the category of theology described as “apologetic” or “answering” theology. Paul Tillich proposes the method of correlation which, “makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.”⁵

What follows is a description of what I consider to be the essence of theological reflection rather than a description of how to do theological reflection. I have given a fairly detailed account of the model proposed by James and Evelyn Whitehead, which has become something of a standard by which other methods are measured, and then I have referred, less comprehensively, to other methods (Taylor, Pattison, McIntyre, Miller) for comparison.

The Whiteheads, basing their approach to theological reflection on Tillich’s existential theology, proposed a system comprising a *model*, and a *method*.⁶

The Whitehead Model

The *model* proposed by the Whiteheads recognizes three essential sources of relevant information for theological reflection:

Tradition

The information that we draw from Scripture and Church history are central sources of theological reflection. The challenges that these sources impose derive from their *complexity* (even the Scripture contains a diversity of theological emphases) and their inaccessibility to the faith community. Part of the task of the minister is to “befriend the tradition;” i.e. to develop a relationship to the tradition that is a “more-than-intellectual-grasp,” to aid the community in its reflection.

Experience

This factor in theological reflection is not entirely divorced from the first in that “experience” is defined as the accumulated experience of the minister and the faith-community as formed by the Christian tradition. To begin the process of theological reflection with the pole of *experience* is to engage in what Tillich describes as “answering” or “dialectic theology.”

Cultural Information

This includes both contemporary and historical aspects of culture which influence Christian thought; e.g. the importance of language, which is always culturally bound, to the understanding of ideas and symbols within a given

cultural context. Mature theological reflection will look for enlightenment from political and philosophical thought and from the insights into human behaviour that are available from the social sciences.

The Method

The purpose of theological reflection is to arrive at an appropriate response to a specific situation. To do this the Whiteheads propose a three-stage *method* of theological reflection.

Attending

Begin by *listening*: listen to the situation, listen to the community, listen to the tradition, listen to oneself. *Attending* demands a range of listening skills that draw on the resources of tradition, experience and culture in order to gain as wide a perspective on the particular situation as possible. A necessary ingredient in effective listening to each of these sources, according to Whitehead, is the “capacity to suspend premature judgement.”

Assertion

The second stage of theological reflection begins when adequate attention has been paid to the sources of information. To arrive at a pastoral conclusion it is essential to make some judgements about the information gleaned from tradition, experience and culture. *Assertion* presupposes some degree of conflict between the sources, and possibly within the community. It acknowledges that each source is a potential medium of revelation, but that each (including tradition) has limitations. *Assertion* is neither aggressive nor vacillating, involves both listening and self-disclosure, and recognizes that conflict is a normal and appropriate mode of human communication.

Decision

The final stage in the process of theological reflection is *decision*. Having engaged the sources and the community, an action that reflects the outcomes of the process is decided on (by the minister or by the community as appropriate to the situation). The decision is taken recognizing the diversity and ambiguity inherent in the situation, that there may be many alternative valid Christian responses to the situation, but that in this place and at this time, this particular concrete response is the most appropriate.

The model offered by the Whiteheads is very helpful in that it leads towards changing the situation in response to the reflection process. Mary Sheehan makes the point that “focussing only on person and tradition could result in a fundamentalist interpretation, only on tradition and culture, a purely theoretical interpretation, only on culture and person, an undifferentiated secular interpretation”.⁷ Each of the poles of interpretation is vital to the process, yet it must be recognized that each one can be interpreted in more than one way. Tradition, experience and culture are ambiguous. The same situation, or the same Scripture, or the same cultural norm, may be interpreted very differently from the perspective of feminist theology, liberation theology or conservative-evangelical theology (to name but a few). A supervisor who is aware of this ambiguity, and who has identified to some extent her own operational theology, will recognize the occasions when there is a clash of theologies causing blocks in the supervisory process.

A similar approach to theological reflection is offered by James Poling and Donald Miller⁸. They suggest a number of stages in the process that will assist in a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience, awareness of the personal biases and beliefs of the participants, correlation of the Scripture and culture. The method focuses on the faith community and its interpretations of experience which then become the foundation for future action.

Michael Taylor’s Approach to Theological Reflection

Michael Taylor’s approach to theological reflection also emphasizes the central place of the Christian community in the process and, in particular, the place of *story* in the reflection process. He suggests that we use three basic questions as a structure by which the community can reflect theologically:⁹

What kind of situation are we dealing with?

What should we aim to achieve?

How can we move creatively from one to the other?

To inform and support this process, he suggests three necessary procedures:

Attempt to make up and tell a good story (story is set in opposition to doctrine)

Fill out and contemplate a picture of the earthly Jesus

Build and improve a pastoral theology

Taylor’s approach (it is hardly a method) is an attempt to encourage “reflection on practice”¹⁰ in a manner that is accessible to and useable by the whole church. Whilst he has many valuable insights, I find the approach imprecise almost to the point of being inaccessible to me (this may say more about me than about Taylor’s approach to theological reflection).

Stephen Pattison’s Approach to Theological Reflection

Another approach that is intended to make theological reflection accessible to the church is offered by Stephen Pattison. He makes the point that theological reflection is “active enquiry, not just historical research or intellectual gymnastics”.¹¹ Pattison’s thesis is that, since there are so many *theologies* (his term, referring to process theology, existentialist theology, fundamentalist theology, black theology, liberation theology, narrative theology, feminist theology, etc.), “there can be no one right way of doing theology and perhaps one’s own way is as good as anyone else’s”.¹² This may relieve the theologically uneducated of any sense of inadequacy, but it fails to recognize the contribution that theological reflection has made to the whole theological enterprise and undervalues the contribution of the traditional theological disciplines to a Christian interpretation of experience. Certainly theological reflection begins with the resources that are available and no one should withdraw from the process because of a lack of formal theological qualifications, but the process should lead to a continuing effort to “befriend the tradition” as the Whiteheads put it.

Pattison is concerned with the complexity of the task of theological reflection and the range of Christian perspectives that may apply to any given situation. His solution to the dilemma posed by the range of sources and possibilities for theological reflection, is to conduct a three-way critical conversation between:

the ideas, beliefs, feelings, perceptions and assumptions of the student

the beliefs, assumptions and perceptions provided by the Christian tradition (including the Bible) the contemporary situation which is being examined.

Pattison personifies these three entities and envisages them asking questions of each other in order to bring greater understanding to the situation. In the supervisory conference, for instance, each of these “participants” in the conversation would be represented, at times by the Minister-In-Training, at times by the supervisor.

The advantage of this kind of construct for theological reflection is that it acknowledges the limited perspective of both supervisor and Minister-In-Training and seeks to broaden the horizons of both. It also avoids the trap of the supervisory conference degenerating into a theological debate or competition and allows the Minister-In-Training to recognize and name his presuppositions and biases and to import new perspectives into his theological framework.

The Limitations of Theological Reflection

The approaches to theological reflection reported here are by no means the only possible options.¹³ Whilst there are differences in each, and none is a complete solution for every context, there is nevertheless a commonality in beginning the process of theological reflection with actual experience.¹⁴ By acknowledging the limitations of the participants in the process (and indeed the sources, including the Scripture) the need for the supervisor and the Minister-In-Training to reach agreement about the interpretation of the experience or the pastoral plans that might ensue from the process of theological reflection is obviated. The responsibility of the supervisor is to ensure that as many as possible of the issues and angles are addressed and the right kind of questions posed. Adherence to this principle will minimize the intrusion of the supervisor’s ego needs into the supervisory relationship. Neither do all loose ends have to be neatly tied up by the end of the supervisory conference. Theological reflection is a process as well as an event and the process as far as the supervisory relationship is concerned continues for the duration of the Supervised Field Education year. Short term agreement to assuage the uneasiness caused by divergent perspectives may deprive the Minister-In-Training of the long term gain of having his presuppositions challenged.¹⁵

John Patton sounds a word of warning regarding the process of theological reflection. In his experience, many students become so enamoured of the process, and with exploring the “deeper meaning” of the situation, that they lose the richness of the experience itself.¹⁶ His response to this distortion is to emphasize the use of imagination in theological reflection, and the need to “feel into” the situation presented.

In the final analysis, the *process* of theological reflection must serve the *purpose* of theological reflection. If the purpose is to seek to understand human experience from a Christian perspective in a way that informs future ministry, then the process must allow this objective to be always kept in focus.

As an example, if a Minister-In-Training brings a report of an encounter with a parishioner, the supervisor will draw the Minister-In-Training into a process of exploration of the event that may examine:

the event itself. What happened? What previous events influenced what happened in this instance? What associated circumstances of the participants contributed to the outcome?

the participants themselves. What psychological and sociological factors may have influenced the outcome of the event? What values and beliefs of the Minister-In-Training are touched in this experience? What did the Minister-In-Training feel about the situation?

the church community and the society. What cultural factors relating to the participants, their society and their church community may have relevance for what happened?

the tradition. What meaning has the church traditionally given to situations like this? What parallels are there in the Scripture and in the sacred story of the church? What insights may be gained from the classical theological disciplines?

new learning. In what ways has the experience and the reflection changed the way the Minister-In-Training thinks theologically? What will he do next time?¹⁷

Whilst being careful to avoid what the Whiteheads call “premature judgement,” the supervisor will be seeking to draw the threads of conversation and exploration together in such a manner that the Minister-In-Training can begin to arrive at some conclusions out of which pastoral plans can be developed. She will acknowledge the limitations of the resources and the provisional nature of the conclusions, yet encourage the Minister-In-Training to respond with courage and initiative in the pastoral situation that they have addressed together. It would be unfortunate if the process of theological reflection were to lead to an attitude of theological relativism or pastoral paralysis in the Minister-In-Training. *reo*

Endnotes

M.E. Sheehan, “Theological Reflection and Theory–Praxis Integration: an experience with the case study method” *Pastoral Sciences* Vol.3, 1984, 25–38. Sr Sheehan writes, “As a method, I understand theological reflection to be a process centred on discovering one’s operative theology as it unfolds in human experience. Theological reflection assumes the involvement of God with human history which mediates his prophetic and healing presence in word and sacrament”.

C.R. Woodruff, “Theological Reflection In The Supervisory Process,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* Vol.24, No.3, September 1980, 197–203. Woodruff quotes Bruce Rahtjen who describes all ways of doing theology as “explanatory fictions”. He posits three methods of doing theology: *dogmatic theology* which deals with answers, *systematic theology* which deals with “what I believe” and *experiential theology* which deals with the life situation, or primary reality, of the believer or community of belief. It is experiential theology, which Woodruff describes as one’s “operational theology” that is most relevant for the supervisory process.

K.H. Pohly, “The Distinctiveness of Ministry Supervision” *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry* Vol.10. 1988, 125. Pohly asserts that the distinctive elements of ministry supervision that set it apart from other forms of supervision are that it is “collegial, mutual, holistic and inclusive”.

C. Davis, “Praxis,” in A Richardson & J Bowden eds. *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 457. “Theology (theological reflection) is not an apolitical and detached approach to reality which “leaves things as they were before” (Wittgenstein); it is involved constantly in the dialectic of theory and practice. Praxis is not the

application of an independently arrived at theory, nor does theory emerge spontaneously out of a praxis which does no more than *reflect and justify*; they interact with one another dialectically. Truth is encountered and demonstrated in praxis, and it is praxis which validates theology.”

P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Vol.1, 62.

J & E Whitehead *Method in Ministry: theological reflection and Christian ministry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983).

Sheehan, “Theological Reflection,” 32.

J.N. Poling & DE Miller, *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

M.H. Taylor, *Learning To Care: Christian reflection on pastoral practice* (London: SPCK, 1993), 100f.

Taylor, *Learning To Care*, ix.

S. Pattison, “Some Straw For Bricks: Introduction To Theological Reflection,” *Contact*, 99 (1989), 2–9.

D. Tracy *The Analogical Imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (London: SCM, 1981), 346. David Tracy also asserts that “there is no single interpretation around which all interpretations focus ... The absolute standpoint is no more.”

M.F. Hughes McIntyre, “Theory of Supervision of Pastoral Counselling,” *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry* Vol.13, 1991, 63–74. Mary Fran Hughes McIntyre bases her theory of supervision on the use of “story”. She follows more closely a psychotherapeutic model addressing the issues of parallel process, “attending to the whole person,” the importance of metaphor etc. Whilst these should be part of the supervisors tool kit, I do not see them as being central to the practice of supervision in our context.

J. Miller, “Practice: Learning Under Supervision,” in P Ballard ed. *The Foundations of Pastoral Studies and Practical Theology* (Cardiff: Board of Studies For Pastoral Studies, Faculty of Theology, University College, 1986), 124–131. Joan Miller asserts that “relationships with people can only be learnt face to face”. She advocates the use of role play as a model for supervision.

B. Joyce, M Weil & B Showers *op. cit.* 393. Bruce Joyce (under the influence of Herbert Thelen) challenges the view of Carl Rogers that learners need a safe place in which to explore themselves and their environments. “To grow,” he asserts, “learners have to acknowledge discomfort and set tasks to break the barriers of fear”.

J. Patton, *From Ministry To Theology; pastoral action and reflection* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 47. “In the training centre ... the richness of the setting can be lost in the learning categories – medical, psychological, or whatever the most common language of the institution is.”

D. Lyall, “Field Education and Ministerial Formation,” in D Forrester ed. *Theology and Practice* (London: Epworth, 1990), 107–119. Forrester asserts that it is in the dynamic of the supervisory relationship itself that the major contribution is made to field education.