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Theological Reflection

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Theological Reflection

Elaine Graham

‘Theological reflection’ is a way of referring to the many ways in which Christians reflect on experience in the light of their faith. At its best, it functions as an educational and formational tool to assist people to explore life’s challenges and to bring the wisdom of theological and biblical tradition to bear. The term is sometimes used in a general sense to denote a religious response to a specific issue, such as a cultural phenomenon, life event, or pastoral issue (Cloete 2020; Gill 2017; Xiong, Isgandarova and Panton 2020). In this article, however, ‘theological reflection’ will be taken to refer to a structured, methodologically orientated process of drawing contextual perspectives into dialogue with theological sources and resources for the purposes of enhancing practice and understanding.

Beginning by considering the emergence of the terminology and practice of ‘theological reflection’, this article will then identify some of its most significant influences and antecedents, including those of Latin American liberation theology, adult theological education, ministerial formation, and educational theory.

In their different ways, each of these approaches attempts the complex task of balancing the multiple voices embodied in scripture, tradition, and cultural context. They also illustrate a number of important methodological principles at the heart of theological reflection: the dynamic of practice-theory-practice; the importance of deductive and experiential learning; and theology as synthetic and conversational. Additionally, the development of the practice of theological reflection in church and academy will be considered by evaluating the work of some of the leading contemporary voices in the field.

Some of the chief critiques of theological reflection will be explored. These include doubts as to its theological rigour, its comparative neglect of biblical literature, the risks of naivety in its accounts of ‘experience’, and the difficulties of teaching theological reflection successfully. More recent developments, including the adoption of conventions of reflexivity and autoethnography, as well as the challenges posed by religious diversity and globalization to theological reflection, will also be outlined.

A final evaluation will consider the impact of such critiques and identify some of the key characteristics of theological reflection: as a route into questions of theological method; its significance for the life of discipleship as a form of practical wisdom; the primacy of praxis; issues of authority in relation to theological, experiential, and cultural sources and norms; and the place of theological reflection in theological education and ministerial formation.

Keywords: Theological reflection, Theologies of liberation, Correlation, Hermeneutic circle, Pastoral cycle, Practical theology, Experience, Tradition, Culture, Postcolonialism

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1 Historical roots and antecedents

There are two major intellectual and ecclesial antecedents for theological reflection: the method of critical correlation, often associated with North American Protestant and Roman Catholic theologies of the mid-twentieth century, and the emergence of Latin American liberation theology and its subsequent adoption in the West. These approaches have several features in common. Firstly, their stress on the importance of listening to the surrounding culture so that the voice of theology can address its context with conviction and relevance; secondly, the use of theories and methods from a range of non-theological academic disciplines (especially the social and human sciences); thirdly, an emphasis on a dialogical process that brings personal, cultural, and social concerns into conversation with theological norms and traditions; and finally, the conviction that theological understanding is constantly open to revision – either in light of wider insights from mainstream culture or by being put to the test of practice. As we shall see, these features persist in later versions of theological reflection as it evolves and diversifies.

1.1 Correlation

1.1.1 *Concerning Theological Reflection, 1971*

One of the first appearances of the term comes from the British theologian and Anglican bishop David Jenkins. In a contribution to a World Council of Churches project, entitled ‘Study on the Role of Christians within Changing Institutions’ (1971), Jenkins discusses how ecumenical programmes for social justice can bring theological insights together with the work of engaging with global developments in politics, economics, and culture. For Jenkins, this is a question of the identity and function of theology in the service of the church’s witness in the world (Jenkins 1971: 1).

According to Jenkins, ‘theological reflection’ is prompted by situations of change and crisis, such as changing gender relations, civil war, or the churches’ mission. For him, the core activities of understanding, discernment, and action are integral to the practice of authentic discipleship. Its objective is to facilitate ‘a) faithfulness, b) discernment, c) judgement’ (Jenkins 1971: 1). It enables Christians to ‘discriminate sensitively and faithfully among developments that are already going on around [...] to be able to perceive what initiatives they should themselves take’ (1971: 1). The third element – ‘judgement’ – anticipates the theologies of liberation in which reflection is put to work in the church’s service to the world. Furthermore, it is an activity shared by the whole Christian community as ‘the common and communal task of all the men and women of faith’ (1971: 4). Jenkins therefore advocates a form of theology that equips, promotes, and directs the life of faith, in fulfilment of a normative vision derived from the deposit or tradition of faith itself concerning human destiny in the light of Jesus Christ.

1.1.2 Two methods of correlation

Paul Tillich's theology of culture has provided one of the main methodological pillars for subsequent work in theological reflection. At the heart of Tillich's theology of culture is what he calls the 'method of correlation'. It originated in his belief that theology consisted of a correlation between the most fundamental questions of meaning and existence emerging from contemporary culture (science, philosophy, and the arts), with the answers deriving from 'the revelatory events on which Christianity is based' (Tillich 1951: 64). Thus, the correlative method 'explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence' (Tillich 1951: 60; see also Tillich 1959: 43–51). Despite Tillich's use of the terminology of 'mutuality' and his emphasis on human beings' 'creative self-interpretation in all aspects of culture' (1951: 71), the theological canon, as an expression of God's self-revelation, remains ultimate and normative. Nevertheless, while the Christian message may comprise the answers to life's questions, these insights still need to be re-contextualized for each generation.

In developing his model of correlation, David Tracy pursued the question of whether the twin realms of cultural and existential questioning and theological sources might actually be mutually corrective. Tracy does indeed envisage correlation as a two-way dialogue, a model he termed 'revised critical correlation' (Tracy 1975: 43–63). For him, this emerges from his understanding of the public and multidisciplinary nature of theological discourse itself. In the face of cultural and religious pluralism, theology risks marginalization and irrelevance, but theologians must insist on the 'publicness' of theological discourse. Every theologian is involved with three publics: 'the wider society, the academy and the church' (Tracy 1981: 6). All these carry their own definitive account of ultimate reality. Theology's constructive task is to correlate the 'classics' of secular culture – what Tracy terms 'common human experience' – with those of the Christian tradition (1981: 446–455). The 'classic' names those artistic, cultural, or religious 'texts, events, images, rituals, symbols and persons' which are acknowledged to represent 'nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth' (1981: 108).

So for Tracy, the task of religious or theological discourse is not simply to supply answers to modern culture's ultimate questions. Rather, theology participates through dialogue with the secular world's attempts to understand itself, and in turn, humanity's quest for meaning prompts theology to return anew to its own heritage in pursuit of greater understanding (Tracy 1983).

1.1.3 Clinical pastoral education

Another significant movement in theological education that predated liberationist models in pioneering an inductive, experientially based approach to theological reflection in practice is Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), which emerged in the United States in the 1920s.

As the duties of ordained clergy became more complex and technical, CPE affirmed the centrality of the 'cure of souls' within Christian ministry, rooting itself methodologically and epistemically in a dialogical method. It drew on the theological presuppositions of liberal Protestantism in its commitment to dialogue with secular science, specifically one that sought common ground between religion and medicine and was consciously designed to expose students to contexts beyond the confines of congregational ministry (Holifield 1983: 231). CPE's method rested on the preparation of concrete data in the form of verbatims and case studies of critical incidents in pastoral ministry as the basis of further interrogation and analysis. Its emphasis on inductive, qualitative learning owed much to Deweyan pragmatism, and from psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic theory it derived the conviction that the inner life offered access to the meaning of life (Kramp 2012: 452). In this sense, like the correlative method, careful attention to the world beyond the church (and specifically the presenting symptoms and narratives of patients in health care institutions) was deemed to be a crucial source of moral and theological insight – even a site of divine self-disclosure.

While its early founding figures had some disagreements on its primary contribution to ministerial formation, it is clear that as well as fostering clinical and professional skills of 'directed listening' (Holifield 1983: 237) in their interactions with clients, and gaining direct insight into the psychological dimensions of human behaviour, practitioners also understood it as a method for fostering the skills of theological discernment in the midst of suffering, as embodied by the 'living human documents' of the pastoral encounter (Boisen 1936; Hiltner 1975: 92). This was acutely and poignantly embodied in the life and work of Anton Boisen himself, who came to regard his own history of severe mental breakdowns – describing himself in his autobiography as a 'broken vessel' – as a providential path to spiritual growth (Hart 2010). Asquith expands on this notion of 'living human documents' further:

Knowledge and awareness of God is never simply cognitive knowledge which is imparted from external sources. It comes also through a careful reading of the 'living human documents' — the human experience of others; and then, perhaps more importantly, the translation of the meaning of that experience for one's own understanding of the reality of God. (Asquith 1982: 262)

This perspective on CPE as an intentional method of what subsequently became 'theological reflection' was later endorsed by Seward Hiltner, a key figure in mid-twentieth-century pastoral theology. Hiltner was heavily influenced by the correlational theology of Paul Tillich in his advocacy of a dialogical model of theological understanding in relation to pastoral ministry. His own understanding of CPE was as a programme of 'operation centered' inductive theological reflection which brought theological questions to bear on actual 'deep crisis experiences of life' (Hiltner 1975: 91) that would engender new

and more profound understandings of faith. In a review of the fiftieth anniversary of CPE, Hiltner argued strongly that for generations of seminary students, this approach transformed their experience of theological study from a somewhat dry, abstract discipline into a dynamic and generative pursuit (Hiltner 1975: 91, 97).

1.1.4 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 1972

Another significant methodological source of the correlative model is to be found in the work of the Roman Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan. In *Method in Theology* (1972) he articulates a pattern of theological reflection that is widely adopted and developed by subsequent writers – what he terms ‘attending, understanding, judging, deciding, and loving’ (1972: 285). He also affirms the essentially dialogical nature of theological epistemology, since the task of identifying and articulating oneself as person of faith is shaped both by the insights of revealed faith and one’s social, economic, and cultural environment. ‘A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix’ (Lonergan 1972: xi).

Lonergan begins with the challenge of articulating a theology that is capable of engaging with its cultural, empirical, and historical context. When culture is conceived as complex and evolving, then it is clear that Christian tradition can no longer be perceived as a ‘permanent achievement’ but ‘an ongoing process’ (1972: xi). This calls for consideration of method, which ‘is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt’ but ‘a framework for collaborative creativity’ comprising various tasks.

Lonergan’s theological method is founded on a clear anthropology and epistemology. Humanity is characterized by its qualities of self-awareness, deliberative reason, and moral responsibility, by which we grow to a ‘fuller self’ who is ‘reflectively and critically conscious’ (1972: 10). This capacity to transcend the material and contingent world into these realms of higher self-consciousness – what Lonergan called the ‘transcendental method’ – is part of what characterizes us as human. Self-transcendence manifests itself intellectually, affectively, and morally (1972: 289).

The transcendental method is thus embodied in the reflective processes of ‘experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding’ (1972: 14) and involves a degree of self-awareness (also known in later theological reflection literature as ‘reflexivity’) or ‘experiencing one’s experiencing’ (1972: 14). ‘The transcendental notions are the dynamism of conscious intentionality. They promote the subject from lower to higher levels of consciousness, from the experiential to the intellectual, from the intellectual to the rational, from the rational to the existential’ (1972: 34–35). Indeed, this is the way in which humanity achieves ‘authenticity’ in self-transcendence. We are not simply bound or limited by the immediate, material, and immanent. Our intelligence, capacity for communication, and ability to love and search for meaning are characteristics of deeper and higher consciousness; this

includes the capacity to reflect critically and constructively on our circumstances (1972: 105–107).

For Lonergan, Christian tradition is dynamic and may develop and evolve in response to changing circumstances (1972: 319). This necessarily renders a provisional and revisionist character to theological method:

For ours is a time of ever increasing change due to an ever increasing expansion of knowledge. To operate on the level of our day is to apply the best available knowledge and the most efficient techniques to coordinated group action. But to meet this contemporary exigence will also set the church on a course of continual renewal. It will remove from its action the widespread impression of complacent irrelevance and futility. It will bring theologians into close contact with experts in many different fields. It will bring scientists and scholars into close contact with policy makers and planners and, through them with clerical and lay workers engaged in applying solutions to the problems and finding ways to meet the needs both of Christians and of all mankind. [sic]. (1972: 367)

Even so, for Lonergan, attention to the dynamics of theological method cannot obscure the primacy of divine revelation whereby human apprehension, reflection, and action are always a response to God's prior self-communication.

1.2 Liberation theology

A second influential source of models of theological reflection comes from movements within the progressive Roman Catholic Church that emerged after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), particularly the Catholic Action movement in Europe. Through organizations such as the Young Catholic Workers and the deliberations of the Medellin Conference of 1968, the values and practices of Catholic Action were introduced into the Latin American church. An alliance of members of religious orders, theologians, community activists, and grassroots educators developed a pedagogy based on Marxist social and economic analysis and a biblical theology centred on the notion of a divine 'preferential option for the poor'. Small groups, known as Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), began to spring up in order to practise 'a new way of being church' founded on participative and socially-engaged activism.

Central to the pedagogy and methodology of BECs was the 'see-judge-act' method of reflection and action. Its basic premise was that a rigorous and critical understanding of the present reality was essential for any kind of pastoral strategy, and that the social sciences were indispensable for this. In that respect, the traditional role of philosophy as the principal conversation partner for theology was displaced by disciplines such as sociology, economics, anthropology, and history (Trokan 1997). Rather than privileging *orthodoxy* (or right believing) as the benchmark of theological authenticity, these educators and activists used the terminology of *orthopraxis*, in which the works of compassion, action

for justice, and achievement of right relation become the benchmarks of true faith (Boff 2003; Sobrino 2005).

1.2.1 Paulo Freire: oppression and conscientization

The Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire is closely associated with the pedagogy of liberation theology. The main characteristics of Freirean pedagogy include its emphasis on a collaborative and inductive method of learning; a strong connection between immediate, concrete problems and wider structural forces; and the indivisibility of critical reflection and action (Henriot 2005: 5–10). In contrast to the ‘banking’ model, where the student is a passive receptacle of knowledge, Freire’s method prioritized the concrete and immediate experience of ordinary believers and encouraged them to reflect critically on their experience, challenge the status quo, and take control of their own destiny (Freire 1972: 45–50). Conventional hierarchies of expertise are reversed in that professional educators regard their role as facilitating and learning from the poor (Freire 1972: 53–54).

Freire’s Marxist convictions are apparent here. Drawing upon Marx’s early writings, Freire recognized the significance of the material and existential alienation of the poor in a society where they were separated not only from due reward for their labour but also from their own resources of autonomy and self-determination. Grassroots education, and particularly the process of *conscientização* (‘conscientization’), sought to restore to ordinary people the capacity for critical and constructive engagement with their own experience, enabling them to attain new levels of awareness and personal agency. Freire’s thinking also bears the stamp of Roman Catholic personalism in emphasizing the exercise of choices and actions as the means towards personal transcendence and the realization of one’s potential as made in the image of God. Such pedagogy is therefore grounded in an affirmation of the transformative role of human agency in history and a belief that critical pedagogy releases the transformative power of self-realization.

1.2.2 The hermeneutic circle

The method of inductive learning pioneered by the BECs, closely modelled on the ‘see-judge-act’ tradition of Catholic Action, was gradually formalized by theologians such as Juan Luis Segundo (1976) and Clodovis and Leonardo Boff (1987) into a fourfold ‘hermeneutic circle’. These processes underpin much of the later models of theological reflection in use, both Protestant and Catholic (Trokan 1997; Osmer 2008; Thompson, Pattison and Thompson 2008).

Segundo characterizes the hermeneutic circle as ‘the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal’ (Segundo 1976: 8). Not only do we see Segundo’s commitment to theological understanding as emerging out of the dialectic of ‘tradition’ and ‘experience’ here, but an apprehension of the provisionality of theological knowledge

and its 'cyclical' nature. Each new situation (or question) asked of scripture or doctrine will inevitably demand revision and change to that very corpus of tradition: 'each new reality obliges us to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then to go back and reinterpret the word of God again [...]' (1976: 8).

Clodovis Boff describes how the basic pattern of 'see-judge-act' evolved into a comprehensive theological methodology by characterizing these three stages of reflection and discernment as three 'moments' of theology. The first represents the memory of God's self-reflection to humanity; the second refers to 'theoretical' or 'speculative' knowledge, in which this experience is apprehended and systematized; and the third, the 'practical or operational' in which "acting" represents [the] constitutive moment of all true theology' (Boff 2003: 200).

For Boff, these different moments or phases reflect the distinction often made in Roman Catholic doctrinal theology between the *fides qua*, *fides quae*, and *fides formata*. *Fides qua* is grounded in the believer's experience of divine revelation; but in keeping with liberation theology's commitment to the preferential option for the poor, it is the material and existential perspective of the world's marginalized – and their 'popular' spirituality – that is epistemologically privileged. *Fides quae* refers to the consolidation of that experience in the canons, doctrines, sacred texts, and practices of the Christian community, although once again the preferential option 'inflects' the reception and interpretation of theological tradition (Boff 2003: 198). Thirdly, *fides formata* is where faith finds its practical outworking as the aim and end of all theological experience and interpretation. However, since the dynamic of reflection and action is mutually illuminating, the process of reflection continues dialectically: 'It is only when practiced that faith becomes truly intelligible. If faith sheds light on praxis likewise sheds light on faith by means of a dialectical return' (Boff 2003: 198).

Liberationist theological method is thus also premised on the correlation between 'the world of the text' and 'the world of the reader' (Miguez 2003: 97; see also Bennett 2013: 11). The hermeneutical task at the heart of theological reflection is one of bringing the historic witness of faith into conversation with the imperatives of daily living, which will only find fruition in renewed practices of Christian witness.

2 Theological reflection in practice: methods and models

2.1 The pastoral spiral

Ubiquitous in the theory and practice of theological reflection, the pastoral cycle, or spiral (Cimperman 2015), evolved from the more philosophical literature on the hermeneutic circle (see section 1.2.2). It was widely popularized by Holland and Henriot (1983) with

the addition of insights on inductive learning and models of action-reflection in secular adult education through the work of writers such as David Kolb (1984). However, the epistemological and methodological premises remain the same in that 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (1984: 38).

Classically, the pastoral spiral begins with a moment of what is sometimes termed 'insertion' – although the terminology of 'immersion' may be more accurate, given the fact 'that everyone was already and always a part of the very fabric of the social reality' (Henriot 2005: 5). Our lived experience is already informed by the 'pre-judgements' of social and economic inequalities, understanding of which is deepened in the second stage (the moment of 'judgement'), which brings the resources of social-scientific analysis to bear on the dynamics and problematics of the status quo. It represents a crucial stage in the process of theological reflection as it makes the transition from immediate or even affective 'experience' into something that probes the structural, historical, and corporate causes of any given situation. It 'examines cause, probes consequences, delineates linkages, and identifies actors. It helps make sense of experiences by putting them into a broader picture and drawing the connections between them' (Holland and Henriot 1983: 8).



Figure 1. The pastoral spiral (source: copyright Maria Cimperman (2015), *Social Analysis for the 21st Century*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, used with permission; see Cimperman 2015: 86).

Thirdly, interpretation turns to exegesis of scripture and other theological sources in

an effort to understand more broadly and deeply the analyzed experience in the light of living faith, scripture, church social teaching and the resources of the tradition. The word of God brought to bear upon the situation raises new questions, suggests new insights, and opens new responses. (Holland and Henriot 1983: 9)

Crucially, however, this process is shaped by a critical sociology of knowledge or ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ which regards all knowledge as ideologically constituted (Miguez 2003). Since much of the theological canon reflects the interests and experiences of the materially and intellectually powerful, liberationist epistemology aims to privilege the situations and perspectives of those on ‘the underside of history’ (Alcoff and Mendieta 2000: 17). Thus, the preferential option for the poor serves as the primary hermeneutical lens through which the reclamation (or reconstruction) of theological tradition takes place, leading to ‘an appropriation of the Bible in a liberative way’ (Miguez 2003: 97).

Reflecting on his own educational practice in facilitating a Freirean inductive pedagogy, Thomas Groome identifies the central value commitments and enduring legacy of this approach to theological reflection. It respects the learners as subjects and agents in its central reflective process; it recognizes that such a process is cognitive and intellectual but also engages the body, emotions, and the will. It respects the religious heritage of Christians while taking its social context seriously. Above all, it is a problem-based and action-centred activity in which participants are moved to decision making and transformation (Groome 1991: 86–90). This dynamic quality is vividly captured in Laurie Green's adaptation of the pastoral cycle into a 'reflective spiral', emphasizing the constant regeneration of new perspectives and challenges (Green 1990).

Like the hermeneutic circle, therefore, the pastoral cycle emerges out of an incarnational understanding of God's self-revelation and presence in history, practice, and action. It also rests on an assumption that authentic faith is essentially praxeological; that human action is essentially goal directed and value driven, an insight that lives at the heart of all practical theologies, especially theologies of liberation. The process of theological and biblical exploration ends in praxis, but in reality the circle is never closed as action is itself subject to further critical reflection.

2.2 The conversational model

John and Evelyn Whitehead's approach to theological reflection draws on elements of David Tracy and Bernard Lonergan's work, adapted and extended for ministerial formation and education. Theological reflection in ministry is essentially correlational and describes the process of bringing to bear the resources of Christian faith on the decisions of practical ministry (Whitehead and Whitehead 1995: ix). It is a systematic means of interpreting the various sources of religious information that leads not just to theoretical insight but to actions that 'celebrate God's saving presence and [...] contribute, by word and action and sacrament, to the fullness of this presence – the coming of the Kingdom' (1995: 11).

Whitehead and Whitehead distinguish between two aspects of their approach: 'model' and 'method'. Model relates to the source material for theological reflection on ministry, adopting a dialogical or correlational epistemology comprising three sources which are, following David Tracy, cultural information, human experience or existence, and Christian tradition (1995: 11–12). The Whiteheads' 'method' describes the process of reflection and mirrors Lonergan's three-step procedure of attending, asserting, and deciding in a 'normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results' (Lonergan 1972: 4). Attending describes an activity of listening and 'seeking out the information on a particular pastoral concern that is available in experience, Christian Tradition, and cultural sources' (Whitehead and Whitehead 1995: 22). Asserting is the point at which divine revelation is understood to speak into lived experience, with these

sources brought into a 'relationship of challenge and confirmation' (1995: 23). There must be a willingness to uphold one's own convictions as well as a commitment to mutual discovery: '[a]n ability to face diversity and tolerate ambiguity is essential' (1995: 24). Finally comes the step of 'deciding or responding'. Out of the tripartite interaction of scripture and tradition, cultural information, and personal and corporate experience comes new insight which must then be translated into practical action, aided by strategic decision-making and planning.

Whitehead and Whitehead present this approach in their work, *Method in Ministry* (1995), which is notable for its sophisticated understanding of 'culture' in anthropological perspective, employing Clifford Geertz's definition of culture as a system of symbols, meanings, practices, and institutions – material and non-material – that are historically transmitted and which form the way of life of a particular community (Whitehead and Whitehead 1995: 68–71). Like Tracy, the Whiteheads also acknowledge the plurality of cultural information and indeed the Christian tradition itself, both across historical epochs and between global cultures, which means it is important to avoid simple or reductionist readings of either of them. There must also be realism towards the ambivalence of Christian tradition, recognising its simultaneous 'gracefulness' and capacity for harm. They speak of the importance of learning to 'befriend' the Christian tradition (1995: 16) in order to overcome alienation or disinterest and cultivate openness to new insights.

2.3 The art of theological reflection

The work of Patricia Killen and John de Beer emerged from the Episcopal Education for Ministry programme, a lay-centred theological education course based at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Killen and de Beer's approach is sometimes known as the 'four-source' model (de Bary 2003: 119), in which theological reflection consists of a mediation between 'Culture and Tradition' and 'Position and Action'. As with other models reviewed so far, this follows a familiar pattern of mediating between personal, immediate experience and corporate, structural, and societal environment, as well as the sources and resources of scripture and Christian tradition (Killen and de Beer 1994: vii–xii).

This model is problem-centred and action-directed and begins, like other models of theological reflection, with humanity's search for meaning in the face of cultural pluralism. After David Tracy (1981), theology proceeds via an internal dialogue between the different sources of church, society, and academy. Killen and de Beer describe their method as 'a spiritual wisdom model rooted in the life experience of believing people' which aims to provide a way to experience greater meaning in life and a tangible sense of God's presence in daily living. They characterize theological reflection as the discipline of exploring our individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own

beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living (Killen and de Beer 1994: viii).

As an aid to reflection, participants are encouraged to identify a defining idiomatic expression or metaphor that encapsulates an initial presenting problem and which provides stimulus for further exploration (1994: 35–40). These ‘images’ work metaphorically and symbolically, releasing the imagination and allowing participants to engage with a situation and its constituent meanings with greater freedom. For that reason, this method has proved popular across a range of formal and informal educational settings (O'Neill and Shercliff 2018).

2.4 Theological Reflection: Methods, 2019

By contrast, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (Graham, Walton and Ward 2019) did not emerge from an adult educational or seminary context and had somewhat different objectives in mind. It is intended to be less of a primer or workbook in how to teach or carry out theological reflection and more a way of identifying how the elements of practice, culture, Christian tradition, and action have been appropriated throughout Christian history and how certain continuities or strands of theological understanding can be identified.

Theological Reflection: Methods affirms throughout the many ways in which these diverse methods of doing theology are always essentially practical. Theological reflection, forged out of the base elements of scripture, tradition, culture, and experience, is always conducted to guide the practices of faithful discipleship. Theological discourse ‘proceeds from, and returns to, the problematics of faithful discipleship [...] theological reflection is itself a practice, mediated and embodied [...] through activities such as social action, writing, praying, caring, worshipping, preaching and living in community’ (Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: ix).

What follows is essentially an exposition of how Christian theology through history – including within biblical literature – has spoken of God in ways that facilitate the practice of discipleship, circumscribe the parameters of the faithful community, and engage with the world around it. The authors also trace how the root sources of constructive theology – personal apprehension of the divine, sacred texts, contemporary cultural contexts, and the collective wisdom and practice of the faith community itself – are combined to generate particular ‘ideal types’ of theological discourse. *Theological Reflection: Methods* advances seven such models, each finding coherence by virtue of a ‘family resemblance’, based around the lead motif of, variously, scripture, spirituality, congregational life, social action, and contemporary culture (Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: xi).

In the first of these seven models, 'Theology by Heart', God is experienced as personal reality speaking through the interior dialogues of the self, and theological reflection takes place through practices such as spiritual journalling, autobiography, and psychotherapeutic accounts of the self. 'Speaking in Parables' describes how theological insights might be generated from the voices of scripture and alternative narratives, often emerging from unexpected sources and authors. 'Telling God's Story' focuses on how corporate Christian identity and practice are shaped around the definitive narrative of scripture. 'Writing the Body of Christ' envisages how the life of the Christian community generates theology through such practices as *liturgy*, pastoral discipline, or corporate metaphors. 'Speaking of God in Public' traces how theological reflection emerges from processes of conversation or correlation between Christian tradition and cultural information. 'Theology-in-Action' is premised on an understanding of God as active in history. The test of authentic theological discourse rests in *orthopraxis*. The aim and end of theological reflection is to promote Christian discipleship in solidarity with the suffering and marginalized of the world. 'Theology in the Vernacular' identifies theological discourse as articulated through a diversity and plurality of cultural, symbolic, historical, and geographical expressions which reflect the specificity of their particular context (Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: 15; Walton 2014: xx–xxi).

In keeping with their emphasis on the inner workings and methodologies of classic theological forms, the authors issue a warning to those who treat the seven models of theological reflection as formulaic or prescriptive; theological reflection is 'not a production line [in] that, if the right ingredients – texts, images, "experiences" – are added in the correct order, will guarantee the manufacture of the right theological answer or pastoral strategy' (Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: xi). Rather, the intention is to foster readers' confidence in engaging with 'the structure and logic' of a diversity of traditions of theology in order to become more theologically literate and creative for themselves. The seven types of theological reflection are intended to be illustrative of broad continuities within the Christian tradition, 'to be used heuristically, not prescriptively' (2019: x), and to help readers both to engage with existing theological traditions and to create their own.

2.5 Theological action research

The work of Helen Cameron and her 'Action Research: Church and Society' project (ARCS) has become a successful method in theological education and has spawned its own research network. While it stands in the tradition of the pastoral cycle, it has developed further by introducing a range of modes of theological discourse, both as source and outcome of theological reflection (Cameron et al. 2010). Like other approaches, this maintains a firm focus on the practical nature of theology, particularly in the way it is rooted in the practices of ministry, mission, and church-related community engagement. The ARCS project was conceived against the backdrop of the increasing

marginalization of religion and religious discourse, and the poor image of theology as irrelevant to the concerns of the vast majority of citizens. Paradoxically, however, it is in the promotion and delivery of various forms of welfare provision – faith schools, community partnerships, social care, and family support – that churches are able to maintain their public visibility and practical impact.

It would be tempting, however, for churches simply to focus their energies on the practical provision of services and to neglect any concern for the values and beliefs that underpin this activity. Yet in order for the church not to be compromised by the pressures of decline it must be capable of distinguishing ‘the practices of faith from the clutches of the cultural forms that would keep faith under cover’ (Cameron et al. 2010: 13). The church’s mission to contemporary society can only be sustained because such care is a manifestation of ‘the deep connectedness of the Christian theological tradition and human experience’ – what might be termed ‘common grace’. It is precisely the ‘performative speech acts’ of such activism that uphold this connection, and which reveals the true purpose of the church (2010: 13).

In order to be authentically Christian and not drift away from core values, such community engagement must be theologically coherent and grounded – what Cameron et al. term an ‘operant’ theology, or the way in which action ‘performatively’ speaks of God. In this way, ‘practice’ invites further theological reflection in order to nurture a greater theological fluency or literacy in its practitioners. Theological reflection serves, therefore ‘to make practice more theological – and in that way it makes theology more practical’ (2010: 17). Furthermore, Cameron et al., in *Talking about God in Practice*, differentiate between a number of different registers or modes in which theological discourse might be articulated, naming them the ‘four voices’ (2010: 54). The ‘operant’ voice describes theology as it is performatively embedded in the day-to-day practices of a group; ‘espoused’ theology is drawn from the group’s own articulation – through word or deed – of its core beliefs. These two categories reflect the informal ways in which theological beliefs and values might be implicit and performative rather than codified or explicit. By contrast, ‘normative’ theology finds expression in sources which the group considers authoritative – such as scripture, church teaching, and the creeds – while ‘formal’ theology is that of the academy (2010: 53–56). Once again, there is a risk that categories are used somewhat formulaically, while there is undoubtedly overlap between them. But it reminds us of the roots of some approaches to theological reflection in grassroots pedagogy of the BECs, and the way in which much theological reflection in practice engages both with credal, doctrinal, or systematic expressions and with less formal expressions of popular and lived religion (Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: 217–249).

2.6 Practice-theory-practice

All these approaches to theological reflection share a number of features. Emphasis is placed on the practical (or 'aretegenic') nature of theological discourse, which is understood to facilitate faithful discipleship and to participate in the *missio Dei* ('God's mission'; Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: 9–11) While Tillich's correlative method emphasizes the dialogue at the heart of theology between the existential questions posed by human culture and society, and the answers emerging from the Christian tradition, the epistemology of liberationist approaches (exemplified by the pastoral cycle) is explicitly not only problem-centred but praxis-driven. Thus, theology is always already

essentially a practical discipline, emerging from concrete human situations, informing patterns of faithful living. The purpose of Christian doctrine is to inculcate habits of life by which God may be apprehended and followed, and by which the divine will may be enacted. (Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: 10)

In *Fundamental Practical Theology* (1991), Don Browning recapitulates a version of the pastoral cycle when he affirms both the essentially cyclical and revisionist nature of theological discourse in the light of experience, and the conviction that theological reflection begins and ends with the concrete imperatives of faithful practice. It is problem-centred, and describes a journey from 'practice to theory and back to practice' (Browning 1991: 9):

We come to the theological task with questions shaped by the secular or religious practices in which we are implicated – sometimes uncomfortably [...] When a religious community hits a crisis in its practices, it then begins reflecting (asking questions) about its meaningful or theory-laden practices [...] It brings its questions to [its] normative texts and has a conversation between its questions and these texts [...] Finally, these new, reconstructed religious meanings and practices continue until this religious community meets a new crisis. (Browning 1991: 5–6)

So far, I have established that the core task of theological reflection is one of mediation – between the voices of theology and experience, or God and the world – and its problem-centred and practice-driven character. Nevertheless, some fundamental questions of method and procedure still remain:

- How does practical theology actually go about mediating between the voices of 'tradition' and 'experience' in the furtherance of faithful practice?
- How are different elements of the Christian tradition – scripture, tradition, cultural information and experience, individual and corporate – harnessed to generate ways of speaking of God that promote the 'practical wisdom' of discipleship?
- Where should people look for resources and insights that will help them make sense of the situations in which they live and work?

- Is there a tension between theology as reflection on human existential questions and that of faithful praxis in the midst of socioeconomic or political inequities?

In the next section, I will consider some of the critiques of theological reflection which address these and other concerns.

3 Critiques of theological reflection

3.1 Evaluating the efficacy of theological reflection

In a landmark article, Stephen Pattison (1989) characterized much of the work of theological reflection for ministerial education as an attempt to manufacture ‘bricks without straw’ (Exod 5:1–21). Since the adoption of programmes of theological reflection in seminaries, colleges, and ministerial programmes around the world, there have been questions about their efficacy and in particular whether they actually succeed in enhancing participants’ confidence (and competence) in bringing theological and biblical sources to bear on aspects of personal and professional practice.

Thompson and Pattison’s survey of approaches to theological reflection in the context of ordination training in the early 2000s appeared to confirm suspicions that theological reflection was a vague and incoherent concept. Despite its pretensions to inductive learning, it did not draw on participants’ prior knowledge, experience, or expertise. Students struggled to interpret tutors’ expectations of the exercise and found themselves caught between the desire to fulfil academic strictures and the requirements of ministerial or vocational formation. The research concluded that theological reflection programmes were judged to lack sustainability or value as a transferable skill beyond initial training and were perceived as adding little in the way of constructive tools for ministry (Thompson and Pattison 2005).

A further survey of students’ experiences of ‘what constitutes positive learning in practical theological education and how this kind of learning is facilitated’ (Lynch and Pattison 2005: 148) revealed more positive results, however. Students valued approaches that related their learning to their current practice (including forms of professional ministry) and took account of prior life experience and expertise. This entailed engaging with critical theories or processes of reflexive examination that offered students new and often challenging perspectives on existing assumptions. Keynotes of theological reflection such as its experiential, interdisciplinary, and inductive approach appear to be endorsed, therefore, although another consistent concern is whether these skills are valued at the expense of more formal intellectual and cognitive skills or specific theological knowledge or understanding (Heywood 2013; Ross-McCabe 2020).

While the benefits of critical reflection on practice was clearly valued, research has recorded a general lack of clarity about precisely how critical reflection was to be facilitated

(Lynch and Pattison 2005). In other words – linking to a wider issue about theological reflection – there is still a question over whether such a process, however highly valued, is necessarily sustainable or replicable. Students may complete such programmes without the necessary skills to maintain their own habits of critical reflection or to communicate them to others. As Lynch and Pattison conclude:

It may be that some students are able to engage in critical reflection in an intuitive way, identifying their assumptions and alternative ways of thinking and acting without being conscious of the exact process by which they are doing this [...] Without such an explicit understanding, there is a danger that students may lapse into using rhetoric of ‘theological reflection’ without really being clear what such critical reflection entails [...] Teachers of practical theology need to be clear about the process by which their particular teaching methods facilitate critical thinking. (Lynch and Pattison 2005: 152)

Such research, while commending the fact that many students have found courses in theological reflection inspiring and empowering, suggests a major fault line in learning and teaching theological reflection, between fulfilling learning outcomes necessary for assessment or successful progression within an academic context, and undertaking programmes of reflective practice more suited to the qualities involved in testing vocation and character (Ross-McCabe 2020: 422). While this may encourage adult theological educators to renew their efforts in curriculum design and delivery, it also raises the suggestion that, given its essentially dispositional and formational character, theological reflection may always tend to be ‘something that is learnt but not taught’ (Smith 2008).

Recent work has attempted to redress this by focusing more explicitly on the skills required for engaging in theological reflection. This has led to new models of participatory, empirical, and practice-based approaches that seek to integrate real world problems with academic study (Click 2012; Dunlop, Nancekievill and Ross-McCabe 2021; Dunlop, Nancekievill and Ross-McCabe 2021; Moschella and Willhauck 2018; Parker 2022). Similarly, the practice of reflexivity as critical reflection on experience is fostered via the use of devices such as journalling, narrative, preaching, autoethnography, and creative writing (Walton 2014; see also [section 4.2](#)).

3.2 The authority of scripture

Another criticism of some approaches to theological reflection reflect a concern that there has been relatively little consideration of how to engage biblical literature as a significant resource for theological reflection. Paul Ballard attributes this in part to a lack of skill in handling scripture in a rigorous yet constructive fashion (Ballard 2011). Other writers record students’ reservations about the authority of the Bible – in particular its role in sanctioning systemic misogyny, homophobia, and racism in the church – as well as its

perceived anachronism in speaking meaningfully to contemporary issues (Bennett 2013: 3–4).

The probity and rigour of varieties of theological reflection deriving from critical correlation or the pastoral cycle and which rest on inductive and experiential approaches has also been challenged. For Helen Collins, starting theological reflection from anywhere but scripture is ‘hard to swallow’ (Collins 2020: 257). To begin with the human context diminishes the importance of divine agency as it speaks through scripture, and so Collins calls for there to be ‘greater engagement within the discipline [of practical theology] over the role of the Bible, the Holy Spirit and Christian experience’ (2020: 225). Collins’ appeal to the authority of scripture as the starting point of theological reflection is justified with reference to the primacy of an ‘evangelical faith conviction’ (2020: 18). Biblical texts should be the starting point for all those involved in Christian ministry, not only because of its authoritative status but because of its role in offering a definitive paradigm for ‘God’s ministry in Christ’. Collins argues that human experience has been unduly privileged within theological reflection, and non-theological disciplines can only ever be servants rather than equal partners in the work of theological reflection.

However, this fails to acknowledge that biblical texts and the canons of tradition themselves originate in codified experience. Carla Grosch-Miller (2020) describes experience as the ‘silent partner to Scripture and tradition’ – one might even say the hidden wellspring. ‘The Bible, first and foremost, was written to testify to people’s experience of God in the world; the witness of Scripture is that God is revealed through human experience in the body [...]’ (and one might add, history and non-human nature) (Grosch-Miller 2020: 29). Grosch-Miller echoes Rosemary Radford Ruether’s insistence that all theology is mediated in and through human experience (Ruether 1993: 12) when she continues: ‘Tradition, too, bears the *finger-prints of experience*, developing over time through argument and innovation. Scripture and tradition are ‘codified collective experience’ (Grosch-Miller 2020: 29).

Collins’ critique also overlooks those working with models of theological reflection who continue to work with scripture, albeit in a post-Enlightenment, post-critical culture. These include Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward’s characterization of two out of seven methods which identify scripture as a legitimate starting point (2019: 55–86, 87–118), as well as work that explores how preaching and liturgy might be forms of ‘performative’ practical theology (Shercliff and Allen 2021: 87–112).

Similarly, Dorothy Bass’ (2016) attempt to foster a post-critical ‘Biblical imagination’ capable of grounding practical wisdom for church and society is grounded in a deep appreciation of the enduring and generative power of scripture, in all its manifestations in the liturgies, narratives, and devotional practices of the church. Even so, Bass argues

that by elevating the authority of scripture and that of the church as primary interpreter, there is a risk of silencing the critical function of marginalized voices and those from beyond ecclesiastical circles – echoing some of the inhibitions towards using the Bible in theological reflection voiced by Zoe Bennett and others (Bennett 2013). While acknowledging the ‘the manifold oppressive ways in which this grand story [of the Bible] has been told and used’ (Bass 2016: 214), those who embody ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ within and outwith the church need to be able to call on non-theological sources in order to exercise a prophetic, critical corrective towards any hegemonic or partial model of revelation.

3.3 Subjectivity and experience

As we have seen, experience, tradition, and culture are staple sources for theological reflection. However, fundamental as it is, ‘experience’ as a category requires further interrogation. It may be apparent how theologies of liberation developed an appeal to experience as a critical device designed to offer visibility and legitimacy to those ‘on the underside of history’, but even that is followed by deeper social analysis which puts to the test these initial expressions against wider structural and systemic factors. Any naive or unreconstructed account of supposedly ‘raw’ experience as self-evident runs the risk of descending into a kind of experiential or autobiographical pietism, whereby there is assumed to be an essential core of self-expression and interiority through which ‘authentic’ religious experience and theological experience takes place. However, the ‘self’ who speaks through the narrative is also always constructed by it.

Even the conviction that the most effective education rests on experience does not mean that all experiences are equally educative, valuable, or transformative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other, and the former always needs to be mediated through some form of critical interrogation. Hence the need for the articulation of contextual experience to be complemented by reflexivity, which is essentially relational and self-critical (D'Souza 2009: 89). Nor should an emphasis on the personal and subjective aspects of theological reflection on experience be allowed to obscure the socio-economic and political dimensions of a situation, which have been central to liberationist approaches.

There is a consistent strain in theological reflection literature, therefore, that insists on the intrinsically critical and transformative nature of any evocation of experience as a category within theological reflection, and the necessity of measuring that initial articulation within a wider framework of critical understanding. To return to Bernard Lonergan’s four levels of consciousness – experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding – it is clear that these presuppose the possibility of reflexive self-transcendence, which he terms ‘conversion’ (1972: 239–240). This serves to remind us of the importance of critical enquiry and self-questioning in a constant cycle of biography, learning, reflection, and

transformation. The question of how conventions of reflexivity enable a sophisticated representation of personal experience will be returned to in [section 4.2](#).

3.4 Non-correlation

Finally, the question of how exactly the insights of non-theological disciplines are brought into dialogue with those of ethical and religious traditions remains perennial. Working across disciplines can be risky as the theoretical and ideological frameworks underpinning these disciplines carry hidden assumptions and biases, which begs the question of how much and what level of expertise and specialist knowledge can be expected of those conducting such correlational interpretations.

At one level, this is a debate about the theological substance of theological reflection, and mirrors wider debates in [Christian theology](#) between those who regard divine revelation as contained in scripture and tradition as paramount and those who regard it as more synthetic. The latter have been roundly criticized by representatives of the former camp for placing too high a premium on the providential nature of human reason, arguing that the canons of received tradition must be considered normative. Any consideration of theology being subject to revisionism in the face of non-theological insights represents a capitulation to secular reason (Allen 2012: 210–212). Rather than accommodating itself to concepts or presuppositions derived from non-theological enquiry – or conceding that the domains of nature, human practice, and culture may be redolent of God’s grace and revelation – opponents of correlation insist on the priority of revealed sources, on the grounds that secular thinking is derivative of a theological (or even doxological; Allen 2012: 211) worldview, and not the other way around. However, advocates of correlative approaches would insist on it being grounded in a robust incarnational theology of [creation](#) and culture, in which God’s continuing revelation is manifest in and through human society, thereby endorsing the necessity of ‘speaking of God in practice’ and, as Andrew Todd puts it, ‘tak[ing] the risk of thinking as a social scientist’ (2007: 218).

4 Evaluation and future prospects

4.1 The life of discipleship, the believer, and the church

4.1.1 ‘Ordinary theology’

Ernesto Cardenal’s *Love in Practice: The Gospel in Solentiname* (1977) was a collection of transcripts drawn from a Basic Ecclesial Community of ordinary *campesinos* (manual workers) in Nicaragua in the 1970s as they reflected on scripture. Similarly, James Cochrane draws on his transcriptions of Bible study sessions in a disadvantaged Black church in South Africa. Cochrane deliberately foregrounds the everyday faith of ordinary believers and their practical reflection on daily life. These may not attain the sophistication or polish of academic theology, but for Cochrane they represent an ‘incipient

theology' (1999: 16). These two books serve as examples of theological reflection at work in grassroots communities with those who have little formal theological training or qualifications. They illustrate an enduring interest in the adoption of such inductive and experiential methods for equipping 'lay' Christians with the tools of theological reflection.

Jeff Astley's work on 'ordinary theology' as 'non-scholarly and non-academic' (Astley 2002: 56) which may incorporate elements of folk religion, popular culture, and everyday life in its reflective and constructive process, as well as Helen Cameron's distinction between normative, operant, espoused, and formal modes of theological discourse (Cameron et al. 2010: 53–56), serve as further examples of the breadth of ways in which theology is not only expressed in systematic or doctrinal forms but as the 'wisdom of faith [...] practical rather than theoretical knowledge, having to do with making sense of one's life and living one's life before God' (Astley 2002: 55; see also Wilson 1988).

Therefore, beyond its adoption in programmes of formal, accredited academic or ministerial training, theological reflection for the church endeavours to foster greater 'theological literacy'. This has relevance for those in the church seeking to promote a wider acceptance of the ministry of the laity, or what is sometimes termed 'whole-life discipleship' (Archbishops' Council Lay Leadership Task Group 2017). It aims to bridge the gap between the academy and the ordinary person in the pew to fulfil the precepts of the 'priesthood of all believers', something anticipated within practical and pastoral theology by Killen and de Beer's emphasis on theological reflection for everyday life (see [section 2.3](#)). It is also consistent with liberation methods drawn from Freirean pedagogy in basic ecclesial communities which return the Bible, and [theological education](#), to the whole people of God. As Trokan affirms:

Every ordinary Christian believer who authentically tries to appropriate his or her faith is participating in the theologizing process. Whenever we examine what is creative or destructive about life and relationships, we are theologizing. Whenever we struggle with sin and human limitation, we are theologizing. Whenever we hunger and thirst to care and be cared for, we theologize. (Trokan 1997: 145)

A recent example of an attempt to incorporate the language and methodology of theological reflection can be found in the deliberations of the Church of England around the ministry of the laity. In February 2017, a report was presented to the General Synod of the Church of England which proposed a renewal of understandings of mission and ministry as the work of the whole people of God, lay and ordained (Archbishops' Council Lay Leadership Task Group 2017). The report, titled *Setting God's People Free*, lamented the lack of recognition of what it termed 'lay leadership' as a crucial part of the church's mission and presence in society, arguing that greater time and attention was paid to lay

people's contributions to church life on Sundays, at the expense of valuing and supporting the rest of their lives, Monday to Saturday – not least theologically. The report decries

[...] the absence of any systematic theological framework for thinking about lay engagement and leadership. People are not equipped with the vocabulary or enabled to connect with the resources of the Christian faith in order to make theological sense of their own aspirations to leadership, influence and service [...] Without proper theological undergirding, it will be impossible to form and nurture Christians who are capable of proclaiming and living out the gospel in their daily lives, engaging confidently and faithfully with the complex challenges of today, and becoming an effective presence for Christ in their communities. (2017: 14)

Setting God's People Free can be understood, therefore, as an effort to put theological reflection to work in facilitating forms of everyday discipleship and Christian ministry in the world, beyond the church. It invites the church to explore how lay Christians might be encouraged to make the connections between collective worship and other practices such as reading the Bible, personal prayer, and so on, and the dilemmas people are facing every day as parents, workers, voters, or consumers (2017: 15). Effective theological reflection for the laity involves the cultivation of forms of worship, formation, and discernment which enable them to make sense of their life stories in the light of God's story by connecting the wisdom of Christian scripture and tradition with the dilemmas of everyday life.

4.1.2 Facilitating theological reflection as a work of ministry

In *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (2008), Richard Osmer appropriates the classic learning cycle within practical and pastoral theology to argue for the work of ministry (ordained or lay) as one of an 'interpretative guide' – reminiscent of Whitehead and Whitehead's (1995) concept of 'minister as theologian'. For Osmer, it is the minister – ordained or lay – who has the role of facilitator for their communities, helping them to make sense of experience by bringing theological concepts, narratives, and values to bear upon significant 'episodes, situations and contexts' (Osmer 2008: 8). This process of ministry to facilitate reflection is a question of hermeneutics, except the texts in question are 'living human documents', or the narratives of lived experience. The aim is 'wise judgement': reaching an anatomy of a situation; discernment of moral ends; and plotting strategic means.

Osmer also astutely incorporates the observation that such an educational and interpretive vocation is more than simply a matter of conducting empirical research or biblical exegesis. It is, profoundly, also a question of virtue and Christian formation. A greater theological fluency is nurtured in order to affect a deeper *phronēsis*, or practical wisdom, of faith. A church's presence in a community is to be judged not just in terms of service

delivery but in the way that congregation embodies gospel imperatives of justice, mutual care, and reconciliation.

The notion of theology as a form of 'practical wisdom' also reflects a commitment to a more virtue-based model grounded in a clear theological anthropology. Like liberation theology, this affirms the realization of full personhood and self-determination as the aim of theological reflection: 'the complementarity of theological reflection is to be found in a personalist philosophy emphasizing freedom and its manifestation through choices and actions' (D'Souza 2009: 82). It is used in a range of educational settings as a tool not simply to enhance professional competence but to foster 'the education of the whole person' (D'Souza 2009: 85; see also Le Cornu 2006).

4.2 Reflection, reflexivity, and representation

An extensive literature has emerged in recent years using sources from narrative, autobiography, autoethnography, and creative writing for theological reflection. However, as posited in section 3.3, reflection on experience requires participants to locate, interpret, and challenge their own presuppositions as reflective subjects. The illusion of such work emerging spontaneously and unmediated must be exploded; the convention of 'reflexivity' offers a means of giving an account of the reflective process in ways that lay bare the writer's context, interests, and presuppositions. It represents a further development of Donald Schön's contention that reflection on or in practice engenders a distinctive epistemology, distinct from technical-rationality (Schön 1983). It also stems from the recognition that all religious experience is necessarily mediated through personal and corporate narratives and texts that are themselves bound by wider social conventions of language and representation. As Walton argues, this is a highly 'crafted' process (Walton 2014: xii) and requires studied attention to the skills of reflexivity in bringing sophisticated and calibrated accounts of self and experience into being.

Such narratives are neither wholly private or public, fixed or unformed, entirely subjective or universal. They serve as a device for creating and managing the space or interaction between faith identity, autobiography, and 'public' or professional persona. Not only is the narrative itself constructed by the narrator and subject to social and political constraints, but the narrator – the subject or the self – is formed through narrative. Thus, narratives should not be read one-dimensionally in the light of 'truth' or 'falsity', but rather should be seen as the moment of – and space for – subject-formation, where constructive agency and creative theological reflection can emerge. Therefore, as Heather Walton (2014) argues, writing about experience has its own distinctive genres and conventions but nevertheless constitutes a valid form of constructive theological discourse.

This is exemplified in the work of writers such as Terry Veling, for whom the pedagogical practices of reading, writing, teaching, discussing and learning are also ones of spiritual

formation and theological discernment. Veling juxtaposes his own classroom practices of textual reading with students with the ancient tradition of *lectio divina* (Veling 2007). Similarly, Nicola Slee adopts the methods of autoethnography for the purposes of reflecting theologically on experiences of personal and social trauma. In a deliberate strategy to move beyond rational analysis as a way of making sense of systemic violence, Slee chooses creative writing, especially poetry, as the vehicle of her theological response in the face of visceral and overwhelming events and experiences (Slee 2020).

In his discussion of Killen and de Beer's model, the poet and educator Andrew Rudd makes a startling claim: 'a poem is a theological reflection' (Rudd 2018: 136). Any creative medium that can be put to work exploring the nature of faith and apprehending the presence of God, he argues, can be a *locus theologicus*. Writing poetry can engender a more profound attention to a particular situation in order to draw out its deepest meanings:

If I can make a comparison with theological reflection, it is like the process of discovering the heart of the matter, and allowing that to become an image. If I can put it this way, a poem is *all* 'heart of the matter', and its normal currency is images, metaphors, seeing one thing in terms of another. (Rudd 2018: 141, original emphasis)

Like other modes of engaging with Killen and de Beer's method, Rudd regards creative writing as one way of generating a focal image or moment from which further reflection can flow.

4.3 Theological reflection and religious diversity

4.3.1 Global and postcolonial perspectives

There is a danger that the widespread adoption of theological reflection in the West obscures its origins in the majority world, or the Global South, specifically that of Freire's liberative pedagogy in the Base Ecclesial Communities of Latin America. This section returns therefore to consider contributions within and to global Christianity, and in particular the adoption of explicitly postcolonial perspectives.

Postcolonial thinking emerged as a critical and interdisciplinary school of thought in the 1950s and 1960s, inspired by the work of Edward Said (1978). It has prompted a re-evaluation of the received intellectual canon and core curricula, as well as approaches to teaching and research (Smith 2021) in multiple disciplines, including theology and religious studies (Hong 2021; Mombo 2019; Parker 2022; Reddie 2018). Postcolonial theories focus on the oppressive impact of imperial power relations in denying agency to colonized communities and cultures, including what counts as legitimate knowledge. Crucially, postcolonial critiques argues that Western constructions of reality rest on a process of 'othering' colonial subjects (Goto 2018: 28–31, 148–150). Thus, the familiar epistemic and pedagogical steps of theological reflection – beginning with experience, reading tradition,

and formulating new guiding principles – should always be filtered through postcolonial lenses in order to expose and correct ‘assumptions of Western superiority, preoccupations with identity, fear of difference, and processes of othering’ (Jong-Kumru 2013: x).

Postcolonial theological reflection therefore extends the models of materialist and contextual hermeneutics first established in Latin American liberation theologies in order to address the multiple flows of poverty, climate emergency, racism, globalization, and androcentrism (Kim-Cragg 2015). Such an approach would not be out of place in the earliest discourses on doing theology ‘from below’, but the incorporation of postcolonial theory provides still further clarity and reinforces the epistemic and pedagogical commitment to ‘learning from others whose views are more holistic and integrated [...] especially those lives that are oppressed and exploited’ (Kim-Cragg 2015: 172). Such perspectives reflect the emergence of a range of critical and constructive tools associated with Said’s postcolonial theory, such as intersectionality (Hong 2021: 88) and ‘contrapuntal’ strategies of reading (Jong-Kumru 2013: xii), which emphasize both the cognitive and material dimensions of marginalization and dis/empowerment (Parker 2022).

Knowledge is connected to differential economic status, as well as the ways in which networks of embodied difference (such as gender, race, dis/ability) make themselves apparent in culture and society. The task of what Mombo terms an ‘inclusive global theological education’ is thus to destabilize these forces and equip the church for ministry in its widest sense, although the vestiges of colonialism still endure in the shape of lack of resources, the obstacles facing women in patriarchal societies, and the hegemony of the Western theological canon within the curriculum (Mombo 2019: 451). Acknowledgement of embodied experience and global cultural diversity as well as the dangers of collusion with epistemologies of bias and othering are integral parts of any pedagogy for inclusive theological reflection in postcolonial perspective. This translates into an insistence on approaches that stress grassroots learning, use of narrative, attention to everyday, embodied experience and – in another reaffirmation of liberationist convictions – the goal of working for justice (Reddie 2018; Hong 2021; Parker 2022).

Postcolonial theory and pedagogy also reminds us of the corporate, communal nature of much theological reflection. The African concept of *Ubuntu*, often translated as ‘I am because we are’, or the East Asian term *Sansaeng*, meaning ‘mutuality’ or ‘co-living’ (Kim-Cragg 2015: 174), or the Pasifika [sic] idea of *talanoa*, meaning conversation (Havea 2021), all speak of aspirations to learn collaboratively in a transformative and inclusive process of theological reflection. At the same time, the significance of the Bible, the emphasis on context and lived experience and the process of consciousness raising, plus the search for practical and ethical resolutions to theological investigations, maintains a continuity with the essential methodologies and values of liberationist theological reflection.

4.3.2 From ‘theological reflection’ to ‘reflective believing’

In response to growing religious and non-religious diversity, the North American Roman Catholic theological educator Edward Foley has advanced a variation on traditional theological reflection, or what he terms ‘reflective believing’ (Foley 2015). Foley is indebted to the approach to theological reflection offered by James and Evelyn Whitehead, but his attempts to adapt this method into some form of ‘interfaith theological reflection’ have been frustrated by what he regards as the incipient hegemony of the Christian tradition, not least in the usage of the terminology of ‘theology’. Instead, Foley has coined the phrase ‘reflective believing’ which he renders more akin to a work in the creative arts, requiring the skills of ‘improvisation’.

Once again, the essence of religious faith is less propositional object than performative action. The object is ‘believing’ rather than ‘belief’, specifically expressed in the ways we use language to search for and articulate ‘meaning’. The process of reflection is directed towards participants exploring faith commitments as a combination of *orthopraxy*, *orthodoxy*, and *orthopathy* (right affection or attachment). The emphasis is placed on a common search for meaning, embodied in language, narrative, and metaphor

[...] that honors the experiences and stories of its participants. Employed for diverse purposes, it welcomes and displays a holy envy for other ways of believing, while recognizing the bond of humanity between all participants. Necessarily improvisational, it displays respect for the common good and exercises humility in knowing how to contribute to that good. (Foley 2015: 92)

A further notable feature is Foley’s insistence on the corporate exercise of reflective believing. Religion is not a personal possession, the life of faith is conducted in community – and, what is more, the very *telos* of reflective believing lies in the common good of all concerned.

4.3.3 Praxis and engagement

Another example of theological reflection in the pursuit of interreligious dialogue can be found in the work of the Birmingham-based pastor and theologian, Ray Gaston (2017). His method represents a shift away from theological reflection framed around formal doctrinal statements, sacred texts, or propositional truth claims towards a form of religious dialogue rooted in incarnational practices of dialogue, solidarity, and accompaniment. This process of theological reflection is also highly reflexive, as it begins with interrogation of one’s own beliefs as preparation for further engagement in which the emphasis is on joint learning for purposes of deepening understanding of one’s own journey of faith and ‘how [...] other faith traditions enable us to enter into a deeper relationship with Christ’ (Gaston 2017: 23; see also Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: 208–212).

4.4 Conclusion

The ‘conversation’ at the heart of theological reflection is, according to Stephen Pattison, both method and metaphor (2020). In other words, it describes a particular epistemology but also a wider worldview in which knowledge and understanding about God are rooted in human discourse (theological and non-theological). Question and answer, shared enquiry, and constructive dialogue: these are embedded in its very nature. In making the connections ‘between human dilemmas and divine horizons’ (Graham, Walton and Ward 2019: 6), theological reflection aims to mediate between theological discourse about the nature of God and the exercise of faith. This rests on an incarnational theology by which Christians experience God as active in history and revealed in human affairs. It is contextual, inductive, dialogical, problem-centred, and performative. The goal is enhanced understanding, renewed discipleship, and social or ecclesial transformation.

The processes of interrogating and reflecting on one’s beliefs and practices are therefore central to the enterprise of clarifying and renewing the values that underpin any kind of human action. As well as being fundamentally dialogical, we have seen that theological reflection is similarly enquiry driven and action guiding. In its dynamic of practice-theory-practice, it identifies human experience and culture as its Alpha and Omega, naming it ‘with all its specificity and limitation – as the place of encounter with the infinite mystery of God, the place of grace; the Christian practitioner is thus compelled to seek out and speak the language of God within definite human contexts’ (Cameron et al. 2010: 23).

Attributions

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• Further reading

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