

Introduction

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1 Getting started

Theological reflection is, quintessentially, an experiential activity which can only be assimilated, appreciated and mastered by the doing of it. So, rather than begin by telling you what it is – if you don't already know – and why its significance is almost universally accepted by theological educators and practitioners, we invite you to try it out for yourself. This should whet your appetite for more, if the process is new to you. If you are a seasoned theological reflector, it may revitalize and reaffirm your experience and practice.

You are encouraged to engage with the exercise below, and the other exercises in this book, so that the work to enrich your use of this skill is always rooted in practice.

A basic 5-Step exercise in theological reflection

Write brief notes, rather than paragraphs, for each step of this exercise:

- 1 **Focus** on whatever has been the best thing that has happened to you or for you so far this week. Write a short phrase to identify it and make it specific.
- 2 **Fill out** the memory of that event as richly as you can: include the sights and sounds around you at the time, the context of the event and its significance for yourself and others, and its relationship to other events in your own life, and in the wider world. You might find it helpful to draw pictures or write your notes as a flow diagram or make a table with headings for each aspect of your account (which could then be linked with your discoveries in Step 3).
- 3 **Find connections** between elements of your reliving of the experience and texts, parables, prayers and events from the religious tradition you are most familiar with. Savour and enter into the narrative of what comes to mind in this way, using brainstorming, spidergrams or whatever form of representation enables you to explore the connections and feelings that arise for you. Ponder these things and offer it all in prayer in whatever way feels appropriate.
- 4 **Return to the event** that you began with but look at it from the perspective of Step 3. Allow the 'flavours', nuances or clear insights from your explorations to surprise and intrigue you as you look afresh at the experience you had. Wonder and ponder on any resulting changes in your view of that event, and record anything especially significant.
- 5 **Action:** note down two or three actions, however small, that your reflection leads you to consider taking as a way of living out the truth of what you have discovered. Note also how you would hope to respond should something similar happen in the future. Finally, make a definite commitment to undertake at least one of the actions you have noted.

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There are many different ways of approaching theological reflection, some of which are described in Chapter 1. The exercise you have just completed is only one way in to this life-giving and energizing (but often misunderstood) method of interrelating life and faith. You may not much like writing things down, and may prefer more visual or tactile ways of reflecting. Whatever mix of methods you use, theological reflection (TR), if practised methodically and habitually, can provide a constantly renewing source of discernment and vision for anyone who is serious about developing the practice of faith in the decisions, actions and processing of everyday life and ministry.

2 Connecting faith and practice

In a nutshell, TR is a process by which explicit connections are made between belief and practice. Its evolution as a distinct theological activity is outlined in Chapter 1, but of course a concern to put faith into practice began long before the twentieth century, and has a very long history in all faith communities. In the Christian tradition, it finds expression in the injunction in the Letter of James that the faithful should 'be doers of the word and not hearers only' (James 1.22) and St Paul's insistence that the 'fruits of the spirit' are evident in the lives of believers (Gal. 5.22; Eph. 5.9). The irony is that it is perfectly possible to be a fervent believer in living out faith in practice and still not notice blatant contradictions between, for example, assertions of one's duty to love one's enemy, feed the hungry and forgive indefinitely, and what one actually does in practice. It was the conspicuous mismatch between Christian ideals and social practice in Latin America that gave rise to liberation theology, a major contributor to the development of TR, as described in Chapter 1.3.

Moments such as this, of personal or communal crisis, often seem to provide the triggers which enable individuals and faith communities to recognize the inconsistencies between attitudes, assumptions and habits that have become embedded in their patterns of praxis, and the fundamental tenets of the faith they subscribe to. Executions, imprisonment, torture and crusades are in blatant contradiction with belief in a God of love. But while many of the contradictions between belief and practice are less spectacular, far more undoubtedly occur at a day-to-day level in communities of faith than are recognized or even noticed. A few examples of this for you to ponder are provided in the following exercise.

Exercise: challenging apparent inconsistencies between proclamation and practice

1 Jesus said, 'call no man on earth Father, for you have one father who is in heaven' (Matt. 23.9). Jesus seems to have been encouraging his followers to think of themselves as one equal family united in their love of their heavenly father without hierarchies of any kind – even those traditionally based on family seniority. But most families use this word, or an equivalent, to name the male parent, and some churches have generated the habit of using 'Father' as a title for those in (benevolent) authority over them. (Cf. Alison, 2001, pp. 56–85; Wink, 1992, p. 119.)

How do you respond to the raising of this question in relation to (i) families, (ii) church practice?

2 God's exaltation of the humble and meek and of the weak and the poor in spirit is a recurring biblical theme, as is 'putting down' the rich and the powerful (Luke 1.52). The faithful are repeatedly enjoined to live together as brothers and sisters.

What issues does this raise for you in relation to current practice in your church or faith community?

3 Jesus taught his disciples to 'take no thought for tomorrow' (Matt. 6.25–34) but to trust in our heavenly father's providence.

What contradictions do you notice between what Jesus is saying here, and how we order the life of our churches and our own lives, and how do you account for such contradictions?

4 In the church or faith community to which you belong, there are, doubtless, many instances where accepted practice fails to take account of explicit and implicit teaching and preaching in text and proclamation. Brainstorm as many examples as you can where accepted practice in your faith tradition seems to be at odds with the tradition itself.

The examples given above and others you have thought of illustrate how easy it is to ignore divergences between our practice and both minor and major tenets of the faith we proclaim. Those who regularly, habitually and unthinkingly believe the

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teachings of their faith by what they do and say, may often be very sincere believers, devout in their pattern of prayer and worship and commitment to religious practice, and they may be quite unaware of such contradictions. The Church has been described as *semper reformanda*, and certainly it has always been, and always will be in need of reformation. Theological reflection, as exemplified in this book, offers a simple yet effective way of enabling ongoing reformation and reconsideration of thought and practice applicable to any faith community.

Equally important is the issue of how what we do and experience feeds back into our interpretation of belief. Indeed, it is arguable that theology itself evolved in one form or another through reflection on practice and experience (see Graham *et al.*, 2005; Wilson, 1988; Tracy, 1981).³

In the New Testament theology arises out of the practical wisdom of Jesus and the efforts of Paul to build up the Church. In the Fathers, experience and practice generally precede doctrine, a case in point being Augustine's doctrine of original sin, which emerged out of the practice of infant baptism. The doctrines of the incarnation in Athanasius, and the Trinity in the Cappadocian Fathers, were intrinsically linked with the experience and practice of participation in God in the liturgy and elsewhere, while in modern times the Trinity has been 'rediscovered' in the practical search for equality in community. Not until the Middle Ages did theology begin to establish itself as a theoretical, systematic discipline in its own right; only then was a theological academy established, separate from the practical searchings of 'unprofessional' Christians.

The guru's cat

When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshippers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship.

Long after the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat eventually died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied up during evening worship.

Centuries later, learned treatises were written by the guru's disciples on the essential role of a cat in all properly conducted worship.

(De Mello, 1983, p. 79)

But doctrines tend to become gurus' cats (see box), preserved for their venerable age and widespread acceptance rather than the long-forgotten practical content! However, whenever in TR a connection is made between a doctrine and practice, not only is practice transformed, but the doctrine itself is seen in a new light. The theological cat can then begin to wake up, shake off its bonds and purr.

In many ways, despite its long antecedents, TR is still in the early days of its history and development. It currently forms a key component in many modules in practical theology as studied in universities, colleges and courses; and it forms a regular part of the life of a few Christian communities, notably within the Roman Catholic Church in parts of Ireland and North America (Gros, 2001). But it is not as yet a recognized and established element in the daily life and practice of churches and faith communities generally. It is hoped that this book will provide a useful guide in contributing to this development.

3 TR in Christianity and other faiths

As is evident from the outline of its history above, TR as a distinct activity has grown within the context of the Christian tradition, and, certainly in its early days, with specific reference to ministerial education. More recent developments (Pattison, 1997b; Heskins, 2001; Green, 2002; Killen and de Beer, 2002) have stressed its crucial importance for all the faithful, laity as well as clergy, in honest appraisal and critical self-awareness, in bringing the practice of daily living closer to the vision and teaching of the Christian faith. The gestation of this book, therefore, has been from within the field of Christian ministerial education. However, the theory and application of this process as presented here is intended to be transferable to any group of believers of any faith community – and even, perhaps, secular 'faith communities', as in *The Faith of the Managers* (Pattison, 1997a). The issues of the vital importance of connecting faith and practice are, after all similar, though the belief systems and traditions with which practice is correlated may be different.

The authors of this book would be particularly glad to hear from members of other faith communities who can relate the use of TR as described here to their own experience; and to enable the development of ways in which the relationship between different faith communities could be enriched by working

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together in such projects, locally or nationally. Examples of using TR in other faith traditions would be a welcome enhancement to any future edition of this publication. But as it stands at present, examples are drawn from the authors' own experience and research within the Christian tradition. It is our firm belief and hope that, by describing and illustrating the elements of the process of TR from the standpoint of one tradition, this book can make TR more readily transferable to other traditions, and thus make a real contribution to interfaith dialogue and understanding (see further Chapter 8.5).

4 Understanding TR: the basics

At this stage it is necessary to begin to state more clearly what TR is and how it works. It may interest, amuse or alarm you to know that although TR exercises have been a requirement in most practical theology and ordination courses for more than twenty years, no clear definition of what TR actually is has yet been agreed. Research has shown how immensely frustrating and deskilling students have found being expected to operate in this vacuum (Pattison, Thompson and Green, 2003, pp. 123–4). This reaction is hardly surprising since there can be few things more frustrating than being told that you have to do something though no one will tell you what it is or how to do it, or how to judge for yourself how well you have done it – only criticism if you don't get it right.⁴ Too often, it seems, people cannot really see what they are being invited to do and how this really can add value to their lives, thought and faith.

For this reason considerable importance is attached to the process of defining and describing TR in this book. This process is developed in Chapter 1.5 and is revisited in Chapter 10.2, by which time you will be able to refine your understanding and definition more precisely from the experience gained by working through the exercises in this book. TR must be known by its fruits: and it is hoped that you will discover this fruitfulness for yourself.

It would seem helpful to identify three broad understandings of the TR process, and to clarify the focus of this book in relation to them.

- 1 Some people use 'theological reflection' fairly loosely to mean any ruminative activity making connections between life and faith, and speculating about other ways of being and thinking in relation to belief. This use of the

term is descriptive rather than prescriptive: there are no 'rules' for doing it or evaluation. It is simply a description of a cognitive process that takes place quite spontaneously, though not necessarily with much rigour or criticality, among faith community members.

- 2 Others use TR as an umbrella term, almost synonymous with practical theology, to cover any thought-out activity that seeks to correlate theological concerns and insights with current social issues and events.
- 3 A third use of the term describes a much more precise, disciplined activity, undertaken methodically and rigorously by ministers, lay people or practitioners of any faith who are seeking, consciously and deliberately, to integrate belief and practice. This activity relates insights and resources from a theological tradition, specifically and carefully, to contemporary situations and vice versa, so that a mutually enlightening reappraisal may result. Pointers are sought to action which leads to a response which is more authentically true to the faith tradition on which it is based.

It is this third, rather more precisely defined use of the designation 'theological reflection' that is the main focus of this book, to which we have given the acronym PTR to distinguish it from the other two more general uses of the term. A fuller explanation for the use of this term, and the specific range of activities to which it refers, is given in Chapter 1.1.

5 Taking care of the reflector: a warning

This book, and the practice of PTR which it describes and exemplifies, will be of no help whatever to anyone who is not prepared first of all to care for themselves by allowing adequate time and space for rest, recreation and prayer. One of the very first groups encountered in the early days of the project that formed the background to this book illustrated this necessity very clearly. At the end of a weekend exploring current practice and new possibilities in TR, when invited to name new (to them) methods of theological reflection that they would explore over the coming year the participants identified activities such as hill-walking, going to India, dancing, creating music, having time away with a partner, timetabling space for reflection, going to the pub in a group. All of

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these seemed valuable commitments to make, and were affirmed as such, and were in themselves an acknowledgement of the absolute necessity of recreative space as a prerequisite for the practice of reflection – but they were not, in themselves, methods of theological reflection.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) suggests that only when our basic physiological and safety needs have been met, so that we have adequate nourishment, rest and shelter and a sense of security and stability, can human beings have spare energy to devote to relating, belonging and a sense of confidence and self-worth and thence to the kind of maturity that enables self-acceptance, objectivity, creativity, an awareness of the transcendent (and much more). Maslow is concerned here with the overall development of the human personality. But in a similar way, surely, it is true that, until fundamental physical and bodily needs are met, including rest and recreation, and the needs for security, relationship and a sense of belonging and worth, we will simply not have the time or strength or mental capacity available to make possible the kind of open-minded but demanding searching, lateral thinking and lively interaction with text, tradition and community that theological reflection requires.

Seeking to discover and translate into real life God's truth for us today in relation to particular situations through the hermeneutic of scripture and tradition requires a lively freshness of heart and mind on the part of the seeker, as well as diligence and commitment in searching and questioning, and a readiness to let go into uncertainty for as long as may be needed. (Trying to force an answer too quickly is likely to destroy the process.) The agent in this process is not a machine but a fragile human being whose physical, emotional and spiritual needs have to be met – every bit as much as would a machine's needs for fuel, lubricant and proper care – if these rewarding tasks are to be well carried out. The commandment to 'do no labour' on the Sabbath day may be flexibly interpreted these days, but accepting that we are divinely commanded to take proper time off from work and commitments for rest and space and peace and renewal, as well as prayer and worship, is one that all the faithful, but perhaps clergy in particular, need to take very seriously (Litchfield, 2006; see also Chapter 5.3).