

A new way of being theologians

During my predominantly urban ministry, I have developed a style and method of doing theology which has quite naturally emerged from the needs of the people and situations with which I have been engaged. It has proved to be creative and productive for those with whom I have lived and worked, and it has grown from the theological insights just described – the ‘tent pegs’ which hold it firm even when under the strains of the issues generated by our new economic and political situation.¹ All this has inevitably prompted me to try to clarify what the nature of the method is, and, slowly but surely, a picture has come into focus. I want to offer that now, but on the strict understanding that theological groups do well to develop and redesign the model as their own predicament determines. On that basis, many have found the model that follows quite helpful.

It was some years ago when I came across a diagram in a book on industrial and educational psychology² that was intended to describe a method of learning which paid due attention to the experiences that adult students brought to the classroom. The diagram attempted to display how elements from experience could be brought together with elements of theory. I remember how I began to play with the idea of substituting into that diagram new words and phrases which could convert it from a conservative learning model into a pattern for personal and social transformation, and thus produce a picture of what I meant by the phrase ‘doing theology’. After much trial and error with the small group of urban Christians with whom I was then working, I ended up with a spiral diagram that owed much to my reading of Paulo Freire and Juan Luis Segundo, two fascinating thinkers from South America.³ Most of the descriptions of theology that I had met before had made the whole theological process sound more like a method of control and conditioning than an open system of discovery and transformation; however, the more I developed my spiral diagram, the greater my conviction grew that here was a style and approach that would serve people who were more concerned to be open to the Spirit’s operation in the world rather than merely learning theological constructs of past eras. All that was some years ago and it was not until much later that I realised that what I had been doing then was trying to reinvent the wheel! For it was on meeting a number of Roman Catholic friends who had recently returned from Latin America that I learnt that there already existed a spiral model of doing theology which they referred to as the Pastoral Circle or Cycle – the similarities between that and my home-grown spiral were remarkable. The Pastoral Cycle had been developed by liberation theologians working from a model originally created by Father Joseph Cardijn, a Belgian priest who had been

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the inspiration to many Catholic workers and students between the wars. He had attempted to find ways of moving Christians to a more careful analysis of their situation by asking them to 'see, judge and act' upon their experiences. The Catholic justice and peace movement had taken that framework and developed it significantly, and, more recently, Joe Holland and Peter Henriot in North America have inspired a movement there towards what they call 'Social Analysis'. In Europe, such organisations as INODEP have been sponsoring similar routes into theology.⁴ I found so many parallels between all this work and what we had spontaneously been developing here that I was even more convinced that we were mutually on the right track.

Although my spiral diagram conforms largely to the Latin American Pastoral Cycle, the way of working it which will be described in this book is very much home-grown, and has been developed from many hours' experience of using the model with a variety of different Christian groups in Britain.

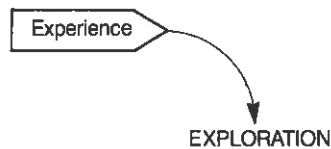
Let me then present, in diagrammatic form, how I think we should go about the business of doing theology in the complex society in which we live. As I have suggested, I have found it most helpful to think of the process as a circle, cycle or, even better, a spiral, which moves around continually from action to reflection and from reflection to action; it is this constant interplay between the two that we have earlier called 'praxis'. To earth my description it may be useful to make reference to an example so that we can see how the spiral works in practice, although I will of course be going into more practical detail in subsequent chapters. Freda, whom we mentioned in Chapter 1, presents an ideal example, because her situation of having to make a decision at work about a staff redundancy is a typical starting point for doing theology. Thus the spiral starts with *experience*.

EXPERIENCE

As was constantly stressed in Chapter 1, our theological work must always remain conscious of the encounter with experience. This is fundamental to any earthed theology, and so this is where we must start. We begin, when doing theology, by trying to become as conscious of the real situation that surrounds us as we possibly can. We will not be wanting at this stage to engage in a thorough analysis, but instead to make sure that we really are aware and conscious of the feelings, emotions and impressions that the experience engenders. No Christians can engage dispassionately about God, and thus it will be much better for us to take as our starting point for theology an involved encounter of participation in something that touches us deeply as human beings. The experience we choose to consider may be a very active one, like running a rowdy youth club evening, or it might be passive – more of a predicament than an activity. Or it may be a situation demanding a response, like that of Freda hearing that an employee had to go. In any event, there is a situation that confronts us or an activity to cope with. And it is interesting to note how often the situation which grabs us to do theology will have this common element of worry or anguish about it. 'How are we going to cope with this?' or 'what on earth can we do about that?' is so often the starting point for

a relevant and exciting piece of theological work, even though it begins on a negative and worrying note. This may have something to do with God's special concern for those who are heavy laden; but, in any case, it is a fact that good theology is more likely to derive from a problem than a statement, more likely to arise in a prison than a palace.

It is this felt experience that can be our starting point, with all its implicit assumptions and emotional sub-strata. As we engage this aspect of the Doing Theology Spiral, we will tell stories about how the experience feels and hear from others in the theological group how they are feeling, and what sort of experience it is for them. Of course, no one comes to the experience from a vacuum, and so, at this early stage, opportunity is made to explore some of our prior feelings and prejudices, for good or ill, about the experience or issue. As Christians, we will also want to express something of our inner understandings of what meanings and values lie behind our immediate perceptions of the situation and share some of those feelings together. Often this can be done through prayer and worship, as well as by the utilisation of either discussion or non-verbal exercises in the group. In any event, the group will try at this stage to make sure that they have properly identified just what the experience is and that they have a feel for something of the significance of the experience; to discern what their investment is in the situation and finally to become more aware of the issues that are at stake and the questions that are begged by the experience. When they have made this preliminary engagement with the issue and experience, it becomes possible to move on to more concerted analysis of what is happening in the situation. This is done by moving around the spiral into the *exploration* phase.



Exploration is key, and yet it is a stage often skipped by hasty would-be theologians. Having told stories of how they feel about the experience or situation in which they are participating, it is no good the group assuming that first impressions have in fact presented a precise and accurate picture of what is happening. The only way that a theological group can come anywhere near knowing what is really going on is to immerse themselves in a thorough analysis of the situation in which it is set and really make sure they know their stuff. If Freda had heard only the first word or two that her boss had spoken to her, and then switched off from listening to him in order to go straight down to her Bible study group, she might well have missed some vital information that would have made an enormous difference to the whole situation. Likewise, if she had not taken time to read up on employment law, she would never have known of the wider implications of her predicament.

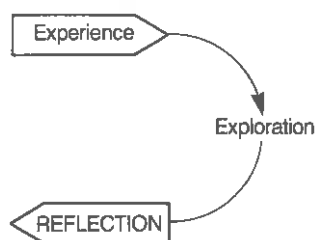
We too have to use all the disciplines at our disposal to get right under the skin of the situation about which we are endeavouring to do theology. We need to use our critical imagination in order to ask perceptive questions thrown up by our initial

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appreciation of the situation, and then set about gaining as much information and insight into the experience as we can using whatever disciplines of enquiry are necessary. It makes very good sense to use experts in the fields of sociology, psychology and the humanities, as long as they are invited in just for this part of the exercise and not allowed to let their own agendas dominate the group's life. But the group's own ability to 'read the signs of the times' and a large helping of street wisdom will often be just as important in this analysis as academic knowledge. The group will need a listening sensitivity to the situation and the people within it. They will want to itemise, analyse, search back through the history, and gain perspectives from other sources. They will need to ask questions about individual agents around the scene, look at the structures that are operating and ask questions about their power. It may even be possible, and perhaps important, to put the experience into a national or even international perspective – especially in these days of the EEC and transnational companies. It will be important to see who is benefiting and who is losing out in the situation, what values are or are not operating, and in what direction the whole issue seems to be heading. The group will need to know the situation inside out, for the clearer it can be at this exploration stage, then the more their later theological reflection and activity will go to the jugular of the experience.

Having explored our experience, the next stage is that we think and *reflect* about it all.

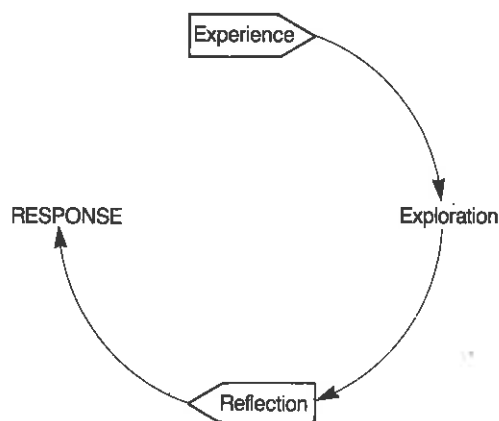


From the first moment of engagement in this exercise, the participants may already have been aware of all sorts of Christian assumptions that lay behind their initial impressions of the situation, and it was important to think and pray about those assumptions even at the outset. But in this reflection phase it will be necessary to make a concerted and conscious effort to see how the Christian faith relates to the experience, now that time has been taken to analyse and explore its implications more carefully. The situation being experienced must be brought into direct intimate contact with the Christian faith and all that the Christian community means for them. In this way, the group will be able to check the situation against that Christian heritage, and check the heritage against the situation. Bible study, prayer, worship, hymns and songs, the creeds and councils of the Church, the theologies of times past, the present social teaching of the Church,⁵ the great themes of the faith like salvation, creation, sin, thanksgiving, and so on: all these and much more will be at the group's disposal as it engages in theological reflection upon the experience. Just as Freda went to her

church to worship and to her Christian house group meeting, and talked it through with the vicar and read some literature about the subject, so the group will need to reflect carefully upon its experience in all sorts of ways. Freda may well have considered some of the Old Testament prophets' injunctions about the nature of justice in society, or been helped by hearing a collect about human responsibility and God's grace. The stories of creation and the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis may have thrown light on the difficult balance that must be struck between being productive and being responsible stewards of God's creation. Jesus' discipleship group may well have modelled to her something of the sort of solidarity that she and her colleagues were striving to emulate, and so on. As did Freda, each theological group will try to bring forward those treasures from the Christian heritage which seem to resonate with the experience that they are currently encountering. And this activity will help them to discern whether the story they are telling in their lives might truly be considered as part and parcel of the Jesus story, or whether their words and actions are just the telling of their own separate story - an altogether different story.

We can also learn from Freda that this whole reflective exercise is best not done in isolation. She needed others around her for her to do her theology and the same will be true for us. The group helps in a whole variety of ways and not least because - although at first sight it may not appear to be the case - the theological depth of most Christians is quite astounding once they find their voice, and we would not want to ignore that great resource. But this potential can only be tapped if all Christians are encouraged to participate in theology - even at this reflective stage. To begin with, they may need a lot of support and encouragement, and this the group can give, but we must never forget that theology is the activity of the whole body of Christ, and we waste that wide resource if we try to individualise it and separate it from the community.

In Chapter 5 I will say a lot more about this reflective element in the theological cycle, and those later detailed comments will require a slight modification of this part of our spiral diagram, but at this stage it is more helpful to keep the picture as simple as possible and see how the next stage in the process of doing theology develops out of reflection. For next in the cycle comes that element we might wish to call *response*.

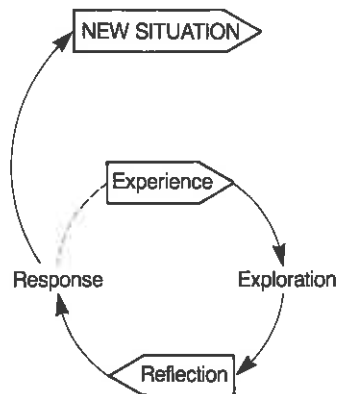


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We can sit and reflect till the cows come home. If that's all theology is ever going to do for us, then we would be right to ignore it. But the essential style of the sort of Christian theology being described here is that it gets back into the action at this point with new insight and drive. To this end the group asks itself, 'In the light of all the experience, exploration and reflection, what does God now require of us?' This is where faith and action go hand in hand once again. This is where theology becomes concrete again, and cashes out in experience, for the group sets about experimenting with a range of different responses to see which one works best in practice given the new insights derived from the theological reflection phase. Freda, you will remember, had many options. She could choose to sack one of her staff, or reflection might have prompted her to try to engage in new negotiations with her employer. Such negotiations would have been just one of a number of possible theological responses she could make. Of course, responses can take a whole variety of forms, from tough action to silent presence, or indeed it may even be that a group's response is to continue doing what was being done in the first place, but this time with much more insight and understanding. Action without reflection can be irresponsible, and so the theological spiral allows us to survey many different responses based upon a fuller appreciation of the analysed situation. The task then is to judge which response is best in the light of Christian reflection upon the whole experience. Such a considered response, based in the faith, will be a 'spiritual' activity even if it is very practical and down to earth, because it will derive from a hunger to see God's will done. It will probably need the resources of what I have termed a 'courageous spirituality' to accomplish it.

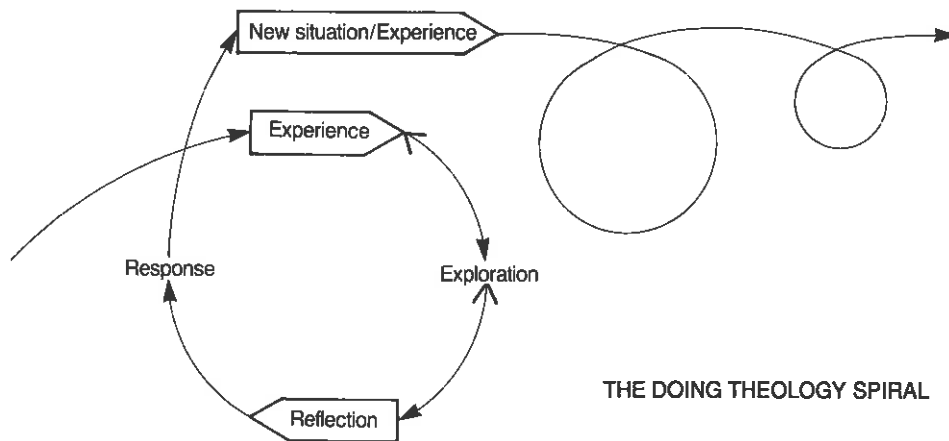
Having discerned the response God seems to demand, be it of an active or passive nature, the participants then go ahead and do their best to implement it. But this is only to find that this responsive action puts the group into a brand-new predicament, for they have come full circle into experience again; but this time it is a different experience, the experience of a *new situation*.



Things are not guaranteed to work as well as this every time, of course, and inevitably we sometimes fail to risk the consequences of our new discoveries and refuse to move on to the new situation or experience; we prefer the safety of the old, even when our hearts know better. In the diagram I have tried to indicate this possibility by drawing in a dotted line from 'Response' back to where we started

from; but even so, I doubt whether it is possible to find ourselves back in exactly the same place, for so much will have been experienced on the way.

But if the group chooses to respond more creatively, then they will move into a new situation which is in fact a new starting point, an experience that will require a new exploration, a new set of reflections and new responses. Following the cycle round like this will not just be going round and round in unproductive circles, because each time the group moves into active response it will find itself in a new place; not just moving over old ground, but a moving spiral taking us forward all the time. What we have then is a spiral of action and reflection, of experience and contemplation, of praxis. The diagram will now look like this.



Once having engaged with the situation at the different stages around the cycle, the group finds itself in a good place from which to look back over the various phases and check whether the outcome of their endeavours has been constructive and faithful. Moving into a second cycle of exploration, reflection and so on allows the group to evaluate the whole theological process from the perspective of their new situation. This evaluation is an important part of the whole process, as is the continuous opportunity for celebration – celebration of all that has worked out well and celebration of the opportunity to be part of the discovery and comradeship that this style of doing theology always offers the group.

However, any diagram will have its limitations, and there are some glaring simplifications in this diagram which will require further clarification. It may be of course that the group that seeks to do theology will prefer to redraft this diagram or produce a different model altogether. Nevertheless, I hope that the general impression of the model I am proposing is now clear, and during the course of the chapters that follow I will seek to explain in more detail each phase of the Doing Theology Spiral that I have presented. Suffice it here, however, just to add a few points for the sake of clarification.

First, the distinctions between each phase of the cycle are certainly not always as clear in practice as the diagram might imply. For example, the diagram makes the distinction between exploration and reflection much sharper than it is in reality, but this is done because it is a constant fault of theologians that we do not *look*. We jump to conclusions, leapfrogging the exploration phase, much preferring to work

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only with preconceptions and ideologies rather than with observable and awkward phenomena. Having stressed this need to look and explore as logically prior to reflection, I nevertheless find it helpful sometimes to draw the arrow between exploration and reflection as a two-way link to remind us that in reality we cannot have one without the other.

In precisely the same way, it is impossible for a human being to have an experience without some prior reflection playing its part in that experiencing – this is simply the way we subjective creatures are made. We are predisposed to interpret our world by virtue of our very looking, our very experiencing.⁶ But again I find the distinction made in the diagram between experience and reflection serves as a helpful reminder lest we forget the importance both of experience and interpretation. As it is, the diagram stresses the importance of involved encounter (experience) as well as the value of that detachment which is necessary to some extent both in analysis (exploration) and in interpretation (reflection). Having done justice to the distinctions, we are then in a better position to see how, taken together, they combine as praxis, thus emphasising the physical and incarnational base-line of our Christian faith.

This brings us to another factor that cannot adequately be represented in the diagram, but which will certainly become apparent in the subsequent chapters. It is simply that experience can play a very significant role in all the phases of the cycle and not only in the first phase. This is because with the use of the right group methodology, even reflection can be 'experiential' when that is appropriate. By using the insights of adult education and learning theory, there is no need to limit ourselves to a distanced, boring or theoretical style of operation in any part of the diagram, and I hope to make that much clearer as the book proceeds.

It is important here to clarify further my use of the terms 'doing theology' and 'theological reflection' as I have used them in the spiral diagram. In the chapters that follow I will reserve the term 'theological reflection' for that aspect of theological activity which is centred upon the reflection phase of the cycle, where the explored experiences are brought into engagement with the great traditions of the faith and questions are asked about where the transcendent God is active within creation and our experience of it. That particular reflective activity is, in my terminology, just one aspect of a much larger process of discovery and response, the whole cycle, and to describe this I use the term 'doing theology'. Theological reflection alone, although understood by some to be all that theology consists of, is, I believe, dependent upon and responsible to the other aspects of the Doing Theology Spiral and is therefore only one particular element within the total endeavour that is theology. The tight definition of theology as one particular scientific discipline among others is what I specify as 'theological reflection', whereas I reserve the term 'doing theology' to refer to a much wider and more ambitious process of reflective action which incorporates many disciplines and phases. The importance of this distinction cannot be overemphasised, because it allows us to see more readily how the argument between activists and academic theologians may in fact have been worsened by a confusion of terms and definition.

But there is one more important issue raised by the diagram and it is indicated by the boxes that appear around the words reflection, experience and new

situation. These signify that, since the whole process is essentially cyclic, it is perfectly possible to move around the diagram having started from a variety of points, and not only from experience. For example, we may have started into the spiral process from an inner realisation that something is seriously wrong with our reflection and our thinking. For example, we may always have assumed our own denomination to be the only true one, and other so-called Churches to be neither Christian nor authentic. If we then read an account of the beliefs and practices of another denomination that contradicts all that we had assumed and we now become convinced that its adherents are Christian after all, and that the denomination has authenticity, then we are confronted by a problem. This is because the intervention of these new thoughts has brought dissonance to the harmony of our previous system or construct of thought. This tripping up of the mind by a new realisation is what learning theorists call 'cognitive dissonance'.⁷ The dissonance presses us with a need to do some fresh sorting out in our minds and lives. We are therefore prompted to move from this reflection into some new response that will enable a fresh analysis of the situation to be made. This means that we can find ourselves starting into the cycle of doing theology from a point different from that initially expected; not from experience but from cognitive dissonance within our reflection. The important thing is that although for most people the point of entry into doing theology will be in some committed experience, there is nothing wrong with starting from wherever it feels natural for the individual or the group and to get moving around the Doing Theology Spiral in whatever way turns out to be possible and most productive. The boxes in our diagram serve to remind us that we should start from wherever is most natural and effective.

The important thing is to keep moving on from one phase to the next so that the whole cycle of the Doing Theology Spiral is rehearsed again and again. The diagram is a simplification of a quite complex process, but I think it is the more helpful because of its simplicity. For the aim is that, with practice, the whole process may become second nature to any theological group so that they find themselves following the cycle quite intuitively, without having to make constant reference to a complicated blueprint. The cycle moves along into new discoveries and new places at each turn of the theological spiral, and in this way it reminds us that theology is just one vehicle on a Christian journey, which never allows us to remain for long in one secure place. The Doing Theology Spiral is just one supportive tool for following Jesus in the Way.

A South African example

It will be helpful now to look at some examples of the Doing Theology Spiral in action so that we can keep our thinking earthed. Since southern Africa can never be far from our minds, I want first to relate a story which comes from the South African Institute for Contextual Theology.⁸ A small group of young South Africans, black and white, decided to do some theological work together, and took the Church as the focus of their interest. They had no formal theological education, so where were they to start? We could imagine them starting from the models of the Church to be found in the writings of St Paul or the early fathers.

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