

Formation for Enabling Ministry: Stage 2

Theological Reflection for Discipleship and Ministry

What are we thinking about when we think about theological reflection (TR)? What exactly is TR and what is its role in discipleship and ministry? In the Church of England in the UK, and in many other Churches across the world, every ministerial student is expected to master TR. Moreover, TR is the core practice of the relatively new but increasingly established discipline of practical theology. Yet there is still a degree of uncertainty about its role. The past twenty years have been marked by uncertainty about the scope and methods of TR, its usefulness or otherwise, and its standards of good practice.

In this essay, I hope to show that recent research has gone a long way to clarify and distinguish between the different ways in which it is possible to speak of 'theological reflection' and the contribution of TR to the practices of both discipleship and ministry. By the end, I hope that you will be able to:

- describe the outlines of the conversation about TR over the past twenty years or so
- describe the relationship of TR and experiential learning
- describe the relationship between TR in everyday life and the formal exercises in TR used in ministerial formation
- identify, describe and provide a rationale for the features of 'good TR'

A feature of most of the standard textbooks on TR is that they begin with illustrations of TR in everyday discipleship or ministry and then proceed to describe a more formal process of TR as a tool for learning. Thus Laurie Green shares the story of 'Freda', who is asked to make a member of staff redundant,¹ Paul Ballard and John Pritchard begin their explanation of the pastoral cycle with the story of 'Sheila', a minister whose local school is threatened with closure,² and Judith Thompson distinguishes between, 'any ruminative activity making connections between life and faith,' and a, 'more precise and disciplined activity undertaken methodically and rigorously ... to integrate faith and practice.'³

Behind this distinction lies another equally if not more significant distinction between theology as a way of life and theology as an academic discipline. Summarising his survey of the development of theology, Edward Farley writes:

First, theology is a term for an actual, individual cognition of God and things related to God, a cognition which in most treatments attends faith and has eternal happiness as its final goal. Second, theology is a term for a discipline, a self-conscious scholarly enterprise of understanding. In the former sense, theology is a habit (*habitus*) of the human soul. In the latter, it is a discipline, usually occurring in some sort of pedagogical setting.⁴

¹ Laurie Green, *Lets Do Theology*, 2nd edition, London: Mowbray, 2009, p.6-9.

² Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 2nd edition, London: SPCK, 2006, p.83-7.

³ Judith Thompson, Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection*, London: SCM, 2008, p.7-8.

⁴ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983, p.31.

These two related distinctions lie at the heart of the confusion of the last twenty years or so about the role of TR and help to explain why, for so many people, not least ministers in training, the concept of TR has been so difficult to grasp.

In the UK, the early years of this century saw the inception of a powerful narrative about TR, based on numerous observations, to the effect that, while the staff of the training institutions in which TR was taught were fully committed to its vital importance for ministry, students failed to make use of it in the daily challenges of ministry and were, if anything, bewildered by the concept. In 2003, Stephen Pattison, Judith Thompson and John Green reported that the ministers they interviewed saw TR as, 'a technical term that is essentially mystifying, alienating and non-specific.'⁵ Should students grasp what TR is all about, their next problem is learning how to do it; and among those who did master the process, few went on to make TR part of their regular practice. As Janet Henderson wrote in relation to the pastoral cycle, 'Theological students would be hard pressed to end their courses without exposure to it, yet many leave unconvinced by its value and puzzled by the true nature of the theological reflection it requires.'⁶ The problem was summed up by Pattison, Thompson and Green: 'While professional theological educators see TR as the jewel in their disciplinary crown, a good number of their students regard this activity as an irritating and inhibiting pebble in the ministerial shoe, to be discarded as quickly as possible once pre-ordination training is complete.'⁷

This narrative, emphasising complexity, mystification and the failure of theological educators to get their message across, has proved persistent, at least in some quarters. Drawing on the title of an early article by Stephen Pattison, critics suggest that training students in formal methods of TR is akin to Pharaoh's requirement of the Israelites to produce bricks without straw. Pete Ward criticises the pastoral cycle for including theology at only one stage of the process, thus allowing the use of insights from other disciplines to escape theological critique.⁸ Gary O'Neill and Liz Shercliff point to the lack of clarity between 'models' and 'methods' of TR, doubt the usefulness of the pastoral cycle and offer their own alternative approach.⁹ Helen Collins also takes the earlier narrative for granted and adds to her critique a lack of emphasis on the role of the Bible among more theologically liberal practitioners. Collins' proposal is to 'reorder' TR by starting with Scripture instead of with experience.¹⁰

And yet despite the level of uncertainty surrounding TR, some acquaintance with its rationale and techniques is a requirement for ministerial students in a wide variety of Churches and training institutions across the world. In the Church of England, it is expected of every student completing a Common Awards programme. The Programme Specification for the BA in Theology, Ministry and Mission, which most students preparing for ministry in the Church of England follow, assumes that students will learn to 'reflect on experience and practice in the context of discipleship, mission and ministry', that they will be 'introduced to the subject specific skill of theological reflection,' and

⁵ Stephen Pattison, Judith Thompson and John Green, 'Theological reflection for the real world: time to think again,' *British Journal of Theological Education* 13.2, 2003, p.123.

⁶ Janet Henderson, 'What is wrong with pastoral theology?' *British Journal of Theology* 13.2, 2003, p.110.

⁷ Pattison, Thompson and Green, p.127.

⁸ Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017, pp. 101-2.

⁹ Gary O'Neill and Liz Shercliff, *Straw for the Bricks: Theological Reflection in Practice*, London: SCM, 2018. Pattison's article is 'Some straw for the bricks: a basic introduction to theological reflection,' *Contact* 99, 1989, p.2-9.

¹⁰ Helen Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection Starting with Scripture*, London: SCM, 2020.

specifies that at levels 4 and 5 at least 10 credits will be gained from modules in the category, 'Theological Reflection and Reflective Practice.'¹¹

The Preface to the Common Awards locates this insistence on the centrality of TR in a broader theory of knowledge and learning:

A wider and deeper epistemology that also embraces affective knowledge underpins the Common Awards. Such knowledge shapes the emotions, hones virtue and fuels passion after the pattern of Christ. It is not acquired simply by putting theory into practice but is generated by the very process of learning ... The methodologies of theological reflection are an important - and developing - facet of this kind of learning and therefore feature extensively in the Common Awards.¹²

Some recent research suggests that the decision to provide a guaranteed place to the 'methodologies of theological reflection' may be bearing fruit. In an article of 2020, Pippa Ross-McCabe compares the marks gained by students in a variety of modules requiring skills of TR with a selection of modules in which TR does not figure. She found the marks for the modules requiring TR to be only very slightly lower overall than those where TR is not involved. Although reporting these results with appropriate caution, Ross-McCabe does suggest Common Awards may be achieving its aims in relation to the formation of skilled theological reflectors.¹³

In 2019, a research project in the Anglican Diocese of Oxford set out to discover, 'What equips ministers to enable whole-life discipleship?' Questionnaire responses from 33 curates in the early years of ministry and 43 lay ministers whose training may have taken place at any time in the past twenty years suggested that the response to having been trained in techniques of TR fall into three distinct categories:

- those who found TR a revelation and embraced it enthusiastically
- those for whom TR was something they had always been used to doing and intended to continue
- those who were put off by experiencing TR as another academic exercise.

All three of these responses have significant implications. First, they demonstrate that it is possible for students to learn the techniques of TR and apply them in their ministry. In *Kingdom Learning*, I shared the response of a former student:

I found that the Pastoral Cycle can be a quick response in any situation, even simply taking a pause in proceedings to re-centre yourself theologically. I have found that using the Pastoral Cycle in a structured way means it is weaving itself into my everyday life.¹⁴

Another student at a different institution testified,

¹¹ [Prog_Spec_BA.pdf \(durham.ac.uk\)](#)

¹² [Preface to the Common Awards \(churchofengland.org\)](#)

¹³ Pippa Ross-McCabe, 'Straw for the bricks at last? Theological reflection under the Common Awards,' *Practical Theology* 13.4, 2020, p.413-26.

¹⁴ Ripon College Cuddesdon student assignment: used with permission.

‘When I consider my use of this method over the last three years, I am struck as to how much it has, almost without thinking, shaped my reflections and in turn my actions and thus the narrative of the communities in which I have been placed.’¹⁵

So firstly, it is possible to teach formal methods of TR and for these to become part of a minister’s regular practice. Secondly, the outcome of the research reveals a significant number of students already familiar with TR and using it in their everyday lives, suggesting that TR may be a natural process that takes place without anyone needing to teach it. And thirdly, learning formal methods of TR and being required to produce these in essay format may be experienced as antipathetic to the reflection that is taking place in everyday life.

These potentially contradictory findings are in fact tied together by the observation that, by paying attention to experience, reflecting on it to arrive at an insight about its significance and deciding how to express this in action, TR echoes the cycle of experiential learning. In fact, TR could be described as an ordinary process of learning, but one in which there is an attempt to discover God’s presence and discern God’s mind in everyday situations. Whether consciously or not, TR is the way people learn to think theologically outside the academic context, by taking the insights they have gleaned from Bible reading, Christian books, sermons, hymns and songs and applying them as best they can to the challenges they face in everyday life. Ordinary experiential learning in the course of everyday life involves a variety of processes including formal learning and learning with others, may take place over a long period of time, and may result in either small shifts of understanding or moments of revelation when the ‘penny drops’ and a new perspective is formed. All these things are likely to be true of the ‘ordinary’ everyday TR of Christian disciples.

The crucial difference between the natural processes of TR by which people learn their ‘ordinary’ theology and the ways in which theology is learned in the context of ministerial formation is that the traditional pedagogical approach of the academy frequently fails to engage with all four phases of the learning cycle, concentrating almost entirely on conceptualisation. TR is therefore required if students are to complete the learning cycle and apply their theology to experience. In this context, the pursuit of TR becomes an academic exercise, designed to enable the application of theological thinking particularly to ecclesial and ministerial experience. This disjunction between the way theology is learned in the academy and the way it is learned in everyday life can explain all three observations of the Oxford research: the joy of those students who discover a means of applying their newly learned theology in experience, the observation of others that formal methods of TR are an echo of the way they have been theologising in everyday life, and the complaint of a third group that the formal ‘theological reflection’ essay reduces what should be a natural process to an academic exercise.

We therefore arrive at a new starting point: all Christian disciples engage in TR, though not all realise that this is what they are doing and not all do it particularly well. There is therefore considerable scope for equipping students with models and methods that will enable them to engage in TR intentionally and to a high standard; and will further enable them to equip their congregations to reflect with them. But just as all effective teaching must engage with the students’ existing knowledge and attitudes, the teaching of TR in the academic context must engage with the informal

¹⁵ Jane Leach, ‘The End of Theological Education: An Analysis of the Contribution of Portfolio Learning to Formation in Ministry within a University Context’, *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 7.2, 2010, p. 117-204; quotation from p. 135.

processes of TR that students bring with them into training, help them to recognise what these involve, and use their existing experience as a starting point.

It is also necessary to identify the barriers to learning that students may bring. In research with his students on the Peterborough Diocese Lay Ministry Course, Quentin Chandler discovered several obstacles to effective TR, overcoming which was the equivalent of passing through a 'threshold' to a new understanding not only of TR but of vital aspects of Christian faith:¹⁶

- The 'pervasive' threshold. Students would come to focus groups believing they had no relevant experience on which to reflect. But this was because they came with the assumption that 'relevant experience' encompassed only the narrow field of ecclesial or ministerial experience. Crossing the pervasive threshold involves the realisation that God is present in the whole of life and that any and all experience can become the subject of TR.
- The 'interpretive' threshold. Some students would approach TR in the belief that the task was to apply the teaching of Scripture to experience. This 'one-way' approach frequently prevented them from arriving at a satisfactory insight about the experience. This group needed to recognise that any use of the Bible in TR involves interpretation. Not infrequently, the most significant outcome of TR is that it calls us to reconsider the way we have always interpreted a particular passage or even a major theme of Scripture.¹⁷
- The 'complexifying' threshold. Experience of TR also taught students that the outcome is rarely a simple straightforward answer. Especially in groups, TR throws up a range of viewpoints and draws attention to previously unconsidered factors. Crossing this threshold can mean for some students a reappraisal of the nature of faith and discipleship.

Perhaps even more significant were the thresholds crossed by Chandler himself as he wrestled with the outcomes of his research. The first was the recognition that TR, 'is not merely a cognitive activity: it is also a dispositional and spiritual one.' Simply put, Chandler discovered that a significant number of his students were already familiar with TR because it was what they did in prayer. As he puts it, 'Prayerful attention to experience is part of theological reflection: it is not a separate activity.'

Secondly, Chandler discovered that students for whom prayer was a way of seeking out the presence and guidance of God brought into the process of TR a 'set of durable dispositions' that could be called a *habitus*. These dispositions had been formed by internalising the voices of those who had been influential in the formation of the person's faith. Chandler lists Sunday school teachers, priests, ministers and theological educators, to whom we could easily add the voices of parents, friends,

¹⁶ Quentin Chandler, 'Cognition or spiritual disposition? Threshold concepts in theological reflection,' *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 13.2, 2016, p.90-102.

¹⁷ In their *Guide to Theological Reflection* (Zondervan, 2020), Jim Wilson and Earl Waggoner overlook the importance of the interpretive threshold. Responding to the relative lack of importance attributed to the Bible in other introductions to TR, such as that of Graham, Walton and Ward (SCM, 2005), they want to safeguard the role of the Bible as the principal source of authority in the evangelical understanding of Christian faith. Thus, the stages of the TR cycle as they describe it are: 'identify' the various facets of the ministry situation and the minister's response to it; 'align' the minister's response with the truths of Christian faith (as taught by the Bible); and then 'explore' the possibilities of action. Behind this account of TR seems to be a concept of an unchallenged and unchallengeable teaching authority mediated through a particular interpretation of Scripture. While I agree with them on the importance of safeguarding the authority of Scripture in TR, the consequence of their approach is likely to be to obscure the fact that everyone applying the Bible to concrete situation is interpreting it in some way. The danger is that ministers unable or unwilling to recognise this fall into an inappropriately authoritarian way of using Scripture. For an alternative understanding, see *Kingdom Learning*, pages 93-102.

mentors and the authors of Christian books. These along with their personal reading of Scripture form those dispositions and habits of interpretation that are brought to reflection on experience.

Chandler's research fully bears out the basic proposition: TR is a natural process, an extension of experiential learning, in which most Christians habitually engage. It adds substance to the idea that learning formal methods of TR can be compared to coaching. In training, a tennis coach takes apart the player's stroke, forcing them to concentrate on details like the positioning of the feet or acceleration into the ball, enabling the player to take improvements into their next game without thinking. In a similar way, the learning of formal methods of TR has the potential to develop students' capacity to reflect in everyday life.

Sarah Dunlop, Catherine Nancekeivill and Pippa Ross-McCabe take this observation one step further in a piece of research funded by a seedcorn grant as part of the Church of England's Common Awards programme.¹⁸ Their aim was to discover just how well ordinary believers reflect, with the aim of resourcing knowledge of how TR skills can be developed in both informal parish settings and in formal ministerial education. To do this, the researchers needed to set out their understanding of the appropriate standards of excellence to be applied to the reflections of their subjects. The discipline of practical theology, in which TR is a core practice, is by now sufficiently well developed for them to be able to do this in an uncontroversial way, taking for granted a significant degree of consensus. They suggest that 'good' TR can be described as follows:

- It displays openness to a divine agent: an assumption and dependence on divine participation, an attentiveness to the presence and participation of God
- It wrestles with Scripture and Christian tradition
- It connects with everyday reality / experience / context and/or a specific problem
- It seeks and assumes transformation of persons and practice – at the very least moving towards naming of some provisional outcomes of the reflection
- It includes self-awareness and reflexivity, a move 'beyond' reflection which challenges the tendency to see what we expect to see
- It displays an awareness of complexity, ambiguity and the provisional nature of knowledge.

The sample was small: 18 people balanced between women and men of whom some were exploring licensed ministry. However, in-depth interviews and follow-up exercises with this group exposed several areas where intentional training in TR might yield fruits for discipleship. For example, surprisingly few made any use of the Bible in their reflections. Although nearly all reported some change in their practice or theology after processing a significant life-event, few of these changes involved a reconsideration of an existing theological framework. There was very little increased awareness of the ambiguity or complexity of situations or of ways of knowing God.

They also noticed that at least half of their sample were hesitant about the possibility of God's direct involvement in the process of reflection and suggested that the reason for this might well be the prevalence of the 'immanent frame' limiting people's 'social imaginary' to the natural rather than the supernatural realm. Their suggestion is that in learning together to discern God's presence and guidance Christians need to be encouraged to expect God to 'talk back', to take an active role in the process of reflection.

¹⁸ Sarah Dunlop, Catherine Nancekeivill and Pippa Ross-McCabe, 'Exploring the practice of Anglican laity: finding manna in the desert,' *Practical Theology* 14.4, 2021, p.309-22.

These findings pose a challenge to church leaders to find ways of equipping their communities to wrestle together to discern where God may be present and active and to engage with Scripture and Christian tradition; to encourage and enable an expectation of engaging with God directly when processing issues of all kinds; and to nurture environments sufficiently challenging and yet safe enough to allow for change, not least in people's understanding of God. The relevance of these findings to everyday faith is clear: all these are among the requirements of a community supporting its members to engage with the spheres of everyday life in a Christian manner.

There is likewise a challenge to theological educators, to acknowledge and build on the experience students bring of having previously reflected theologically in the course of their everyday lives and to make the connection clear between this experience and the learning of formal methods of TR. The researchers suggest that this requires a clear distinction between the technical (or academic) and the discipleship nature of the practice, and propose that written work might be called a 'theological integration essay' to distinguish it from 'theological reflection' in everyday life. They conclude with the suggestion that, rather than applying the image of having to make bricks without straw, a more appropriate image is the provision of manna in the desert, 'an abundant, wondrous gift from a loving God.'

It seems that the task for church leaders and theological educators alike, is to enable a deepening dialogue with this generous God. It is about encouraging dialogue with God within the rich tradition of Scripture and the Christian church. It involves giving opportunities for such dialogue in the community: encouraging the asking of questions, expressions of lament and acceptance of uncertainty, but all in the context of confidence in the transcendence and divine meaningfulness of everyday life. This moves away from ministers doing all the reflecting in their study and then giving the answers from the pulpit. It also challenges the conception of theological educators simply as those who offer expert answers. Instead, people in the pew and in the classroom are encouraged to talk together to find a way forward.

In conclusion, the recognition that TR shares the characteristics of experiential learning draws attention to the prevalence of TR in daily discipleship and the vital role it plays in enabling everyday faith. Just as experiential learning may include formal academic learning but is rarely complete until this learning has been tried out, discussed with others and integrated into habitual practice, so the training in formal methods of TR students receive as part of their ministerial training needs to be anchored in practice if it is to take root. Just as TR can enable 'Gospel truth to come alive', so it can play a vital role in rooting the self-conscious scholarly enterprise of academic theology in the *habitus* of students as disciples and ministers.

Moreover, as 'disciple-making disciples', ministers need to become reflectors who teach others how to reflect. This means taking TR out of the formational context, where it functions as a tool for professional development, back into the church and using it as a means of enabling individual Christian disciples, groups and whole congregations to wrestle with the issues of everyday life.