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Mind The Gap:  
A Critique of the Literature on  
Theological Reflection

by

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submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the question of whether there is a single process of theological reflection which can be described with a clarity which makes theological reflection accessible to a broad range of people. The literature of theological reflection is examined, and its historical roots are disentangled. The applications of theological reflection are examined in order to understand the expectation of the outcomes of the process. Some underlying assumptions and issues, particularly of power and control in and of the process are exposed and clearly described.

The thesis begins by drawing out the themes and differences in definition and method in the foundational texts. These themes serve to identify underlying and implicit assumptions. From this work, the literature search was widened to include reflective learning theory, theology and hermeneutics.

This thesis places importance on the person of the reflector, who is largely ignored in the literature of theological reflection. It suggests that there are three inputs to any process of theological reflection: the person of the reflector, especially their faith and their lived experience; the situation or issue to be reflected upon; an element of theological tradition. The process described encourages the formulation of connections and new ideas. The process allows for outcomes ranging from practical solutions to the assimilation of life changing insights. The possible outcomes include change to the person of the reflector, by altering their future behaviour or belief; change to the situation being considered; change to the theological tradition, and consideration is given as to the difficulty of the last.

This thesis brings clarity to the subject of theological reflection, and will be of particular use to those who teach theological reflection and those who use it.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Professor Randolph Ellis for his wisdom and encouragement through the world of phenomenological hermeneutics and Professor Leslie Francis for his patient and kind supervision. Without Revd Alison Pattenden and other Learning Community friends, I would not have persisted in this endeavour.

Thanks are due to Andy, James, Alice and Margaret for their ready applications of wine, coffee, love and hugs during my studies.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandparents, who taught me that education is a privilege to be valued and used as far as my ability can take me; and to the memory of my mother, who showed me that there is nothing in the world as wonderful and formidable as a determined woman.

## **Declaration and Inclusion of Material from a Prior Thesis**

I declare that this thesis is all my own work, and does not include any material which has been used previously by me for any other thesis or for publication.

This thesis has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.

Claire Maxim

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# Chapter 1 - Introduction

All in the golden afternoon  
Full leisurely we glide;  
For both our oars, with little skill,  
By little arms are plied,  
While little hands make vain pretence  
Our wanderings to guide. (Carroll, 1947:8)

## Introduction

Theological reflection processes are used extensively in Christian churches and in the study of theology. In attempting to use these processes, this researcher has found a muddling mixture of methods, descriptions, models, and applications. This thesis analyses the literature describing theological reflection, identifies issues and gaps, examines the historical derivation of the subject, and draws out some of the assumptions and difficulties with the methods proposed in the literature. It suggests description of the process which is clear and logically robust. The intention is to bring clarity of thought, and so help those faced with needing to undertake theological reflection, those who teach it, and those who propose to develop it further.

Much has been written about theological reflection from the early 1990s onwards, and it is this body of literature, regarded in this thesis as the foundational texts, which was initially reviewed and analysed during the course of this thesis. As analysis proceeded, the literature search was widened to include texts on learning theory and developing reflective learning cycles. Hermeneutics, particularly the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, is also used to aid the investigation conducted here.

## Background

The first glimmer of this thesis happened some years ago, when this researcher was engaged in a course of methodologically based studies. The requirement was to write an academic piece with theological reflection as the methodology. This researcher

turned to a well-known text from a well-respected publisher of theology, in order to reference a methodology. There began the struggle to find clarity in a subject which became more confusing as this researcher delved further. The intended subject of the essay was never reached. The object of that initial essay changed to become an attempt to investigate the troubles this researcher was experiencing with theological reflection methods.

As a result of the initial essay, this researcher spent some years trying to understand the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, in order to learn about phenomenological hermeneutics, and tried to identify ways in which that area of philosophy might impact upon a Christian understanding of theological reflection. This endeavour, although not wasted, was perhaps too large a task to undertake alongside a full-time job, and so, although this thesis is informed by that work, there is no attempt to undertake a full-scale study of the interaction of theological reflection and phenomenological hermeneutics. That may well be a fruitful area of study for someone with philosophical and theological training, rather than an engineering and theological background.

Instead, it was decided to undertake a close analysis of the definitions and methods offered by foundational texts, and to examine some of the assumptions made within those texts. This researcher was already aware of internal contradictions within texts, and of the plethora of methods apparently available. However, rather than being excited by the diversity, this researcher knew herself to be motivated by anger that professionals writing for students and newcomers to the field appeared to be unconcerned by the muddles. This researcher has remained fueled by anger and irritation throughout the researching and writing of this thesis, although she is beginning to make her peace with the subject as this work completes.

Initial investigation, while this researcher was long ago writing the original essay described above, showed that the topic of theological reflection method and application lacks clarity. There are no agreed definitions, processes vary considerably, and there is debate over whether or not the process actually can be said to have happened. It is this researcher's contention that this plethora of issues arises because

there are many unarticulated assumptions underlying the current literature. The thesis, as it explores the areas of agreement and difference, exposes some of those unwritten, and poorly understood assumptions. It also exposes a fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes a method or process. The conflation of inputs, process and outputs in varying combinations has led to much muddle and needless complexity. As the cornerstones of theological reflection processes become visible, this thesis suggests that the process of theological reflection remains constant, but that it may be undertaken with inputs which vary in complexity, the process may take a varying length of time, and the expectation of the outcome will be different. Naming how and when the differences arise and where they matter, will enable better application of the process known as theological reflection through a whole variety of situations and circumstances.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions grew from the investigations of this researcher, and may be summarised as:

Are there many different methods (and hence many different definitions) or is there just one method, and can that method be described clearly, particularly bearing in mind the needs of those learning to undertake theological reflection for the first time?

What are the historical roots of theological reflection?

What are the applications of theological reflection?

Are there assumptions (articulated or implicit) in the literature of theological reflection; if so what are they and what bearing do they have on the operation of the process?

## **Methodological Orientation and Choice of Literature**

This researcher planned a close reading of the foundational texts, looking particularly for definitions of theological reflection, and for descriptions of the method of doing theological reflection. During this analysis, looking for similarities and differences, this

researcher remained attentive to the assumptions being made by their authors. She particularly looked for questions which were not answered by the texts.

This researcher originally searched for introductory texts to theological reflection at undergraduate level, beginning with recommended texts from her own theological studies. From the bibliographies within the initial finds, the net was widened. From being limited to texts focused upon theological reflection, the search was widened to include other theological texts concerned with reflective practice. As the link with the reflective cycle became clearer, the author searched for the texts related to its development, and included some texts covering professional reflective practice and its application. The philosophical roots lead to consideration of some literature from the area of hermeneutics.

The literature is considered over three chapters, concerned with definitions, processes and origins of theological reflection. The chapters concerned with definitions and process use texts which refer specifically to “theological reflection” in their titles, content or indices. In other words the texts have the prime or significant aim of discussing aspects of theological reflection. Literature which does not refer to “theological reflection” in title, contents or indices is considered in the chapter on the origins, history and development of theological reflection.

This researcher has made this distinction for two reasons. First, how human beings think and what constitutes reflection are important issues, and the secular and philosophical roots are examined. Second, some theologians were actively trying to incorporate the secular development of reflective practice, or the philosophical understandings of learning, into their theologies without ever using the term “theological reflection”. These texts are mostly older than the texts which refer to theological reflection, and are often cited by the theological reflection texts. This researcher could have chosen a date as the arbitrary boundary, but this would have led to significant and secular work on reflective practice being included in a theological section of the thesis, or to one or two foundational and current theological reflection texts being put into the origins chapter and not analysed in quite the same way as their more recent companions. The most recent text in the

chapter on secular origins is from 1999; the oldest text in the theological chapters on definition and process is from 1994.

There is one exception to this approach, and that is a lecture by Monika Hellwig (1982), in which she considers the lack of diversity of people involved in the development of academic theological thinking. This lecture is firmly focused on power and authority in theological tradition, rather than definition or methodology, and so its use in this thesis is confined to Chapter 6. The ramifications of its analysis there are threaded through the remainder of this work.

## **Contribution to original body of knowledge**

This thesis exposes the points of similarity and difference in the definitions and methods of theological reflection offered in the literature. It has been found that the methods all shared a lack of understanding of what constitutes a process; and that although there is variation in language, there are shared themes of input, method and purpose. It demonstrates a link exists between expected outcomes of the theological reflection process and their different historical derivations. Those methods rooted in theology expect a development in academic theology; those rooted in learning theory and professional reflective practice expect practical solutions to concrete issues; those rooted in hermeneutics expect a development in self-understanding. All of these outcomes are possible from the same process, and each may come about despite a different original expectation.

This thesis reveals assumptions about the use of power in theological reflection, and also highlights the role of the reflector in a way omitted from most of the texts. It also shows how the tension between theological tradition and lived experience is held within an individual, so highlights how different people will come to different conclusions from similar inputs to a process of theological reflection.

The differences of method, definition and approach in the body of literature have never been explored before with a methodological, process focus, rather than with the focus being on outcomes or on particular inputs. This thesis offers an entirely new

and fruitful approach which will give clarity for those new to theological reflection. It may also enable a deeper, richer outcome for those familiar with the process, but who perhaps are now able to articulate their inputs and outcomes more clearly.

This thesis describes a single theological reflection method, which is capable of fulfilling different needs and expectations. In it, situation, experience and tradition are described, and connections between them are sought. As new insights are found and noted, the inputs are revisited, looking particularly for gaps or blind spots. The reflector then chooses which connections and insights are useful and which to take forward as actions. By changing the complexity of inputs and the time invested, the same process can be undertaken by a beginner, or by someone very experienced in theological reflection. Some of the mystery of theological reflection is removed, but this thesis opens up the use of theological reflection for a wide range of purposes and by a diverse range of people with different academic and practical skills.

This thesis is a contribution to knowledge because it brings clarity and accessibility to a highly professionalised, often clericalized, topic. This contribution will be useful in the field of education of lay and ordained people of all ages, and in ordination training. The clarity means that it could easily be understood and taught by any church leader (again, lay or ordained). The consideration of power and control will serve as a useful warning to anyone sharing the process with others.

This researcher hopes that the process of theological reflection will be undertaken with confidence and enthusiasm by anyone willing to use it.

## **Structure**

First, the definitions and methods offered in the foundational texts of theological reflection are examined. The historical derivation of the definitions and methods is then uncovered, before moving on to a consideration of the applications of theological reflection. A chapter is devoted to one of the major unspoken issues of theological reflection – that of power. The thesis moves to consider the reflector and what they bring to the process of theological reflection, and then similarly considers

theology and theological tradition. In the penultimate chapter the discoveries made are synthesized into a consideration of process and definition. The thesis concludes with a review of the ground covered, suggestions of further work, and a personal view of what this researcher has learned through her studies.

This thesis begins by considering the definitions of theological reflection offered by the foundational texts. These definitions are analysed to understand their similarities and their differences. Common themes are identified in an effort to understand whether different methods may be grouped together. Similarities and differences of view and emphasis are identified, and the impact discussed in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 3, the same texts are examined to draw out the theological reflection processes or methods. These are identified and analysed. As in Chapter 2, this thesis seeks to highlight similarities, differences, common themes and different emphases. During this chapter the nature of a process is considered, and a distinction is drawn between a process, and the inputs to and outputs from that process. It is here that one of the main sources of confusion with theological reflection methods is identified – the conflation of process with its inputs and outcomes.

Chapter 4 extends the literature examined, by considering some of the texts referenced in the foundational texts used in Chapters 2 and 3. This investigation of the derivations followed by authors to arrive at their methods reveals both the academic underpinnings of theological reflection, and some linkages between those roots and the expected type of outcome. The history of theological reflection is traced through theology, through philosophy, and through twentieth century learning theory.

In Chapter 5 the different applications of theological reflection processes are reviewed. In previous chapters, the approach used was chronological, in order to see if there was a clear development over time. In this chapter a grouping by usage was applied. This change was intended to facilitate the exploration of themes and shared approaches.

Chapter 6 investigates the unspoken issues of power and control which affect definitions and process. In this chapter, the use of theological reflection and power in developing tradition is considered at length, prompted by a lecture text dating from earlier than most of the foundational texts. Questions are also raised regarding why discussions of power are absent from the foundational texts. Instead these texts ask who can undertake theological reflection and what constitutes valid theological reflection. They do not discuss who decides the correct answers to these questions.

Chapter 7 considers the person undertaking the theological reflection - a person much neglected by the literature considered. The question of what a reflector brings to the process of theological reflection is at the heart of this chapter. The earlier consideration of hermeneutics is used here to consider the indivisibility of a reflector from their lived experience, beliefs and culture. The impossibility of objectivity in theological reflection is recognized and acknowledged.

Chapter 8 asks and offers an answer to the question of what makes reflection theological in its nature. It considers the tradition which is part of the process of theological reflection and examines its development and use.

Chapter 9 attempts to synthesize the results of the work undertaken. It postulates that there is only one theological reflection process, but that the scale of that process may be varied in time and breadth depending upon the purpose and the complexity of inputs being considered. The different emphasis upon experience and tradition during the reflective process, and the impossibility of neutrality during the process is considered. It should be noted that this researcher was expecting to find different processes being used with different outcomes in mind. She believes that one of the strengths of this thesis is that the evidence did not conform with that expectation.

Chapter 10 concludes by reviewing the work undertaken. It describes the contribution to the body of knowledge on theological reflection and recommends areas for further work. In a final word, this researcher considers what she has learned during the genesis and writing up of this thesis.

## Chapter 2 - Definitions

“When I use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.”

(Carroll, 1947:222-223)

### Introduction

It may interest, amuse or alarm you to know that although T[heological] R[eflection] exercises have been a requirement in most practical theology and ordination courses for more than twenty years, no clear definition of what T[heological] R[eflection] actually is has yet been agreed. (Thompson et al., 2008:7)

It may be unkind to open with this quotation, but it is taken from the SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection, part of a well-respected series of introductions to theological topics aimed at undergraduate students.

This quotation summarises the state of theological reflection in 2008, further reading suggests it is accurate, and the newly published Second Edition (Thompson et al., 2019:7) differs only in changing “more than twenty years” to “more than thirty years”. In other words, there is no more clarity eleven years later than there was in 2008. This researcher believes that such a statement in a basic textbook is a matter of concern. The statement suggests that since at least 1990, people being trained in theology have been encouraged to practise processes which are poorly defined, and highly contested in academic circles. This may be amusing for those who happen to thrive on controversy, but it is of no help to the students attempting to become proficient, theologically aware, reflective practitioners. As one of those hapless students, this researcher has founded her thesis on a quest to unearth what is going on in the definitions and methods of theological reflection.

One of the initial points of interest in this topic was the discovery that definitions of theological reflection (and even the name) vary with different texts. The definitions of

theological reflection used by different authors are here identified, analysed and compared with each other.

## **Definitions in Literature**

This researcher has chosen to begin by examining some definitions of theological reflection. This section draws out the initial definitions of theological reflection, given by different writers, and points out the basic components of each. They have all been taken from the early chapters or introductions of the books concerned. This decision to use the earliest definitions to be found in each text was taken because they reveal the starting points and intentions of the writers, and as such, show the place at which they wish the reader to begin. The writers all develop their chosen definitions throughout their work, but by using early definitions, crucial similarities and differences can be found. The definitions are presented in approximate date order of publication, with the intention that the development of thought (or lack of it) within the field of theological reflection over time may be shown clearly.

Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring 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)

In this early definition, theological reflection is a discipline (implying that it can be learned and practised); it is conversation; it is exploration; the objects of exploration are experience, of one person or of many people, and religious wisdom; both objects of exploration are respected; a variety of outcomes is possible including no change, increased depth of understanding, and increased breadth of knowledge. The outcome

is of significance to the future life of the individual or corporate body which has undertaken the exploration.

Whitehead and Whitehead consider theological reflection specifically in relation to ministry. They open their introduction with their definition:

Theological reflection in ministry is the process of bringing to bear in the practical decisions of ministry the resources of Christian faith.  
(Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:ix)

Here theological reflection is clearly designated as a process. Its aim is to aid practical decision making. The restriction of this definition to “ministry” is an interesting distinction - this researcher wonders what difference it would make if the references to ministry were omitted and the process applied to ‘practical decisions’.

[Theological reflection] begins with the lived experience of those doing the reflection; it correlates this experience with the sources of the Christian tradition; and it draws out practical implications for Christian living. On the surface this is a natural commonsense way of functioning. It reflects the way most people think practically.  
(Kinast, 2000:1)

Kinast’s definition starts with a clear reference to the person undertaking theological reflection, and to the experience which they bring; it is an act of correlation; experience and the sources of the Christian tradition are drawn upon; there is an outcome which is practical and which by implication involves change for the person undertaking the activity and for their way of life. Kinast goes on to make a connection between theological reflection and common sense, asserting that it is the way people tend to think. This begs the question of why theological reflection has to be taught at all if it is so natural?

Theological reflection is an activity that enables people of faith to give an account of the values and traditions that underpin their

choices and convictions and deepens their understanding.

Theological reflection enables the connections between human dilemmas and divine horizons to be explored, drawing on a wide range of academic disciplines including social sciences, psychotherapeutic and medical disciplines and the arts.

(Graham et al., 2005:5-6)

Graham et al. make explicit that theological reflection is undertaken by people who have a faith upon which they draw; it is an activity; it makes explicit underlying assumptions; it leads to greater depth of understanding. There is an assumption of connections between human and the divine; the activity is exploration; theological reflection also uses other academic disciplines.

T[heological] R[eflection] is a process by which explicit connections are made between belief and practice. (Thompson et al., 2008:3)

Thompson et al. wrote the text which piqued the interest of this researcher in the first place, and a second edition has been published during the writing of this thesis. The main analysis will be of the original 2008 text, but this will be augmented where the second edition sheds fresh light.

From the same authors who pointed out the lack of agreement on defining theological reflection, comes the initial definition that it is a process; and by implication is an exploration of a faith system and way of life, looking to articulate how those two things interact. Thompson et al. provide their own criticism of their initial definition, pointing out that theological reflection may be

any ruminative activity making connections between life and faith...that takes place quite spontaneously, though not necessarily with much rigour or criticality. (Thompson et al., 2008:7-8)

This makes it clear that theological reflection is an intentional activity, deliberately undertaken, rather than a casual event. It also reflects the idea that there needs to be assessment and judgement as part of the process.

They go on to offer a different, more specific definition later:

[theological reflection] is itself a process of coming to know God through reflecting on God's world in the light of the resources from the tradition. (Thompson et al., 2008:57)

So theological reflection involves reflection; the object of reflection is "God's world"; the reflection includes drawing in the knowledge and experience of the religious tradition.

We would say reflection is giving something appropriate attention and consideration, looking at it from a variety of perspectives, being aware of the lenses we use, and making a response. (Nash and Nash, 2009:3)

Nash and Nash choose to begin with a wide definition of reflection rather than specifically defining theological reflection. They suggest that a thing is given attention which is appropriate for that thing; that the thing will be examined in several different ways; they postulate that the reflector looks through a lens; the outcome is that there is a response to the reflection.

I like to 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 engagements with the great traditions of the faith...You'll find that many commentators call the whole process theological reflection, but my reason for keeping them separate is for clarity's sake and also, as we'll see, the disharmony between activists and academic theologians may have been worsened by a confusion of terms and definition. (Green, 2009:26)

Green tries to be precise in his definition, noting that theological reflection is just one part of theological activity although his definition actually includes the experience; the faith tradition; interaction of each with the other. He goes on to say later that:

We certainly do not come at experience merely to lay upon it the prejudiced dogma of a bygone age, but we do bring our faith traditions and our analysed experience of the world together into a creative mix that each may help interpret the other and that we may find God in both. This is what theological reflection is all about. (Green, 2009:81)

Here the definition includes creativity; interpretation; the discovery of God.

...theological reflection in which experience and practice are brought into critical relation with the whole of the Christian tradition. (Thompson and Thompson, 2012:xix)

Thompson and Thompson's definition has evolved further, now including experience; the current practice; the idea that reflection might involve critical thought (in other words some kind of assessment and judgement); and specifying it is the Christian tradition that is being considered.

Reflection is about focusing on something - an experience, a text, a piece of artwork, a story, a performance, oneself even - in a way that enables learning and gives birth to new insight and knowledge. It is a way of engaging our whole person with our experience of life and creating meaningful ways of living. (Walton, 2012:114)

Walton begins with specifying possible objects of reflection and suggests that focusing will bring new knowledge which will bring about action. There is perhaps something of reconciliation in the quest to bring together the "whole" person with their experience.

Theological reflection can be said to be fundamental to living faithfully in the world: it is the process through which we constantly deepen our understanding of ourselves, others and God and of how we integrate this understanding in our lives so that what we do becomes congruent in any given context with who we are as people and as communities of faith. (Cameron et al., 2012:2)

Cameron et al. are actually describing a particular example of theological reflection in their book, but they attempt a definition before embarking on the example. They, like Walton, are looking for reconciliation between the person, faith and community, and define theological reflection as a way of increasing the depth of knowledge.

Graham's (2013) review of this book is particularly of note, given her own work (2005, 2019) examined in this thesis. She commends it as a record of a particular event, but offers several criticisms:

The chapter on the use of the Bible seems oddly disconnected from the actual process. We are not shown whether it had any significant impact on participants' understandings or on influencing practical outcomes. Similarly, many crucial questions about the Church's legitimate role in a simultaneously religiously pluralist and sceptical public realm, and what happens when theology 'goes public', are not addressed. There is little consideration of either the power dynamics between clergy and laity in such a conversation or of how the church might actually equip ordinary Christians with the tools for theological reflection.

This researcher finds herself intrigued by these questions, particularly as they are not generally asked or addressed by Graham et al.'s (2005, 2019) own work. This researcher would like very much to see Graham and her colleagues engage with the underlying assumptions exposed by these questions, which are examined later in this thesis.

## Identifying the Themes

Analysis begins with identifying the themes which emerge from this collection of definitions.

Theological reflection is an activity. Definitions use verbs such as “explore”, “correlate”, “give an account”, “focusing”. Several definitions refer to “bringing” or “brought”. Theological reflection requires that something be done, some activity undertaken.

Someone has to undertake the action of theological reflection. Kinast refers explicitly to the person doing the reflection (Kinast, 2000:1); Killen and De Beer include the idea that people may reflect together as well as individually (Killen and De Beer, 1994:viii); Graham et al. identify people of faith (Graham et al., 2005:5-6); Green’s use of the word “our” attaches belief and experience to a person (Green, 2009:81). More recent definitions also refer to “our” or “ourselves”, perhaps underlining theological reflection as an activity in which the writers expect everyone to engage.

However, a significant proportion of the definitions we have seen so far make no reference to a person. Some of these are written in the passive tense, so as to avoid the need to refer to a person at all, although their presence is implicit by the presence of “experience”, “faith”, “belief” - all of which reside within a person. This thesis will use the term “reflector” to identify that person, although that is not a term prevalent in the literature. The apparent absence of a person from some definitions, and the person of the reflector will be explored at length in Chapter 7.

So far analysis has established that a reflector does ‘something’. The ‘something’ is varied as we shall see. In our earliest definition from Killen and De Beer (1994:viii) there is an expectation that the reflector has experience, and has knowledge of a religious tradition. Those two things are brought together for consideration. They describe “conversation” between the two. This develops their idea of exploring from earlier in their definition. Kinast (2000:1) takes a different line, following Whitehead and Whitehead’s line of experience and Christian faith (1995:ix). He too expects the

reflector to have experience, but believes this must be correlated with the Christian tradition. Killen and De Beer suggest equal weight and respect is accorded to experience and tradition, whereas Kinast appears to expect the experience to correlate to a 'fixed' tradition. There is a profound difference between conversation and correlation - one implies listening and hearing and change, the other notes the difference between two points and looks for similar trends. This difference of approach may prove of importance later, especially as the different uses of theological reflection are considered in Chapter 5.

The tradition, or Christian tradition, referred to in the definitions, will bear closer examination. The definitions suppose that the person engaging in reflection has full access to the Christian tradition, which presupposes possession of a body of knowledge, and the confidence to access it. Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:ix) refer to faith rather than tradition which may make a difference – arguably faith is held within a person whilst tradition represents a body of work.

Graham et al. (2005:5-6) reiterated the theme of exploration of prior knowledge, being clear that this might derive from academic areas other than theology. But Thompson et al. (2008:57) took a different view again, speaking specifically of reflecting on God's world whilst using resources from the Christian tradition. There is not quite the same sense of exploration, and also not the same sense of bringing the reflector's experience to the process. However, there is now a subject of reflection made apparent (God's world), which is far less obvious in the previous definitions.

When we examine the definitions for what they have to say, if anything, about outcomes, we again find a range of ideas. Earlier definitions expect some form of change in the reflector, for example Killen and De Beer (1994:viii) are specific in their expectation that theological reflection leads to "new truth and meaning for living". Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:ix) expect "practical decision making", but Kinast (2000:1) concurs with the idea of life change to a degree, expecting that the reflector will find "implications for Christian living".

This is a large claim, that doing theological reflection is life changing. It is worth noting again that this is an early definition of theological reflection, and expected outcomes are something to which this thesis will return in later chapters as historical development, applications and power are examined.

Graham et al. (2005:5-6) are not as expansive in their definition. Their expectation is that the reflector will be better able to articulate their faith, and make explicit the things which underly that faith. Here there seems to be less expectation of change; instead the expectation is that the reflector will have a greater self-understanding and faith understanding that they will be able to share with others. Obviously from the perspective of “the Church” such an ability is to be encouraged as it helps with mission.

Thompson et al. (2008:57) have a different expectation of the outcome - their definition is that theological reflection is a tool for discovering more about God. This deeper “knowing” may well lead to change in way of life, but the expectation is not explicit in the definition, and cannot be inferred.

Nash and Nash (2009:3) are clear that they expect a practical outcome in their definition of reflection, and they describe the outcome as “a response”. This puts the onus on the reflector to adopt their own response and to ensure any changes required are made and endure. There is a question of accountability here, explored further in Chapter 7.

Green’s (2009:27) definition of theological reflection is limited to the actual activity of reflecting, and so he doesn’t define any expectation of outcome at that point. Later (2009:81) he suggests that the reflector will “find God”, which aligns with Thompson et al. (2008:57). Again, from a Christian viewpoint, finding God is life changing, but that is inference rather than clear definitional statement. Green is keen to be as precise as possible, by restricting theological reflection to refer to one very specific part of the process. However, as we shall see in Chapter 3, it is necessary to consider the entire process not just one part of it. Thompson et al. address their concern about

precision by using the term “Progressing Theological Reflection (PTR)” as their name for a theological reflection process (Thompson et al., 2019:22).

Present in some of the definitions is an element of assessment and judgement. Killen and De Beer (1994:viii) include words such as “genuine”, “integrity” and “truth”. These all carry a weight of implied judgement. Kinast (2000:1) asserts that his definition is “natural common sense” applicable to “most people”. Again there is an implied assessment and judgement made, which needs to be examined. Nash and Nash (2009:1) suggest there is an “appropriate” level of attention to be given. This makes it clear that the level must be determined, and that there will be an impact upon the activity as a result of the decision. Thompson and Thompson (2012:xix) use the term “critical relation” which implies assessment and judgement, and Thompson et al. (2019:8) implicitly decry any theological reflection definition which does not include “rigour or criticality”.

As the themes are drawn together, a discussion can begin of the definitions, of their similarities and their points of difference.

## **Discussion of Emerging Themes and Disparities**

This analysis of the initial definitions of theological reflection given by different writers demonstrates the diversity of their starting points. Further investigation may well reveal valid reasons for the diversity, but it does explain some of the uncertainty and confusion experienced by this researcher as she attempted to select a standard method of theological reflection for her essay, long ago.

A strong point of agreement between the writers is that theological reflection is an intentional activity. Some of the verbs used in the definitions may be perceived as more active than others, for example “exploring” has far more active overtones than “reflecting”. But despite this, theological reflection, by agreement, requires someone to do, to undertake an activity. One of the verbs which appears is ‘to reflect’ and it is recursive, if not downright unhelpful, to include “reflect” in a definition of “reflection”. This is a theme to which we will return in Chapter 3, as we examine the

processes of theological reflection. Equally the definition of theological reflection as 'process' (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:ix) demands more explanation.

From this discovery of activity as a common theme it follows that a person chooses to engage in the activity of theological reflection. The reflector is expected to have experience of life. At this point, the kind of experience they are expected to have is not specified. Their reasons for deciding to undertake theological reflection are also as yet unclear.

Many of the definitions imply that there is a body of religious tradition to which the reflector has access, as well as their own experience, faith and beliefs. Later, in Chapter 8, this thesis will consider the possible constituents and the ease of access to this tradition.

The reflector may expect a variety of outcomes, although with one or two definitions, the expected outcome is either completely omitted or is not defined. Generally however, the outcomes fall into three categories. The first category concerns how the undergoing of theological reflection is believed to be life changing and the result is the making of practical changes to the way the reflector leads their life. The second category concerns how theological reflection leads to a more prosaic improvement in decision making and in ministerial practice - it might even be deemed 'professional learning'. The third leads to a deeper or broader knowledge of the object of the theological reflection, whether that is experience or tradition being better understood. Graham et al. (2005:5-6) would be an example of this. Although they speak of making connections, as do Thompson et al. (2008:3), there is not a suggestion that life will be significantly altered by the theological reflection. Also included in this category might be the outcome of "knowing God better" after undergoing theological reflection. Although one might expect that to be life changing, it is not explicitly stated in the initial definitions.

It is interesting to discover that the earliest definition of theological reflection examined (Killen and De Beer, 1994:viii) is also one of the most comprehensive in the themes it covers. It acknowledges the presence of the reflector, it expects the

bringing of experience and religious knowledge to the process. It assumes an outcome which alters either the reflector's understanding of their experience, or changes their understanding of their religious tradition. The definition also expects that outcome to be life changing. This definition sets a clear agenda of using a process to change the way the reflector lives, because of what they find out about themselves and their faith. This is a lofty ideal, and one which any student might find inspiring and daunting. It perhaps makes theological reflection seem an extraordinary activity rather than something very everyday and normal.

Whitehead and Whitehead's (1995:ix) initial definition is much more down to earth. It is about improving ministerial practice. However, as we shall see in the next chapter, this is where they have chosen to restrict their exploration, as they identify a range of processes and outcomes, but focus firmly on the area of ministerial practice.

Kinast's (2000:1) definition is perhaps less lofty in its apparent ambition, but it too expects an impact on the life of the reflector. However, it perhaps links in its intent with "Professional Reflective Practice" developed by Schön (1982) and Kolb (1984). Kinast's claim that theological reflection is common sense and very accessible suggests that he sees it as a normal part of everyday - perhaps indicating expectation of incremental change rather than of a shift in the way of living.

This shift towards the normal is continued by Graham et al. (2005:5-6), whose expectation is that theological reflection is a tool to aid the articulation of faith, perhaps in order to emphasise the mission responsibilities of Christians. Their emphasis on bringing in other academic disciplines reinforces the professional reflective practice roots of theological reflection which will be explored in Chapter 4. However, the invitation to use other disciplines perhaps helps encourage those with little formal theological training to use their own experience from other areas in engaging with theological reflection. In other words, this may help to make theological reflection an activity which is easily accessible to a wide range of people.

The work so far in this chapter shows clearly that there are very different definitions of theological reflection. Variations include what is brought to the activity of

theological reflection in terms of personal experience, faith or aspect of tradition and situation choice. There are different explanations of what the activity is or entails, which seem to depend on whether the aim of the activity is deep seated learning or practical action, and different expectations of results, including some difficult questions about acceptable outcomes. This begs a number of important questions:

- Do the writers of texts about theological reflection share the same underlying ideas about theological reflection? The answer to this question appears to be “no”, as, if they did, a definition would have been agreed over the last 30 years.
- Where does the divergence in underlying ideas originate?
- Are these differences irreconcilable?
- Is there a single unified activity which can be defined as “theological reflection”, or does theological reflection serve as an umbrella for different activities which include different inputs and/or different expectations of output?

These questions all arise from the initial definitions of theological reflection given by the writers in their different texts. Is there convergence as each develops their ideas, or does this divergence continue?

The next chapter will look at how the writers define the theological reflection process, and once that has been analysed, these questions will be re-examined.

## Chapter 3 - Process

“Why,” said the Dodo, “the best way to explain it is to do it.”

(Carroll, 1947:31)

### Introduction

It has been seen from Chapter 2 (Definitions) that there is a plethora of definitions of theological reflection. This chapter considers the process of theological reflection. The descriptions of the process from various texts are identified and analysed, in order to find points of similarity and difference. As in Chapter 2, recurring themes will be analysed and discussed. Again, the processes are introduced in chronological order of publication, to aid investigation of the development of theological reflection over time.

The researcher’s view of what constitutes a process is informed by her background in engineering. A process has inputs, and outcomes. It is linear, with a clear beginning and ending. The inputs are chosen to support the intended process; so if the intended process is to hang a picture on a wall, there will be a picture, possibly a frame, a wall, a way of affixing the picture to the wall. A process may include a number of decisions and actions; so is the wall suitable, where should the picture go, does this need a sticky hook, blu-tack, a nail or screws, as well as the practical placing of the fixings on the wall and the picture being hung by means of the fixings. The inputs are all used during the process. The outcome is the result of the process; in this case a picture is hung upon a wall, although other outcomes include the picture not being on the wall because the fixings are unsuitable or the tools to apply the fixings are inappropriate. The process may be repeated many times, but it always has a clear beginning and ending. In engineering terms this is a “black box” way of thinking about processes, whether they are wrought on electrical signals by circuits, or on physical materials by heating, cooling, pressuring or mixing them. In simple terms, if someone is baking a cake, they gather the ingredients (or inputs), they combine them and bake them according to the recipe (the process), and the result is a cake (the output). One may vary the inputs, one may vary the exact process, one might produce outputs of two dozen small cakes instead of one large one, but the principle of the process of baking

cakes holds. This researcher wonders whether the same might be true of theological reflection, that inputs may vary but the process remains the same.

## Process Descriptions

Killen and De Beer (1994:ix) begin their process description with a picture, showing two equal circles overlapping. One circle is labelled 'tradition', the other 'experience' and the area where they overlap is labelled 'theological reflection'. The diagram depicts tradition and experience being brought together and theological reflection happening where they meet.

They discuss in some detail the need for a balance between experience and tradition, and are also very clear that there is no room for certitude in giving more weight to either one or the other (Killen and De Beer, 1994:3).

They expect "genuine conversation" in this overlap, saying that

In genuine conversation participants can invest without being controlling, can wonder without needing to judge, can disagree and still appreciate the other, and can be surprised and challenged by new insights or deepened understandings and appreciations of things already known. Profound and long-lasting transformations come from this kind of reflective process.

(Killen and De Beer, 1994:3)

However, although they have referred to conversation, and process, they have not as yet described what happens at this point of overlap. They go on to work through a number of points until they describe a "framework for theological reflection":

1. Focusing on some aspect of experience (sources are aspects of experience)
2. Describing that experience to identify the heart of the matter

3. Exploring the Heart of the Matter in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage (includes questions from Christian themes and material from the tradition source)
4. Identifying from this conversation new truths and meanings for living.

(Killen and De Beer, 1994:68-69)

In this description we can identify inputs, where steps 1 and 2 show the definition of the experiential input, and step 3 refers to the Christian heritage, including questions and material, that forms the tradition input. The activity specified is “conversation” as a tool for “exploring” the inputs and connections between them, and finally “identifying” the outcomes. The outcomes are expected to be significant to the person engaging in the process of theological reflection.

Killen and De Beer spend some time considering “conversation” and as we have seen, require it to be “genuine” (Killen and De Beer, 1994:3). They describe this as where we “narrate our experience...remember that in reflection we want to slow down our interpretive processes” (Killen and De Beer, 1994:26). Their exploration requires that attention is paid to feelings, and also requires the avoidance of problem solving (Killen and De Beer, 1994:39). There is a strong sense that theological reflection takes time and energy, and that interpretation must wait for longer than might be the case in everyday life.

Whitehead and Whitehead distinguish between a model and a method.

A model of theological reflection provides an image of the elements that are involved. The method describes the dynamic or movement of the reflection. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:x)

They go on to describe a “continuum of theological reflection” (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995: xii), suggesting a range of time taken from “one or two sessions” to “indeterminate” (perhaps the work of a lifetime?); a range of scope from “immediate and concrete” to “broad” (a theological question in its philosophical and historical context); and with “conversation partners” ranging from personal and ministerial

experience (is ministry experience not personal?) through “theology and social sciences” to “philosophy and history” (the reason for splitting the academic disciplines is unclear). They label the immediate, brief and personal end of their spectrum as “ministry” and the broad, long term, philosophical and historical end as “theology”.

Whitehead and Whitehead’s explicit presentation of theological reflection as a continuum is the only such description this researcher has encountered in the literature. Their suggestion that it ranges from the simple to the complex, from immediate problem solving to the development of new theologies is extremely helpful and much neglected by more recent literature. The implications of this continuum will be considered further in Chapter 5.

The model presented by Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:6) is a triangle, with the pastoral challenge at its centre and “religious tradition”; “surrounding culture”; and “experience” at the three apices. They say that

the model of theological reflection offers a way to structure our conversation, paying attention to three sources of information...The method of reflection suggests a process by which we pursue this continual discernment. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:13)

Again this distinction between process and model may be helpful in aiding the understanding of theological reflection and its process. They go on to offer a three stage process of:

1. attending...seeking out the information...Listening critically while suspending judgement;
2. assertion... lively dialogue of mutual clarification;
3. pastoral response...discerning how to respond; planning what to do; evaluating how we have done. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:13)

Although they talk about listening critically in their presentation of the process, they go on to remind the reader that listening is a skillful business, and that sources and people both require to be listened to with care. They also suggest that judgement should be suspended during the first stage of the process (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:14). This apparent contradiction suggests to this researcher that they have in mind a particular kind of “critical” listening, where that is a technical term, rather than the more general understanding of the word “critical”. They also highlight the importance of this initial information gathering, and the fact that it takes time and “depends on the ability to explore honestly the information available from the three sources.”

At the assertion stage, they use two metaphors to explain what they mean. The first is “conversation: the different voices we have heard in the attending stage are now allowed to speak to one another”. The second metaphor they offer is that of a “crucible: the diverse information is poured into a single container...a crucible suggests the transformation which often happens at this stage - if we handle to volatile components with care” (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:15).

Last but not least, Whitehead and Whitehead consider the implementation stage, noting that change impacts a community, and that conflict resolution can be a useful skill (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:17).

Kinast takes a very different approach to that of Killen and De Beer or Whitehead and Whitehead. He decides in his introduction that “it is necessary to look at the various styles of theological reflection that the common form has generated” (Kinast, 2000:3). He does not, as far as can be seen, describe the “common form” which begets these styles. He does argue that to separate style from substance is similar to separating form from content - “the two always go together and to split them is one of the three fatal separations of Western culture” (Kinast, 2000:4). He thus chooses to examine five styles of theological reflection, saying that

A theological reflection style is determined by the type of experience practitioners of that style focus on, how they correlate it

with the faith tradition and what sort of praxis they envision emerging from their reflection.” (Kinast, 2000:5)

It is not clear to this researcher how describing a “style” of theological reflection, rather than a process of theological reflection, is terribly helpful to a student trying to learn what theological reflection is and how to do it. With his description of style, Kinast risks muddling the inputs (the type of experience, the faith tradition) with the process of correlation, and with the outcome (how the learning will be embodied into practice). It can be surmised that he sees the process of theological reflection as ‘input of experience, input of faith tradition, correlation of the two, result in change of praxis’. However, “correlate (with an object) [means] establish a mutual relationship or connection between” (OED, 2019). It does not imply that either data set will change during the correlation process - indeed ‘no correlation’ is an acceptable mathematical outcome. His style description quoted above might be read as implying that experience must be forced to correlate with tradition, so that experience is seen as less valid than tradition. By contrast, Killen and De Beer (1994) go to lengths to ensure that tradition and experience are equally valid, as we have seen.

Kinast’s five styles are actually summaries of the work of others, and so his text serves as a useful guide to the state of theological reflection writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although his five styles will be considered, it will be with a view to understanding the process employed by each style, not a comparison of stylistic differences at this point.

The first style he identifies is Ministerial and is based on the work of Whitehead and Whitehead, examined above. He describes it as a “method within a model” where the input or sources are “faith tradition, personal and communal experience and contemporary culture” (Kinast, 2000:7). In Kinast’s view the inclusion of contemporary culture avoids individualism and clericalism, and draws attention to

the role that the sense of the faithful has played in history [which] encourages contemporary communities of faith to engage their

tradition actively rather than submissively as they respond to current challenges. (Kinast, 2000:8)

It is notable that the Whiteheads encourage theological reflection in community, rather than individually, and this will be considered further in Chapter 7. Kinast (2000:9) says kindly “this degree of maturity cannot simply be presumed, which is one reason why the Whiteheads recommend theological reflection take place in a group which is well facilitated.”

Kinast identifies a distinctive feature of this method as

theological positions are formulated in conjunction with the pastoral situations in which they are to be put into practice. As a result, the pastoral response emerges from a particular context of ministry as it is theologically interpreted. (Kinast, 2000:10)

There are different points of distinctiveness to the model to which this researcher would give more weight. First, it separates experience from contemporary culture, and treats them as separate input entities. This will have some benefits, in that it will require any relatively homogenous group to look beyond its own boundaries into wider society. However, it may also lead to reflectors presuming that they are not themselves already affected by the culture in which they live. Second, Whitehead and Whitehead insist that theological reflection is a corporate activity. Third, this researcher is unconvinced by the label “ministerial” attached to this process of theological reflection. There seems no reason to require ministerial involvement in this process.

Kinast’s second style is “spiritual wisdom”. Here he draws on the work of Killen and De Beer (1994), already examined in some detail above, and Groome (1991).

A spiritual wisdom style of theological reflection is rooted in the everyday life experiences of believing people. (Kinast, 2000:15)

He links this method to the original meaning of theology; “the wisdom proper to the life of a believer” (Kinast, 2000:16).

Groome stresses from the outset the integral connection between knowledge and being (and uses a number of ancient and unusual terms to convey this perspective). What a person learns affects who a person is, and who a person is influences what a person learns. (Kinast, 2000:16)

Here is a hint as to the roots of Groome’s theological reflection method, which will be further examined in Chapter 4.

We may contrast the situation considered in the process of theological reflection – ‘ministerial’ suggests a particular issue arising from the work of a minister, whilst this definition of spiritual wisdom suggests a more day to day enterprise. However, this distinction of style may not make much difference to process.

Kinast’s third style of theological reflection is “feminist”. He is unable to rely on one or two primary sources for his examples, explaining that “from the perspective of theological reflection methodology, a feminist style is an international, collaborative undertaking” (Kinast, 2000:27). He adds in a footnote

it may also be argued that feminist theology exhibits a collective style because women function in a relational and cooperative way. Whether this is attributed to women’s nature (sex) or to social conditioning (gender), it means that all else being equal, women would prefer to do theology collaboratively. ...a feminist style of theology is not restricted to women; it provides a model for any who hopes to do fruitful theological work. The encouragement of group reflection in all styles of theological reflection is an endorsement of this approach. (Kinast, 2000:77)

While this paragraph is open to critique from many angles, the particular issue for theological reflection is that Kinast apparently relies on 'collaboration' as being the thing which defines feminist theological reflection, then goes on to destroy this claimed distinctiveness by correctly identifying that many processes encourage group rather than personal theological reflection. Despite rendering the label invalid in this way, we will continue to examine the process he identifies to see if there are actually distinctive points.

Kinast (2000:28) gives Carr's (1993) description of a four stage process - stage one is a critical consciousness of the experience of women; stage two is a critique of the Christian tradition in the light of the experience ("equivalent to the dialectical correlation of experience and tradition in theological reflection" says Kinast, 2000:28); stage three uncovers forgotten examples of women in the Christian tradition (which Kinast equates with new insight); and stage four is the formulation of proposals for new understanding and practice (Carr, 1993:18). However, reading Carr's essay (1993:5-29) this researcher finds Kinast's rendition of a single method of feminist theological reflection is not obvious from the original text. At this point Carr is describing the work of Schüssler Fiorenza (1991) as one of many feminist approaches to theology. Carr explores the methods of several feminist theologians and it is unclear how Kinast has concluded from her work that there is such a thing as a single feminist method.

Kinast notes that for him, the feminist style is distinctive because it aims to emancipate women and change the power dynamics. For our purposes, the distinctiveness of the feminist process is that the material constituting tradition is regarded with a hermeneutic of suspicion; "it exposes the one-sided, distorted view of the Gospel that has been handed on as normative" (Kinast, 2000:36). This researcher's experience as a woman who is a Church of England priest is of a very high awareness among women twenty years later of reclaiming the story of women in scripture, but that this is not always the case among men. However this personal view has not been empirically tested. The impact of regarding inputs to theological reflection with a hermeneutic of suspicion will be examined in Chapter 6.

Kinast's fourth style of theological reflection is "inculturation". His source for this is the work of Schreiter (1985), who was particularly concerned with reinterpretation of Christianity in new local contexts. Thirty-five years later, his work seems just as applicable in the United Kingdom as elsewhere in the world. He suggests a flowchart which again abides by dialectical principles (Schreiter, 1985:25).

It is clear that some of the boxes in the flowchart are inputs and some of them are processes. Equally some of the arrows are also processes. Although the boxes are numbered, the starting place is not terribly obvious, but taken in order the process appears to be:

1. Get to know local theologies
2. Analyse culture
3. Identify themes for local theology arising from 1 and 2
4. Analyse church tradition
5. Break down church tradition into parallel local theologies
6. Bring chosen themes into dialogue with parallel theologies
7. Examine impact of church tradition on local theologies
8. Examine impact of local theologies on church tradition
9. Examine the impact of revised local theologies on culture.

In the terms used so far, there are inputs of culture, tradition and pre-existing local theologies. These inputs are brought together into dialogue. The expected outcomes are change in the local theologies, change in culture as revised local theologies are lived out, and perhaps some change to tradition.

This particular style raises many questions about imposition and power which will be examined further in Chapter 6. In process terms, there is a strong parallel with Whitehead and Whitehead's use of culture as an input. Although the presumed context is different, the process appears similar.

Kinast's fifth and final style of theological reflection is practical. His source is the work of Browning, primarily outlined in *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (1996). Browning's work will be considered further in Chapter 4.

Kinast quotes Browning as saying

I find it useful to think of fundamental practical theology as critical reflection on the Church's dialogue with Christian sources and other communities of experience and interpretation with the aim of guiding its action towards social and individual transformation.  
(Kinast, 2000:53)

Kinast's justification for treating Browning as offering a separate style is that it is about critically examining current practice as opposed to applying theory to practice and that it is about faith and society rather than clergy-congregation relationship. However, as will be seen from Chapter 4, there seems little process difference to justify Kinast's decision to define this as a separate style.

Kinast concludes that the obvious distinguishing features of his styles are in the types of experience they bring, and the important distinguishing feature is how they correlate experience and tradition (Kinast, 2000:64). This different description of how experience and tradition are correlated is very important, as it may arise as a result of a difference in the process of reflection, rather than a stylistic difference.

In four of the five styles, the engagement and dialogue of tradition and experience leads to insight, which might be either about the tradition or about the experience, but which is more likely to lead to a change in the way of living and thus to the accumulation of different, changed experience. The exception seems to be in the feminist style, where the change is not only emancipation, hence a change of experience, but also a change in the interpretation of the tradition, which changes the tradition.

We leave Kinast and turn to the work of Graham, Walton and Ward's 2005 book, *Theological Reflection: Methods*. This is another of the seminal texts proffered to students during theological education, and this researcher recalls perusing it with some confidence in search of a process or method.

We advance seven indicative methods, which are genuine, if stylized, representations of authentic theological traditions... [which] suggest processes of creative theological thinking. (Graham et al., 2005:12)

They suggest that theological reflection has three tasks - to enable people to explore their faith; to build the body of Christ; to share the Gospel (Graham et al., 2005:9-10). One of their stated reasons for writing the book is

To identify the process of 'theological reflection' as the common methodology of theological thinking. We will ask what identifies each method as 'theological' and trace how each distinctive genre of reflection has taken shape over successive generations...(Graham et al., 2019:14)

There are a number of points of interest within this stated aim. First, there is a confusion as to whether the authors are identifying a common methodology, or different methods, which leads to a lack of clarity about whether they believe that there is a common methodology underlying the different methods (which begs the question of what the difference is between a methodology and a method, but perhaps this researcher is being too picky at this point). Second, their emphasis is on theology, rather than reflection, so it can be inferred that their aim is to secure each of their methods in theological terms, rather than in reflective process. Third, they now refer to genres of reflection, but it is not clear to this researcher whether genres of reflection differ by reflective method, or by the theological label each method serves. They appear to acknowledge the historical roots of each of their designated methods.

It is now time to look at each of their methods and see what the expected application is, and whether that means a particular method carries a particular expectation of use and outcome.

The first of these methods is “Theology by Heart: The Living Human Document”. The person engaged in reflection articulates their inner experience by means of journaling, letters or other ways of putting experience into words. Graham et al. claim that “these documents are always dialogical...witness to their conversational encounters with other people, other world views, and with God.” (Graham et al., 2005:18). They describe this as a process of identity-formation (2005:20), and explain that

Writing brings a sense of separation between the interior life and an external text and this is an important step in this method of theological reflection. Writing about one’s inner life becomes a conscious self-reflexive activity. (Graham et al., 2005:33)

A number of examples are then presented, including letters, a journal, a record of a recalled conversation. Graham et al. believe that the dialogue arises from the intended reader of the document, and that even if it is intended only for the eyes of the person writing, the act of writing separates the writer from the later reader.

This process raises a number of questions as to how this is theological reflection. There is nowhere an instruction to engage with the wider Christian tradition, and no imperative to change. In some ways, this process does not go beyond capturing a thick description including the observer which we saw Kinast describe above. The next steps are unclear.

The second method offered is “Speaking in Parables: Constructive Narrative Theology”. The people reflecting are encouraged to make stories or narratives out of their lives, including using myth and metaphor. It is suggested that the meaning of the story transcends the events it contains, and that encounter with God is revealed through narrative (Graham et al., 2005:47). They consider the work on narrative of Crites (1971) and say

in times of danger, or rapid cultural change the permeability of narrative forms enables people to perceive new configurations between their experience and the sacred stories of their culture. These together may generate new symbols...which enable human beings to reorientate their cultural identity to meet the challenge of our times. As part of this process human beings continually discover new ways of addressing their sacred roots and thus retaining (sic) their connection to the divine. (Graham et al., 2005:63)

Constructing a narrative may well help draw people together and create change, but the actual process of theological reflection is not well defined in this chapter. The expectations around how the story might be constructed, who contributes, how it is shared and how modified are unstated. It is clear from human experience that stories have power and enable people to make connections with their beliefs and own experience, but as a theological reflection method, this process is poorly explained. Graham et al. acknowledge the difficulties of constructive narrative theology:

There is a great danger in underestimating the irreconcilable aspects of existence by, for example, seeking to resolve pastoral problems through offering narrative closure or by too readily assuming that God can easily be plotted into human narrative scripts. (Graham et al., 2005:76)

The third method outlined by Graham et al. is "Telling God's Story: Canonical Narrative Theology".

The theological task is to discern how contemporary experience can be interpreted through the story that the Church tells about Jesus and to identify forms of practice that are coherent with this narrative. The method does not establish rules or principles to guide the reflective process. Rather it invites the Christian to develop a 'habitus', or way of life, through which the story of Jesus continues

to be told in the life of the story-shaped community of the church.  
(Graham et al., 2005:78)

This method of establishing and continuing a way of life as a Christian does not fit the assumption in this thesis that theological reflection is a process undertaken over time with a specific start point and an end point. The aim of this method is similar to that of other methods, to achieve life change. However, this method seems to rely on life patterning, of allowing a rhythm of worship and living with the Gospels to shape life and habit. This is laudable, but is it theological reflection? There will be a full discussion of this question in Chapter 5.

Graham et al. assert (2005:105) that “canonical narrative theology offers a straightforward and coherent vision of the task of theological reflection; it is the process through which individuals and communities seek to embody and act out the story of God told in Jesus”. As a theological reflection method, this is neither simple, nor straightforward, and there is no description of the process required by the task.

The fourth method considered by Graham et al. is “Writing the Body of Christ: Corporate Theological Reflection.” This method is discussed specifically as a group activity, where the group is assumed to be a collection of Christians, who may live together or only gather to worship together, and all points between. The method is concerned with how groups forge their identity and how they emphasise their distinctiveness. The method is rooted in congregational studies as “...faith communities reflect corporately and form themselves around a central motif, narrative or symbol” (Graham et al., 2005:134) although the process by which they do so remains somewhat opaque. However, important issues are raised of how to ensure every community member is included in such a process, of how community is affected by power, and of how loose networks of people reflect theologically together. One process is identified during the summary “the faith community [is] something that lives, suffers, responds and acts” (Graham et al. 2005:136). This might perhaps be described as experience - dissonance - theological reflection - outcome. The actual process of theological reflection undertaken remains undescribed in this method.

The fifth method presented by Graham et al. is that of “Speaking of God in Public: Correlation”. We have already seen correlation as a part of the process of theological reflection, but here the distinctive feature is that the act occurs in public. The correlation that is undertaken is that of Christian tradition with contemporary culture, with the suggestion being that

the Christian tradition should be prepared to engage in an open exchange of ideas and debate with different cultural disciplines, values, images and world-views. (Graham et al.,2005:138)

Here the outline of a process can be seen. Inputs are the Christian tradition and the contemporary views, there is a dialogue of engagement. The outcomes are more contested, Graham et al. suggest that either the outcome is to “commend the Gospel” to a new audience, or that the Christian tradition may be changed by the engagement. They give a likely example of change being if the engagement is undertaken from a feminist perspective (Graham et al., 2005:138). They describe undertaking the process as dual stranded, depending whether the intent is to make the Gospel accessible to those hearing it (apologetic) or to glimpse theological understanding within secular views (dialectical). The identification of a strand before the process is undertaken suggests that the person undertaking it has a view of the expected outcome before the process is started.

Graham et al. (2005:161-163) cite the work of Whitehead and Whitehead, examined above, as an example of the correlation method. They raise questions of authority and authenticity which will be further explored in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively.

The sixth theological reflection method identified by Graham et al. is that of “Theology in Action: Praxis”.

Practice is both the origin and the end of theological reflection, and talk about God cannot take place independent (sic) of a

commitment to a struggle for human emancipation. (Graham et al., 2005: 170)

This is a description which could be applied to liberation or feminist theology, and Graham et al. locate its process firmly in “the pastoral cycle of action and reflection” (Graham et al., 2005:171) which we shall examine further in the work of Thompson et al. (2008, 2019).

The seventh and final method presented by Graham et al. is “Theology in the Vernacular: Local Theologies”.

This method draws attention to the specific form the Christian gospel assumes in any given place or time. It demonstrates that theology is culturally, temporally, and spatially located, and that the gospel cannot exist independent (sic) of particular, embodied expressions. (Graham et al., 2005:200)

There may be parallels with Kinast’s “inculturation style” examined above. Graham et al. suggest that the aim of this method is to identify the signs of God’s work which are already present within a culture, and to articulate those signs in ways which the people located within that culture understand (Graham et al., 2005:202). This method raises issues of authority and power which will be discussed in Chapter 6.

The work of Graham et al. opens up some interesting lines of thought. However, if one believes that a method should be capable of description step by step, some of these methods are actually approaches, differentiated by the expectation of the outcome or by the perspective of the inputs. This result is a set of categories, each one of which is perhaps more about theological style than theological reflection process. This view is reinforced by Kinast’s (2006) review of their work in which he comments

Unless one equates methodology with typology, the book is misnamed and serves a different, though valuable, purpose. (Kinast, 2006:916)

This researcher notes that he can identify the difference between typology and methodology, despite his own work not citing obvious methodological differences between the methods he examined above.

Other reviewers overlook this issue, instead Paddison (2006:200) takes issue with the broad range of sources suggesting it leaves readers “unguided”, and Jenson (2006:180) says “As a typology, the book is instructive in outlining the diversity of theological reflection and avoids reductionism”.

The next book to be examined for a process is “Theological Reflection” (Thompson et al., 2008, and its second edition 2019). For the purpose of this thesis the first edition is used except where differences are specifically helpful. The first process outlined is by way of an exercise for the reader, “a basic 5-step exercise in theological reflection” (Thomson et al., 2008:2) rather than as an explicit process. It may be summarised as: focus on a recent event. Recall it as clearly as possible so that you are immersed within it. Find connections between the reliving of the event and your religious tradition. Relive the event in the light of the connections you have found and see if there are any changes to your view of that event. Note some actions which arise as a result of the truth you have discovered in order to live out that truth.

This follows the now-familiar process already seen, with experience and tradition as inputs, a finding of connections between them, and an output of action. The immersive approach to experience, the invitation to relive it, is perhaps not dissimilar to an Ignatian reading of scripture. This process attempts to give some of the steps of creating the connections, and its emphasis on experience, then tradition, then returning to experience, perhaps allows the reader to begin to discover the conversation, or dialogue process identified above.

The writers then move to formulate a process. They begin with the seven approaches we have already seen from Graham et al. (2005), and choose to develop the final one, “Theology in action”. Thompson et al. start with this approach but have

refined and defined [it] more closely in order to distinguish it clearly from other kinds of theological reflection and have called it ‘Progressing theological reflection’ or PTR for short. (Thompson et al., 2008:22)

They root PTR in Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle and in liberation theology, and emphasise that PTR is “a specific approach to theological reflection from a critical distance, with as much objectivity as possible” (Thompson et al., 2008:21). This emphasis and its implications for the person undertaking the activity of theological reflection will be discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7. The stages of Kolb’s cycle are “concrete experience...reflective observation...abstract conceptualization...active experimentation” (Kolb, 1984:30). The work of Kolb will be considered further in Chapter 4.

The issue with a cycle as process is that it can be difficult to see what are inputs, what is process, and what are outcomes. Here in PTR, experience and tradition remain as inputs, identifying and describing the experience may well be the reflective observation stage, the activity of theological reflection equates to the abstract conceptualising and the outcome is the experimentation. It is worth noting that Thompson et al. do not actually describe their own process of PTR, although they do talk about characteristics of the process as identified by Heather Walton in 2006 at a conference of the British and Irish Association of Practical Theology: “sexy... blessing... engaging with other... scary... does it hurt... does it help...”(Thompson et al., 2008:30). These characteristics may be interesting to discuss, but without a clear process, the student is left in difficulty.

Thompson et al. go on to review briefly “some of the main models of PTR as currently taught and practised in theological colleges, departments and courses” (Thompson et al., 2005:50). At this point it becomes clear that the writers have not identified a

single process after all, despite using the term PTR to distinguish “their” subject from other types of theological reflection. This contradiction between apparently describing one process but going on to describe several under the same guise, is at best unhelpful. Some of the variants they go on to consider, particularly those involving writing down experience, are described by Graham et al. (2005, 2019). Effectively Thompson et al. have renamed one of Graham et al.’s approaches from “Theology in Action” to PTR, but then introduced some of the other approaches identified by Graham et al. into their re-named category. This muddles the work done by Graham et al. to define some different theological approaches, by collapsing their approaches (which relate to theology not to reflection methods) under the guise of PTR - which up to this point apparently had a single process with minor variants.

The work of Graham et al. examined above essentially examines and categorises different kinds of theological approaches, and looks at the way theological reflection is used in each. Thompson et al appear to have failed to grasp the nuance of this in appropriating one approach, and then shoehorning the other approaches into it.

In reviewing Thompson et al.’s work, Woodward (2010) was largely positive, and offered a critique of their handling of the matter of personality type theory and the dangers of misusing models. He also commented upon a lack of diversity of experience, with the examples all being liberal in their nature, and added that “narrating and interpreting experience is a much more complex process than some of these exercises suggest.”

Abshire (2009:125) comments that “it is more of a workbook...than a ‘study guide’.”

The next text to be examined for an account of theological reflection process is Green’s “Let’s do Theology” (2009). This is the second edition of a work first published in 1989, and it has been considerably revised. Because it has been updated, this thesis uses the second edition in this section of the thesis, rather than considering the first edition in Chapter 4 together with other older, underpinning texts.

It has been seen above that Green himself constrains theological reflection to the “reflection” part of his process, but this thesis considers the whole process of what he describes as “doing theology” (Green, 2009:19). Green describes a spiral, which he relates directly to the work of Kolb (examined in Chapter 4). The first stage is to experience, and it is notable that Green suggests the experience should be something that matters to the person engaging in the process. Second, the experience is explored with others. Third, the Christian tradition is considered “at this stage the group works concertedly to see how the Christian faith directly relates to the experience at issue.” (Green, 2009:21). This is the stage which Green specifically describes as theological reflection. Fourth, the group decides and enacts a response.

Green makes the point that “once round the Doing Theology circle, things are never the same again” (Green, 2009:24). For this reason, he prefers to think of a spiral rather than a circle, with the next experience to be considered inevitably being different from the first.

Green’s decision to have a spiral as his process rather than a circle opens up the heart of the issue for processes of theological reflection. Any process may be rerun, with different inputs and different outcomes. Most of the writers of the texts we have seen so far do not make much distinction between the inputs and the process, and so end up tying themselves in knots to explain why outcomes may be different if the person engaging with the process tries to travel ‘around the circle’ again. If an outcome of a process is a transformed life, then it is obvious that although the process may be entered again and again, it will never be the same in terms of the inputs and outputs. Even if the outcome is modified professional practice, the next iteration of the process will be different. This is perhaps more easily accepted by engineers (for whom it is a self-evident truth) than it is by theologians.

Green warns against the dangers of never completing the process, and of living in the action phases of stage one and four. This would mean there is experience and change, but no deep consideration either of the experience or of tradition. Likewise there is a danger of exploring and reflecting upon Christian tradition for so long that the result is “fine words” but no transformation (Green, 2009:36).

Green does not shirk from probing into the reflection part of the cycle. He suggests there are further stages within the cycle at this point - stage one being the consideration of the experience and tradition together, stage two being an intuitive or imaginative leap as a connection is made, stage three is to “check-out” the theological integrity of the imaginative leap, stage four is the recording or sharing of the new understanding that has been created (Green, 2009:99-103). This is an attempt by Green to unpack the “critical reflection” phase of the process, and to explore what it means to hold a genuine conversation between experience and tradition. He notes that “this secondary circle of the diagram refers to an activity which is an integral part of the main cycle - it is all one endeavour” (Green, 2009:103).

The addition of a mini cycle within the larger cycle which actually tends towards a spiral makes any diagrammatic presentation of the process appear quite complex. However, Green is to be applauded for his attempt to make clear what actually happens during the activity of reflection. Brackett (2011) and Jordon (2010) are both complimentary about Green’s clear description of process.

Next for consideration is the work of Nash and Nash, published in their book *Tools for Reflective Ministry* (2009). They root their work in the experiential learning advocated by Kolb, Dewey and others, which will be examined in Chapter 4. They advocate a “straightforward cycle that can be used in most contexts” (Nash and Nash, 2009:6) which they describe in terms of stages. Each stage is associated with a particular preferred learning style.

Stage one is “having an experience” and is associated with an activist learning style; stage two is “reviewing the experience” associated with a reflective learning style; stage three is “concluding from the experience” and associated with a theoretical learning style and finally stage four is “planning the next step” with an associated learning style of “pragmatist” (Nash and Nash, 2009:8). It is not clear why they choose to link these stages of reflection to preferred learning styles. These linkages they have made may perhaps act as a warning that everyone will find some stages easier or more attractive than others, but this is not something they state explicitly. They then

turn their attention from reflection to theological reflection. Concerned by the supposition “a circle does not totally fulfil the task as it takes us back to the same place”, which as we have seen is the result of an erroneous understanding of process, Nash and Nash also suggest a spiral as their basic process because “it highlights the end of the process as always being a place of new learning or discovery” (Nash and Nash, 2009:43). They suggest three stages of name and describe; analyse; outcome. They then go on to cite processes suggested by other authors.

It is notable that Nash and Nash do not make connections between their “straightforward cycle of reflection” (Nash and Nash, 2009:6) and their suggested spiral of theological reflection. The reason for the lack of connection is not obvious, and their reason for moving from a four stage reflection process to a three stage theological reflection process is left unstated.

Nash and Nash go on to consider the act of reflection in more detail. They look at the use of art and music as inputs (although they do not describe them in those terms), and at the act of creating as an aid to reflective thought. They suggest it is “a way of getting to our feelings rather than reflection remaining a head based activity” (Nash and Nash, 2009:118). They note that this approach is not without danger, and this will be considered further in Chapter 7.

Nash and Nash also suggest the possibility of undertaking the reflective activity outdoors, or surrounded by nature, or with a focus on the surrounding environment. They add that

people come from a range of different starting points. For some it will be a valuable new window on God, the world or themselves and for others it all may seem a little bit of a waste of time as it is not their preferred way of working or is taking them out of their comfort zones. (Nash and Nash, 2009:139)

This researcher notes the urban-centric viewpoint of this comment - no-one ever apologises for taking people used to rural life into towns and cities! The approach

taken by Nash and Nash to theological reflection does not suit everyone. Roberts (2010) agrees that:

What it is and how to do it can still be a source of confusion for those who are in initial ministerial training. Among experienced ministers, a lack of reflection in their ministry can lead to frustration, disenchantment, weak leadership and a sense of purposelessness. (Roberts, 2010:392)

However, he dislikes an “almost didactic style” and suggests that this is a course to be worked through or dipped into for reference, rather than a leisurely read (Roberts, 2010:392).

Walton’s work is concerned with discipleship and the role of reflection in creating and shaping faithful disciples. It has already been seen that Walton prefers to consider “faithful reflection” rather than “theological reflection”, on the assumption that most people will be put off by the word ‘theological’ (Walton, 2012:114). He argues that his term better encompasses the people of God who are trying to be disciples. Like others we have seen, Walton finds the roots of theological reflection in the professional reflective practice of Dewey (1910) and of Schön (1983, 1987), but emphasises strongly (Walton, 2012:118-122) the more recent work of Moon (1999). The contribution of each will be explored in Chapter 4.

Walton doesn’t draw out a process specifically, but instead speaks of reflection being “prompted naturally out of life experience”; “on situations and self”; he points out “reflection needs time and resource”, suggests it works through “fact and imagination” as well as through “words and images”, and that “reflection involves thinking and action” (Walton, 2012:126-133). He doesn’t gather this together into a process, but we can see the drawing together of experience and facts, the use of thought and feeling, and the expectation of action as a result. His reference to the need to set aside the time and energy to undertake reflection is well made.

Cameron et al.'s work (2012) is concerned with providing a very detailed example of theological reflection, but their process description is rooted in Kolb's (1984) learning cycle and in the pastoral cycle, which they lay out with commendable clarity.

They describe stage one as "identification of an issue"; stage two "building a thick description"; stage three "engaging in critical reflection"; stage four "making decisions and planning"; stage five "implementing the action plan" and stage six "continuing the cycle" (Cameron et al., 2012:6-7).

Despite the now customary confusion between input and process, they have resisted the temptation to refer to spirals, and simply return to the start of the process again, acknowledging that it will never run in the same way. They have broken down the action stage to include decision making, planning and implementation as separate activities, which is helpful.

## **Discussion of Emerging Themes**

There are a number of themes and issues which emerge. There is a very common misunderstanding among theologians of what constitutes a process, which might be deemed a 'structural' problem in the literature. In the introduction to this chapter, this researcher outlined her expectation of inputs to a process being used during the process with an outcome resulting. This is essentially linear, although it may be repeated many times. Theologians writing about theological reflection appear to prefer to describe processes without clear beginnings or endings, and also prefer to use pictures or diagrams rather than words. For example, Nash and Nash (2009:43) became concerned about the circle as it implied a lack of change to return to the same place. This researcher agrees with them, and this is why she dislikes 'cycles' (regardless of the number of stages they contain or the shape in which they are presented) as process descriptions, unless they genuinely refer to a cyclical process such as that of rainfall from the perspective of a water molecule.

There is a conflation of inputs with activity, which again may be deemed 'structural'. There is the question of what actually happens when the inputs are put into the activity. This activity is at the heart of the theological reflection process, and there is little agreement between conversation, correlation, reflection, engagement, and the many other terms used to describe the activity. There is little clarity or agreement about the process itself. There is a variation in the expected outcomes of undertaking the process. Given the disparity in definitions shown in Chapter 2, it is hardly surprising that delving deeper reveals greater confusion.

The 'structural' difficulties will be examined first. The conflation of inputs, activities (or processes) and outcomes gives a lack of clarity to processes, particularly for the student or newcomer to the activity of theological reflection. The underlying thought behind theological reflection is likely to remain valid. However, the lack of clear communication of process is likely to result in a lack of clarity as to what is supposed to happen. Some evidence for this exists in the determination of writers to give more and more examples of practice, whilst never explaining the underlying processes more clearly. Describing a process and then giving a few examples is eminently sensible. Telling a student to do something before teaching them how to do it can be a set up for failure. This researcher wonders if this failure to explain clearly is based on a fear of imposing process on a transcendent God; or on a fear of science and mathematics occasionally found in arts and social science practitioners; or on the attempt to keep theological reflection 'mysterious'. The notion that theological reflection might not be for everyone is examined further in Chapters 6 and 7.

The other structural issue discovered is the incorrect assumption that repeating a process will result in the same outcome, and so trying to impose a "spiral" model that shifts through time. Of course, if the same process is given different inputs, the outcome may be different, just as when six is multiplied by two, the result is not the same as when four is multiplied by seven. This misunderstanding does not invalidate the underlying process, but again it displays a discomfort with associating process with theological reflection. Theologians seem quite content that 'repeating' worship daily and weekly through annual cycles will change people, and do not seem to feel

the same need to stress its differences week by week as they do with repeated theological reflection process.

The first of these processes, relates closely to the Learning Cycle described by Kolb (1984) and by Schön (1983, 1987) which will be examined further in Chapter 4. However, none of the authors has made very precise links from the learning cycle to their own processes. Sometimes the disjoint is very marked indeed, for example in Nash and Nash's (2009) leap from the four stage learning cycle to a spiral three stage process. Thompson et al. (2008, 2019) never make their PTR process explicit; other writers are deliberately relying on the work of others for example Kinast (2000) and Graham et al. (2005) and do not draw the similar processes together but leave them separate. As this thesis delves deeper into theological reflection process, an attempt at consolidating these processes will be made in Chapter 9.

There is surprisingly little that all of the authors agree upon. At each step of the process there is variation, or the prospect of contention. This raises the question of whether theological reflection is so personal that no one can articulate the method or process they undertake.

There is one thing the writers have in common. Some may mention a *kairos* moment, some of them mention faith, belief or tradition. They seldom mention God. This omission is mysterious in a process of theological reflection, and in Chapter 8, we shall consider what makes the difference between reflection and theological reflection.

We have seen a considerable variation of explicit and implicit processes. There is no agreement about the input - whilst most authors start with experience, Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:6) place ministerial challenge at the heart of their model. Anne Carr in Kinast (2000:28) requires "critical consciousness of experience and condition of women everywhere in the world at the present time", which feels like an impossible beginning. Thompson et al. (2008:2), in their initial invitation to try the process, suggest beginning with an "event". Kinast (2000:2) makes explicit a question of power and authority, asking "What type of experience is suitable for theological

refection?” He appears to believe that some experiences are unsuitable for theological reflection, a claim which will be considered further in Chapter 6.

Already in the most basic of inputs, human experience, we see a wide variety of expectations, and questions of “who decides” what is suitable, what constitutes experience, whether the input must be an event or a situation. Why all this variation? This researcher suggests that power, authority and control each play their part in theological reflection and are worthy of further consideration in Chapter 6.

The outputs too vary between “new meaning for living” (Killen and De Beer, 1994:viii); fresh understanding of self, experience or tradition; new practice; an action list; no change. The range of outcomes is huge. At one end of the spectrum we have a deep insight into life, at the other end of the spectrum we have a to-do list of things to try differently next time. The outcomes go from transcendent to mundane.

It should be no surprise that a variation in input type, put through processes which differ, results in a whole spectrum of outcomes. For example, if a cook begins a process with wholemeal flour, the end product might be cake, bread, spaghetti, or any other wholemeal cooking result. However, a cook has an expectation of the result and so embarks upon an appropriate process. There is a link between expectation, input, process and outcome, which will be explored further as we disentangle the roots of theological reflection, in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4 - Academic Underpinnings

“You promised to tell me your history, you know,” said Alice.

(Carroll, 1947:33)

### Introduction

In this chapter we consider the roots of the various methods of theological reflection found in Chapter 3. We begin with the world of theology, visiting the early development of theological reflection by Groome (1991) and Browning (1996). Their work leads to a brief exploration of Gadamer’s (2004) hermeneutics. This chapter goes on to review the development of the reflective cycle, starting with Dewey (1910) but particularly considering the work of Schön (1983) and Moon (1999). It examines experiential learning through the work of Kolb (1984). The chapter goes on to draw links from these various underpinnings to the methodologies seen in Chapter 3, and families of methodologies are created. This will enable the use of methodologies to be analysed in Chapter 5.

### Theology

Browning’s work (1996) is on the cusp of the artificial boundary made by this researcher between texts about theological reflection, and texts which may be understood as part of the historical development towards theological reflection. Although the paperback edition of Browning’s work referenced in this thesis was not published until 1996, the hardback edition was actually published in 1991, the same year as Groome’s work. Analysis of both of their processes are located within the historic section of this thesis because the term “theological reflection” does not appear within the index of either book, and so this researcher has judged that theological reflection was not a phrase either of them would have used regularly at this point in their careers.

Writing in 1991, Groome is interested in religious education and preparing people to undertake pastoral ministry. He describes “the Movements of Shared Christian Praxis”, identifying five stages or movements:

Movement 1: Naming/Expressing Present Praxis

Movement 2: Critical Reflection on Present Action

Movement 3: Making accessible Christian Story and Vision

Movement 4: Dialectical Hermeneutic to Appropriate Christian Story/Vision to Participants’ Stories and Visions

Movement 5: Decision/Response for lived Christian faith (Groome, 1991:146-147)

Once again we see some confusion between input and process – Movement 1 is about describing a situation and defining the input to the process, Movement 2 is a chance to understand “[present praxis] reasons, interests, assumptions...its sources...consequences” (Groome, 1991:147). This indicates that Groome’s “critical reflection” is not the same as the reflection phase of other processes we have seen. Rather it is an attempt to ensure deep understanding of the situation being brought as an input to the process. Movement 3 is another input which concatenates faith and tradition, such that the inputs to the process are unclear. Movement 4 is the point at which the rich description of the situation is placed “in dialectical hermeneutics with Christian Story/Vision” (Groome, 1991:147). Movement 5 is the output, the change that results from undergoing the process.

The process described is actually one of dialectical hermeneutics, of logically uncovering the contradictions of the situation being examined, and of attempting to bring those contradictions together into some kind of synthesis. Groome goes on to claim that although this sounds highly complex (this researcher asserts his explanation is not helped by some highly technical theological and philosophical terminology), it is in fact a very natural process. In support of his being “convinced ... that it is an approach for which we have a natural affinity”, (Groome, 1991:148) tells of an episode he observed between a mother and her seven year old son. The son had been in several physical fights, and his mother opens a beautiful discussion with

him about why that might be happening and what might need to change (Groome, 1991:149). This researcher is also a parent, and her experience is that such discussions are not “natural”, but the result of hard won, learned strategies. If such a process is so natural, why is there any need to try to teach it? Groome goes on to address this challenge by saying

Given the educational approaches into which people have typically been socialised, it may be experienced by many as a paradigmatic shift, in facilitation and participation. However, with a little time, people can discover they have an affinity for it, that it comes somewhat “naturally” to them. (Groome, 1991:149)

This researcher agrees that what is taught may indeed eventually seem very natural.

Of interest in Groome’s work is not only the process he describes but the history he reviews in coming to that process. He spends a chapter subtitled “In Search of Conation” reviewing philosophical ideas and argues that critical reasoning must not force the separation of “knowing” and “being” (Groome, 1991:80). He goes further, suggesting that critical reasoning has developed into technical rationality, leaving people “severed from memory and imagination, from past and future, and so from people’s own “being” in time and space” (Groome, 1991:82). This researcher, with her engineering background, knows that technical rationality is not the answer to all problems, and that many apparently mechanistic issues are better approached with imagination than technical rigidity – although that rigidity has its place.

This researcher also notes that her frustration with the process of theological reflection began with the expectation that the process could be and should be described with clarity, and now wonders if she has fallen into the trap of technical rationality. This ‘wondering’ will be addressed in Chapter 7.

Groome exposes the hermeneutical principles of his set of movements, explicitly citing Gadamer’s “fusion of the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreters” in Movement 3 (Groome, 1991:224) and again in Movement 4 (Groome,

1991:251). By doing so, Groome is making clear that the interpreter matters as much as the text.

By reading Groome's work, this researcher has confirmed for herself that the best way to find out what an author is saying is to engage with their own texts, not with interpretations. The impression of Groome's work she now has is rather different to the impression after reading Kinast's summary examined in Chapter 3 above. This point underlines the importance of the person doing the reflecting.

Although the term theological reflection does not appear in the index of Browning's 1996 edition of *A Fundamental Practical Theology* it does occur in the introduction.

...the rhythms of descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic practical theology...are movements of theological reflection...

(Browning, 1996:9)

However his prime aim is to define and show some detailed case studies of practical theology, not to define theological reflection. He goes on to say

The overall dynamic of practical reason is a broad scale interpretive and reinterpreive process; it is, as Gadamer would say, a "hermeneutic" process. I depend much on Gadamer's claim that there are important analogies between the interpretive process that he calls hermeneutics and Aristotle's understanding of phronesis or practical reason. (Browning, 1996:10-11)

Once again a theologian is rooting at least part of their approach in the philosophical work of Gadamer. Browning describes the rise of practical philosophy and its influence on theological education, as bringing historical thinking, hermeneutics, reason, and ethics into a closer intellectual relationship. For Browning as he makes a case for practical theology, the essential point Gadamer makes is that "in both hermeneutical conversations and moral judgment (sic), concern for application is there from the beginning" (Browning, 1996:39). Browning also uses Gadamer's work

on temporality and hermeneutics to point out that “the present is largely a product of the past. The past lives in the present whether we realise it or not” (Browning, 1996:41).

Browning describes a four step process. First he suggests a hermeneutical approach to collating the descriptive theology of a situation and of those who are in it, “to describe the contemporary theory-laden practices that give rise to the practical questions that generate all theological reflection” (Browning, 1996:47). Step two is a critical reflection on the themes arising from step one in the light of the faith tradition. Browning believes that whole communities should work together at this, and that they will need to come to a common understanding of their tradition as well as of their situation. His third step is systematic theology which

when seen from the perspective of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, is the fusion of horizons between the vision implicit in contemporary practices and the vision implied in the practices of the normative Christian texts. (Browning, 1996:51)

Browning makes clear the strong link between his work and Gadamer’s development of hermeneutics. However, he identifies a point at which his proposed practice diverges from Gadamer’s approach. Browning believes that the outcomes from this stage should be tested philosophically and critically. He says “My emphasis on the importance of defending validity places me in tension with Gadamer” and highlights criticism that Gadamer has “no method to test the fusion of horizons that emerges out of the hermeneutical conversations” (Browning, 1996:52).

Browning’s fourth and final stage of strategic practical theology consists of asking four questions. The first is “How do we understand this concrete situation in which we must act?”. The second question is “what should our praxis be in this situation?” (Browning, 1996:55). Third, he asks “How do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this concrete situation?” (Browning, 1996:56) and finally “what means, strategies, and rhetorics should we use in this concrete situation?” (Browning,

1996:56). The answers to these questions draw heavily on each of the stages he has already described.

## **Hermeneutics**

On the face of it, where definitions of theological reflection refer to conversation between tradition and experience, they are invoking a hermeneutical interrogation of a situation. On this ground, what constitutes tradition matters, what experience is matters, and the authority accorded to each in conversation matters. Gadamer, in his consideration of authority, is scathing about the effect of the Enlightenment

If the prestige of authority displaces one's own judgement, then authority is in fact a source of prejudices. But this does not preclude its being a source of truth, and that is what the Enlightenment failed to see when it denigrated all authority. (Gadamer, 2004:280)

It is Gadamer's contention that tradition (especially held in a text) is always reinterpreted to give meaning for the interpreter.

What characterises a dialogue, in contrast with the rigid form of statements that demand to be set down in writing, is precisely this: that in dialogue spoken language - in question and answer giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other's point - performs that communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics. (Gadamer, 2004:361)

The effect of engaging in hermeneutical dialogue, and the change resulting from the engagement requires the reflector to be prepared to have their beliefs challenged and "to be confronted by the new and unexpected" (Porter and Robinson, 2011:87).

They go on to suggest that

The challenge of this hermeneutical experience is proportional to the degree that one is willing to become moved in the playful

dialogue of understanding ... in interpretation neither the text nor the reader remains the same. (Porter and Robinson, 2011:87)

Here we see an invitation and challenge from the world of hermeneutics, which suggests that the more a reflector is able and willing to engage with the process of theological reflection, the greater the reward will be.

## **How We Think**

Dewey's work of 1910 serves as a starting point for considering what constitutes reflective thinking. He suggests that

Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas but a consequence - a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors. The successive portions of the reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another: they do not come and go in a medley. (Dewey, 1910:2-3)

Here Dewey seems to be describing a logical thought process, rather than the creation of connections we have seen defined in previous chapters. He goes on to develop his definition:

Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought. (Dewey, 1910:6)

This definition does not seem to correlate particularly with the definitions of theological reflection found in Chapter 2. However, as Dewey (1910) explains the two subprocesses he believes are present in reflective thought, the parallels become more obvious. First, he expects there to be a problem of some sort "a state of perplexity, hesitation or doubt"; second, he expects the thinker to respond to this

problem with “an act of search or investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts which serve to corroborate or to nullify the suggested belief” (Dewey, 1910:9). Here we see the description and expectation of a process.

## **Experiential Learning**

The work of Kolb (1984) examines the state of experiential learning. He argues that “people do learn from their experience” (Kolb, 1984:3), and emphasises in his educational context that learning from experience is as valuable as learning from a college course. He refers back to Dewey’s role in developing “a framework for examining and strengthening the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development” (Kolb, 1984:4).

Although there are a number of models of experiential learning, essentially they can all be described as a four stage cycle consisting of “concrete experience; observations and reflections; formation of abstract concepts and generalisations; testing implications of concepts in new situations” (Kolb, 1984:21) or “Impulse; Observation; Knowledge; Judgment (sic)” (Kolb, 1984:22). It is interesting to note the cycles contain a reflective phase. It is also worth noting that these cycles are not processes as this researcher understands process – they are continuous, rather than having inputs which are put through a process with resulting outcomes.

Ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience. ... No two thoughts are ever the same, since experience always intervenes. (Kolb, 194:26)

Kolb goes on to contrast learning as process with learning in terms of desired outcomes. He suggests an over reliance on outcomes “can become a definition of nonlearning, in the process sense that the failure to modify ideas and habits as a result of experience is maladaptive” (Kolb, 1984:26). This tension, between process and outcome, mirrors that of knowing that theological reflection has happened by its results (a suggestion seen and explored in Chapter 2 above).

Kolb comments on the attitude the learner brings to learning, which is shaped by their prior experience:

To focus so sharply on continuity and certainty that one is blinded to the shadowy penumbra of doubt and uncertainty is to risk dogmatism and rigidity, the inability to learn from new experience. Or conversely, to have continuity continuously shaken by the vicissitudes of new experience is to be left paralysed by insecurity, incapable of effective action. (Kolb, 1984:28)

Both of these states have implications for theological reflection. The state of certainty impairs reflection and learning as surely as the state of being overwhelmed by change, a view we have seen expressed by Killen and De Beer (1994) in their discussion of certitude.

## **Reflective Practice**

Schön wrote *The Reflective Practitioner* in 1983, and was seeking to understand how certain professions go about solving problems. He was aware that no one person could hold the entire body of knowledge in their head for their profession. He used engineering, management, architecture, medicine and town planning as his professions under consideration. Schön describes a world in which

problems are interconnected, environments are turbulent, and the future is indeterminate just in so far as the managers can shape it by their actions. (Schön, 1983:16)

Schön goes on to consider the different kinds of knowledge we possess. He highlights “knowing-in-action” (1983:49-53). An example could be a child catching a ball. They are actually undertaking thousands of computations of movement, explicable by the mathematics of calculus. They are highly unlikely to understand the mathematics of

what they are doing, or to be able to describe how the ball lands safely in their hands, but they demonstrate “knowing-in-action”.

A slightly different kind of activity arises as “reflecting-in-action”. Here Schön uses the example of someone throwing a ball in a baseball match. The pitcher makes fine adjustments until they “find the groove” which gives the results they want (1983:54-56). Reflecting-in-action may be a fast activity - for example when musicians improvise together and adjust to one another as they play (Schön, 1983:55-56), or it may happen slowly, as a lawyer considers the progress of a long lasting case.

When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on...established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case... He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing. (Schön, 1983:68)

Ignoring the gendered language used at the time of writing, Schön is pointing out the reality that the boundary between research and practice becomes blurred. Practitioners cannot and should not necessarily send every problem off to researchers for investigation. So it is that he makes the case for being a reflective practitioner.

Schön goes on to break down reflective practice into smaller steps. He suggests that they are “appreciation [of the problem]; action; reappreciation” (1983:132). Within action there are also some further sub steps - reframing the problem into something congruent with prior experience; experimenting or testing of hypotheses; considering when to stop. Each of these steps actually implies a high degree of expertise and the bringing of artistry to a situation.

Moon pulls these strands together in her work on reflection published in 1999. She notes in her introduction that there are at least three common ways in which the

verb “reflect” is used including “considering in more detail”; “implying purpose”; “complicated mental processing” (Moon, 1999:4). She suggests that:

the apparent differences in reflection are not due to different types of reflection - in other words to differences in the process itself, but to differences in the way that it is used, applied or guided. (Moon, 1999:5)

Effectively she is considering the same issues with reflection that this researcher is considering with theological reflection, albeit possibly with a different conclusion. It is notable that she has confined her work to learning theory rather than including philosophy.

Moon begins by reviewing work done on Kolb’s learning cycle. She draws out two questions from the studies done

If these phases are ‘reflection’, when does actual learning occur?  
These phases themselves might reflect learning but then where does reflection fit in? (Moon, 1999:31)

In her consideration of Schön’s work, she notes a number of criticisms that were subsequently made of it, and notes two points that are raised by the critique:

First, there is a tendency for interpretations of “reflection-on-action” to be broader than Schön’s own use of the term. Second, there has been a tendency to accept Schön’s model as “fact” and theorise on this basis rather than treat the model as speculative. (Moon, 1999:54)

Despite the lack of agreement about the model, Moon identifies a number of outcomes, particularly in nursing, from encouraging reflection - “learning and action, empowerment and emancipation” (Moon, 1999:65). She notes that reflective practice may be more attractive to those engaged in subjects where interpretation

and a hermeneutical approach is important, an idea put forward by Habermas (Moon, 1999:55).

Moon goes on to review the implementation of reflective practice into professional life, and notes that

becoming reflective meant, for example, that they became aware of aspects of their professional life with which they were not comfortable, and they required support to cope with the situations or change them. (Moon, 1999:68)

This refers to a study of introducing reflective practice for experienced teachers, but from the experience of this researcher, this finding is applicable to other professions, including professional Christian ministry. It also resonates with Gadamer's view that "the task of hermeneutics has always been to establish agreement where there was none or where it was disturbed in some way" (Gadamer, 2004:292). Of necessity, this establishing of agreement will require the letting go of some opinion or view, and acquiring new insight. Change can be a painful process.

Personal development or "growth may occur when a person puts themselves in a challenging position and faces up to difficulties" (Moon, 1999:79), but the decision to adopt that position may well have arisen as a result of reflection about a situation. Again the notion of discomfort as an impetus to change arises.

Moon identifies very clearly issues of definition of reflection, and also the lack of critique of the largely non-empirical work of Schön and Kolb. She recognises that "the difficulty of interpretation does...create a problem for those who wish to investigate reflection in a more theoretical manner" (Moon, 1999:93). This assessment correlates very closely with the experience of this researcher when she tried to find and apply a theological reflection methodology, and then delved more deeply into the literature on theological reflection.

The issue of conflating processes with inputs and outputs, already seen in Chapter 2 above, also exists in the literature of reflection. Although Moon attempts to unpick these different elements (Moon, 1999:100 Table 8.1), the list of characteristics of reflection she synthesises from the literature is possibly more helpful

Reflection is:

- Learning and the material for further reflection;
- Action or other representation of learning;
- Reflection on the process of learning;
- Critical review;
- The building of theory;
- Self-development;
- Decisions or resolutions of uncertainty;
- Empowerment and emancipation;
- Other outcomes that are unexpected - images or ideas that might become solutions;
- Emotion. (Moon, 1999:99)

Although here definition and method are somewhat entangled, there is a gathering of the major recurring characteristics of reflection which may well be useful for considering theological reflection.

One aspect Moon considers which is not present in the literature of theological reflection is that of the conditions necessary for reflection to enhance professional practice. She includes the possible needs for time and space, facilitation, emotional support, and awareness of hidden agendas within the institution (Moon, 1999:166-170). These factors are equally applicable to theological reflection, and one of the aims of this thesis is to articulate some of the hidden assumptions implicit within the process. These needs will be further explored in Chapter 7.

When Moon pauses to consider the literature of reflection, she comments that

The existence of different accounts of reflection without a common definition at their root means that particular features associated with the term have been accentuated or diminished in the definition of the word in order to apply it to the topic in hand. (Moon, 1999:92)

We have seen a number of points of development of theological reflection – from theology itself, from hermeneutics and from educational theory. These different starting points may well account for some of the differences in definitions of reflection identified by Moon.

The situation is more muddled for theological reflection than for reflection. If the word “reflection” means different things in different contexts as Moon identifies, then adding “theological” as an adjective will not make the underlying definitional issue disappear. Equally, if the difficulty is not clearly foregrounded, then it will be ignored. The meaning will be subsumed by the averagely intelligible discourse, and never questioned.

## **Connections between theological reflection, hermeneutics and educational theories of reflection**

Perhaps the easiest connection to draw between theological reflection and the historical root is for the definition described by Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:ix). They conceive their definition in terms of improving professional practice, so firmly locating the process in the realms of professional learning through reflection. Here, although they leap from the learning cycle to their own three stage process, the derivation of their thinking is easy to categorise. It also causes us to consider the aim or purpose of theological reflection - and Whitehead and Whitehead’s description also locates their thinking as being borne out of the same aim as reflective practice in other professions. At this point, the question of whether their definition requires the reference to “minister” or “ministry” becomes even sharper. Is their theological reflection actually theological at all, or is it merely professional reflection aimed at

learning (and potentially improving) professional practice – practice which happens to be ministerial?

However, when considering the development of their argument, and the continuum they describe as part of their process description, the roots become less clear cut. They describe the importance of dialogue - which is an integral part of reflective learning. They also talk about suspending judgement during critical conversation. Dialogue is also an integral part of hermeneutics, thus begging the question of whether learning theory itself is rooted in hermeneutics without actually explicitly acknowledging that?

Killen and De Beer's definition sits at the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of its language and expectation. "The outcome is new truth and meaning for living" (Killen and De Beer, 1994:viii). Here are clear parallels with Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 2004:305) - before the process of theological reflection began there was a being with its horizon, and now that being has assimilated a new horizon into its concern. There is nothing incremental about the outcome Killen and De Beer expect from their theological reflection definition, but rather a large step change of understanding.

Thompson et al. (2019:104-117) devote a chapter to the "*kairos* moment", which they explain is explicitly or implicitly present in the various methods to which they refer. They use the visual image made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein which may be seen as a duck or a rabbit depending on the viewer and describe that moment when the viewer realizes that what it thought was a duck may be a rabbit as analogous to the *kairos* moment (Thompson et al., 2019:105-106). Here again we see a clear connection being made to Gadamer's fusion of horizons. A perceptible change happens and the viewer is changed as a result.

This moment is also observed and described by Hay (2006).

Intuitions of a spiritual dimension to reality were particularly likely to burst out in two kinds of extreme situation, deep distress and

overwhelming delight. It is as though the constraints of a lifetime's conditioning fall away in the face of unavoidable immediacy. (Hay, 2006: 99)

Although Hay's quest at this point is biological, his observations are helpful in understanding what a moment of assimilation may look and feel like in practice.

It is the view of this researcher that many people engaged in teaching and using theological reflection processes have forgotten the historical development of the subject. This unawareness of roots makes it far harder to be clear about definition, process and expectation of outcome. As we shall see, this has repercussions for the application of theological reflection.

# Chapter 5 - What is the application of theological reflection?

The Mock Turtle said: "No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise." (Carroll, 1947:110)

## Introduction

We have seen the variation in definition, input, process and output of theological reflection. In this chapter, we consider the use to which the activity of theological reflection is put. This will be done mainly through consideration of the texts also reviewed, together with some experiences of this researcher.

In this chapter, as we consider the different applications of the theological reflection methods already examined, we shall dispense with the chronological approach. This researcher is making the working assumption that each method has an expected outcome, and that the use of each method in different situations is dictated by those expected outcomes. We have seen a range of expectation, included improved professional practice, resolution of situations, and changed lives. By grouping in this way, this researcher expects to reveal the extent of expectation and practice. This is the same practice as was used by Kinast (2000:5) to try to identify different styles. In this thesis the aim is not to examine styles but to focus on expected outcomes.

There is one exception to this grouping which will be examined first and alone.

## Journaling

We begin with a consideration of the one method that appears not to be theological reflection at all. It is included here partially as a warning, but also to consider the changes necessary to the proposed method if it is to be used as theological reflection.

Graham et al.'s first method of theological reflection is "Theology by Heart". The expectation is that the reflector will journal or write letters, or otherwise record their experience. The outcome is:

focused attention to the interior life as a source of theological knowledge that can result in greater self-awareness and confidence in response to the call to faithful self-giving and adventurous living, in relation with God. (Graham et al., 2019:22)

If this researcher has understood correctly, the experience is converted into a record (usually text) and that text can serve as a theological resource. The expected outcome is a new theological resource that can then be used in theological reflection. The authors themselves are aware that "there are dangers to this method", pointing out that some may "become self-indulgent...to the extent that the self only engages with what concerns him or her, forgetting the central Christian method of self-giving" (Graham et al., 2019:24).

The issue appears to be that this method actually results in a possible input into theological reflection rather than being a process in and of itself. Without further steps, the act of writing experience down does not constitute theological reflection. This researcher is of the view that to describe "theology by heart" or straightforward journaling as theological reflection is a misappropriation of the phrase "theological reflection". This should not be seen to undermine the importance of recording experience as an important input into the theological reflection process, nor as trivialising the contribution which experience makes to the process.

By recording experience, it can become obvious to the reflector what actually matters to them. The editing and sifting in choosing what to write may well reveal situations or ideas which need further consideration. Merely revisiting the text at a later date may well induce reflection on experience and understanding gained in the interim. However, for reflection to become theological reflection it is necessary to bring that written or recorded experience into conversation with tradition in some way. Thus journaling can be an immensely useful input into a theological reflection process.

Journaling is very accessible – anyone who is literate can use it, anyone familiar with technology might choose to record themselves speaking aloud rather than to write. Thompson et al. (2019:126) offer a useful extension of straightforward journaling via a practical exercise which is familiar to this researcher from her days at theological college and has offered a basis for reflective journaling ever since. The reflector is invited to leave plenty of space around the journal entry (easier in these electronic days) and revisit the text produced after different periods of time, annotating it with any wider insights, theological themes or connections and taking these to a conclusion, preferably with a measurable action.

## Decision Making

Theological reflection is considered primarily as a decision making tool by Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:ix). We have already seen this from the definition they offer of the term in their book, which is concerned primarily with practical ministry. Their expectation is that a practical problem will be considered in the light of faith in order to gain insight, and that the insight will lead to action. Because they are particularly interested in practical ministry, they expect this process of discerning a way through decision making to be a shared enterprise. They make the point that “there are many *right ways* to bring shared insight to fruition in effective common response” (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:87).

They also keep the link between theological reflection and practical ministry throughout their book. This makes sense, because it reflects the title itself and their thinking. However, there are implications of this expectation. One implication is that the process of theological reflection must be led (or perhaps ‘guided’) by a Christian minister. Another is that the issue faced must be practical and require a decision, although that decision may be highly complex to implement. This expectation of theological reflection is very narrow.

As was seen in Chapter 4, Browning also expected his outcomes to be highly practical (Browning, 1996:55).

It is worth noting that in their introduction, Whitehead and Whitehead considered a much broader range of theological reflection which they defined by timescale as running on a continuum from ministry (“scope immediate and concrete”) to broad (“a theological question in its philosophical and historical context”) (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:xii). By narrowing the scope of theological reflection to ministry, although they started quite broadly, they have constrained the term theological reflection to a very particular situation. In doing so, by implication they have limited those who may undertake the process (who apparently must either be a minister or be overseen through the process by a minister) and the circumstances in which it may be used. This researcher considers it a matter of regret that they did not explore the other ranges on their spectrum, as their insights could have been most useful.

In conversation with Canon Dr Jill Hopkinson of Sarum College on 24th April 2019 she described theological reflection for theological college students as “a tool for helping them deal with complex situations in parish”. This definition suggests that taught theological reflection is expected to make a contribution to practical decision making.

## **Ministerial Formation**

Theological reflection can enable a clearer mindfulness about one's own ministry as part of the greater pattern of God's self-giving to and in the world. This means, of course, having some understanding of the world, and particularly the parts of it in which you are called to minister. It involves a theological understanding, rooted in Scripture and tradition and is deepened by experience, of God's sustaining and redeeming activity in the world. And it also involves an understanding of the church in the context in which you minister, and of your fellow ministers, both within your congregation and in the wider community. (Thompson and Thompson, 2012:xx)

Here again is a method aimed at Christian ministers, but with a less “decision-making” focus. Instead the intent is “doing your job with a critical awareness of the relationship between what you are doing and the ideals and goals you are trying to

achieve” (Thompson and Thompson, 2012:xix). The planned result here is to “embody good ministry” (Thompson and Thompson, 2012:xix). Of course, the major difficulty with embodying good ministry is in deciding what actually constitutes good ministry. Everyone will have a different answer depending on experience, tradition and context. This usage of theological reflection is probably one of this researcher’s experiences at theological college, where one of the aims was ‘formation’ of a student into a priest. Students were encouraged to reflect on their practice regularly, with the intention that this would become a lifelong habit. After this researcher was ordained, her initial professional development was assessed by a combination of evidence of doing particular tasks, and the quality of her theological reflections upon them. Thus the habit was intended to continue into normal priestly life.

the process of telling a story that enables a person to discern God within the circumstances of their lives is a powerful means of personal formation and deeply affirms individual faith. (Graham et al., 2019:57)

Graham et al.’s ‘Constructive Narrative Theology’ contains two aims, affirmation of faith held, and personal formation. This researcher has separated them, as they are two very different expected outcomes. Formation implies change from current situation, whereas affirmation implies confirmation of a particular situation or chosen path.

Personal formation suggests a shaping, a change that permeates throughout the whole of the way a life is lived. Here is resonance with Gadamer’s fusing of horizons discussed in Chapter 4.

Affirmation raises an interesting question of expectation – can the outcome of the theological reflection process be “no change”? Effectively affirmation is confirmation that all is well. It may be encouraging, and someone may feel more confident and so changed by being affirmed, but one would not expect a profound shift in life as a result. So there is a contradiction within this particular theological reflection method. However, it is worth remembering that expectation of outcome and actual outcome

are two different things. Thus despite entering the process of theological reflection expecting affirmation, the outcome may actually be a major insight leading to lifelong change.

## **A Response (Learning)**

Nash and Nash hedged their bets by describing the expected outcome as “making a response” (2009:3). Their theological reflection is rooted in the learning cycle, although they espoused a three stage model in the end. Despite this choice, they obviously expect theological reflection to result in learning and practical changes to behaviour and practice. They describe their expected outcome as

In the light of the previous stages [of the method] what will we change or do differently next time? (Nash and Nash, 2009:47)

Here there is a clear expectation of an alteration in practice and they list some active verbs to illustrate what they mean “react, change... start ... move... plan” (Nash and Nash, 2009:47). Alongside these action words, they place some nouns which might provide boundaries, barriers or opportunities for those actions – “expectations, hopes, need, resources, desires....reactions, consequences” (Nash and Nash, 2009:47).

It is clear that Nash and Nash understand that the outcome and action resulting from theological reflection is unlikely to be perceived as neutral. It will either itself be a change, or it will provoke a change, and that will cause a reaction from the people perceiving the change. The reaction may be positive, supportive and encouraging, or it may be negative, combative, and dissuading. Given this demonstration of understanding, this researcher is perplexed as to why they have been so very non-specific about the expected outcome from their process. They may believe the outcome is so self-evident from the learning cycle roots of their method that it is unnecessary to spell it out.

## Ways of living

It was the early definition from Killen and De Beer (1995:viii) that said very clearly “The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.” They describe reaching this point via a moment of insight, and stress the importance of using images to assist (1995:42). Equally, they are clear that insight must lead to action if the situation under consideration is going to change – “Until our lives change as a result of what we have learned, insight remains incomplete” (Killen and De Beer, 1995:34).

Theological reflectiveness... means setting that totality [of what is going on in your ministry] in the context of your theological beliefs.  
(Thompson and Thompson, 2012:xix)

Whitehead and Whitehead’s continuum of theological reflection (1995:xii) has three main categories, each of which is distinguished by difference in scope, length of time spent reflecting, and conversation partners. They give examples of each category.

The first category is at the “ministry” end of their continuum. Its scope is immediate and concrete, it is considered briefly within one or two sessions, the conversation partners are personal and professional ministerial experience and the example given is of resolving specific problems in Christian community.

This category is open to challenge as to whether it is theological reflection. There is no mention of faith or tradition as conversation partners, although given the example is within a Christian community, it may be that the presence of faith is an underlying assumption. A seeker of theological reflection method who came to this category first is in danger of omitting the theological from their reflection. Together with the omission of faith or tradition, bringing personal and ministerial experience together as conversation partners is problematic. It depersonalises ministerial experience, rather than understanding that each minister will bring different ministerial experience. It sets that experience as a minister in tension with personal experience, potentially leading to ministerial experience being seen as worth more than personal

experience and creating a clear imbalance of power which is open to misuse if ministerial is seen as more important, valid or authoritative than personal experience. This imbalance is difficult if it is contained within one individual reflecting alone, but potentially dangerous if it is a tension held between two people. This researcher can imagine this approach to community problem solving might lead to an excess of power being vested in the community leader, and a loss of voice for personal experience by other members of the community. This issue will be considered further in Chapter 6.

The middle category of the continuum given by Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:xii) is described as intermediate in scope, with a length of reflection lasting several weeks or months. The conversation partners are “theology and social sciences as well as experience”, and the suggested example is community “experience in explicit relation to the Christian tradition and surrounding culture”.

This category clearly demonstrates features of theological reflection, with the requirement to consider theology and experience made explicit. It is noticeable that experience is not sub divided or set against itself in the way it was in the first category. However, this researcher believes that difficulties with the categories begin to emerge. For example, the intermediate category suggests that culture should be taken into account, but as we see in Chapter 6, and has been partly discussed in Chapter 4, the reflector may be unaware of the impact culture has on their lived experience. Omitting it from the short term reflection process whilst including it at the intermediate phase brings to mind the “bracketing” required by Husserl (Porter and Robinson, 2011:54-55), during which one notices one’s own preconceptions and attempts to correct objectively for them. The same criticism holds for the inclusion of theology here, and its exclusion from the immediate end of the continuum.

The third and final category on the continuum is given as “broad” in scope (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:xii). It takes an indeterminate amount of time and may be described as ongoing, its conversation partners are philosophy and history. The example given is of “Christian community as interpreted by scriptural images and historical understandings of church; ecclesiology”.

Here again there is a confusion of conversation partners as described. Experience is missing altogether as a conversation partner, although the example suggests that scripture is involved despite the omission of theology. However, it is suggested that a suitable subject for consideration in this category is “a theological question”, suggesting that the presence of faith, tradition or theology is assumed.

It is the description of conversation partners which is perhaps the weakness of this continuum. It is not obvious why different subject areas should be considered within different timeframes. Of course, if this researcher were to try to include a subject area with which she was unfamiliar within her reflection process, the process would take longer as the inputs would have to be garnered with great care and possible effort.

The idea of theological reflection as a continuum or spectrum may well be extremely useful, in order to consider the varying levels of complexity where it is used. This idea will be developed further in Chapter 9.

There remains a further question to be explored about the application of theological reflection. All the expectations seen so far about outcomes have been that there will be some change in the behaviour or motivation of the reflector. Whether the result is learning, or meaning for living, or an implemented solution to a ministerial problem, the reflector has brought their experience and their faith tradition together, and it is their future experience which is expected to be different.

What happens if the conversation between experience and tradition results in a need for tradition to change? There are many examples of parts of Christian tradition which have been used to oppress people in the past and which continue to be used in that way now. One only has to consider issues of slavery, ethnicity, sexuality, priestly caste, poverty, to see cases where tradition impinges directly on the experience of people. The application of tradition in many of these instances by people with power, be they professional theologians or church leaders, has resulted in people turning away from God. They turn away believing they cannot meet the ideals being imposed

by one set of human beings and their interpretation of tradition upon another. For a faith whose God-made-Man gave two commandments, both about love, this is a poor outworking. There is not a clear mechanism for tradition to flex with experience, despite the fact that the Bible is a record of the changing relationship of people with God as their Godly experience grew.

Is it acceptable for the outcome of theological reflection to be change to tradition? Liberation theology would suggest that it is, and feminist theology would agree.

Here too we encounter the difference between tradition and faith. For the purposes of this thesis, we might consider faith as residing in a person, and so being part of their experience. This is explored further in Chapter 8. This interpretation is consistent with the definitions presented in Chapter 2, where the tradition is considered as being distinct from experience – a point of agreement between them!

This question of whether a change to tradition is a possible outcome of theological reflection is considered further in Chapter 6, particularly through the work of Monika Hellwig (1982). Chapter 8 also considers the development of tradition, and highlights how although there are many strands of tradition, changes to it are contested and often not agreed universally.

Earlier in this Chapter, 'affirmation' as a possible outcome was identified. Affirmation of a reflector may well lead to an increase in their self-confidence, hence to some sort of change. However, the question 'is no change a possible outcome?' remains. This researcher is of the view that engaging deeply with tradition, with a situation, and with one's own self, in a process of theological reflection, is likely to lead to a discovery about any of those things. Whether that discovery leads to an enduring change in behaviour, the situation, or the tradition is a slightly different matter. There is a slightly different criterion which could be applied to this question of no change: can a process of theological reflection ever be repeated exactly? This researcher believes not, because the inputs will have been altered by the previous iteration of the process. The reflector's understanding will be deeper, and their lived experience

will be slightly different. The outcome may not be that which was envisaged at the start of the process, but there will be change.

# Chapter 6 - Power and Control

“Off with her head!” (Carroll, 1947:131)

## Introduction

This researcher has identified a number of issues of power over and control of the theological reflection process. The most pressing is that no-one talks about power and control in their descriptions of theological reflection. Yet each author who opts to enter the fray attempts to define and specify process in some way, with the hidden assumption being that what they have to say is “right” and sometimes that what others have said to date is “wrong”. This assumption applies to everyone who writes on any topic (including this researcher), and each book or article is of itself an attempt to shape deliberately the dialogue and message.

In this chapter, the use of the word “power” is intended to convey a system where one person or entity has authority over another. This may be by way of economic power, educational attainment, spiritual power by virtue of office (for example a clergy person having authority over a parishioner), or may be through some of the well understood positions of privilege, where being white, or male, or able bodied, or rich, offers power over those who are not. Jesus acted and taught in ways which challenged the structures of authority of his time. He spent time with those on the margins of society, and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) lay out a manifesto where those without authority are shown a different way. However, this chapter is predominantly concerned with exposing the unspoken assumptions about who holds power and authority in the theological reflection process.

It was reading Kinast’s Introduction (2000:2) with its questions about “complexities” which first alerted this researcher to some hidden assumptions about who controls theological reflection and who decides what constitutes theological reflection. This chapter exposes these assumptions.

Issues of authority and power to be examined include those triggered by the following questions:

- What kind of experience is suitable for theological reflection? (Kinast, 2000:2);
- Who can do theological reflection? (Hellwig, 1982:43);
- Who decides if the theological reflection outcomes are ‘good enough’? (Implicit in Thompson et al., 2019:7);
- Who decides what constitutes Christian tradition? (Kinast, 2000:2);
- How does anyone move from reflecting to changing behaviour as a result of reflection? (Kinast, 2000:2).

All of these questions are asked directly in the texts. Few answers to those questions have been given by the authors who pose them.

This chapter follows the now familiar pattern of identifying issues raised by each of the theological reflection texts, grouping the themes, and discussing the issues which then emerge.

Whilst exploring this topic, this researcher found one more text which seemed pertinent for this particular chapter. “Whose experience counts in theological reflection?” was first given as a lecture by Monika Hellwig on 18 April 1982. As we have seen from other texts, this is a very early use of the term ‘theological reflection’, but because the subject is so specific, it has been included only in this chapter, where it is treated at some length.

## **Power and Control in the Literature**

Hellwig begins her discussion of experience by referring to the way theology was being undertaken particularly in the United States of America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She notes the presence of “a groundswell of prophetic protest” (Hellwig, 1982:4) demanding a transformation of method, and cites John Macquarrie’s naming of “experience” as the first of his “formative factors in theology” (Hellwig, 1982:4) and as an example of that transformation. However, she goes on to consider the question of “*whose* faith experience?” in the light of theology being built on Christian

experience and in interpretation “in order to formulate doctrines appropriately” (Hellwig, 1982:5-6).

There is of course a question right there about how one knows if a doctrine is formulated appropriately (once again, who decides?), but Hellwig makes the point that the “experience is necessarily that of the professional theologian” (Hellwig, 1982:6). She underlines the effect

the scrutiny of what might be significant to express is always being made from more or less the same human bias - heavily male, largely celibate, usually clerical, economically privileged,...almost always educated in certain fairly narrowly defined traditions of literature, science, philosophy and notions of what constitutes scholarly pursuit of truth, very generally by temperament and disposition introverted and more attracted to the farther reaches of abstraction than to the exigencies of structuring human life in society and coping with its inevitable problems. (Hellwig, 1982:7)

She was writing some forty years ago from a Roman Catholic perspective, and states the bias present at that time with remarkable clarity. She extends her argument with similar clarity into a call for the transformation of how theology is done:

If the essential, or central, or only task of theology is to move from a complex and highly technical, time-consuming, linguistically, historically and philosophically skilled, grasp of the past development and deposits of the tradition, into the confronting of present questions, then it is assured that only a certain type of person can set out on the enterprise, and that person is going to continue (in spite of all efforts to the contrary) to look more or less like the persons described above. (Hellwig, 1982:8)

Here is a description of the difficulty of access into the world of theology (or indeed any specialised undertaking). She goes on to demand “a reciprocity” in the dialogue

between the untrained person reflecting on their Christian experience and the trained theologian. She argues that both sides have questions and answers (Hellwig, 1982:10) and sees their outworking in two strands, one of community action and ministry teams, and the other of black, feminist and liberation theology. The first strand lies in political theological reflection in her view, the second grows out of rejection of hermeneutical privilege.

Of the first strand, she says:

Theological reflection...is properly drawn from the social and political action of Christians and their experiences of organisational responsibility and transformations. Theology is political...because the central questions upon which a theology must be built rise out of our human life together confronting the challenge of human destiny. ...It claims, in effect, that there is an inexorable demand for salvation arising out of the whole social situation which must be heard and examined in its own right in order to understand what God promises and demands and does in the world, because such understanding cannot simply be superimposed from preconceived theological categories drawn from academic studies of the past. (Hellwig, 1982:15-16)

Hellwig is clear about the use to which theological reflection is being put. It is a tool for building a theology that works 'where the rubber hits the road', which doesn't rely on an academic understanding of the history of the theologies which have gone before, but rather tries to deal with the action of God in current, present, pressing situations. It is notable that Hellwig does not shirk from putting God in the middle of the purpose of theological reflection - for her, theological reflection is about discovering and understanding God's action in the world.

She points out that much of the activity in this strand is "political theology writ small" (Hellwig, 1982:16). This is perhaps because it is contextually placed within groups of

Christians, responding to shared experience. She points out that the result of the first strand can also be the growth of pressure groups for social justice.

Implicit in the reflection of these groups on their experiences is the understanding that sin is revealed in suffering. ...By a process of negation of such suffering and therefore of the structures which cause it, human hope begins to acquire shape and content. (Hellwig, 1982:17-18)

Hellwig points out the academic theological models in such circumstances tend to fail to deal with the reality they attempt to address, whereas those models borne out of experience tend to be more robust, because they are able to take a wider variety of factors and issues into account. The outworking of this reliance on experience also shows that those doing theological reflection based on experience tend to mistrust academia with its professional theologians. Thus they go back to scripture and tradition and interrogate them in the light of their experience, but they:

are not asking the scholars or the Church magisterium for answers to their questions. At most they are asking for some technical assistance in the finding and correct reading of sources. Sometimes they are not even asking for this, because they perceive the technical apparatus has been elaborated without reference to faith or commitment, possibly to the point of obscuring the faith content. (Hellwig, 1982:19)

It is worth noting once again that Hellwig was writing in 1982, well before the internet was widely available, and perhaps just as British education was beginning to encourage pupils to look at source materials and draw conclusions from what they examined. If her words were true then, they seem even more appropriate for today, when there are a plethora of interpretations and opinions available via a quick internet search. Hellwig is clear not to dismiss such an approach as anti-intellectual. Rather, she ascribes it to a broadening “understanding of what it is that constitutes

wisdom and knowledge, of an understanding more particularly of what constitutes theology” (Hellwig, 1982:20).

She takes her argument even further, as she describes:

The purpose of the quest is...to learn to recognise the voice of the Father, of the transcendent God, speaking to us today in our experience, that is in our total experience in the human community with all its complexity. That is why the answer is not to be found in books, not even the Bible, nor in the voices of human authorities...Theology is always systematic reflection on God revealing himself (sic). (Hellwig, 1982:20-21)

Here is a direct challenge to the power and authority of the church. Its interpretations of the Bible, and its noting of experience, has been largely through a particular, privileged lens. This has gone on for so long that there is a systemic disconnect between the people living their lives and the theologians trying to offer a theology to support, encourage (and perhaps even control) them.

Now we can ask questions and expect answers with a few keystrokes, in a climate where corporations and institutions are increasingly mistrusted, the church is losing control of theological reflection. It gets worse:

the reduction of revelation to propositional truths has for centuries been a tendency in Christian theology (whether admitted or not). Such tendency subtly gives the impression that once these ‘truths of revelation’ have been established, it is simply a matter of reasoning logically and comprehensively from them. In other words, in practice faith and commitment, as actualised in personal and community lifestyles, are understood to make no difference in the theological reflection or conclusions. This is what is being put in question by so many groups today. (Hellwig, 1982:22)

The academic theological bubble was starting to burst, and the effects of this are still playing out forty years later. As every denomination relies more heavily on its laity, 'top down' theology is failing Christian people. Denominations are removing ordained (and therefore at least to some extent theologically trained) people from areas with lower populations, and expecting laity (who have been kept out of theological development for centuries) to step in and to keep the physical and organisational structures of church propped up. Denominations expect this to happen with very little money, and with very little practical training, let alone with any acceptance of the theological insights from the laity on whom they now rely.

Hellwig's second strand refers to the attempt to redress the imbalance brought about by hermeneutical privilege, and attributes the rise of black, feminist and liberation theology to the attempt to restore a balance of lenses. She makes the point in the case of feminist theology that

A subtle tension has emerged. As in other well-established professions, women have been allowed or even invited into academic and professional theology with the understanding that the proper and respectable way to do it has already been established and that the newcomers will do it the way that it is done. (Hellwig, 1982:30)

Things haven't worked out like this at all in the longer term. If Kinast can claim that feminist theology is noticeably collaborative as he wrote in 2000 (Kinast, 2000:27), this researcher assumes that the influx of new voices has shifted the way professional theologians approach their task. Hellwig also notes that it is taking longer for the voices working on black and liberation theology to be heard (Hellwig, 1982:32). This researcher attended the launch of The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education's Centre for Black Theology in 2018, and at the time of writing it appears to be the only such place of study in the United Kingdom.

This researcher has dwelt at some length upon the work of Monika Hellwig. She highlights very clearly the issues of power and control of the Christian tradition so

often referred to in the methods we examined in Chapter 3. Although we are forty years on from Hellwig's lecture, that is a tiny amount of time compared with the two millennia of development of the Christian tradition, which has been undertaken and tightly controlled by one particular segment of society. To counter this, we have also lived through the introduction of the internet in the last forty years, which has thrown all sorts of areas open to debate by anyone who wishes to take the time and corner of cyber space to do so.

It is perhaps arguable that this loss of control of the discourse and development of tradition has led to the polarisation of many debates. In the Church of England for example, those who could not tolerate the development of tradition to include the ordination of women have been given protected status. At the moment, the same denomination is struggling with changing understandings of sexual identity and gender constructs. The organisation has to cope with many voices speaking, and the days of the development of tradition by a few for the many are perhaps disappearing.

We move now to the more familiar works which have already been considered, again in date order to see if development can be discerned.

Killen and De Beer devote an early part of their first chapter to a discussion of "certitude", particularly with respect to the Christian Bible and tradition.

The standpoint of certitude prevails when Christians accept the Bible or official church teaching literally as God's Word, providing an absolutely clear set of directions for life. In this stance we blindly accept the rules, truths, or general principles and apply them in every situation that might arise. When we apply absolute rules to situations, we avoid having to look deeply at the situation and the people involved; to take responsibility for interpreting and acting in the situation with the eyes and heart of faith; to be responsible carriers of the Christian heritage. (Killen and De Beer, 1994:4-9)

This echoes the argument of Hellwig about reducing “revelation to propositional truth” quoted above. Killen and de Beer go on to make a similar point:

many contemporary First World Christians, having lost the foundational insight into how the Word of God works in a community of faith, use Scripture, lists of beliefs, or moral teachings of a particular denomination like talismans: they repeat the words or perform rituals and all will be well. (Killen and de Beer, 1994:8)

Here is the logical end to the reduction lamented ten years before by Hellwig. People carry on doing what we know, without necessarily understanding why we are doing it. The less we understand, the harder we cling to the facts as we have received them. There is the possibility of a vicious circle here - as people (generally laity) have been consistently disempowered by the professional clergy and theologians for so long, laity become less theologically literate, so less confident in their own understanding, so clergy and theologians become the repository of knowledge. The authoritative voice becomes that of the professional, and that gets reinforced.

In the end, the building and interpretation of tradition has been left to professionals for probably nearly two thousand years. This results in a huge imbalance of authoritative voice. The nonprofessional is disempowered. However, as has already been said, even in the 1980s this was starting to reverse. With the improvements in societal education, and then with the sharing of information via the internet, people can find out and question more easily. One might think that there are now very few Christian denominations where there is unflinching belief in an authority figure who knows the correct version (although the infallibility of the Pope remains intact at the time of writing). However, there has been a rise in some networks of churches based on the teachings of particular people (generally the white men described by Hellwig) perhaps because their thread of conservatism exemplified by some megachurches offers certainty in an uncertain world.

Killen and de Beer also take issue with self-assurance - the viewpoint that experience is the only thing to be trusted. And they astutely comment that:

when we operate from the standpoint of self-assurance we often chide those who cling to the tradition in quest of certitude, accusing them of submitting themselves to outmoded external authorities. What we don't see is how much our own standpoint of self-assurance is a quest for certitude through self-reliance. (Killen and de Beer, 1994:13)

Although they are obviously aware of the difficulties that tradition can present, in interpretation and in application, Killen and de Beer do not offer any solutions other than to continue holding tradition and experience in tension. They do go on to say:

Precisely because these two ways of understanding dominate discussions of individual and corporate values and spirituality in our culture and our churches, we are in desperate need of authentic theological reflection. Without theological reflection, faith becomes something that belonged to the forebears of tradition and currently is protected by the sanctioned theological experts. (Killen and de Beer, 1994:14)

There are two points of interest here. One is the use of the word "authentic". This researcher wonders if they are using it as Heidegger might, to indicate a state of being in which one is startlingly connected to one's own mortality and becomes fleetingly more alive as result (Heidegger, 2010:296).

But as ever the question arises, *who* decides what constitutes authentic theological reflection? The question becomes sharper if it is reversed - who dismisses engagement with the process of theological reflection as 'not good enough'? Who is this judge, jury and executioner? And whence comes their power?

Killen and de Beer do not answer these questions with any clarity. They discuss the need for maturity and integrity, for bearing witness powerfully, for being intelligible. But once again they do not discuss how these things come into being or who decides

if they are present (Killen and de Beer, 1994:15). They offer the observation that “conversation can only take place when we allow the questions to assume primacy and set aside our fears” (Killen and De Beer, 1994:18), as well as the claim that “theological reflection nurtures growth of mature faith” (Killen and de Beer, 1994:19). Once again, there is no definition offered of mature faith, although we might be reminded of the Epistles in their references to milk and solid food:

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, (1 Corinthians 3:2)

But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

This brings us to the question of who can do theological reflection? Is spiritual maturity a necessary prerequisite or does theological reflection aid growth? This researcher hopes that the latter is true, and anyone who engages with children in discussing scripture and their life experience would make a case that maturity is not a prior condition for the Holy Spirit to be at work - otherwise where could She ever begin?

Although Killen and de Beer discuss tradition, and the various weights that different denominations give to scripture, doctrinal statements, lives of saints (Killen and de Beer, 1994:55), they do not discuss the ways in which interpretation has shaped that tradition, that is, they do not question its authority. Interestingly they do suggest:

Religious pluralism and inter religious dialogue may be leading us to a situation in the twenty-first century where increasing numbers of people will have multiple authoritative religious tradition sources. They will draw on all of them in their theological reflection. (Killen and de Beer, 1994:56)

The authors do not attempt to impose any kind of standard of authority that the tradition must achieve, rather they leave it to the person engaging with theological reflection to draw on tradition as they see fit.

Moving on in time slightly, we consider some of the power assumptions made by Whitehead and Whitehead in 1995. They set up theology and ministry as two ends of a continuum of theological reflection, claiming that although some theologians have made important contributions:

they remain too complex for all but the most astute minister. This is partly due to the scope of the inquiry, its length and the conversation partners of such theological reflections. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:xi)

These authors obviously subscribe to the idea that theology and the development of tradition is part of an abstract, abstruse process which rests firmly with a subset of professionals, and that their work is not to be disturbed by the (also professional) ministers. They suggest that the ordinary faith community will be insufficiently familiar with “the conversation partners for such a reflection...history, philosophy and hermeneutics...” (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:xi)

Anyone, whether a minister or not, reading this is thus not very subtly warned against tangling with things ‘too difficult’ to understand, and the gulf identified and discussed by Hellwig above between the development of tradition in theology and the practical experience of ministry (let alone general life experience) is perpetuated. Whitehead and Whitehead comment that they are not “belittling” the theological reflection of developing theological tradition - and this researcher agrees with that claim. They are actually elevating the status of tradition development as something to which only highly educated professionals can contribute. Whether this elevation is appropriate is an entirely different matter.

It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that as they go on to consider theological reflection from ministerial concerns and experience, they warn that

Weaknesses sometimes experienced in both methods [of theological reflection from a ministry perspective] are the lack of explicit attention given to the Christian tradition in regard to this pastoral concern and a difficulty of moving from such concrete incidents to broader theological understanding. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:xiii)

There is a logical flaw in warning people not to engage with the development of theological tradition and then complaining when they don't. It sounds like a serious attempt to have one's cake and eat it. Authority and power are both being handed to the professional theologians by these authors.

In an attempt to bridge the gap, Whitehead and Whitehead suggest that ministers (together with their parishioners) try to "befriend" tradition:

A challenge for theological reflection in ministry is to develop methods of access to the tradition that are appropriate not to the scripture scholar or systematic theologian, but to those working directly with the community of faith. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:9)

They argue that it is impossible for a minister to master the tradition and instead they should aim to become intimate with it (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:9). Quite what this means in practice is never made clear. This researcher finds the concept a little woolly, although she accepts it is possible to learn a set of facts or positions without fully understanding them. Whether that is what ministers should be encouraged to do with tradition is quite another matter.

The authors extend their befriending image to experience. Whilst noting that experience should include feelings as well as facts or ideas, they suggest:

The discipline of communal reflection requires that we submit our experience to patient scrutiny in the company of seasoned Christians. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:46)

Once again we see the idea that theological reflection needs to be undertaken with (or at least alongside) mature Christians. If we look for definitions of mature Christians, we will find two in the epistles - when people stop quarrelling and being jealous (1 Corinthians 3), and when people know right from wrong (Hebrews 5:14). It seems to this researcher that the former definition sets the bar rather high, the latter may perhaps be perceived as more accessible.

Killen writes in Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:103-110) of a process designed to train adults “to think theologically”. She describes a process of theological reflection, noting that it needs to be undertaken regularly, preferably as part of a group. She concludes:

They begin to understand that the professional theologian engages in a more complex, lengthy and nuanced process of identifying the heart of the matter in a situation, putting it into conversation with the wisdom of the Christian religious heritage, and identifying higher understandings and experiences of their tradition. At this point, adults have become intelligent partners in the theological conversation. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1995:110)

Here this researcher thinks that Killen subscribes to a number of fallacies. First, it is arguable that the process undergone by a professional theologian is not so dissimilar as she claims, although they will access a more complex set of inputs, simply because they have a better knowledge of tradition. It still involves the identification of an issue, understanding that issue and having the dialogue between tradition and situation to form insights and actions.

Second, a person may understand a process perfectly or imperfectly, but this understanding will not alter their intelligence level one iota. Certainly their skill set may be widened, but that is not the same as creating intelligent partners.

Third, there is an articulated claim that theological reflection requires a standard of intelligence. The standard is not defined, but the implication is that the person must be able to follow an academic argument in order to engage with tradition.

Fourth, this process seems designed to pull people into line with the professionals. It is akin to Hellwig's description of women entering the field of professional theology in her 1982 lecture previously examined.

There is an expectation that the person leading the group will have some aim and standard in mind. It hands power and authority to them - who will be allowed to join such a group of theological reflection trainees? Will potential candidates have to demonstrate some capacities or abilities as a prerequisite?

The next text to be examined is Kinast's survey of the state of theological reflection literature in 2000. Although the questions of power and authority he raises have been cited at the head of this chapter, he doesn't go on to answer them in the body of his work. In his chapter on a feminist style of theological reflection, he is very clear about the impact of unjust treatment of women:

This situation is not a mere discrepancy in points of view nor a difference of emphasis between men and women. It is a fundamental distortion of relationships that pervades both church and society. And yet, because this pattern is so deeply imbedded and has been so long lasting, it is not always easily recognised.

(Kinast, 2000:29)

Kinast believes that because the inequality of power is so clear, all feminist theology accords primacy to the lived experience of women, in a way which most other styles

of theological reflection would not. He comments that this style “cannot help but be a personally, engaging advocacy theology” (Kinast, 2000:30).

He also makes explicit the impact of sexism on the tradition, just as Hellwig pointed out nearly twenty years before:

it is imperative for a feminist style theological reflection to uncover the sexist bias in Christian tradition in order to make truthful correlations. Of course, it is equally essential for other styles of theological reflection to take account of this bias, but it is an absolute priority for feminist theology. (Kinast, 2000:32)

There are questions of power and authority which extend far beyond those pertaining to theological reflection methods. If one sees it as duty to recover an entire Christian tradition and rebalance it, then conversation between that emerging tradition and previously unheard experience can happen just as it does for other styles. This question will be explored further in Chapter 8.

Similarly, if tradition is acknowledged to have been formed for centuries by white celibate men, then applying it in different cultures around the world raises similar issues of reclamation for people of those cultures as are faced by women. Kinast addresses these imbalances in his chapter on inculturation.

The growth of these [creedal, organisational and material] norms is a historical process which, in spite of many conscious decisions, is on the whole unconscious. It happens in and through the encounter of the church with the Christian message. This encounter is different in each generation and its difference becomes visible in the successive periods of church history. The norm grows; it is not produced intentionally; its appearance is not the work of theological reflection but of the Spiritual life of the church, for the church is the ‘home’ of systematic theology. Here alone do the sources and norms for theology have actual existence. At this place alone can

experience occur as the medium of systematic theology. (Tillich, 1953:54)

Thus one of the professional theologians of the twentieth century describes the way Christian tradition has grown up, and how the normative version of tradition emerges. The claim that this process belongs within church appears reasonable, but a reading of the introduction to the first volume of Systematic Theology (Tillich, 1953) makes clear that the work resides among the professional theologians, not in the general population of the church. Given Tillich was writing in the mid twentieth century, this position is hardly surprising.

As we turn to the next text in this consideration of authority and power, this researcher realises she is changed by reading Hellwig's lecture. She is drawn to be kinder to Graham et al.'s (2019:22) first theological reflection 'method' of "theology by heart" which is about the writing of experience. Where people have been voiceless, the recording of experience through journal, blog, letters or even vlogs assumes an importance beyond that of the intensely personal. If the experiences of the disenfranchised are to be taken seriously, if the advent of the internet really leads to a widening of our access to theological tradition and experience, then the addition of previously ignored experience is crucial. Of course, there is a requirement to be literate and at least reasonably articulate, which may still exclude too many people from entering the discourse, but here is a beginning for the recovery of theology from white celibate males into the whole of humankind.

Graham et al. (2019) address the situation where theological tradition seems unable to speak into a situation being experienced in their chapter on 'telling God's story':

Theological systems that are established upon cultural norms that are so ingrained as to be invisible are difficult to contest on their own terms. When the systems begin to strain or disintegrate due to the pressures of cultural change then narrative theologies can be a potent means of reforming faith. (Graham et al., 2019:102)

They use the example of Barth's work after the First World War to illustrate the point. The point they miss is that all theological tradition is bound to contain deeply cultural elements, simply because the people forming it are embedded in their culture, whether they like it or not. For example, this researcher rails against the maleness of Christian tradition, and longs for it to be rebalanced, an attitude which is very much in tune with her culture. She may think she is being 'reasonable' or that this is a matter of 'common sense', but actually it is an attitude just as culturally induced as the production of the largely male tradition.

The power and authority of culture is insidious and not always easy to name. Graham et al. (2019) point to the struggles of Tracy with attempts to read the Bible realistically:

Tracy is concerned that prophetic and mystical readings of the text may be devalued by scriptural realism. This is a particularly acute problem [for Western theologians] because these readings are often favoured by Christians outside the Western tradition. Might it not be the case, asks Tracy, that the reading practice that is supposedly generated 'intratextually' through fidelity to the texts and the grammar of tradition is actually generated by the social milieu in which the texts are read? (Graham et al., 2019:108)

This point is addressed from a philosophical viewpoint by Gadamer:

Neither the doctrinal authority of the pope nor the appeal to tradition can obviate the work of hermeneutics, which can safeguard the reasonable meaning of a text against all imposition. (Gadamer, 2004:279)

This may be a triumph of hope over experience. Reasonable meaning may well be that which makes sense within a culture. This researcher understands what the red light means in a set of traffic lights in the United Kingdom, but even a century ago, no-one would have understood why traffic of any kind might stop because of a

coloured light. So although any text will always be read with “reasonable meaning” by its reader, that reasonable meaning may not be the author’s intention and may not be the reasonable meaning which will be ascribed to the same text in the next century.

Dewey (1910) made a very similar point:

social conditions tend to instigate and confirm wrong habits of thinking by authority, by conscious instruction, and by the even more insidious half-conscious influences of language, imitation, sympathy and suggestion. (Dewey, 1910:25)

His answer was that education will train people to safeguard against “the accumulated and self-perpetuating prejudices of long ages” (Dewey, 1910:25). This researcher believes that education is not immune to cultural influence, any more than any other discipline of thought.

Gadamer considers how the meeting between thought (reason) and tradition (authority) results in a decision about where power is vested:

The Enlightenment’s distinction between faith in authority and in using one’s own reason is, in itself, legitimate. If the prestige of authority displaces one’s own judgment (sic), the authority is in fact a source of prejudices. But this does not preclude its being a source of truth, and that is what the Enlightenment failed to see when it denigrated all authority. (Gadamer, 2004:280)

He seems to be saying that sometimes authority happens to be right, as can be seen as his argument develops:

...acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational or arbitrary but can, in principle, be found to be true. This is the essence of the authority

claimed by the teacher, the superior, the expert. (Gadamer, 2004:281)

But it is not obvious how one identifies when authority happens to be 'true' and when it is merely a source of prejudice. However, Gadamer's (2004) argument is helpful in considering that the same authority (tradition) may at times be true and may at times be a source of prejudice. Here perhaps we find a response to accusations of "picking and choosing" which bits of tradition we accept and which we discard or attempt to develop in a different direction. Here the question of "who decides?" is apposite. In this researcher's educated English white liberal culture, it is acceptable to decide for one's self. However, this does not lead to a development of tradition, and it does not test those personal decisions. They must be exposed to challenge to test their 'truth' - and even then, as we have seen, they are more likely to be widely accepted if they are in line with current culture. The fragmentation and democratisation of theological thinking means we have to formulate new ways of developing tradition.

Graham et al. (2019) construct a possible answer in terms of community. Drawing on the different work of Hauerwas, Wells and Swinton, they also offer a critique in the forms of questions similar to those being asked of theological reflection in this thesis:

Whose narrative? Whose authority? If the Christian Church is a story-formed community, who determines the way in which the story is told? Are the narratives themselves shaped to reflect the interests of particular groups and repeated at the expense of others? (Graham et al., 2019:116)

If Christianity is to be a corporate, shared faith, then community must be part of that. "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39) requires a neighbour to love - another human being. Tradition is inherently shared and corporate, and so must also be held in community. The question then becomes "to which community do I give authority?"

This brings us neatly to Graham et al.'s next chapter on corporate theological reflection.

The tasks of theological reflection - the induction and nurture of members, building and sustaining the community of faith and communicating the faith to a wider culture - are all of crucial importance as many congregations and communities of faith face times of decline and difficulty in commending themselves within wider cultures that have largely lost the habits of churchgoing. (Graham et al., 2019:119)

There is nothing easy about community life. The earliest Christian communities faced tensions, as we know from the writings of Luke and Paul.

Paul identified issues of power and exclusion on the basis of class... (Graham et al., 2019:123)

Bound up in these issues are those of literacy - a perusal of statistics provided online by the Reading Agency suggests that around 15% of adults in the United Kingdom are at the lowest level of literacy. Many church communities expect excellent literacy - it is not uncommon to be offered a hymn book, a service booklet and a notice sheet on entering a church. Those church communities which have reliable internet access may well prefer to put words on a screen, and notice sheets online, but they still expect their community to be capable of accessing them.

In terms of theological reflection, methods tend to include recording experience, usually by writing. Someone at a low literacy level just cannot do this, although their experience is surely as valid as that of a person more able to read. Accessing the tradition is by aural means for many (all those sermons must surely land somewhere?), but invitations to further study and discussion groups may again rely strongly on a good standard of literacy. The Church of England has in recent years produced its set of "Pilgrim" materials for small groups, each with a participant booklet, although videos of the "tradition" input are also available online via its

website. The unspoken message is clear - you can join in with our community theological reflection if you can read, and if you have the money to buy our booklet.

This may not be an intentional message, but the accessibility issue is one faced by many churches serving largely working class communities. We tend to think of liberation theology as being located in South America and India, black theology in Africa and the Afro Caribbean communities around the world, but actually there are many people waiting to be liberated into the Gospel here in the United Kingdom. This liberation will not happen if the Christian faith is rendered inaccessible or exclusive. Christians have to be prepared to meet people where they are and to use language they will understand.

## Chapter 7 - The Reflector

“You are thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk. I can’t tell you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember in a bit.” (Carroll, 1947:94)

### Introduction

In this chapter, consideration is given to what the reflector brings to the process of theological reflection. It opens by noting the curious absence of the reflector from much of the literature.

A human being is very hard to define, perhaps why Heidegger (2010) developed Dasein when he wanted to think about humans in a philosophical way. He captured the fact that each person is in relationship with that which is around them. Humans come with relationships, with personalities, with experience, with likes and dislikes. This chapter places the reflector in their wider culture, closes in on their personal experience and then more specifically to the personality of the reflector, thus identifying some of the points which make each reflector unique. The chapter goes on to consider what might happen if a group of reflectors with their cultural, experiential and personal differences interact with each other in a process of theological reflection. Each reflector is likely to reach a point of outcome of the theological reflection process. Responsibility for implementing this outcome rests with the reflector, and so this chapter ends by considering accountability.

### Absence of the reflector

It was noted in Chapter 3 that the person of the reflector is curiously absent from definitions and theological reflection processes, other than as a student to be taught. This may be partly because of the convention of academic writing that everything is written in the third person. This conventional formality can lend an air of objectivity to such writing – if “I” do not appear then “I” have succeeded in being objective and not let my subjective opinion intrude upon fact. This posture is very much of the Enlightenment, and we have seen how hermeneutics rejects any such idea of

objectivity or of separating a person from their experience. Hoy (2006) makes a plea for the use of the first person in relating and drawing upon experience in order to accord authority to the experience – and theological reflection would seem to be a prime subject for its use.

The absence of the reflector from the process also perpetuates the confusion of input and process. Someone reflecting theologically is not entering a process in the same way as someone making hydrochloric acid. Two chemicals being mixed do not care whether the mixing is being done in a school laboratory by a year 8 science student or by machine as part of an industrial production line. No amount of pretending to be scientific and objective can alter the fact that experience arrives in a human package.

## **Culture and Assumptions**

The reflector brings their culture and cultural assumptions with them into a theological reflection process. Every person lives within a culture. This will be shaped by prevailing local and national culture, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, education, work, income, friends, hobbies, skills, politics and belief systems. Many of these shaping factors will locate the reflector on a scale of privilege. This researcher is a well-educated, white, employed, middle aged, straight, female, British citizen. These things locate social status, and perhaps class. This researcher is human and so has had experiences which have shaped her, and her relationship with other people, as well as her relationship with God.

But many of the cultural and experiential aspects of our lives go unnoticed. In the United Kingdom, drinking water is clean, utilities are reliable, food is of an excellent quality. Yet these are all aspects of privilege. There are plenty of people in the United Kingdom who are hungry, who cannot afford utility bills and who are excluded from 'normal' culture. There is no normal. Each of us is part of societal structures – as we pay tax (or avoid it), vote (or don't) and engage (or not) with colleagues, friends and family. Life unfolds within a huge number of rules and expectations – the vast majority of which go unnoticed until we find ourselves confronted with other ways of being.

Fox (2005) points out that in her experience of participant-observer research:

Although the whole point of the participant element is to understand the 'culture' from a native perspective you must spend a good 3 pages explaining that your unconscious ethnocentric prejudices, and various other cultural barriers probably make this impossible. It is then customary to question the entire moral basis of the observation element, and, ideally, to express grave reservations about the validity of modern Western 'science' as a means of understanding anything at all. (Fox, 2005:4)

She may say this with some degree of levity, but that doesn't alter its point. A reflector is located within their culture. Any attempt to examine their culture puts them in the role of participant observer, with all its attendant pitfalls. Any pretence of objectivity, as we have seen, merely shows a preference for Enlightenment values.

One way of thinking about culture is to break it down into three constituent parts. The first is "culture narrowly defined. This includes the symbols, mores, assumptions, values..." and the second is "the patterns of organized interaction within human groups". The third is "the physical environment" (Killen and de Beer, 1994:56-7).

Their first category would cover such concepts as "British culture" where there are assumptions about personal freedom, education, class, art, political systems... the list goes on. These assumptions are often not articulated, because people immersed in them cease to notice them as important. In Gadamer's (2004) language, they are not foregrounded.

Within this broad category, one might locate attitudes towards religion, spirituality and ethics. Hay's (2007) book *Why Spirituality is Difficult for Westerners* locates a number of strands of his discussion about the biological nature of faith within the enlightenment and the rise of atheism as evidenced by Dawkins (2006). Billings on the

other hand argues that cultural Christianity “has left behind a legacy of stories, words, images, values, and a morality” (Billings, 2004:13).

Killen and de Beer’s (1994) second category may be experienced on a national level or more locally. Woe betide the person who jumps any queue in the United Kingdom – and woe betide the person who tries to queue to board a train in Germany. Two groups of people have organised themselves to act entirely differently. No-one actually polices this, and a person familiar with train travel around the United Kingdom may miss a train in Germany because they do not appreciate their own cultural assumptions let alone that there are different cultural assumptions elsewhere.

The third category may be exemplified by the affinity of people for particular places or types of place. Those who belong to a place whether “a physical location...a building...the pew” (Walker, 2017:58) will have a different understanding of that place than those whose relationship with it is less intimate. Inge comments “places are inextricably bound up with the communities associated with them” (Inge, 2003:125). Hjalmarson believed that “In Christianity... we have *callings*, not places” (Hjalmarson, 2015:18) although the fact he then wrote a book on place reveals his mind was changed. Sheldrake clearly connects people, community and place when he writes:

If holy people were portrayed as associated with the extraordinary, the beyond, and the Other, it was very important that they also remained highly visible carriers of spiritual traditions and values ... however because holy people were a kind of ‘place of otherness’ in the midst of the community, they were frequently angular and awkward as well as useful. (Sheldrake, 2001:38-39)

Were a reflector to try to articulate their cultural heritage and assumptions before beginning theological reflection, they might well never get as far as the reflection process. The point is rather that a reflector needs to be open to the idea that they

have such assumptions, and that those assumptions may be a hindrance to resolving a particular situation.

One highly simplistic example of such an unspoken cultural assumption is about time. There may be conflict because people arrive late to events. This researcher encountered the experience when she moved from a context where the start time given always meant 'arrive from this point and things will begin around fifteen or twenty minutes later' to one where the given start time was when an activity would begin, and everyone was expected to arrive earlier. Even simple cultural assumptions can cause difficulties unless they are articulated.

[Social structures] are especially invisible when they reflect ... commonly held values and assumptions... Social structures come to our awareness when we begin to realise that they do not embody the values we say we hold or when we recognise the ways in which these structured relationships positively militate against our best values and self-understandings. (Killen and de Beer, 1994:57)

They go on to offer examples where people began to initiate change, for example around race in the 1960s. An older example would be of slavery. Social structures are hard to challenge and usually slow to change. Liberation theology has grown out of the desire to challenge social structures and cultures which are experienced as unjust by some groups of people.

The reflector also brings positions. These are prompted by culture and experience. "Position statements often involve our understandings of roles and values associated with society, politics, religion and economics" (Killen and de Beer, 1994:58). These are the attitudes we hold and by which we identify others with whom we align. It may be easier for the reflector to identify their own values by looking at their friends and those whom they admire.

These aspects of culture form the basis on which we live and operate. But as has been pointed out, we tend not to notice them – until we meet those from very different

cultures who hold different positions on issues where the right answer may seem obvious. But more than that, our different cultures will give rise to different attitudes to the process of theological reflection, and different degrees to which it is accessible.

## **Experience**

Human beings have a multiplicity of experience, of emotions and practice. Love, hunger, rejection, happiness, safety – they all contribute to shape us. Just as we may not notice the effects of our culture upon us until we meet someone very different, we may not realise how our experience has impacted our lives until we meet those with different experience.

We never come to an experience as if from nowhere, but we bring with us a whole range of prior experiences, reflections and beliefs, and all these will affect how we initially respond to any situation.  
(Green, 2009:43)

Billings identifies a cultural attitude to emotion:

The turn to self has meant that ours [England's] is a culture that takes the interior, emotional life of the individual very seriously. For many, emotional well-being has become the goal of life and people make sense of the world through the prism of emotion. Anything that threatens the emotional well-being of the individual, particularly the individual's sense of self-worth, is regarded as the greatest of evils. (Billings, 2004:22)

He suggests that this is a shift of emotion from being private to being public. The reflector's emotional experience will likely be accorded similar status to their physical and learning experience within English culture. This researcher wonders to what extent this claimed shift of emotional life depends on class in England.

Lamberth (2000) describes a “pragmatic” approach to (religious) experience and adopts Peirce’s explanation of relating separate moments of perception into an interpreted experience (Lamberth, 2000:70).

It is the compulsion, the absolute constraints upon us to think otherwise than we have been thinking that constitutes experience. Now constraints and compulsion cannot exist without resistance and resistance is effort opposing change. Therefore there must be an element of effort in experience, and it is this which gives it its peculiar character. (Peirce, 1994: Volume 1:336)

This idea of experience arising as a result of change is perhaps not so far away from Gadamer’s (2004) description of assimilating a horizon and as a result seeing new horizons. Lamberth (2000) goes on to explore Emerson’s (2013) essay *Experience* and observes that:

Life is not so much made up of experiences as life is experiential. That is, experience is not something we have now and again, but rather something constitutively environmental, something we stand, think, and move both in and with. (Lamberth 2000:73)

Having read Emerson’s essay herself, this researcher is at something of a loss to understand how Lamberth distilled this thought from it. However she can draw a link from this continual experience Lamberth articulates, back to Heidegger’s Dasein Being-with-in-the-world (Heidegger, 2010:115).

A reflector may seek particular experiences, but they will bring all of their experiences with them into the theological reflection process, whether they intend to or not. Throughout the theological reflection process it is worth bearing in mind the emotional and spiritual safety of the reflector. If the process causes them to call to mind a painful experience, they will need to be appropriately supported.

## Personality Preferences

There are many ways of trying to think about and describe human beings. This thesis has already seen the work of Heidegger (2010) and Gadamer (2004). Their work is a general description of human beings. Other models try to categorise people in particular ways. Most of these models are susceptible to misuse if not applied well, and may not always be helpful.

Belbin (1981) observed and described the roles that different people tend to play within teams. He did not attempt to put people into specific categories, but gave them a profile which depended on their preference for each of his nine team roles, in which each person will score more highly in categories which relate to their preferred ways of working with others. This model is intended for business use, but its practical application and results have been called into question, for example Batenburg et al. (2013) found no correlation between team diversity and performance.

The Myers-Briggs model takes a different approach based on Jung's *Psychological Types* first published in the 1920s. Briggs and her daughter Briggs Myers developed their personality type theory and indicator after the Second World War (Briggs Myers, 2000:5). They divide people into one of sixteen types, based on their preferences exhibited during the perceiving and judging processes and also depending on introversion and extraversion during each process. Briggs Myers stresses that the "types do *not* define static boxes: instead they describe dynamic energy systems with interacting processes" (Briggs Myers, 2000:6).

Herein lies the strength and failing of this model. It is dynamic and acknowledges that the same human being may act differently on different days. Each of the dimensions expresses a preference rather than a reality. However, the existence of the categories inevitably means that those categories are used, regardless of the fact that they may not be appropriate. Its use has been debated (Cowan, 1989 and O'Roake, 1990 for example) to the point where the website [myersbriggs.org](http://myersbriggs.org) has a section to defend the model.

Christians are not immune from trying to create models to fit humans and their behaviour.

The Enneagram is more than an entertaining game for learning about oneself. It is concerned with change and making a turnaround, with what the religious traditions call conversion or repentance. (Rohr and Ebert, 2013:4)

The Enneagram is a system of nine categories, laid out in a geometric pattern, and a person is placed into a category, either by reading the category descriptors or by answering questions. The movement Rohr describes is explained by Bland (2010) as motions of regression under stress in one direction, and growth in another, following the geometry of the figure. This researcher has to confess that she has tried for some years to understand and appreciate this model, but finds it makes no sense to her.

Nash and Nash (2009) suggest that learning style affects which approach to theological reflection the reflector finds comfortable. They add that

Learning style theory is good to consider when reflecting with a group as it can be beneficial to have a range of activities that connect with different learning styles to enable everybody to get something out of an event. (Nash and Nash, 2009:7)

In contrast, Hendry et al. (2005) found that in order to really benefit a group, rather than individuals undertaking the same activities in parallel, more guidance than just an understanding of learning styles was necessary. Guidance needs to be given as to how learning styles interact together. Learning style theory forms one of the roots of theological reflection methods, so it is notable that Nash and Nash draw upon it very explicitly. This point touches on something we shall consider later in this chapter – dealing with a multiplicity of reflectors reflecting together.

Whitehead and Whitehead (1995:71) describe careful attentive listening as attending, saying “attending here is part of the lifelong process of self-knowledge and self-acceptance which marks both maturity and holiness.” They suggest that we are more

able to hear others as we are more secure in ourselves. Here perhaps is a clue about openness, to being able to hear others and to experience insight.

To their great credit, in their student text, Thompson et al. (2019) spend a chapter considering personality. They reason that

the influence of your personality, emotions and preferred learning style will be present anyway, and, without any awareness of this, there is a danger that what is asserted as objective truth may be the result of unacknowledged personal bias or distortion. (Thompson et al., 2019:133)

This researcher tends to agree, although she would take issue with the idea of asserting “objective truth” in any hermeneutical process.

Thompson et al. (2019:134-149) divide their consideration of personality into emotions, preference for reflecting process, Myer-Briggs Type Indicator, the Enneagram, and learning style theory. Apart from emotions, all of these areas rely on models and categorisation – although the authors give a description of categories for each, they caution against placing too much weight on each choice without delving more deeply into the selected models. As well as potentially producing a set of labels, these models all describe preferences for learning and behaviour. They don’t encapsulate experience, and so there is a danger that by emphasising a Myer-Briggs type preference, or an Enneagram number, that is taken to describe a whole human being, which of course it can never do. This is the case even if the reflector has engaged with models in all their richness – they can only ever be partial.

Graham et al. underline this point (they happen to be speaking of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator).

We are not remotely suggesting that you use this or any other personality or learning theory as if it were proven fact; still less would we want to encourage you to pigeon-hole yourself or anyone else in a restrictive way. But it can be of value if you use it simply as

one tool among others that may help you to know and understand yourself and your reflective processes a little better without thinking of it as something fixed and determinative. (Graham et al., 2019:142)

## **A Collection of reflectors**

Most texts recommend undertaking theological reflection in a group of people, rather than alone. Thompson et al. say “you will probably derive great benefit from setting up a group of like-minded people who will meet with you regularly” (Thompson et al., 2019:150). This researcher wonders whether “like minded” means ‘willing to engage in theological reflection’ or whether it means ‘people who think like I do’ – in which case the possibility for significant new insight may be lower.

Green states that part of gathering experience in a group is for the group to get to know one another “to begin to feel they can trust it [the group] and open up themselves within its circle” (Green, 2009: 42). He suggests a number of exercises to build trust and openness, and adds

There is no need to rush this important aspect of the group’s life, for time taken now will pay great dividends when the time comes to share deeply together and to support one another during the later phases of the theological enterprise. (Green, 2009:43)

As we have seen in Chapter 6, power has a considerable impact upon the theological reflection process, so building trust in a group setting is absolutely vital.

Thompson et al. identify that expectations of each member must be shared if groups are to work because:

if differences are openly acknowledged and allowed for, the group process is more likely to be fruitful as a learning experience, and in its impact on daily life and practice. (Thompson et al., 2019:151)

They go on to articulate a useful point about working as a group rather than alone.

While personal reflective practice has the advantage of much greater flexibility about when and where it can be done, it lacks the greater objectivity, and commitment to task, that sharing with others makes possible. (Thompson et al., 2019:152)

It has already been seen that “objectivity” is impossible to achieve alone or indeed within a group. Thompson et al. might consider using the word ‘accountability’ instead, especially in their desire to keep the reflector considering the matter in hand and to remain focused on the specific task. However, this researcher recognizes that a diversity of culture, experience and personality types in a group leads to far more opportunity for a creative process – and is significantly harder to facilitate.

Nash and Nash devote their final chapter to “reflecting together” (Nash and Nash, 2009:145-162). They make the distinction between reflecting as a group, and reflecting individually in a group setting, concentrating on the former for their chapter. After noting that everyone needs “inclusion, control and affection” (Nash and Nash, 2009:146) they go on to suggest that each group sets its own ground rules, and that they are on display while the group is at work.

Moon takes a wider view of the reflective learner, including their environment. She points out an important idea:

The significant aspects of the environment are those perceived by the learner and may be quite different from those perceived to be important by an observer. (Moon, 1999:166)

This is a pertinent reminder that different people will find different things helpful to their reflective process. It is important to remember that imposing conditions deemed “appropriate” on a reflector may result in a less rich outcome, because their reflective process may have been disrupted by the imposition. Unless the reflector

has a good level of autonomy, it may be that such an imposition is an abuse of control. This researcher recalls her thought processes when told to “sit over there and think about what you have done” were not usually productive. This is an extreme example unlikely to happen to an adult, but silence, music, talking may all affect people in different ways.

Moon notes the need to allow time and space to reflect and endorses the idea of a “creative silence” (Moon, 1999:166). This doesn’t mean the absence of noise, it means a portion of uninterrupted time where a reflector can think before they speak – a pause. This intentional reflective time is likely to have to be planned in advance, so that it actually happens.

Although Moon is writing specifically about reflective learning, her identification of the importance of a supportive emotional environment is highly pertinent to theological reflection. She suggests that factors contributing to an emotionally supportive environment include a good social experience and the ability to take thought risks in safety (Moon, 1999:169). In other words, the reflector needs to feel they are ‘among friends’. Given the risk of landing in heresy during theological reflection, this safety is even more important, and there is benefit in knowing that outcomes are provisional, never fixed. She goes on to name two further factors:

it will be an environment in which there is understanding for the emotional concomitants of reflection – and one in which these can be supported; it will contain and help those who react negatively to counselling perhaps because, initially, reflection is an alien activity for them and they have difficulties with the task. (Moon, 1999:169)

Moon’s clear statement that reflecting can bring emotional issues to the surface is something to be considered very carefully in the teaching and practice of theological reflection. By its nature, theological reflection includes the examination of personal beliefs which may be held so deeply that they have not been articulated clearly until the point of reflection. Her identification of reflection as a “alien activity” for some people (Moon, 1999:169) contrasts with the assertion that the process is one for

which humans have a “natural affinity” (Groome, 1991:148). Here is another possible power dynamic which is not explored in the literature on theological reflection. In a group of reflectors, those who are skilled in the process may inadvertently silence those who are not.

Thompson et al suggest “supervision is accepted as a regular and essential part of professional practice in counselling and social work” (Thompson et al., 2019:127). They go on to encourage establishing a regular pattern of supervision for clergy. However, LaMothe (2002) suggests that clergy may resist supervision as part of their normal practice. This researcher suggests that regular supervision is part of the provision of dealing with the “emotional concomitants” identified by Moon above.

Incorporating feelings into theological reflection is helpful and arguably unavoidable and necessary. They can be useful as

a (fallible) cognitive indicator, important at the stage of reflection on experience; and as a discernor and motivator of possible responses at the action stage. (Thompson et al., 2019:134)

Moon identifies some different impacts of emotion. She highlights research suggesting that “a feeling about the content of a memory often reaches consciousness before the memory itself” (Moon, 1999:95). So feelings will affect our recall of fact and situation, and may help or hinder it. She points out that emotion can be the subject of reflection, and that “the material of counselling is usually emotional” (Moon, 1999:95). Emotion may well be the trigger for selecting an experience or situation as the subject of theological reflection. Lastly she acknowledges that “emotion influences or steers the process of reflection so that it is not under immediate voluntary control” (Moon, 1999:95). This lack of control may result in the need for support, but equally may lead to a rich seam of reflection which might be otherwise lie undiscovered. Billings (2004:23) suggests that culturally we use therapeutic language of stress, self-esteem, trauma, healing. Our culture affects our attitude to and acceptance of our emotions.

## Accountability

As was highlighted back in Chapter 2 whilst considering definitions, Nash and Nash's expectation of "response" as an outcome (2009:3) places a responsibility on the reflector to produce a response. It has already been noted in Chapter 5 that there are different possible outcomes of theological reflection, and different possible responses. This highlights a question of accountability. How can the reflector best ensure that they assimilate the learning, or change their behaviour on a permanent basis?

There is a strong case to be made for the reflector to involve other people in their theological reflection. This may be as simple as discussing an outcome with a trusted person, and sense checking future steps. It may mean making a commitment to track changes with a friend. This is not an issue specific to theological reflection, many other professional processes require appraisal, or supervision as part of normal good practice. In Christianity this is achieved through prayer partners, soul friends, cell groups and spiritual directors. A library search of accountability and theological reflection revealed Harborne's 2017 doctoral thesis *What constitutes good practice in spiritual direction and what is the contribution of supervision to that practice?* Although she does not specifically discuss theological reflection, the aims of supervision of spiritual direction she identifies include "to protect the directee" and "to provide support [to the spiritual director]" (Harborne, 2017:17). These aims appear eminently transferable to accountability in theological reflection. The only other result from the library search was Coonan (1996) *Rescuing History: Legal and Theological Reflections on the Task of Making Former Torturers Accountable*. This is sufficiently far from the point to indicate that there is room for further work in how to hold reflectors to account for implementing their learning or insight.

Within this idea of holding to account, there are still issues of power, authority and judgement. The reflector needs to be able to take responsibility for their own response and learning, whilst trusting their accountability partner and process to help them assess their own insights and responses. Those insights and their learning may need time and room to grow and embed, and any accountability process should help

and enable. The question of authority remains. What happens if the insight gained is not within Christian tradition? Theological reflection has a history of being used in uncomfortable places and situations, and the process must be able to allow humans to flourish in their relationships with God and each other. This is the point at which the outcomes may result in change to tradition rather than requiring a different experience of living, and this is not a comfortable place for most Christian churches. The mechanisms for change of tradition are various and slow, and as identified in Chapter 6, tend to be rooted in one particular Western male culture.

## Chapter 8 – Theology, Faith and Reflection

The moment Alice appeared, she was appealed to by all three to settle the question, and they repeated their arguments to her, though, as they all spoke at once, she found it very hard indeed to make out exactly what they said. (Carroll, 1947:93)

### Introduction

It is necessary to consider what it is that makes the activity of reflection ‘theological’ in its nature. The obvious answer is that the reflector is considering a theological tradition alongside experience. This researcher rejected journaling as a theological reflection method and its lack of theological input was part of the reason. But defining tradition is not easy.

This chapter considers some of the different strands which constitute tradition, and highlights the ways in which different reflectors pay more attention to some strands of tradition than others. In order to do so it briefly reviews some Christian history and development. It also considers the ways in which the process and outcomes of theological reflection are affected by faith.

This researcher suggests that the body of tradition will be approached in different ways by different people, and that faith is essentially the individual internalised belief of each person, shaped by the theological traditions they encounter and by their own experience and personality. In effect, each reflector will bring their faith to the process of theological reflection, just as they bring their experience. Astley offers a useful discussion of the difference between “knowing about God” and “knowing God” (Astley, 2002:30).

It is not the place of this thesis to rehearse the history of Christianity, but an identification of early controversies will help to highlight some modern strands of theological tradition.

If a more in depth understanding of the development of Christianity is required, this researcher would suggest MacCulloch's (2010) *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* as a good place to start – or if something short is needed than Woodhead's (2014) *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction* does exactly what it says.

## **What is theology and how has it developed?**

Theology is a word used in different ways. It has two main meanings – the study of God and of belief in God; and a set of beliefs about God. Note that in both of these definitions, Christianity is implied; even Knitter applies the plural theologies to the Christian religion, not to other faiths (Knitter, 2002:2). Ford begins his excellent short work by defining theology “at its broadest is thinking about questions raised by and about the religions” (Ford, 2013:3) but then goes on to root his work in Christianity. Here is one of the major issues of theology and its development – there are many implied assumptions, some of which this researcher will not notice because they are so much part of her own experience and culture. In this section as we consider its origins, the emphasis is on the first definition of theology as academic study.

The earliest Christian thinking was developed by Jesus' followers, and developed orally through sharing stories. Some ideas were written into letters, some into narratives, and some of these have been combined into the New Testament we have today as scripture. The forging of the scriptures was a quarrelsome process, as we might imagine when a number of people all share their experience of Jesus with others. Viewpoints become very important, and it is difficult to construct a definitive account of any event from eyewitness evidence. The twelve disciples were from diverse backgrounds ranging from tax-collecting to fishing. They each shared their stories of Jesus and their belief in who he was in different ways to different audiences. It is no wonder that Christian belief is diverse some 2000 years later.

Different strands of Christianity quickly developed, some of them early enough to be recorded within the New Testament. For example, Paul's revelatory experience of Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus shaped him profoundly, and meant he wrote

and taught about Jesus very differently from those who had been disciples of Jesus – as can be seen in Acts 9:26:

When he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe he was a disciple.

Different traditions were already beginning to emerge.

The point is well made that the Roman Empire was a very interconnected state, it had a common language of Greek, and Judaism had travelled to most areas of it (Threlfall-Holmes, 2012:4). These factors combined to aid the spread of the faith in Jesus, originally considered as a strand of Judaism, but transforming into a separate faith of Christianity that spread throughout the Empire by the third century CE. There came a “dramatic change in fortunes” for this new religion when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 (Threlfall-Holmes, 2012:7).

The intertwining of church and state which began with Constantine was by no means a continuing certainty. The Emperor Julian (332-363 CE) soon wanted to undo the relationships but found it difficult, blaming “Christian philanthropy, their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives” (Threlfall-Holmes, 2012:8). Here we see the social concern of Christians, reflected today in a tradition of Christian support for social justice. We also see the tension between church and state – which manifests in England as the ‘Church of England being the Tory party at prayer’, a phrase attributed to Agnes Maud Roydan, a suffragette of the early twentieth century, who had strong faith and an interest in upsetting the then status quo (Shapiro, 2006:654).

It is perhaps no coincidence that, as Christianity became more important to the Roman state, people began to try to be more systematic in what was and wasn't Christian. A whole series of meetings or Councils were convened from 312 onwards, trying to agree the basic beliefs in Christianity, and combating false belief, labelled ‘heresy’. Statements of belief were formulated as described by Young (2002) and

Need (2008), the 'definitive' list of books of the New Testament was finalized, heresies were identified. Bishops, Popes, leaders of religious orders, drawn from the already formed Eastern and Western traditions, all attended the Councils. Note that, as we saw in Chapter 6, men were well represented, women not so much.

It might be imagined that the result was a single Christian faith that everyone united behind.

Because the emperor wanted unity, he appears to have listened to the debate and then sided with the views that seemed to command the most widespread support among the delegates. (Threlfall-Holmes, 2012:19)

Political expediency was a fact of life in Roman times, as much as today. It was also the undoing of any unity among Christian traditions. Threlfall-Holmes goes on to describe how Constantine's sons supported those who held different beliefs "because of their popular support in some places" (Threlfall-Holmes, 2012:19). Although state and Christianity have been more or less entwined ever since in various places around the world, there has usually been a separation of those who hold church office and those who hold political office – although the church officers have often held a great deal of power.

This researcher has dwelt at some length on the early years of Christian history to illustrate how quickly belief about Jesus Christ diversified, and how multiple strands of tradition emerged. Those divergent beliefs still influence Christians today. For example, this researcher is a member of the Church of England, formed at the Reformation by Henry VIII (for a number of reasons, some of them to do with not wanting the Pope to have jurisdiction in England). A theologian in the history of her branch of the church, Richard Hooker, taught that Christians should rely on scripture, tradition and reason. This gave the famous *Via Media* of Anglicanism, rejecting the idea that complete guidance is laid out in the Bible for Christians to follow (a Puritan position) and also that tradition (that summation of the work of the Church Fathers)

alone is not enough. Hooker believed that God acts when people use their reason, in other words when they think (Williams, 2010:149-152).

However, it is one thing to have a theologian say that using one's reason is permissible, and another actually to do so in a church as heavily intertwined with the state as in England. The move to Protestantism was not simple, and the entire nation nominally 'switched sides' with Henry VIII, again with Mary's accession, and lastly with Elizabeth's accession. The enmity continued and English people still "remember, remember the fifth of November" although how many of them would know the Gunpowder Plot was discovered in 1605 is unclear. At the same time there was a rise in Puritan dissent which reached its moment of government with Oliver Cromwell in 1649. England showed its intolerance of Puritan dissenters after the Restoration in 1660, and of Catholics by the 'Glorious Revolution' when William of Orange and his wife Mary took the throne from Roman Catholic James II. In the Church of England, there is a range of beliefs from nearly Roman Catholic through to Calvinist. A reflector has a wide-ranging tradition from which to draw.

There is an enormous body of work which has been produced in the field of theology, from the early Church Fathers and their contributions to the Councils, right through to the present day. Some of it will be broadly acceptable to a large number of Christians, some of it is most well-known within the denomination or part of the church in which it was produced. It is worth noting that respected theologians tend to be white and male. Even within that somewhat sweeping statement there are various degrees of acceptance. This is complicated by the fact that the process for incorporating new thinking into agreed theology is unclear and outside the scope of this thesis. The writings of Archbishop Justin Welby (2018) on culture, theology and church are likely to be taken seriously by members of the Church of England. We have seen a dearth of centres for black theology in the United Kingdom. Liberation theology and feminist theology are still regarded as specialist subsets of the academic discipline as was seen in Kinast's categories and descriptions (2000).

The purpose of this highly selective and simplistic review of the development of Christianity and its outworking today in one place, is to remind ourselves that one cannot assume what constitutes 'tradition', even if it is described as Christian.

Ford (2013) helpfully summarises Frei's (1992) spectrum which covers five types of Christian theological thinking. These five types will be useful as the interaction of tradition with theological reflection is considered below.

Type one describes an approach to Christianity adopted where there is already a very fixed framework of values and beliefs firmly held. Ford says:

It frequently displays what we might call the 'superiority complex' of much modernity - an extreme confidence, perhaps overconfidence, in the progress made by society in the modern era. (Ford, 2013:21)

It is likely to result in a complete rejection of Christianity.

Type two has values and beliefs in a framework it takes seriously, but tries to apply these to Christianity to develop faith which is relevant (Ford 2013:22). Type three rejects any single framework because they are all inadequate and instead exists in a dialogue between different faiths, philosophy and social science (Ford, 2013:24). It is possible to criticise type three as being an impossible balance, because there is no neutral point in a dialogue. Type four "gives priority to Christian self-description" (Ford, 2013:25), but also recognises the value of parts of other frameworks.

Type five is the reverse of type one but still shuts off dialogue because here is:

the attempt to repeat a scriptural worldview, classic theology, or traditional version of Christianity, and to see all reality in those terms... there is a drastic rejection of contemporary frameworks and worldviews. (Ford, 2013:21)

This researcher notes that type five theologians may not necessarily agree with one another, and that a type five reflector may still place greater or less weight upon scripture or doctrine.

Thompson et al. consider the case where experience and practice fall short of the requirements and expectations of the theological tradition. As they are considering cases where a church “seriously fails to live up to the fundamental teachings and beliefs that it proclaims” (2019:26-27), it appears at first that they expect the results of a theological reflection process to be a recalibration of behaviour back to orthopraxy. This is not necessarily the case. They have a helpful chapter on “PTR and Theology” in which they define five strands present in practical theology in terms of starting point and emphasis on scripture and reason as has been identified above:

**Deductive...** Starting from the Bible as the revealed Word of God, practical theology applies this to experience and practice today...the direction is from Word to life.

**Hermeneutical...**a two-part circle appears: understanding the text changes our life, but our changed life comes back and sees the text in a new light.

**Empirical...**gathering data about religion and faith with theology then interprets. The emphasis is on experience and reflection and the move is an inductive one, from experience to theology....in the opposite direction from that of the deductive variety.

**Critical...** The classical ‘liberation theology cycle...seeing; judging; acting in a constant reciprocity.

**Pastoral...**the emphasis is on enabling pastors and ministers to relate their beliefs to good professional practice and vice versa.

(Thompson et al., 2019:162)

These different descriptions from one branch of academic theology are helpful illuminations of where different emphasis is placed within some different strands of a particular discipline. Within them we see again the confusions of input, expected outcomes and process now familiar from texts on theological reflection, although of

course these descriptors are not intended to be guides to theological reflection in their own right, but strands of academic theology.

## **What is the difference between faith and tradition?**

So far this chapter has considered the first meaning of the word 'theology' and has considered how the body of work which constitutes 'tradition' has developed. The other use of the word 'theology' is referring to the set of beliefs a person holds. These beliefs are personal, and may or may not align with a particular strand of tradition. This researcher defines personal faith as the beliefs held by an individual. We have already seen from Ford's (2013) precis that individuals will approach and use theology in different ways. Belief will be shaped by experience and culture – so again we can consider the example of Paul, whose belief set was entirely changed by a spiritual encounter on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-23). His new-found faith propelled him into a set of journeys, undertaken deliberately to share his faith in Jesus Christ with other people. He operated within a specific set of cultures, broadly Graeco-Roman, but each place he visited was slightly different. From this personal faith and the relationships he formed came a set of written letters, which went on to become part of the New Testament.

Every theologian contributing to tradition has their own personal faith and viewpoint, and they write out of their own subjective experience, no matter how objective they might seem.

Fowler (1981) integrates the work of Tillich and of Niebuhr, and suggests that faith is at the heart of the values each person holds:

We are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living. Moreover, we look for something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being. (Fowler, 1981:5)

These attempts to find meaning are very personal, and so for the purposes of this thesis, faith is considered as something each person uniquely holds and brings to the task of theological reflection, while tradition is held communally and publicly.

Fowler goes on to expound a theory of faith development, which appears similar to the way one might describe the development of a human being from being a baby to adulthood, with the caveat that a human being's faith development can stop at almost any of the stages – so automatic progression is not assumed. In an empirical study of over three hundred interviews, Fowler found just one person operating at his final stage, Stage 6:

Their heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality give their actions and words an extraordinary and often unpredictable quality. In their devotion to universalising compassion they may offend our parochial perceptions of justice. (Fowler, 1981:200)

Fowler bases his stages on Judaism and Christianity, and does not consider other major religions. In his further description of Stage 6 he describes martyrdom (Fowler, 1981:201); a description which perhaps sits uncomfortably in a post 9/11 world.

This researcher is inclined to agree with the reviewer who said:

what causes significant changes in peoples' growth and how they grow is probably much more ambivalent, complex, and unpredictable than the present formulation of the stages suggests. (Boozer, 1984:91)

Keating (1982:289) not unreasonably points out that fitting the responses of real people into categories of a model is not simple. This has already been seen as an issue with any kind of modelling of human personality or behaviour in Chapter 7.

Ford considers people's faith experience in some detail within an epistemological framework which he describes using an apple. He describes a combination of experiencing, questioning, understanding, judging and deciding (Ford, 2013: 154).

There is a further dimension of theology to be considered, and that concerns what belief is articulated verbally and what belief can be inferred from behavior. Four voices in theology have been identified and described by Cameron et al. (2010). They are summarized as:

Espoused: theology embedded within a group's articulation of its beliefs.

Normative: scriptures, creeds, official church teaching, liturgies (an enormous diversity here!)

Formal: theology of theologians, dialogue with other traditions

Operant: theology embedded within actual practice of a group  
(Thompson et al., 2019:164)

Here interesting juxtapositions can be seen between what a group might articulate as its belief and what an observer might assume they believe from the way they act, in other words a divergence between espoused and operant theology. If the group is a small part of a much larger denomination, there will be a body of normative theology. As the quotation above hints, this may be derived from a number of different sources. There may well be a tension between the operant theology of a group and the normative theology they are 'expected' to believe. The formal theology described may be accessed by comparatively few Christians, and most likely those who encounter it will be training for formal leadership roles within the church, or be listening in the public square, rather than in their churches or faith groups.

In effect, faith is held within a reflector and is something they bring with them to the theological reflection process. Just like their cultural assumptions and experience, it is shaped by their lives to date and by the cultural assumptions of their particular theological tradition. What a reflector articulates as their faith and how they behave may not necessarily align.

## Implications of tradition for theological reflection

We have now seen that different theological reflectors will accord different levels of primacy to scripture, doctrine and reason. This affects what they chose to adopt as the strand to lay alongside the experience they bring to the situation or issue they wish to consider and reflect theologically upon.

There will be a range of approaches to theological reflection by Christians from different denominations and cultures. For those where the doctrine (as developed by professional theologians and confirmed by the priests and bishops) is of supreme importance, theological reflection is likely to result in a change to the future experience of a reflector. This is because unless the reflector is a recognised theologian, theological reflection can only result in a change to the reflector and their behavior, not to the tradition.

For those where scripture is regarded as supreme, theological reflection is possible by using passages from the Bible. Once again, any outcome will affect the reflector, not the scripture upon which they reflect.

Where 'reason' is something Christians are expected to bring to bear as part of and on their faith, the situation becomes even more complex. The methods by which "tradition" develops and changes are not obvious in most denominations.

Also revealed particularly above (Thompson et al., 2019:162) are some of the tensions and fault lines in academic theology – a deductive theologian starts from scripture and an empirical theologian starts from experiential evidence. This researcher's experience of empirical theology is that the authors of this description have used caricature to make their point briefly. If this is the case for empirical practical theology, it is likely to be the case for the other strands described here, but given a good caricature contains a kernel of truth at its heart, for the purposes of this thesis they will be allowed to stand.

The strands identified above are more interwoven than the initial descriptions suggest. It is possible for an empirically inclined theologian to have pastoral concerns, and to be motivated to work for social justice by learning from liberation theology. A pastor may prefer work deductively. Reality is more complex than models.

## **Emotion, Theology and Faith**

We have seen that theological reflection methods try to draw on emotion as well as logic for their inputs. Indeed we have seen one of the motivations for a reflector to choose a situation for theological reflection is because the reflector 'felt uncomfortable' about it. This researcher draws on her own experience of wanting to understand and tease out the issues of theological reflection because of the way the dissonance made her feel, not because of a logical imperative (although arguably the logical imperative induced the dissonance and subsequent feeling).

If emotion is to be treated seriously as an input into theological reflection (and we have seen that a reflector brings their whole self to the process), can emotion be seen as a legitimate output from the process? More than that, does every step in the theological reflection process have to be logical, or can feeling play a part?

Green (2009:77) helpfully reminds us that in the reflecting part of his cycle "we attempt to look afresh at the situation...and begin to see more clearly within it the very presence of God". He goes on to refer in passing to some emotions as well as facts, for example:

...on entering a beautiful church building, that they have had to start answering questions about the ugliness of their own lives or the society that surrounds them. (Green, 2009:79)

Some have received Holy Communion and been shocked to think how different the equal sharing of Christ's body in that action is from the unequal distribution of gifts in our own society. (Green, 2009:79)

In the first case, an emotional faithful response to perceived beauty promotes thought and reflection, in the second, shock is the impetus. Neither of these is a logical step, but in both cases the emotion can be articulated, and it is used as the motivation to begin theological reflection.

Feeling and emotion as a way into theology is perhaps akin to natural theology, something which modern academics (led by the philosophical approach of Kant and the theology of Barth) have tended to reject (Thompson et al., 2019:167). It is interesting to contrast this rejection with the way in which some of the theological reflection methods seen encourage creative connections being made through nature (Nash and Nash, 2009:139).

In Chapter 4 Groome's dislike of technical rationality was examined. He pleaded for imagination to be part of the process of theological reflection, rather than it being a matter of logic as might be preferred by Dewey (1910). This researcher agrees that the best outcomes are probably prompted by ensuring the process contains room for creativity, and the writers of the literature examined in Chapter 3 tend to agree.

## **Accessibility**

In considering the 'tradition' strand of theology, it has been seen that various models of theological approach are available for consideration. However, in considering the role of emotion in theological reflection, it is appropriate to move to a discussion of accessibility of the tradition.

Walker (2017) describes four ways in which people belong to Christian communities. He suggests that people may primarily belong through their routine activities with the church, for example by attending a particular type of service regularly. Others belong because of their relationships with other people in the church. The third category of people belong by attending particular events, such as harvest festival or a Christmas service. Last but not least, there are those who belong by place. These people may

live in a particular place, or have family roots there. Walker's work goes beyond the categories he offers, to explore what people who belong actually believe.

What Walker uncovers, even among the occasional attenders, is that they are specifically attracted by terms which might be regarded as difficult to understand – such as 'prayer' rather than terms which might be considered more prevalent in modern society such as 'spirituality' (Walker, 2017:87-86). By attending to the voices of the church community, Walker is hearing and describing how they talk about God for themselves. Here, in practice is the Ordinary Theology described by Astley (2002, 2003).

Religious faith has deep roots; it is deeply rooted in the tangled morass of the mangrove swamps that constitute our lives. And down below those murky waters, our faith is anchored in even murkier mud. (Astley, 2002:14)

Astley contends that the roots of our theology are seldom in taught academic theology, but rather that they are to be found in our memory of specific events or people (Astley, 2002:14). He is clear that 'ordinary' has value and should not be dismissed or derided. More than that, he claims a place for "the ordinary believer's talk as theological talk" (Astley, 2002:113).

This claim is a large one, although this researcher has sympathy for it. It has ramifications for the questions examined in Chapter 6 about whose experience counts, and who can do theological reflection. If ordinary theology is to be included in the category of theology, then that makes the theological tradition highly accessible, and certainly enables anyone prepared to try to articulate their beliefs to undertake theological reflection.

Astley (2013) goes on to consider ordinary theology in the context of theological reflection. He is writing in the context of learning, of a conversation between ordinary theology and academic theology. Here perhaps in this conversation is where the different theological voices described above may be examined more closely, where espoused theology can be brought into conversation with that which is operant,

without shame or embarrassment. Allowing the validity of ordinary theology should not be threatening to the professional theologian – instead it should open dialogue and allow strands of tradition to be better accessed and understood by everyone, rather than being the preserve of the paid professional.

## Chapter 9 – Findings and Synthesis

“Consider your verdict”, the King said to the jury.

“Not yet, not yet!” the Rabbit hastily interrupted. (Carroll, 1947:117)

### Introduction

The literature on theological reflection has been reviewed, and the definitions and methods have been described and compared. The historical derivations of theological reflection methods have been exposed. Its uses have been explored, and the unspoken assumptions about power in the processes have been articulated. Two of the three major inputs into a theological reflection, the reflector with their experience and faith, and the tradition, have been considered.

In this chapter the consequences of what has been discovered are considered, and an attempt is made to synthesise a theological reflection method which may be used in a variety of circumstances. This researcher is mindful of some of her own prejudices as this method develops.

An attempt will also be made to define theological reflection. This researcher has found it easier to develop a process than to write a definition. She also notes that this adds to the clamour of existing, competing definitions rather than resolving the issue.

### Motivation

Most of the texts on theological reflection attempt to categorise the method of theological reflection in different ways. These categories tend to be based upon the inputs, particularly the tradition – so we have seen feminist theological reflection, progressing theological reflection, ministerial theological reflection, and so on. However, it has been very difficult to discern practical differences between the processes associated with these allegedly different styles or categories.

Instead, this researcher proposes a different categorisation, based on why the reflector is choosing to enter the process of theological reflection. In other words, theological reflection begins by understanding the motivation.

There are effectively just three inputs into a theological reflection process – the reflector (and all that they bring with themselves); the situation being considered; the tradition to be used in the process. And effectively there are four possible outcomes – change to the reflector themselves; change to the situation under consideration; change to the tradition; no change. The expected outcome may, as has been seen, be a new meaning for living or the embedding of learning for the reflector, it may be the solution to a practical problem, it may be a change to the theological tradition and an adding to that body of knowledge. The actual outcome may not be what the reflector expected, differing either in detail or in scale of impact on their future praxis.

If the reflector identifies what they expect the outcome to be, that will help them understand the task they are to undertake. They need to understand their motivation for undertaking the theological reflection process. The actual outcome may not necessarily be the one they expected. For example the reflector may be seeking a solution to a practical issue, undertake a theological reflection process and discover by the end of it that they have discovered new meaning for living, rather than a solution for the situation being considered. This doesn't in any way invalidate the theological reflection process they have undertaken.

Identifying the motivation allows the reflector to set the parameters for the complexity of the theological reflection task. Identifying the motivation also highlights the factor which will most affect that particular process of theological reflection.

However, there are other contextual effects which must be considered. A novice reflector learning the process may well want to come to the "correct" answer for their assessor, and so the power dynamic must be borne in mind. There is always the possibility that the reflector will make a discovery about themselves and their identity during the process, regardless of the expected outcome they have identified, and so the reflector must consider whether they have appropriate support in place for their

emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing. As the reflector puts these structures in place and finds support networks, they might be mindful of the power dynamics and of the extent to which they are prepared to be held accountable by their support system. Before the reflector begins the process of theological reflection, they should always consider the state of their mental health and decide if they are content to proceed.

This researcher emphasises these points about power, and about mental health, because they are largely absent from literature on theological reflection.

## **Method**

This researcher finds the process at the heart of the issue to be relatively simple. A reflector brings themselves, their faith and their experience, and considers a situation or issue that matters to them, in the light of their theological tradition. Here the difficulty is the same as that encountered within the body of literature: how does one define and describe reflection?

There are a number of decisions to be made at the beginning of the process. Beside the reflector's self-assessment identified above, they need to identify the matter upon which they wish to reflect, and identify a portion of theological tradition to use. They also need to consider what they expect as an outcome, and what length of time they intend to devote to the process. Lastly they need to consider whether they wish to involve other people in the process or rely on other people to maintain their own accountability. These questions, which must be asked as part of the theological reflection process, may explain why inputs and outcomes are so often muddled in with the process. Note that the process is 'to identify' the inputs and the expected outcomes. They remain inputs and expected outcomes.

At this stage the scale of the process should become clear. If the expected outcome is to publish a book which will become part of the theological tradition, that is going to take considerably longer than an afternoon. If the expected outcome is to find a

solution to a simple issue, it might only take an hour. If the matter under consideration is controversial, either in its local context or more widely, then the theological reflection process may last longer.

If the theological reflection process is to be undertaken over weeks or months, it is worth remembering that the reflector may well assimilate some outcomes of their theological reflections during that time, and be changed as the process continues. In essence, each engagement with the theological reflection process is complete in its own right, and starts over again when the reflector returns to it. This is unavoidable because each engagement will become part of the reflector's lived experience. This researcher notes that similarly she has been changed by the experience of researching and writing this thesis.

This thesis deliberately refers to expected outcomes. If a reflector chooses to engage in theological reflection about an issue, it patently matters to them, and the reflector is expecting something to change as a result of the process. The reflector may not know what these expected outcomes actually are. But they are likely to have a sense that a practical problem is likely to spawn a practical solution, and so to have identified the kind of outcome they expect. However, there may be unexpected kinds of outcomes, rather than those expected. These outcomes merit serious attention should they occur, because they have occurred as a direct result of theological reflection, rather than being identified as possibilities beforehand. Indeed, their appearance is arguably confirmation that the theological reflection process has actually worked, and that new possibilities have emerged from it.

It is these unexpected, unlooked for outcomes that may require the reflector to engage with another person in order to gain understanding and to be accountable. If the reflector was expecting a practical solution to emerge and instead gained a new insight into the way they should live their life, then they need to ensure that outcome is scrutinised and implemented appropriately. The reflector may well need support in order to achieve this.

This researcher suggests that the act of reflection is making and exploring connections between different experiences, ideas and situations. The process of reflection contains a number of phases. There is a creative phase, in which new connections are imagined. The connections might be 'sensible' or they may be apparently daft. In the next phase of reflection, space is given to explore and consider the connections made in more detail, perhaps whilst attempting to suspend judgement (and here the notions of neutrality and objectivity must be debunked – one person's creative connection is another person's stupid idea). Each connection is explored and considered more deeply – is that 'daft' idea actually potentially helpful to hold as a possibility as the situation is considered further? Eventually, the reflector will make an assessment of what they have explored, and will come to a conclusion about what the outcome is to be.

This process may be relatively quick, taking just a few minutes, or it might be spread across weeks and months, depending largely on the level of complexity chosen by the reflector.

There is one input which is not open to selection and that is the reflector themselves, with their faith, personality, preferences and experience. Regardless of the complexity of the situation being reflected upon, regardless of the depth of tradition they chose to bring, the person of the reflector may not be "varied" or be capable of having boundaries applied as might be the case for other inputs. Naturally the emotional state, the receptiveness to the process, even the physical condition of the reflector will make a difference, but these are not things which are susceptible to decision and choice in the same way as more external factors.

Having said that it must be made clear (as should be obvious from previous chapters) that the person of the reflector is not static, and they and their assimilated experience will change over time. The outcome of a process of theological reflection with the same theological tradition input on the same situation by the same reflector may be quite different if undertaken at two different times.

The theological tradition is a matter of deliberate choice. The part of tradition which is chosen may be a piece of scripture, a painting of a theological subject, sacred music or an entire library of books. This is a matter of selection by the reflector, or possibly by someone overseeing the reflector, accompanying them through the process, or who will hold them accountable. Here the scale and time devoted to the theological reflection process is relevant to the choice, as is the person of the reflector. One may not perhaps wish to give a pile of books to someone who cannot read, or a picture to a cerebral person steeped in logic (although the results of the latter could be fascinating), and it is worth being aware of the power that is exercised by the person responsible for this choice of input. The choice of the input to represent the theological tradition will potentially bias the outcome in particular ways. This was part of Hellwig's point seen in chapter 6.

The choice of theological input will also be influenced by the situation or issue to be reflected upon. Again, this will be partly a matter of appropriate scale. The person making the choice may have a clear idea of, for example, a portion of scripture which appears relevant. Again there is a balance of relevance and possible bias to be struck. It may be that an unavoidable issue presents itself to the reflector that needs to be resolved. Kinast (2000:2) asked what might make a suitable subject for theological reflection; this researcher is finding it difficult to imagine a subject that isn't suitable, although some may be more trivial than others.

As the reflector considers the situation, they hold themselves (their faith, experience and identity) in tension with the theological tradition. Because they cannot be neutral or objective in the situation, inevitably they will tend towards placing credence and weight upon certain inputs. In other words, if the situation under consideration is born out of the experience of the reflector, they may be likely to give that experience greater weight than a tradition which may speak in direct contradiction. Debates within the church about inclusion and exclusion may be of this type – no-one will be neutral, and no theological reflection process will be undertaken neutrally either. This is not a 'fault', but it is something to be aware of as a reflector. Attempting to 'correct' for it is likely to lead to a poorer execution of the process than abiding with the perceived bias.

The reflector will need time to become familiar with the chosen inputs. Their own experience and personality will be part of the process regardless, but they do need to ensure they understand the information they have about the issue or situation, and the same applies to the theological tradition input. This stage is important. If the inputs are not clearly articulated and understood, then any conclusions drawn will be similarly fuzzy. It may be that a particular part of lived experience of the reflector is relevant, and time to call that to mind, to foreground it, will be well spent.

The creation of connections is an opportunity to engage in ways of encouraging the brain to range far and wide. The reflector might listen to music, engage in something creative such as making or painting, they might engage in physical activity, or they might prefer to be still and quiet. They will need a way to record the connections they make and ideas they have, and this stage no idea or connection is foolish. This is the time to be as a little child – curious and interested. Questions may be useful – and here the example of Godly Play with its “I wonder” framing of questions (The Art of Wondering, 2013) is helpful. It invites speculation and imagination. The reflector may notice how they feel, both bodily and emotionally.

One of the challenges of theological reflection is to answer the question “where is God in this situation?”. The theological tradition input should help with the answer, but that is not the whole answer. God is also present in the process and that is why particular attention should be paid to the surprising as well as to the obvious. Space for the unexpected needs to be maintained, which is why this researcher does not recommend rushing to assess and judge. This researcher is less likely to use the question “What would Jesus do?” because the answer either already lies in the theological tradition, or the situation is very different from anything envisaged in the New Testament. However, the question “what might Jesus have done in this situation?” may be helpful, and is perhaps gentler in the phrasing of asking and answering.

Feelings and emotions may be part of the next stage as the reflector reviews the connections they have made. Some connections may appear more inviting or exciting

than others, and this researcher notes that may be because those connections confirm or affirm the inclinations of the reflector. Equally it may be that they are new and strange to the reflector, and provoke interest or pique.

At this point it is worth returning to a close consideration of the inputs - experience, theological tradition and situation or issue. Are there areas which the reflector has neglected? Is there a particular aspect which repels all attempts at connection? Has something been forgotten or missed? The reflector may wilfully choose to concentrate on certain aspects at the expense of others, and this choice may be perfectly sensible, but it should be made deliberately rather than accidentally.

Once connections are established to the satisfaction of the reflector, they will need to be considered. What does each connection bring to the situation? Are there groupings of connections which interact, or replicate effects? Is there a 'conversation' between experience, the situation and tradition? Is one of those three conversation partners dominating? The reflector may begin to see which connections are helping them to determine an outcome. It may be that there are several groups of connections, each group pointing to different outcomes, and now is the time to begin to name the outcome possibilities.

Are there connections which are outliers and quite distinct from other connections and groups of connections? The reflector may choose to discard them or hold them for longer, but again they should understand the reasoning behind their decision. Is there a particular emotion in play? Is there something unduly attractive or unattractive about the connection? What outcome, if any, does it point to, and should that outcome be added to the other possible outcomes? Here the aim is still to keep a broad range of possibilities.

The reflector now generates as many outcomes as they can from the connections they have identified. Again, a creative process may be helpful, or a logical approach might be preferred. Although using a wide range of creative approaches may be helpful, the reflector may be so anxious about their ability to draw or mould play dough shapes that trying to use these methods becomes an objective in its own right

and a hindrance rather than a help. This researcher is of the view that even if the situation or issue under consideration is serious, it ought to be possible or at least permissible to find pleasure and joy in the theological reflection process.

The reflector may feel it necessary to return to the connections again or to the inputs again, in the light of the outcomes that are starting to emerge. Once again, are there areas which have not been considered? Do the emerging outcomes answer all the points raised by the situation, and if not, is further thought needed?

The reflector essentially retains control of how often they revisit the inputs, how they choose to make the connections, and how many possibilities they are prepared to consider as outcomes. This responsibility for movement through the process and back and forth from inputs to connections to outcomes is crucial. It is why the reflector requires not neutrality but integrity, curiosity and openness.

Despite this call to openness, there comes a point where the reflector must begin to sift through their connections and outcomes, and practicalities come into play. 'Leave it all behind and go to the moon' will have to be discarded as realities are considered, even if its associated outcomes remain options. As the reflector sifts and considers and discards, they may wish to involve others in the process, either for the advice they may offer or the accountability they bring. The advice may lead the reflector to enter back into the creative part of the process again, bringing the advice as new knowledge and hence new input.

There is a danger of spending so much time in the creative phase that the reflector never moves to describe outcomes, and nothing changes. Although 'no change' is a logically possible outcome, abandoning the process part way through and declaring 'no change' is an abuse of theological reflection and says more about the state of mind of the reflector and their current motivation to engage with the change that might be provoked than it does about the theological reflection process itself. This is why the question 'am I ok to do this today?' is important, if not crucial.

Identifying and recording the chosen outcomes and committing to enacting them is an essential part of the process. The reflector might wish to compare them with the expected outcomes – has a new idea or action appeared which was not originally envisaged? This unexpected outcome merits special attention, both in terms of testing and of accountability if it is enacted. This researcher believes that God is at work through the theological reflection process, and may be especially present in the unexpected. Despite this belief, accountability means that the outcome should be discussed with a trusted person or supervisor.

Finally the reflector needs to consider how they are going to enact their chosen outcomes. This is not necessarily a simple matter, and again an accountability partner may be helpful.

This chapter hasn't explicitly identified a theological reflection process for use by several reflectors together. There is nothing to stop several people engaging together in the process described. However, noting the indivisibility of people from their faith and experience, the ways different personalities interact, and the fact that the situation or issue may be contentious, this researcher suggests that using an experienced facilitator to hold the space and shepherd the group through the process. But she also notes the caution shown by Thompson et al. (2019:128) in their discussion of the use of theological reflection in groups "Examples of good use of theological reflection in church communities have proved hard to find".

## **Review of synthesized method**

The method identified can be applied to any of the situations identified in the literature of theological reflection. It is flexible enough to be used in simple or complex ways. It is accessible.

This process does not constrain the kind of experience, situation or issue to be reflected on. It does not limit the theological tradition to be considered.

This process does cut through all the categorizing and attempts to name different "types" of theological reflection. We have seen that some of those types are named

by input, some by outcome, and that actually the processes all contain a stage described as “reflection”. This process attempts to offer a framework for that reflection stage, without resorting to diagrams of spirals or circles. The metaphor of conversation remains useful for this theological reflection process, with its movement to and fro from articulating inputs to creating connections, to using the connections and new ideas to point to outcomes. This process is articulated without mystery and could be enacted. There is room for mystery in the creativity and sifting, the possibility of authenticity or a *kairos* moment or divine inspiration; that has not been lost.

Any method should be accessible, that is to say it should be useable by the widest possible range of people. This means it must be described in ordinary language, and be susceptible to use by people who do not necessarily read well. Simplicity and clarity must not be mistaken for ‘dumbing down’.

As far as possible, any power imbalances within the method should be minimised and where they remain (and remain they will), they will be made explicit.

This researcher believes that if the method meets those criteria, practitioners and researchers alike will look at it, and recognise it.

## **Definition**

Any definition of theological reflection needs to meet similar criteria to those laid out above for method. Simplicity, consistency and accessibility are important. Equally any theological reflector should recognise it as they read it. This researcher offers:

Theological reflection is the deliberate act by the reflector of seeking greater understanding of a subject or situation in the light of their experience and tradition. That understanding will lead to changing behaviour or belief by the reflector, or to a change to the theological tradition. The reflector may wish to share their new understanding and its impacts with others.

## Chapter 10 - Conclusion and further work

Thus grew the tale of Wonderland:

Thus slowly, one by one,

Its quaint events were hammered out -

And now the tale is done,

And home we steer, a merry crew,

Beneath the setting sun. (Carroll, 1947:9)

### Introduction

This thesis has sought to review the literature of theological reflection, to understand what it says about itself, to investigate its roots and history, and to identify common themes in a topic where diversity is adding to confusion. It was born out of anger that a topic could be taught in theological college and yet be so poorly defined.

Investigation revealed a plethora of definitions, methods and uses. Here in the conclusion, the discoveries are reviewed, next steps considered and areas for further study are identified.

This thesis draws together the literature, the history and the usages, and the implications of those linkages in a way not made clear before. It allows those trying to understand and apply theological reflection practically to appreciate that the derivation of the process they chose will affect both the process and the outcome.

This thesis contributes to learning because no-one has explored the links between the derivation of the various methods and the expected outcomes. This thesis allows theological reflectors to break down what kind of activity and process they want to engage in, and to understand what they actually mean each time they use the phrase theological reflection. This understanding will aid teaching of theological reflection as well as making it accessible to those trying to engage with the process.

## Review

This thesis began by looking at the definitions of theological reflection in the literature, and attempted to understand whether there were consistent themes or any kind of progression of understanding through time. A number of themes recurred in the definitions, including the intentional bringing together of experience and theological tradition; and an expectation of change which might be about insight, understanding or future practice. The person doing the reflection was absent from the definitions, and it became obvious that the person doing the theological reflection needed a good understanding of, or access to, the body of the theological tradition. Implicit in the outcome expectations was assessment and judgement of those outcomes.

It became clear that despite the themes which emerged from the definitions in the literature, there was no sense of building upon previous understanding as the body of literature grew. Rather those understandings were brought together and laid out alongside each other without any sense of why the differences might have arisen, or of what the impacts of those differences might be. In effect the definitions became more diverse as time went on, rather than coalescing around one standard. The reasons for this remained unclear.

The same approach was taken to analysing the methods proposed by the literature. The same pattern occurred as with the definitions – themes emerged, and the methods became more and more diverse. Some texts attempted to group methods together - Graham et al.'s (2005, 2019) *Theological Reflection: Methods* and Kinast's (2000) *What are they saying about theological reflection?* being just two examples. However, these attempts to group by methodology fail to bring much needed clarity.

Each reflector brings with them their own experience garnered through life. So it is with this researcher, who long ago trained as an engineer. This thesis has identified a lack of understanding of process which appears common throughout the literature of theological reflection that it has examined. First, authors conflate inputs to the process with the process itself. This results in attempts to describe different

processes which are in fact the same, differing only with the chosen inputs. Similarly there is little understanding of the difference between the process and the output or outcome. This failure to distinguish an outcome in its own right, and subsequent lack of acknowledgement that this outcome may be used as an input into a subsequent process of theological reflection has profound repercussions within the literature. Authors attempt to describe an infinite process, with varying diagrammatic illustrations. The resulting circles, loops and spirals look suitably authoritative or daunting, but they do not bring any clarity to the process itself. There are in the literature some assumptions that processes using illustrative circular or triangular cycles must naturally belong together, but because of the diversity of conflation of input, process and output, contained within such diagrams, the groupings are false. This was seen for example where Nash and Nash (2009:44) attempted to map a three stage cyclical theological reflection process on to a four stage learning cycle.

The result is a set of descriptions of methods which may be grouped around a perceived illustrative shape, a chosen field of theology, or even a desired outcome. These groupings add to the complexity rather than bringing clarity because, as with the definitions, they are laid side by side for the reflector to select one to use, without any attempt to understand how the differences have arisen.

This thesis took on the task of tracing some of the historical roots of the various methods, in order to try to understand the differences and limitations of the definitions and their methods.

Previous work by this researcher (Maxim 2013, 2014) pointed towards the philosophical field of phenomenological hermeneutics. This area of philosophy studies what is going on, and the interpretation of what is going on. The work of Heidegger and Gadamer was found by this researcher to be very difficult to understand, even with the benefit of guidance. However it offered a number of insights. It is impossible to sever a person from their experience, no matter how objective they may think they are. This is a helpful insight when considering what the person doing the theological reflection brings to the process. They bring their life experience, their faith and their personality – which is of course why two people may

interpret a text or a situation very differently. Gadamer's work on hermeneutics is particularly helpful. Where theological reflection methods take into account hermeneutics, they tend to assume that the results of the theological reflection process will be life changing – a *kairos* moment might be the theological description of such a philosophical assimilation.

Another strand of history was that of education. Dewey's (1910) work highlighted the logic of a thought process, whereas Kolb (1984) developed a more experiential approach. His learning cycle suffers from the same misunderstanding of process as do many of the theological reflection methods, but it does attempt to bring abstract concepts and concrete experience together. Learning outcomes are important, although Kolb would agree with many of the authors of theological reflection texts, who expect changed behaviour as an outcome.

The history of learning theory suggests that more than logic is at work in the reflective process. Through the work of Moon, we see a challenge offered about the use of the verb "reflect", with its diverse meanings. Later we saw different meanings for the word "theology". Given these variations, it should not perhaps be a surprise that the phrase "theological reflection" is being made to carry a multiplicity of meanings. It is more surprising that these meanings have not been made clear in any of the texts.

Implicit and explicit in the definitions and methods found in the literature of theological reflection are a range of outcomes. These vary from fundamental to the reflector's understanding of themselves ("new meaning for living" Killen and De Beer, 1994:viii) to immediate decision making regarding ministerial practice. This thesis has already seen that the expected outcome is that the reflector will change their practice or faith, and thus their future experience, rather than the tradition.

There is some suggestion that an expected outcome is an increased level of self-awareness, for example seen in Thompson and Thompson (2012:xx). Engaging regularly in theological reflection might make a reflector more reflective – perhaps underlining that theological reflection is a skill which takes practice, rather than

something everyone does quite naturally. There are implications here for ministerial training, given the emphasis upon formation, the role of theological reflection in formation and the opportunities to presuppose outcomes and judge their desirability.

This researcher is of the view that there is a link between the historical derivation of various methods of theological reflection and their expected outcomes. Clearly any theological reflection method based on or derived from learning cycles and learning theory has education and learning as one of its main outcomes. This may seem so obvious as to not require stating, but this researcher is of the view that the complexity around theological reflection arises partially because assumptions and connections are left unstated.

Equally, those methods derived from the work of Gadamer (2004) and Heidegger (2010) are intrinsically about the person of the reflector and the experience and faith which is part of them. These methods are more likely to expect a profound shift of self or world understanding as their outcome. A point of learning is that these methods which expect a change of attitude or heart require more emotional support for the reflector than might be associated with a straightforward learning experience.

This link between history and method is explained in some of the literature on theological reflection, but the assumptions about the different range of outcomes and their impacts on the reflector have been lost. This researcher believes it to be vital to future work that these links between history and method are explored more deeply. Those methods rooted in hermeneutics would particularly benefit from attention by a practical theologian with a good grounding in philosophy, so that the linkages can be made more explicit.

The development of theology has also been considered, very briefly. It is this researcher's reflection that if the outcome of theological reflection is a change to the reflector, that is theological reflection. If the outcome of theological reflection is a change to tradition, that is theology – and much more overtly contested ground.

Although changes to tradition are hotly debated, changes to people are less overtly considered within the literature of theological reflection. We have seen Hellwig's critique of the use of power in the development of the tradition. Less obvious are the assumptions behind the formation and development of people, their behaviour and their beliefs. There is very little reference to accountability of the reflector, so no sense of whether the outcomes of the theological reflection are acted upon, ignored or wilfully rejected. Equally, there is need for accountability of those instigating the theological reflection process. Is the reflector in a situation where they have genuine choice about engaging or not in a process? Are they in a position to go through the process freely or is there subtle or unsubtle guidance towards a particular result?

Is anyone judging the results and if so on what basis? Is it possible to ask or require someone to undertake a process of theological reflection, and assess the results against a standard or ideal answer? Who decides? This thesis found various discussions of power in tradition, but very little about the power or lack of it held by the reflector. There are questions here that need further exploration. Who decides that the reflector should reflect, and who decides the object of that reflection? Is there an expected outcome and if so, expected by whom? What are the consequences of the outcome and to whom? Who (if anyone) is accountable for the results, and how?

In secular reflection processes there is an understanding that reflection may have emotional health consequences. There is very little equivalent realisation in the literature of theological reflection. Supervision is not well addressed within the literature and nor is mental or spiritual health. Some texts advise engagement with a spiritual director, but mostly the onus is on the reflector to notice if they are in need of support or assistance.

The person of the reflector is not well discussed in most of the literature on theological reflection. It is necessary to return to philosophy to be reminded that faith, experience and the person are all inextricably part of each other, and cannot be separated. The objectivity which is implicit in some approaches to theological reflection cannot be achieved in reality. Humans are embodied creatures immersed in

their culture, and although Kinast's description of "An Inculturation style" (Kinast, 2000:40) would appear to be aimed at cultures which are not white and Western, it misses the point that all theological reflection is embedded in and predicated on the culture of the reflector.

The personality of the reflector will also impact on their theological reflection process. There may well be scope for further study here – do certain personality types engage more readily with theological reflection than others? Are theological reflection processes biased towards encouraging the engagement of certain personality types and are others excluded? Similar questions could be asked of preferred learning styles. In any such investigation, the importance of understanding that models are not human beings, nor can they encapsulate entire humans, is paramount.

Some attention is paid to the environment in which the reflector might choose to engage with theological reflection, but nowhere is there a warning to consider emotional state and its impact upon a theological reflection process or outcome. For this researcher, who has conducted numerous secular appraisals and reviews with people, the absence of the question "are you ok to do this today?" is a serious issue. Its absence is a failure to acknowledge the weight of responsibility and effort intrinsic to theological reflection. In effect, the disregard for the reflector cheapens the process.

## **Contribution to Knowledge**

This thesis has contributed to knowledge about theological reflection by identifying and seeking to reduce the confusion of input, process and outcome. This has helped to clarify and simplify the profusion of methods. It has exposed clearly the link between the historical development of the method and the expectation of outcomes. This thesis has highlighted issues of power and accountability which were previously unclear or assumed.

This thesis is unique in the body of literature about theological reflection because it concentrates on the process itself and does not attempt to illustrate that process by applying it to situations or issues. This means that the method is at the heart of this thesis, and the reader is not distracted by an illustration, which would inevitably lead to them considering “how I would deal with that”.

Theological reflection is, rightly, applied to an enormous range of situations, from the relatively simple to the complex, from “what should I do next” to systemic injustice. The conflation of process, input and outcome in the literature on theological reflection has led authors to assume that different processes are being applied in different situations. This thesis reveals that as a false premise. Understanding that there is one process, and acknowledging some of the assumptions within the process will make its application easier, certainly for a newcomer to the skill of theological reflection.

This understanding of process should also help theological reflection to be made more accessible to a wide range of people. It should aid the discipling of Christians and give one clear way of enabling people to apply their faith in their everyday life more easily and consciously.

The reverse may also prove true. This thesis helps to name the complexity of some of the inputs; to name assumptions about primacy of tradition, scripture, and experience; and to acknowledge that change of tradition is a possible outcome, as well as change to the reflector and their self or world view. That articulation may help to remove some of the anger and frustration from long running debates among Christians – or at least aid understanding as to why different people draw different conclusions from similar inputs.

This thesis identifies three distinct sets of roots for theological reflection – theology and the development of theological traditions, learning theory, and hermeneutics. The development of theological tradition tends to be held in the domain of professional theologians, and Hellwig’s (1982) criticism of the lack of diverse voices was explored at some length. This lack of diversity has led to the development of

some different strands of tradition including feminist, liberation and queer theologies. The power still remains with the professional voices. This researcher believes that naming the issue is a helpful start to the long process of developing theological tradition.

Those who trace the development of theological reflection from learning theory expect learning to be an outcome of theological reflection. They tend to expect a practical solution to emerge from theologically reflecting upon a concrete practical problem. The issue here is not that a concrete solution may emerge, but that there seems to be little appreciation of possible bigger outcomes.

The converse may be true of those rooting their appreciation of method in hermeneutics. These authors are more likely to expect profound changes in understanding of self, faith and experience, and may point to leaps across connection gaps. If horizons are not assimilated or a *kairos* moment doesn't happen, for them the question arises of whether that is a failure of process.

This thesis draws these strands of historical development together and underlines that the process is essentially the same for all three approaches. The differences arise from the inputs and from the weight given to experience and tradition in the process. This is not articulated in the current literature.

This thesis draws out some of the dangers of undergoing a process of theological reflection, which are not made clear in the current literature. It is clear from the work undertaken by this researcher that the scale and impact of the outcome on the reflector cannot be predicted generally. Because each reflector brings their experience in an inextricably intertwined way, the process and result will have different emotional impact and will affect personal identity in different ways. This thesis names the need for support to be available for the reflector if it is required, regardless of the expected 'scale' of theological reflection process with which the reflector engages.

This thesis identifies the need for accountability if the outcomes of theological reflection are to be embedded within either tradition or (more commonly) within the future practice of the reflector. The authors who root their work in learning theory and professional practice perhaps identify this more clearly than those rooted in philosophy. This accountability of the reflector for their actions and the responsibility they have for their own development is something which needs to be taken more seriously by most Christian denominations in the United Kingdom.

## **Further Work**

This thesis has identified a number of areas for future study. The detailed process of theological reflection has been described with a clarity not achieved elsewhere in the literature. This work could be extended by careful consideration of accessibility and creativity in the process of theological reflection.

A closer examination of the philosophical roots of theological reflection would be fruitful in the view of this researcher. A full exploration of authenticity, of Dasein, of the assimilation of horizon into experience might usefully be combined with consideration of the *kairos* moment and the work of the Holy Spirit from a Christian perspective.

This researcher believes that the link between theological reflection and formation in theological education institutions would bear close investigation. Any such study needs to consider the aims of formation, and the power and accountability issues which arise when using theological reflection as part of formation.

The articulation of the indivisibility of a person engaging with theological reflection and their life experience would suggest that a study of personality, and learning preferences, when engaging in theological reflection would undoubtedly be of interest. This would aid the development of systematic methods of teaching the skill of theological reflection, and would help those methods to encompass different requirements.

## Personal Learning

This thesis has been some six years in conception. I have engaged with Heidegger and Gadamer, and will never again be afraid of approaching foundational texts – perhaps remembering and misapplying the call of Husserl “we must go back to the things themselves” (Moran, 2000:93). Indeed I have discovered a preference for original writings rather than commentaries upon them or summaries, even when the subjects are complex.

Motivation matters, and dissatisfaction with the literature on theological reflection has driven me onward. There is great satisfaction in naming and drawing out the reasons for irritation, and to have resolved some of them in my own mind and to my own satisfaction. I will feel far happier debating with people about theological reflection in the future, because I have understood, named and even resolved some of the difficulties I saw.

Venturing this far into the world of academia was not something I ever foresaw. Engaging with a process lasting nearly ten years means I have far more confidence in my ability to engage, to question, and to work with others to satisfy my curiosity. Long may that continue.

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