

WHAT IS THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The JCTR has a fancy name – and an important mission! “Theological reflection” means bringing a faith perspective to the realities we look at in order to work for social justice. James Hug, a Jesuit theologian from the United States of America, explains the unique character of this theological reflection, and Pete Henriot, JCTR staff, offers some suggestions of ways to go about this important task.

SOMETHING NEW

This theological reflection is a new phenomenon in Christianity from a number of angles. It differs from traditional forms of theology in:

- where it is done,
- what its starting point is,
- how it is done,
- who does it,
- what its goal is, and
- what its criteria of truth are.

Traditional theology has emerged from two locales. It has come from the libraries and classrooms of universities or from seminaries and the private studies and meeting halls of Popes and bishops. It has been academic or ecclesiastical – or, more usually, some combination of the two. The theological reflection we’re considering here is coming from the streets, from shacks, from the living rooms where small communities and coalitions are being drawn together by the struggle for justice....

The conscious starting point for theological reflection is different as well. It usually does not begin with Scripture study or research into the writings of the Christian tradition. It begins in action – suffering, working, struggling, imagining, lobbying, organizing, building. It begins in pain and in the hunger and thirst for justice. It begins with personal stories about that experience and action.

Its processes are not the usual processes of academic or ecclesiastical theology. It moves from experience and story-telling to looking for patterns and trends.

It sifts society, looking for the roots of suffering. It responds to the shreds and traces of justice that give it hope, that reflect the presence and activity of God.

The explicit goal of theological reflection is not a dogmatic statement or a contribution to academic theology. Its goal is pastoral and practical: it aims at transformation of social structures and institutions and at fuller personal integration and conversion.

As a result, its criteria for truth and value are practical as well. This theological reflection is “true” and successful when it liberates the fullest living of the Christian spirit possible in the context, the fullest and most aware response to what the Spirit of God is doing here and now and inviting us to do.

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[Excerpted from his introduction to *Tracing the Spirit: Communities, Social Action, and Theological Reflection*, edited by James Hug, S.J., New York: Paulist Press, 1983, pp. 2-3.]

SUGGESTIONS FOR A METHOD

For me, the task of theological reflection must always be set within the “Pastoral Circle.” This is approach taken in social action that incorporates four moments: the movement from (1) *contact* with reality, through (2) *analysis* of the causes of that reality, through (3) *reflection* on the meaning of that reality, to (4) *response* of action directed to that reality. This means that we begin with the *stories*, the anecdotes that arise from our lived experiences. Then we search for the *root causes*, the explanations of why things are the way they are.

Only then can we throw the *light of our faith* on the reality, to gain deeper insights and motivations. And for all of this, of course, we are moving toward *action on behalf of justice*.

This use of the pastoral circle is usually done within a group, where individuals contribute their own experiences and insights. The group might be a small Christian community, or a Justice and Peace committee, or a parish council, or a development NGO.

The theological reflection I refer to here comes within a Christian context. But obviously, a more *secular* context could also find worthwhile a reflection that incorporates human values, community norms and cultural guidelines.

TWO APPROACHES

Before making some practical suggestions about steps to be taken in the reflection process, let me note two very different approaches to theological reflection as we probe more deeply the materials that our contact and our analysis have presented us with.

One approach is to proceed in a very organised way, drawing upon scriptural references and quotations from the church's social teaching (CST). The purpose of this approach is to clarify the picture drawn in the social analysis, throwing the "light of the faith" upon the elements presented in the situation.

For example, what can be learned from the analysis of the tension between traditional culture and Christian faith when this issue is submitted to reflection upon the experience of the early church of the *Acts of the Apostles* and the discussion of inculturation found in the reports of the *African Synod*?

Utilising this first approach, *deeper insight is gained, clarifying the path to action (response)*.

Another approach is to be explicitly prayerful with the materials, trying to get in touch with the feelings stirred by the analysis when correlated with my Christian faith commitment. The purpose of this approach is to enrich the picture by engaging in the "movements of the spirit" aroused in reflecting upon the elements presented. Indeed, this is a kind of Ignatian discernment of lights and darkneses, peace and static, empowerment and debilitation, etc.

For example, what can be learned from the analysis of personal and communitarian hopes of overcoming some current social crisis when this situation is submitted to a prayerful cry for "resurrection from the dead and from death-dealing circumstances"?

Utilising this second approach, *deeper motivation is gained, urging the movement to action (response)*.

Personally, I believe that both approaches – and they are obviously closely related – are necessary for the richest fruits of theological reflection to emerge. *Insight* and *motivation* are both important as we move toward action. But I don't believe that either approach can be taken for granted, or presumed to occur without explicit attention to details.

We must resist the temptation to skip lightly over the surface of faith dimensions of our engagement with a specific reality, in an effort to plunge into action.

As we all know from experience, that temptation is even greater in the face of very serious challenges to peace and justice.

ORGANISED REFLECTION

Let me suggest some questions that can be asked in clarifying the issues that arise after we have undertaken a social analysis of some situation that we are challenged to confront pastorally.

For instance, perhaps we are dealing with a scene of social tensions and emerging conflicts. We need to explore a faith perspective on these tensions and conflicts.

- Are there parallel scriptural experiences of such tensions and conflicts? How are they treated and evaluated in scripture?
- What is the model of church actually experienced in these situations of conflict that we are experiencing? How adequate is this model for the effective communication of the Good News in this context? What is the model of church hoped for in the future? Why?
- What is the faith foundation of the growth of "new religions," the return to "popular religiosity," and the search for authentic "inculturation"? Are these phenomena related to the tensions being experienced?
- What hope can be held out in a culture of violence and death? Can any real change be expected? Are people aroused or apathetic, compassionate or pitiless?
- Do "sacraments" have meaning in situations of tension and conflict? What is the relevance of the sacraments to the aspirations of different groups such as youth, military, government leaders, women, politicians, victims of oppression, etc.?

As we reflect on these and similar questions related to our situation, we try to make links with scripture and the social teaching of the church. This can clarify our understanding of the issues.

As a consequence, we can then select responses that are more congruent with the faith perspective that we claim to be guided by.

PRAYERFUL REFLECTION

On the other hand, the more prayerful approach can be taken up. This is, of course, no less "organised" than the first approach. But it is one I have experienced particularly in Africa in working with small Christian communities, Justice and Peace committees, Christian Life Communities (CLC), etc. This prayerful approach is very useful in probing the experiences revealed through the analysis, in order to touch within the experience the various movements of the spirit.

As examples of this approach, here are some helpful questions to ask in exploring experiences of tensions and conflicts:

- How do we hear the call for reconciliation and forgiveness in the face of brutal divisions in society that can result – or indeed, have in fact resulted – in violence and death?
- What meaning does "Christian community" have in a situation of conflict? How do I or we feel the pull to promote that community in a meaningful way?
- What are the feelings of salvation, sin, grace, transcendence, renewal, hopelessness, etc., that I or we encounter now?
- What images of God are attractive? What stories of God's actions in history have power and the capacity to move to action?

- What cultural expressions are called forth in the reflection upon the social realities, e.g., art, poetry, song, dance, drama, etc.?

Prayerful discernment of movements and feelings experienced in reflecting on these questions can enrich and focus our engagement with the issues. As a consequence, responses can then be selected that are more motivated with a faith commitment.

PURPOSES AND GRACES

I believe it is possible to outline some *purposes* (goals) and *graces* (results) of theological reflection pursued according to the two approaches outlined here. A group that is moving through the process of the pastoral circle, and eager to engage in an effective response to a social situation contacted and analysed, can experience:

- *Interpretation*: a deeper, fuller understanding of the issue as seen in the light of our faith
- *Evaluation*: an appreciation of the significance of the issue in terms of the values of the Kingdom of God
- *Suggestion*: an alternative image or design with which to confront the issue from a stance of love and justice
- *Motivation*: a movement to respond with perseverance to the issue in virtue of our vocation to follow Christ
- *Revelation*: an insight into God's presence and action in history as seen in this issue

Theological reflection done in the process of the pastoral circle truly does open up new horizons of our faith.

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