

Theological reflection paper sample



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How can I relate life to theology, and theology to life? What is practical theology? In what ways might we connect Christian practice with Christian thinking and writing?

What is Theological Reflection?

These are the questions that *Theological Reflection: Methods* seeks to address; and through the adoption of a typological approach and engagement with primary sources, it does so very successfully.

The authors — three eminent practical theologians in Britain — recognize that while such questions have been tackled many times before, theological reflection remains “easier said than done.”

Pointing out that usual “understandings of theological reflection are largely under-theorized and narrow, and too often fail to connect adequately with biblical, historical and systematic scholarship,” they aim to help the reader “engage in patterns of theological reflection that are richer in the sources they draw on, more diverse in their knowledge-base, more rigorous and more imaginative”. Given that much writing about practical theology and theological reflection abounds in vagaries and generalities, this is welcome news.

An introductory chapter traces the history of the field. Graham, Walton, and Ward outline a transition from an understanding of practical/pastoral theology as a discipline concerned with “practical training for the ordained ministry” to a broader, more general understanding of theology as “critical reflection on faithful practice in a variety of settings” (2). Today, theology is understood “as process rather than product” and Christian practice —

alongside systematic, biblical and historical theology — is recognized as capable of generating theological insight (5).

They stress that problems with theological reflection remain, however; above all, engagement with traditional Christian resources — especially the Bible — is weak. They wonder, “ What if we could reclaim the project of ‘ theological reflection’ as something that has been fundamental to the evolution of Christian thought and tradition from the very beginning?” (8). It is to this interrelated problem and question that *Theological Reflection: Methods* then turns.

Graham, Walton, and Ward introduce and explore seven models of theological reflection. These are “ Theology by Heart”: The Living Human Document (God is experienced through interior human experience, and theological reflection takes place through such means as journaling, autobiography and psychotherapeutic accounts of the self); “ Speaking in Parables”.

Constructive Narrative Theology (The narrative of Scripture and alternative theological insights gained from unexpected sources are woven together); “ Telling God’s Story”: Canonical Narrative Theology (Christian identity and practice are shaped around “ God’s story” as told in the Bible); “ Writing the Body of Christ”: Corporate Theological Reflection (The Christian community generates theology through its corporate life, such as through liturgy, metaphors of self-identity or pastoral discipline); “ Speaking of God in Public”.

Correlation (Theological reflection takes place through a process of conversation or correlation between Christian revelation and the surrounding culture); “ Theology-in-Action”: Praxis (God is active in history and the task of discipleship is to work for justice in solidarity with the suffering of the world); “ Theology in the Vernacular”: Local Theologies (The gospel finds expression across different cultural historical and geographical contexts).

One of the undoubted strengths of *Theological Reflection: Methods* is its typological approach and the clear structure replicated in Chapter 2-7 for each of the seven methods. First, the method is outlined. Second, an introduction discusses the key features of the method. The substantial third section — “ Reflections from History” — offers biblical and historical illustrations of the method.

Fourth, “ The Method Realized” provides more recent examples of the method, indicating its continuing relevance. Fifth, a “ Critical Evaluation” raises questions and points to potential drawbacks. Finally, an “ Annotated Bibliography” directs the reader towards a range of further resources. This structure enables both deep engagement with each method and easy comparison across the seven methods.

Two underlying threads run throughout. One is the consideration of how each method does or does not facilitate the three core tasks of theological reflection identified by the authors — the induction and nurture of members, building and sustaining the community of faith, and communicating the faith to a wider culture (10-11). The other is consideration of how the sources and norms of theology are understood and employed in each method (15).

The inclusion of extensive primary sources—the “ overarching objective” of the book (16) — is the most significant and innovative contribution made by the authors to the existing body of literature on theological reflection. The first chapter alone includes as historical sources excerpts from the Confessions of St Augustine, the love letters of Abelard and Heloise, and the journal of John Wesley.

The chapters following consider perspectives as diverse as those of the Church Fathers and twentieth-century German systematic theologians Karl Barth and Paul Tillich through to those of feminist theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Black British theologian Robert Beckford. Extracts from Aquinas, the Rule of St Benedict, and the philosopher Paul Ricoeur can be found juxtaposed with letters from activist Quakers, Vatican II documents, and the writings of Chung Hyun Kyung. Biblical passages are drawn from the Psalms, Gospels, Epistles, and Acts.

The broad range of biblical, historical, and systematic sources woven together more than meets the expectations created in the introduction, and the ways in which they are linked proves stimulating. The authors thus achieve their goal of significantly deepening and enriching the usual discourse around theological reflection.

They also shed new light on traditional theological resources as they encourage the reader to grapple with them anew through the lens of theological reflection. As a result, they clearly succeed in beginning to close the “ divisions between ‘ systematic’ and ‘ practical’ theology” (16). The primary sources in this volume are in fact designed only to whet our

appetite: a companion volume, *Theological Reflection: Sources* (London: SCM Press, 2007) contains a range of alternative and lengthier extracts.

If there is a criticism to be made of the book, it is that the authors could have teased out more fully the distinction between theological reflection and practical theology. Is one a field and the other an approach, or are they different terms for the same activity? This is never made clear, and ambiguity around terminology remains.

The lack of conclusion is also somewhat surprising, and the reader is left with the question, “Where from here?” While not designed to be a workbook, it would have been helpful to indicate a few concrete ways in which readers might use these models when reading a theological text or engaging in a Christian practice.

Theological Reflection: Methods is an indispensable resource for teachers of practical theology, contextual education, and theological reflection as well as for those teaching systematic, historical, and biblical theologies.

It provides a framework for discussing both the relevance of religious practices to theology and the relevance of theology to life and practice. Seminary students, ministers, and others struggling to draw links between their theological studies and everyday work in a congregation or community will also find it invaluable.

Graham, Walton, and Ward understand the “connections between human dilemmas and divine horizons” (6) to be a nexus of vibrant faith, and their passion for making these connections is contagious.