

## Theological Reflection as key to Practical Theology

Peter Woodward

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**Abstract:** *This paper provides a critical analysis of Theological Reflection. Recent decades have witnessed the recognition of theology as “multi-directional” or both top down and bottom up. Theological Reflection is a key expression of this approach to doing theology. Thus Practical Theology is no longer simply the “lower order” theological activity; but integrated into the whole enterprise.*

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**Key Words:** ministry praxis, chaplaincy, critical dialogue, postmodernism, theological reflection, practical theology

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**I**n this paper I commence with the presentation of one of my ministry experiences as an Army Chaplain showing that Theological Reflection (TR) was present before, during and after the event. Then I go on to critically examine TR under the headings of: Practical and Applied Theology, Post Modernism, Alternative Theologies, the History of Theological Reflection, Differing Approaches to TR, and the need to develop individual and communal approaches to TR. The paper concludes with the recognition that practitioners need to develop their own approach to TR to avoid the propositional theology which separates theology and practice.

### AN EXAMPLE OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

As an introduction to Theological Reflection (TR) I will give an account of my ministry experience at Parit Sulong. In April 2002 I was the official Army Chaplain accompanying the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) organised celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of “The Fall of Singapore.” In 1942 the Japanese Army invaded Singapore and captured the thousands of Allied troops which led to their incarceration, torture and, for many, their employment in the deplorable conditions of the Burma Railway, leading to the untimely death of many. The touring group organised by DVA included veterans and war widows, then in their eighties, accompanied by supporting military personnel and public servants.

The first commemorative celebration was a visit to the bridge over the river at Parit Sulong a town some hours' drive north into Malaysia. At this spot the Australian troops had destroyed the existing bridge to impede the Japanese advance and, as a result of the battle, had to leave behind about 150 wounded allied soldiers (about 115 Australians and the remainder Indian) to be captured by the enemy. The expectation was that the Japanese would provide them with the necessary medical care. Nothing further from that expectation was the result as the Japanese committed what was probably the first major

atrocities against Australian troops. The account, as we received it, was that the wounded prisoners were locked in a hut for a day, then taken out, shot, bayoneted, and set on fire.<sup>1</sup>

My task was to conduct a short, five to ten minutes, memorial service commemorating the lives lost, particularly the Australians, on the new bridge, where a memorial plaque had been placed and in sight of the spot where the massacre had taken place. In preparation for the commemorations I had assisted in selection of hymns, scripture readings and prayers; and upon arrival in Singapore I had three days to prepare for the service. My TR in preparation was that I knew from previous encounters with veterans of the Burma Railway that forgiving their enemies was a key part of the veterans' lives beyond such an experience;<sup>2</sup> but I was also very conscious of the painful memories of their suffering and I felt that it was not really appropriate to be telling, virtually lecturing, veterans of similar age to my own father to "forgive their enemies." Equally I was conscious that it would be a less than effective memorial occasion if I gave readings and prayers that in my mind "simply went nowhere."

My desire to provide authentic ministry/chaplaincy exercised my mind for two days and on the morning of the memorial service I awoke early and in bed continued to ponder how I might address the occasion. At that point I determined that this required contemplative prayer.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, I fell asleep and, somewhat with surprise, delight, and some alarm, the solution to my difficulty had come to mind on reawakening. The alarm was occasioned by the language that emerged. The message I had was: "This is a special privilege and an honour to conduct this memorial service; but it is a doubly difficult task because I hear the voice of Jesus saying, 'Forgive your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' But when your enemies have been utter bastards, that is a tough ask. And in response to this we pray a prayer committing our mates to God's loving care again; we express our dependence on God; and we pray for peace in the world." My concern was that part of the accompanying military support was a media crew who would video the occasion and send footage back to Australia where, if it was broadcast, some of my "good church friends" and my parents might see me swearing.<sup>4</sup> As I walked onto the bridge, I consciously realised that my ministry at that point was to the veterans and that they would accept it, and even more than accept it.

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<sup>1</sup> As we travelled to the sight, the realisation dawned that at least one prisoner must have escaped so that the story "got out." [http://www.dva.gov.au/commems\\_oawg/OAWG/war\\_memorials/overseas\\_memorials/malaysia/Pages/Malaysia%20parit%20sulong.aspx](http://www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/OAWG/war_memorials/overseas_memorials/malaysia/Pages/Malaysia%20parit%20sulong.aspx) (accessed 19 August 2014) gives this account: "Sergeant Ron Croft, Lieutenant Ben Hackney and Private Reg Wharton all survived the massacre by feigning death amongst the carnage and sustaining wounds from kicking and bayonets in silence and stillness. After this, with extensive wounds, they made their escapes with the help of the local Malaya and Chinese communities, even though their presence put these communities in grave danger."

<sup>2</sup> At a memorial occasion at the War Memorial in Canberra one veteran had stated publicly that "only with an unequivocal apology from the Japanese ... would we forgive the Japanese." Sadly he still suffered tropical ulcers more than 50 years later. In contrast his colleagues were saying that "you have to let it go, some time;" and were in better health.

<sup>3</sup> From a presentation given by Fr Richard Rohr, OFM, in Sydney around the year 2000 where I was introduced to Contemplative Prayer as seeking to be open to God by stilling the mind and allowing God be God in our lives—hearts and minds—not requiring or expecting that God must "speak". He used Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God," as part of the reflective and contemplative prayer.

<sup>4</sup> As it turned out the only part I ever knew to be broadcast was a short excerpt from the prayer for peace: "In this place where atrocities were committed," which I saw some months later.

As I conducted the Memorial Service, there was some momentary TR. I was quite conscious that in a way it had become a multi-cultural occasion as we were accompanied by a small group of Malaysian support staff who were almost certainly Muslim. I was also conscious that in my nervousness my wording changed to: “but when your enemies have been complete mongrels, utter bastards, if you will, that is a tough ask.” As we walked from the bridge the post event TR began. My feelings were that this had been a special occasion, even a “God moment;” and the response from veterans and the accompanying staff confirmed their sense of the specialness and sacredness of the occasion.<sup>5</sup>

Another reaction that confirmed the impact of the occasion was the response from one of the Australian Defence Attaché staff, an officer known as something of a “rough diamond” in the past. He approached me with the request, “Padre, we’ll have to fly you to Malaysia so that you can do [baptise, I presume] my two kids.” The flight to Malaysia never took place; but I understood his response to be something like: “I have heard the faith in such a way today that I want that for my family.”

Subsequently, I have taken further opportunity to reflect on this chaplaincy event. Though not done in a formal session, I compared it to my taxonomy of motivations for ministry: self-interest, keeping the “rules”, caring for people, and responsiveness to what God is doing.<sup>6</sup> There was some self interest in my desire to act appropriately, a desire to represent the faith well, and a sense of being responsive to the feelings and experiences of the veterans and war widows. However, the dominant reality was that this had been an occasion of seeking God’s purpose through prayer and of speaking in a way which enabled God’s word to be heard.<sup>7</sup> It confirmed for me that I must wrestle with ministry tasks and include TR, formally or informally, if I am to deliver authentic ministry.

## WHAT IS PRACTICAL THEOLOGY?

While all theology is practical and situated (just as any academic endeavour is a practice), it is still useful to foreground a dimension of theological reflection as its practical task. Practical theology describes the critical reflection that is done about the meaning of faith and action in the world.<sup>8</sup>

The term “practical theology” almost begs the question of whether there is some theology which is *impractical*. Graham, Walton and Ward describe the stages of the relationship between Theology and Practical Theology commencing with the New Testament and the early church through the “establishment” of the Church in the Holy Roman Empire to the Western Church<sup>9</sup> with the Enlightenment playing a critical role with the professionalising

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<sup>5</sup> Among the comments from the veterans a representative one was: “Boy, Padre didn’t you teach us how to pray!”

<sup>6</sup> Peter Woodward, “Spirituality for Army Chaplains; and Poems.” (1995, unpublished).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, additional questions “lurk” in the TR space, such as, how I a Protestant Chaplain was engaged in a prayer which was virtually “for the repose of the souls” of the soldiers 60 years deceased. And that leads to considering engagement in ecumenical and even inter-faith ministry.

<sup>8</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerton, “Introduction” in *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 7.

<sup>9</sup> This comes with the recognition that we are part of the Western Church; and that the Eastern Church and the Church beyond the European axis, for example, the Mar Thoma Church and the long history of the church in China from the fifth century onward, are increasingly transforming the understanding of “Church”.

of ministry and theology over the last three to four centuries.<sup>10</sup> The Enlightenment gave rise to a propositional theology with reason elevated above tradition and experience, and especially to any appeal to the affective aspects of personal and communal knowledge. Theology, along with all knowledge and truth, had to be provable and objective. Theological enquiry in the post-Enlightenment period lived in the context of a Church divided by denominational and political allegiance. Advances in theology were typically arguments, sometimes as a polemic and sometimes as support, seeking to “correct” or “improve” on the work of others.

In this mode of foundationalist theology<sup>11</sup> ministry education and training was typically a matter of instruction in the basics: Old Testament, New Testament, Theology and Church History. In a type of trickledown effect<sup>12</sup> the expectation was that ministry activity: preaching, pastoral care, teaching and administration, would be acquired or would come naturally when the candidate had shown himself<sup>13</sup> to be a competent theologian and biblical scholar.<sup>14</sup>

Moving forward into the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries has seen both the virtually unexpected “feedback” from the Third World mission context of the likes of Liberation Theologies<sup>15</sup>, and the flowering of post modernism. Some would doubt that “flowering” is an appropriate term since it has meant the questioning of any claims to absolute truth and the rejection of meta-narratives. The end of these theological movements is the development of varieties of theologies, particularly in the Western World in the latter half of the Twentieth Century and into the Twenty-first with TR becoming an active part in this change.

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION (TR)

TR, as a concept, recognises that all theological enquiry and activity is interrelated. In particular, in practical theology and in the lived experience of the faith—where “the rubber meets the road”—there must be dialogue and coherence with other expressions of theology. The form of this dialogue and coherence will vary with the context, the issues and those engaged in this “doing theology”; and it will, of necessity, mean a proper engagement with, rather than a simplistic or token recognition of, other points of view.<sup>16</sup> As Tanner puts the matter, “The ambiguities, inconsistencies, and open-endedness of

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005) 2–3.

<sup>11</sup> J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Fulkerton, “Introduction” 9.

<sup>13</sup> I have used the masculine because for most of the period under consideration ministry was virtually a male occupation or vocation.

<sup>14</sup> David Lyall, “Theology and Pastoral Practice” in *The Integrity of Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK, 2001) 22–23.

<sup>15</sup> I recall from about 30 years ago, now with a sense of humility, the late Rev. Charles Harris, an Aboriginal Uniting Church minister, describing the way in which Aboriginal faith through their suffering (imposed by the white population—though he did not say that) felt a direct connection with God that no longer depended on the white people bringing their knowledge of God to the aboriginal peoples.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Sources* (London: SCM, 2007) 11–17.

Christian practice are, however, the very things that establish an essential place for theological reflection in everyday Christian lives.”<sup>17</sup>

Any myth of theological uniformity has never been a reality. A quick look at the New Testament shows differences and developments in the authors’ understanding and expressions of their relationship with God.<sup>18</sup> Equally TR, which has come to greater prominence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is not a unitary concept or process, particularly because its more recent expressions have developed within the multi-dimensional nature of the Western and worldwide Church. For convenience the issues will be categorised under six headings, accepting that there is inevitable overlap between them:

- The interaction between Applied, Practical and Academic Theology;
- The impact of Post-Modernism;
- The emergence of alternative theologies such as, Liberation and Feminist Theologies and Clinical Pastoral Education;
- The recognition of the history of TR which can be seen in Scripture and through the history of the Church;
- Differing approaches to TR;
- The need to develop individual and communal approaches to TR.

### *Interaction between Applied, Practical and Academic Theology*

Academic Theology—philosophical, dogmatic and historical—has a long standing tradition and has typically been seen to provide the philosophical underpinning for the practice of theology in pastoral work: preaching, teaching and church administration.<sup>19</sup> When Practical Theology and Applied Theology are distinguished from each other, the former is simply the practice of ministry tasks, for which a trickledown effect is presumed; and the latter is taking dogmatic theology and applying it to the pastoral and ministry settings. In both of these approaches the flow of authority and theological thought has only one direction,<sup>20</sup> such as “applying the certainties of the gospel truth to the realities of the human situation. It was based upon a theology of proclamation and the conviction that in the Word of God alone there was balm sufficient to relieve human sin and sorrow.”<sup>21</sup>

I recall a fellow minister whose understanding mirrored this approach; but was marred by the quality of his proclamation. When a mother of two teenagers complained that they got nothing out of his church services his response was, “If the Word is read and proclaimed, how can they not get anything out of it?” The question back to him might have appropriately been, “Is it possible that this concerned mother was bringing to you the Word of God for you?” Equally my desire to provide an effective memorial service in the

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<sup>17</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002) 232.

<sup>18</sup> A simple example is the differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s nativity narratives and a comparison of them with Mark’s and John’s Gospels, and Paul’s allusions to the nativity.

<sup>19</sup> Fulkerton, “Introduction” 9; Tanner, “Theological Reflection” 229

<sup>20</sup> Lyall, “Theology and Pastoral Practice” 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 27–28.

opening example of TR might have been dealt with as the need to *simply* “proclaim the gospel,” presumably as taught in theological education with scant regard for the contextual reality.

The unidirectional approach—from academic theology to practical and applied theology—can serve to give an appropriate reminder that all ministries, even all of life, must be dependent on God who gives gifts to the Body of Christ for the expression of God’s mission and ministry within and beyond the Body of Christ (Eph 4:1–16).<sup>22</sup> However, the unidirectional understanding of the function of theology requires the practitioner, ministry agent and/or the “clients”, whether lay or ordained, to be the recipients of the theology. They are thus virtually denied any part in the process of “doing theology.” The approaches to TR, such as the living human document, constructive narrative theology, correlation, praxis, and vernacular theology, which will receive a fuller description below, actually engage the church, the marginalised and those beyond the church.<sup>23</sup> This means that in a variety of expressions theology is more than an academic pursuit and belongs with the whole community of faith and even beyond the boundaries of the community of faith. TR recognises that theology is “multi-directional.”

The unidirectional approach for theology can give the apparent assurance that orthodoxy is being maintained; but the power imbalance present, or potentially present, in that approach virtually denies the freedom to the Holy Spirit to breathe or blow wherever the Spirit chooses (John 3:8). This power imbalance also provides the seedbed for abuse, hegemony and, at worst, demonic expressions of mission and ministry!<sup>24</sup> Further, the unidirectional understanding fails to recognise that every reception of ministry, whether through listening, reading, community building or other expression, will of itself require a receptive interpretation which is a form of “doing theology” and of TR. Thus decades ago Henri Nouwen could write:

Although none of these (ministries) ... can ever be fulfilled without careful preparation and proved competency, none can ever be called ministry when this competence is not grounded in the radical commitment to lay down one’s life in the service of others. Ministry means the ongoing attempt to put one’s own search for God, with all the moments of pain and joy, despair and hope, at the disposal of those who want to join in the search but do not know how. Therefore, ministry in no way is a privilege. Instead, it is the core of the Christian life.<sup>25</sup>

### *The impact of Post-Modernism*

Post-Modernism deserves special inclusion because it marks a new approach to understanding reality and truth. N. T. Wright gives expression to this critical movement in the study of the human condition:

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<sup>22</sup> Emmanuel Lartey, “Practical Theology as a Theological Form,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2000) 131; see, for example, Paul Avis, “A Ministry shaped by the Mission of God,” in *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London: T & T Clark, 2005) 43–87.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Thompson, with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection*, (London: SCM, 2008); Graham, et al., *Methods*, with chapters on each category.

<sup>24</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: the Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 1641 and see, for example, David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1991) 20–22.

<sup>25</sup> Henri. J.M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Image Books, 1971) 114.

There is at the moment a much-observed and much-discussed state of crisis in the humanities. The dominant viewpoint of the last two hundred years, associated particularly with the Enlightenment, has been in a state of disarray ... and its so-called 'modernism' is being overtaken by the somewhat unhappily named 'postmodernism'. Old certainties have given way to new uncertainties.<sup>26</sup>

This "disarray" or serious questioning of all meta-narratives is also evidenced in the

blossoming of other types: postmodern theologies; an array of "theology and ... (race and ethnicity; the physical, social, biological, and social sciences; literature; the visual arts; music; film; spirituality; etc) and above all, feminist, womanist, and other gender-related theologies.<sup>27</sup>

The diversity of approaches is potentially disturbing unless there is a willingness to engage the issues with openness and a readiness to embrace a critical realism in love.<sup>28</sup> This necessitates conversation: first, that participants speak out of their valued traditions and communities while accepting critical scrutiny from others; second, that participants listen respectfully to the affirmation, critiques and corrections from others; and third, that the process is active and dynamic.<sup>29</sup> Thus,

The postmodern challenge to critique our foundationalist assumptions compels us to accept that there is no more universal or neutral standards of rationality against which we can measure our beliefs and traditions. Our ability to make responsible judgements and share them within and between various epistemic communities does mean ... that we can communicate transcontextually through conversation, deliberation, and evaluation.<sup>30</sup>

This communication demands TR which will be expressed variously both within and beyond the community of faith.<sup>31</sup>

### *The emergence of alternative theologies*

The ministry account in the opening example of TR, where the TR prior to the event centred around appropriate prayers in a context beyond the usual church setting and the use of language which would typically be seen as profane and inappropriate in that setting, required the acceptance of a theological position for that alternate context.

In a context which is "very" alternate Anna May Say Pa, a Burmese feminist and Old Testament scholar, sets this scene as the context for reflection on Ruth and Justa (the Syro-Phoenician woman in Matt 15:21–28 and Mark 7:24–30):

It is estimated that over 30,000 young Burmese women have crossed the borders into Thailand and China to find work. Many end up in the sex trade in the border towns and big cities like Chiangmai, Bangkok, Hunan and Kunming. These young women are in

<sup>26</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1995) 31–32.

<sup>27</sup> David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 8.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, *The New Testament* 44–46

<sup>29</sup> David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003) 59–60.

<sup>30</sup> Van Huyssteen, *Postfoundationalist Theology* 5.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, *Studyguide* Chap 8.

search of work to support their families back home. Their labors are essential for the survival of their families.<sup>32</sup>

She concludes:

What about the women of my country? What is the re-reading and re-telling of Ruth's and Justa's stories that I wish to share with them? Burmese women must claim their dignity and *hpon*. They must no longer submit passively to religious and cultural expectations of the "good wife," "good daughter," who sacrifices herself for others. They must go beyond accepted feminine behavior by discovering new paths. This difficulty can be seen as opportunity or problem. As opportunity it opens the student, the theologian and the church leaders or minister to the possibilities of exploration and integration. However, in the place where theology must have greatest import, namely in the lives of local members and faith communities where "options" can add to the chaos of life, "exploration and integration" can too easily look like uncertainty and confusion.<sup>33</sup>

Thus she demonstrates a readiness to move into the risk of uncertainty and confusion in order to enable Burmese, Asian (and all) women to find a new voice and a faith which embraces what God is doing in their lives—for some a bold, even risky, expressions of TR. Thus Pa stands obviously within the Liberation and Feminist expressions of theological debate and reflection where theology is praxis oriented. This form of TR raises vital, or life, questions like: who are the real people engaged in doing the theology? Who benefits from what is done? Who is excluded or oppressed by what is done? How do we understand the context and the lived experience of participants? Have prior historical theologies been relevant and inclusive?<sup>34</sup>

Another alternative theology is the theology of *the living human document* or Theology by Heart. The subject matter is the personal experience as the place where theological awareness exists and is nurtured. Thus the examination of some form of personal expression in poetry, journaling, verbatim of a ministry encounter, dialogical prayer, web blogging, and so on becomes a key part of theological expression and reflection.<sup>35</sup> In its modern form this TR owes much to Anton Boisen who is seen as the founder of the Clinical Pastoral Education movement.<sup>36</sup>

These *alternative* theologies are representative of the shift in theology—or theological method and process—during the last century with TR being a critical expression of the shift.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Anna May Say Pa, "Boundary Crossers and Risk Takers: Ruth and Justa in the Struggle for Life," CTC Bulletin, Vol. XXVI, No. 1 June 2010: 83, accessed 8 October 2014, [http://cca.org.hk/home/ctc/ctc-xxvi-1/83-95\\_anna\\_may\\_say\\_pa.pdf](http://cca.org.hk/home/ctc/ctc-xxvi-1/83-95_anna_may_say_pa.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 94. *Hpon* is a term expressing the glory of manhood which Burmese women are now applying to their situation and status.

<sup>34</sup> Lartey, "Practical Theology" 131.

<sup>35</sup> Graham, et al, *Methods* 51.

<sup>36</sup> Graham, et al. *Sources* 33–39.

<sup>37</sup> I suspect that many military chaplains in the past have faced similar ministry challenges to that described in the Prologue and that some or most of them engaged in a form of TR that stretched the boundaries of their "orthodox" denominationalism!

### *The recognition of the history of TR*

It is difficult to date precisely the birth of theological reflection as a discrete methodological form within the field of practical theology.<sup>38</sup>

While TR has come to prominence in the last several decades, it is important to recognise that it has been present in various forms over the centuries. The literature gives many examples of TR from the past. For example, the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola as entering imaginatively into the narrative of the faith<sup>39</sup>, Augustine's *Confessions* as theology by heart<sup>40</sup> and Bonhoeffer's "Life Together" as writing the Body of Christ<sup>41</sup> are just three examples of TR through the centuries. Another example worth noting is Walter Brueggemann's "A Note on the Practice of Ministry" in *The Prophetic Imagination* which gives these descriptors of ministry: a) "The task of prophetic ministry is to evoke an alternative community"; b) It "is not some special thing done two days a week ... (rather) it concerns a stance and posture or a hermeneutic about the world of death and the word of life"; c) It "seeks to penetrate the numbness (of so much of contemporary culture) to face the body of death in which we are caught"; and d) It "seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us."<sup>42</sup>

This historic glimpse at TR does suggest the lens of TR rightly belongs within the life of the community of faith and that if this lens is applied to an issue or topic—in scripture, history or a present concern—it will provide fruitful insights. Thus TR should belong in the curriculum and formation of ministry candidates and be practiced regularly in the community of faith.<sup>43</sup> To miss this opportunity may well risk being caught in some form of numbness located in past assurances of orthodoxy and miss the joy which comes through the "anguished disengagement" which the prophetic imagination can bring.<sup>44</sup>

### *Differing Approaches to TR*

As already indicated TR is a critical part of the life of the Church; but it is a messy process.<sup>45</sup> As Mudge and Poling comment:

any pastor knows that if a typical congregation of Christian people is simply told to go and "do theology", what will come out will be a mishmash of favorite scripture verses quoted out of context, superstitions, fragments of civil religion, vague memories of poorly taught Sunday-school lessons long ago, and the like. Not an inspiring picture.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Thompson, *Studyguide* 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 86f.

<sup>40</sup> Graham, et al., *Sources* 52–56.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 224–7.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978) 110–11.

<sup>43</sup> Tanner, "Theological Reflection" 238–42. My own initial theological education, admittedly somewhat dated, included very limited TR. One student did complain about the lack of relevance and connectedness of our course which resulted in regular stand-alone two hour seminars; but these seminars were not well integrated into other subjects.

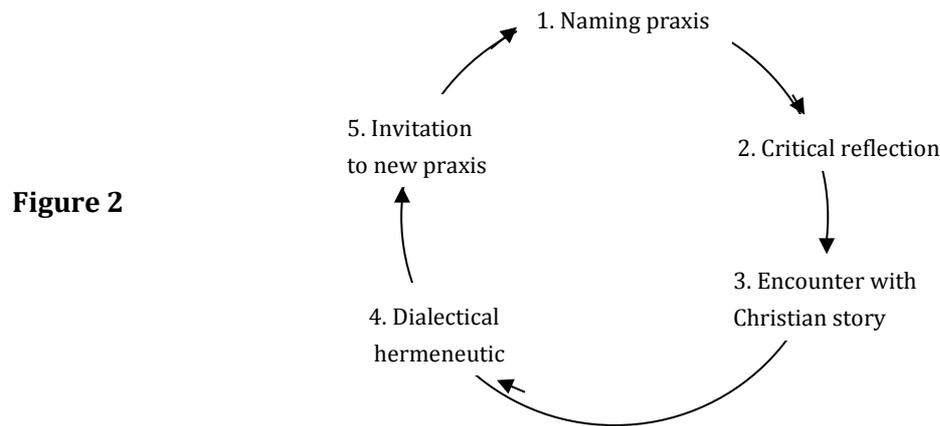
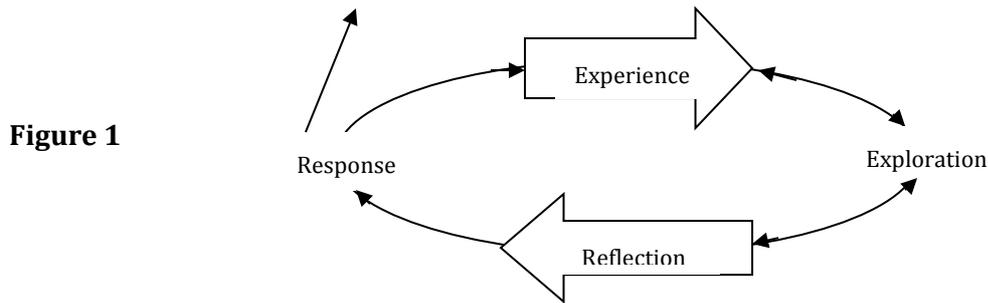
<sup>44</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* 112–3. This mirrors the "newness" found on the bridge at Parit Sulong.

<sup>45</sup> Frances Ward, "The Messiness of Studying Congregations using Ethnographic Methods," in *Congregational Studies in the UK*, ed. Matthew Guest, Karin Tusting, and Linda Woodhead (Farnham: Ashgate, 1988).

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Graham, et al., *Methods* 6.

However, it is this very messiness that demands TR in the academy/seminary, in the pews and beyond.

In the initial stages of introducing TR to practitioners and to participants it can be very helpful to provide a stepwise approach. Thus Thompson and Lartey provide examples of the typical cycle of: Action or Issue; followed by Critical Examination of the action or issue (sometimes called a dense description); followed by Abstract Analysis usually in the light Scripture, Faith Tradition and theological insights together with insights from the social sciences as they are applicable; and a New Synthesis leading to new or experimental action.<sup>47</sup> The diagrammes below of the cyclical and developmental nature of TR—Figures 1, 2 and 3—come from Lartey.<sup>48</sup> Figure 1 provides a reflective cycle which can be applied to any form of human endeavour and thus invites the theologian to engage in a process which is more inclusive of faith experience than academic theology appears to be. Figure 2 gives greater emphasis on *praxis* as the process of TR and invites the theologian into specific steps in the reflection stages of doing theology. Figure 3 again invites a dynamic approach to TR so that each stage of analysis must inform the others. Lartey does also want to include the rich possibility that informal interactions such as social group gatherings can be “very creative points of engagement.”<sup>49</sup>

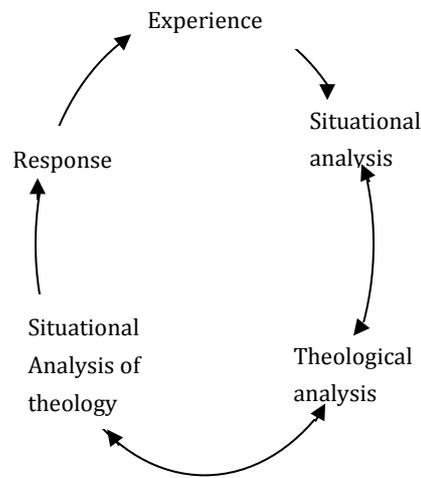


<sup>47</sup> Thompson, *Studyguide*, Chapters 1 and 3 and Lartey, “Practical Theology” 130–32

<sup>48</sup> Lartey, “Practical Theology” 129–130.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 132–3.

Figure 3



Another approach is to think in terms of exegesis and hermeneutic. Thus the presenting issue or action, the people involved, the context and situation, the culture, the faith expressions and the consequences are all carefully, lovingly, extensively and prayerfully examined to determine meanings, intentions, motivations and likely outcomes. Following such an exegesis or hermeneutic a fresh conceptualisation and a new, often tentative, course of action will emerge, which can then become the beginning point of a new stage of reflective theology. Naturally, none of the points in the cycle of reflection should be seen as “watertight” so that review and re-examination of issues can arise through the process.

As already noted TR is not a singular process but has a variety of expressions. Graham, Walton and Ward and Thompson list seven types of TR each locating differing emphases and differing ministry contexts and thus different critical questions in their TR processes, as summarised here:<sup>50</sup>

1. Theology by heart—the living human document: What does my (or others) personal experience and inner life give as a growing experience and knowledge of God?
2. Speaking in parables—constructive narrative theology: How do the stories from my life, family, community, faith tradition, and the Scriptures come together to give a fresh revelation of God?
3. Telling God’s Story—canonical narrative theology: How do I approach the Scriptures, especially the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, so that I know and am known afresh by God?
4. Writing the body of Christ—corporate theological reflection: How do we as a congregation find ourselves being formed together as a community of faith?
5. Speaking of God in public—correlation: How do we bring together Christian identity and contemporary culture so that we know God speaking in all of life?

<sup>50</sup> In both Graham, et al., *Sources* and Graham, et al., *Methods*.

6. Theology-in-action—praxis: By immersion is the pain and struggle of a community how do we participate (in praxis or action) in God's promise of justice, healing and reconciliation and a renewed society?
7. Theology in the vernacular—local theologies: How do I speak gospel truths in the common language? As an example I provide one of my unpublished poems:

“The Gospel for Australians - *Australian Spirituality*”

The kingdom of the heavens –  
 you beauty! God is everywhere.  
 Australia –  
 the Great Southland of the Holy Spirit  
 Terra Australis de Sanctus Spiritus  
 You're out there Lord  
 looking after us;  
 but we're bloody stupid ...  
 we don't really trust you  
 and we treat you and each other  
 as if, as if – as if you're not there.

Give us new understanding –  
 fresh dreaming  
 to see you  
 in our gum trees,  
 in our city streets  
 and in each other

We are your people,  
 people living under the Southern Cross.<sup>51</sup>

To these seven types of TR can also be added the practices of spirituality and spiritual disciplines as expressions of TR, albeit of a quite different flavour.<sup>52</sup>

### *The need to develop individual and communal approaches to TR*

[It is impossible to] attempt to apply someone else's theology—which is inevitably propositional theology—to the realities of the pastoral situation which leads, for the pastoral practitioner, to the separation of theology and practice.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> This poem arose in sessions on Spirituality and Ministry where the conversations (virtual TR) led to the challenge that I should write poetry which put the gospel in the Australian vernacular.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Leech, “Spirituality and Silence” in *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986); Paul Philibert, “The Practices of the Spiritual Life” in *Stewards of God's Mysteries: Priestly Spirituality in a Changing World* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004); and the virtual classics on Spiritual Disciplines, Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Revised Edition (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989) and Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding how God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

<sup>53</sup> Lyall, “Theology and Pastoral Practice” 29.

The cross fertilisation and debate across theologies cannot be avoided and TR will grow as a practice and discipline. In developing an approach to TR the practitioner—individual or group—must go on to grow in their own approach.

For those desirous to move further along the path of TR it can be most helpful to “learn” from the experience of others. Practice with notional or even fictional issues and reading and discussing reports by others of their TR can be instructive in both learning and developing an approach to TR. Thompson’s *Studyguide to TR* provides work examples and exercises for the student to engage with and work on the process. In the Parit Sulong incident described in the opening example of TR I can in retrospect see that I was engaged in TR before, during and after the ministry event. I do not recall specific training in TR other than incidentally in seminars and ongoing professional development which, combined with my naturally analytical mind, conditioned me to seek a best understanding and approach to ministry practice.

In this context a cautionary word needs to be added since, as creatures of habit, people are prone to avoid the challenges of TR and fall back into old practices. Firstly, the acknowledgement of our dependence on God is pivotal. If the post-modernism represents a protest against the elitism and absolutism of modernism and the Enlightenment, it poses the danger that any narrative of God, which is easily seen as meta-narrative, is also discarded; but TR will enable an authentic approach to the praxis of faith. Secondly, in a related issue the approach to Scripture is critical. TR will acknowledge the wide and rich diversity of approaches from a virtual literalism, and even fundamentalism, to the acceptance of Scripture as one resource among many; and, on occasions these approaches will become be the topic of TR. Thirdly, TR belongs with the community of faith where love must be the hallmark even if the struggle to achieve the reality can seem overwhelming. Individualism and privacy are so much a part of contemporary culture that it may be tempting to imagine that personal TR does not need the fruitful input and corrective of voices from within the Body of Christ. Fourthly, with contemporary culture’s adherence to the myths of success and material wealth TR must always listen for and identify with the voice(s) of the marginalised and powerless. Fifthly, TR requires a readiness to engage in self-criticism.<sup>54</sup> The Western Church has for centuries been identified with the dominant culture so that practitioners can easily, and often unconsciously, allow issues in their culture to be co-opted in support of their analysis, synthesis and argument. Elitism, middle class privilege and resistance to change will often unsuspectingly raise their determination to maintain a particular point of view uncritically.

But TR is a process that each person needs to hold themselves to in the community of faith. It does involve telling our own story of discovery. For me this not only includes the Parit Sulong event but the gradual learning of other methods such as the seven methods provided by Graham, Walton and Ward and thus expresses a personal method for that ministry episode. As another example I offer with seven lenses for examining life and faith which have arisen out of preaching on Matt 15:21–28, mentioned above as part of Anna May Say Pa’s article.

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<sup>54</sup> Elaine Graham, “Toward a Theology of Practice” in *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Care in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996) 114.

## CONCLUSION

TR is a critical expression of doing theology and the practitioner, especially those in designated leadership roles in ministry, cannot avoid the reality of developing their own engagement in TR. And this will be true for both individuals and for communities—wherever two or more gather.

Kathryn Tanner sums up this calling to be searching for our individual and collective approach to TR very well:

Through engagement with the Christian practices in this critical, reflective fashion, we are called to be active witnesses to what God has done for us in Christ and active disciples of the way of living that Christ himself struggled against the forces of sin and death to bring into existence. ... Doing so is not a matter of passive reception, of simple immersion in established practices—it cannot be given the messy facts of our existence.<sup>55</sup>

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**Author:** *Peter Woodward, B.Sc.(Hons), B.D., B.Ed.Stud., Grad.Dip,R.E., M.Min, is a Uniting Church minister, ordained 1973, retired from permanent ministry. Over the last 42 years his ministries have included rural (Tully, NQ), Army Chaplaincy (25 years full-time plus Army Reserve), and regional centres (Ipswich and Cairns). He is currently enrolled in a Doctor of Ministry with Charles Sturt University through St Francis College, Milton. His particular interest is preaching. He is married to Joan and we have three adult daughters and eight grandchildren.*

**Email:** *p\_jewoodward@bigpond.com*

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<sup>55</sup> Tanner, “Theological Reflection” 233