



WHAT ABOUT THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION? AN APOLOGIA

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Why engage in theological reflection? Why mix formal presentations with discussions among peers engaged in a common quest? A short anecdote may help.

I was once invited to assist with setting up opportunities for reflection around a lecture series. Those managing the event thought it might be possible to ask the various speakers to offer a series of lectures over a period of several days. Willing participants were then to retire for a retreat to reflect on what they had heard. After a moment to ponder this plan, I suggested that this may be like asking someone to eat all three meals for the day and then begin to digest them. It is possible, but at best it might be uncomfortable. Like digestion, reflection is a process that is always taking place to some degree, and it is best done incrementally.

Reflection is how we digest the information—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—that we sense and receive. Like digestion, it improves when done in the company of other friends as well as personally enjoyed. Eating alone creates isolation. Reflecting alone leads to narcissism. By and large, we human beings are communal animals. We live best in the company of others.

The Context for Reflection

Symposiums and lecture series have long provided opportunities for serious academic and professional discourse. Academic theology has favored these venues to provide opportunities for scholars to present their research and conclusions to their colleagues for reflection, critique, and stimulation. The format usually includes a presentation or series of lectures or presentations, usually lasting about one hour. This is usually followed by a “Question & Answer” (Q & A) period, usually about a half-hour, or a panel discussion to permit exchanges with other speakers or official responders. At some events the panelists provide formal responses that help set the framework to expand the discussion. The most traditional presentations are in the form of a discourse read from a manuscript.

The lecture presentation, Q & A, and panel discussions methods are effective to place information before an interested and knowledgeable public. Often these exchanges provide fodder for discussions and publications. Their influence, however, is often minimal. If we look on library shelves, we find them filled with the detritus of conferences that may have produced a stir, but little else. All too often symposia are isolated events that do not reach a wider public and that evoke little or no change. They are an outgrowth of the combination of the technology of the printing press and the ancient venue of the lecture hall. Much of the personal reflection with others occurs in the halls between presentations, over meals, and at informal receptions. It is, however, an undisciplined reflection; therefore few if any pose the question, “So what? What difference does all this make?” and “What will we do with what we have learned?” An undisciplined reflection may lead to uncritical acceptance, facile dismissal of the salient points, or, all too frequently, blissful forgetfulness. Learning to reflect is to develop a skill. It does not need to be left to chance. Nor should it be left to the vagrant opportunities of the coffee klatch or the cocktail party.

A tip-off to the need for reflection that many people recognize and affirm, albeit with a tacit nod, is that people desire free time. The time between sessions is important for the success of a conference. This offstage time provides the opportunity to digest the data, casually test it with colleagues, augment it, clarify it, debate it, and even defend it. This is also when relationships form between people, often strangers, around the opportunities to develop ideas that evolve from mutual concerns and interests. Unfortunately, this aspect of the process at a conference is often short-changed. Moreover, it is rarely formalized so that it might become a vital aspect of a conference. Recognition of this factor has produced a desire to offer opportunities for disciplined reflections among people who hold common interests so that the internal interpretation could take place and the products can be shared in order to enhance the quality of the conference and enhance potential results.

The Process of Reflection

We learn from our activities when we have the opportunity to think about them, analyze them, and draw conclusions about their meaning. Only then can we develop the quality of both our thoughts and our actions. Thus all reflective process begins with our activities—our engagements with ourselves, one another, and the wider world we encounter within the stream of daily life.

The nature of our observations, however, is always tempered. We know through our senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and vision; but they all can be fooled or at least misled. Our senses and our beliefs shape what we think and feel into perceptions that in turn provide a basis for our actions in ways that we do not always recognize. This explains, at least in part, why different people have different points of view about events we experience and then draw radically different conclusions. Such differences can produce opportunities for significant discoveries. They can also engender destructive conflicts, especially if there is no opportunity for the clarification and empathy that a reflective process can engender. The process of reflection can offer a method to reconcile differences through understanding, or at least to uncover common desires and needs that bridge over our differences. Reflection helps us to understand other points of view, even if we do not find them agreeable. In addition, one aspect a reflective process provides is an occasion to encounter the viewpoints of others that can become a corrective to misconceptions.

Theological Reflection and the Learning Process

Reflection is an aspect of any learning process. While everyone reflects in private, at least to a degree, the task of theological reflection belongs to a community, the community of the faithful believers, commonly called the Church with a capital C.

Reflection requires time. It may be accelerated by the careful applications of methods that promote a reflective discussion; but sufficient time and trust are essential elements of any reflective process. To build trusting relationships, time must first be granted to the development of community.

What Is Theological Reflection?

So what is “theological reflection?” Any disciplined reflection is an element of study, a part of every occasion for learning and discovery. What makes a reflection theological is the posing of questions that come from a theological context. Ultimately theological reflection is the examination of events we experience to seek God’s presence in our lives. It leads to our encounter with the divine Word, the divine incarnation as a present and eternal reality. Put more simply, theological reflection is a search for the most profound meaning we can encounter. It is done with the expectation that ultimate answers are always linked to the source of faith, the divine, the Creator.

In this context, theological reflection ultimately examines traditional theological topics such as the creation (what the world is like), the human condition (our experience of sin, guilt, confession, and forgiveness), salvation, the significance of community, and the final or eschatological aspects. All this is given life through the liturgical functions that express the theology we affirm and encourage the pursuit of life in the context of our baptismal vows.

The Key Elements of Theological Reflection

When casual conversations result in useful reflections they usually have unconsciously, or with purpose, pursued an outline that can be diagrammed by the elements for a reflective process.

These are:

1. A community of trust in which the reflective activity can occur in relative safety
2. A body of knowledge or lore under consideration
3. The context in which the reflection is taking place
4. The experience(s) of the participants that impinge on the reflection
5. The prior assumptions or presumptions of the participants that can be described by the introduction, "I believe that..."
6. A method of extrapolating or generalizing the elements of the reflection into a common/agreed-upon expression with which the participants can work. Metaphors, issue statements that present a situation as a tension or paradox, images, and doctrinal statements can all serve as methods by which to extrapolate elements on which reflection can focus
7. An intention to pursue the reflection to attain a useful outcome

ENGAGING IN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Forming the Reflecting Community

Community develops when we know and trust one another at a level appropriate to the work that is to be engaged. Routinely we begin this with questions and sharing personal characteristics such as our name, home, occupation, home situation, and relationship to the task at hand. The longer we work together and the more intimate we become, the better to produce a safe climate for reflection. The development of community requires openness, consideration for one another (listening), speaking the truth, rules or norms for engagement, confrontation, forgiveness, and celebration. It requires greetings and good-byes as well as rituals that provide routines and mark special moments.

The Conversational Frameworks

The Physical Frames

Our activities are the initial point for all reflections. Even if we are passively receiving information during a lecture, that itself is an activity, and we associate with it emotions as well as ideas. A willingness to examine our experiences is a prerequisite for any productive reflective process. What we do is the point of contact we have with reality. Reflection thus begins with our deeds. If we reflect honestly and well, the reflection on our activities then informs our subsequent actions.

The Emotional Frames

All too often we begin discussions with our thoughts and conclusions. The emotions, however, frame what we do, and it is difficult to get beyond this unless they are recognized and acknowledged. Emotions are complex but can be reduced to variations on anger, fear, sorrow, and joy. (Love and hate are frequently misunderstood. The opposite of both love and hate is apathy. Hate is best defined as the position we assume when we feel the pain of a love that has been thwarted. Love, hate, and apathy reflect a variety of emotions. The stances of love, hate, and apathy are expressed by a wide variety of overt and covert, as well as conscious and subconscious, behaviors.)

In a reflective community it is essential that there exist a safe climate to admit and express emotions. The manner of expressing emotions, of course, is key. Guidelines must exist and be enforced to protect against aggressions that destroy community. One way to do this is to assert that each person is responsible (able to respond) for her or his emotional state. "You make me..." is simply not an acceptable alibi for destructive emotional outbursts.

The Rational Frames

Rationality is often presumed to be sequential and linear, like identifying what causes or produces a certain result; the art of reason is more than setting events in logical sequence. It is the art of connecting links into a sequence and also recognizing relationships that have significance, even when they require a nonsequential leap of the imagination. Thus the rational framework of a reflection demands a careful identification and analysis of the information at hand as well as bold imagination.

For theological reflection, the first and primary documentation emerges from our theological traditions. It begins with the Bible, but also includes that massive body of literature found in liturgy, creeds, histories, confessions of faith, and other theological documents. A substantial portion of the discovery process of reflection comes when we engage the richness and diversity of our theological heritage.

The term "culture" best identifies the second body of information. Culture denotes the greater world—science, philosophies, politics, the news media, theater, literature, art, and many others. One of the perplexities today, of course, is that we live in a multitude of cultures simultaneously. Witness only the variety of ethnic restaurants we can find in any community. It thus becomes difficult to identify our own culture amidst a tidal wave of cultural symbols we encounter every day.

Framing the Right Questions

The questions we raise are important, but so is the construction of the questions we pose. The content and frame of questions preset the quality and content of the response. All too often we begin discussions with questions that are introduced by the interrogatives “how,” and “why.” To engage in a reflective process it is better to agree first on the information that is at hand, or at least to identify our differences. Questions that begin with “who,” “what,” “where,” and “when” are useful to elicit agreement about the facts. To initiate a reflection, it is best first to agree on a descriptive evaluation. Different perspectives will note various pieces of information that fill out a tableau that is larger than any single perspective. It may then be useful to produce metaphorical images that transcend the original event. These thus form generalizations with which all may identify.

The question introduced by “how” becomes useful after a particular point has been thoroughly explored. How something came to be can help a community to track trends and relationships. Relationships, such as correlations, however, may be misleading. One must be careful not to attribute cause just because a circumstantial proximity exists, no matter how suggestive this may seem. Causes, like motives, are often multiple and complex. A reflection is not a search for a cause or an occasion to fix blame. It is a search for meaning and the implications our discoveries reveal.

Finally, questions introduced by “why” are really ultimate questions. It is unfortunate when the question “why” is raised too early in a discourse. To establish too quickly why an event occurs may merely provide pretexts for dismissal. A facile dismissal is only helpful in a debate. It destroys creative reflection and fails to engender the discovery of new possibilities, understanding, or the potential to improve relationships and develop a productive community.

Theology: The Ongoing Dialogue

Theologians and scientists have expressed the idea that modern scientific thinking emerged from Christian theology inasmuch as one major theological thread has been and remains the continuing disclosure of revelation. God has provided an open-ended world, a creation that continues, and a redeeming love that never ends. This means that the theological tasks do not end.

We continue to be confronted by an ever-changing world and an all-loving God. Indeed, we contribute and participate in that change and participate in a response to the divine love. Reflective thinking is how we continue to discover the meaning of the developing drama of creation, how we find our role in this drama, and how we discover God in our midst. The process of discovery is exciting and energizing. It is the best kind of education, much more interesting than simply digesting information. But it does not happen by chance. An ongoing reflective dialogue is a process of discovery that calls us to renew our relationships with one another, with the creation, and most especially with God.

FOR MORE ABOUT THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION SEE:

Edward O. de Bary, *Theological Reflection: The Creation of Spiritual Power in the Information Age*.
Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003.

Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*. New York:
Crossroad, 1994.

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