

THEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

GOAL:

To have an understanding of the living, evolving nature of theology and how each person's theology is shaped by tradition, context and experience.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

After completing this module, participants will be able to:

- a.
 - i. give a definition of theology, both contextual and systematic
 - ii. describe a variety of theological positions
- b.
 - i. give examples of how theological reflection may be used to consider current issues
 - ii. address a current issue from one or more theological positions
- c.
 - i. display an openness to further growth in addressing theological issues
 - ii. demonstrate the ability to think theologically, both in contextual and systematic terms

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WHAT TO DO

Step One Understanding and Defining Christian Theology 4 hours

1.
 - a. Make a list, or diagram, or collage, of as many names, titles, definitions, images, and symbols of God, as you can.
 - i. Start with the Bible and see how many you can find there. The Psalms can be a helpful place, eg. Ps 27:1 - God = Lord, light, salvation, and stronghold or fortress. Or Ps 36: 7 - God = a bird with sheltering wings. Choose at least ten, with some from each of the Old and New Testaments.
 - ii. Then look at Prayer Books, Church Services, Liturgies, Hymns, Songs, Prayers, etc, and add at least another ten you find there.
 - iii. Then look over these and seeing the kind of thing they include add any you can think of yourself that might be suitable, but which you have not yet seen in the sources you have looked at.
 - iv. Then reflect on your own life, experiences, faith journey, and add a few more that describe your own experience of God.
 - b. Make another list, or diagram, or collage, this time about you.
 - i. Start with your own name at the top, or in the middle of the page, and then add things about yourself. Begin with your birth-date, the years you have lived, add in the different places you have lived and especially where you live now, add your family members, relatives and friends.
 - ii. Add any cultural groupings you feel you belong to, eg. racial, ethnic, age group, musical, creative, etc, then add the social groups you belong to, eg. clubs, sports, gangs, interests, etc, and then add any other information that you think might help describe something about you.
 - c. Read the Resources section, 'What is Theology?' on pages 5 - 10. You have already begun to develop your own 'systematic' theology about God, from the names, titles, definitions, images, and symbols of God you have listed in exercise a). You have also begun to describe your own context in exercise b).
 - d. Using your material from 1. a) reflect on which images of God seem to 'fit' your context as outlined in 1. b).
 - i. Fill in the following table to note those that seem to particularly 'fit', and any that do not 'fit', or feel odd, for you. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' images, but rather just some that are more or less relevant for you and your particular context. You will then have begun to develop your own contextual theology about God.
 - ii. Which is the most significant image of God for you?
 - iii. Write a paragraph about why it is the most significant.

Images of God that 'fit' for me

Images of God that feel 'odd' for me

- |
-
- |
- e. Reflecting on the above exercises, write a paragraph defining your understanding of ‘systematic’ theology and its sources. Do the same for your understanding of ‘contextual’ theology.

Step Two	Describing a Variety of Different Theological Positions	5 hours
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2.

- a. Read the Resources section, ‘Other Theological Positions’, on page 9-10. Write a paragraph explaining which of the different theological positions described in the Resources sections, ‘Systematic Theology’, ‘Contextual Theology’, and ‘Other Theological Positions’, you see reflected in your own developing theology from the exercises in Step One and note why you feel drawn to these positions. There may be more than one.
- b. Interview three different people, asking them to tell you about their most significant names, titles, definitions, images, and symbols of God. Ask what these mean to them and why they are important. Choose at least one person whose answers are likely to be quite different from yours. Record their responses and reflect on the differences and similarities.
- c. The following statement is the topic for a debate. Prepare at least 300 words arguing for and 300 words arguing against this statement, as if for a debate speech. You may wish to present this as a taped speech. Use illustrations from the exercises in Step One, the interviews in Step Two - part b), and ideas from the Resources material you have read so far.

Debate Topic: “There are no right or wrong theological positions, but rather different theological positions suit different people and reflect different contexts and world views.”

Step Three	Understanding Theological Reflection	2 hours
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3.

- a. Read the Resources section ‘What is Reflection?’, on page 10-11, and then try to think of two simple examples in your own life, like the tripping over the coat example, where you have undertaken the process of reflection and write a brief record of them making sure you cover the four stages: experiencing, identifying, analysing, and generalising.
- b. Read the Resources section, ‘Theological Reflection’, on pages 11-14. Make a list of several statements under each of the four categories of human knowledge.
 - i. For ‘Personal Action’ they might start with ‘I remember ...’, or ‘I feel...’.
 - ii. For ‘Personal Position’ they might start with ‘I believe...’, or ‘In my opinion or ‘All parents are...’.
 - iii. For ‘Culture’ they might start with ‘My parents taught me...’, or ‘the trend is...’, or ‘Everyone knows that...’.
 - iv. For ‘Tradition’ they might start with ‘Jesus said...’, or ‘The church

believes....’, or ‘The Bible states...’, or ‘Some Christians claim...’.

Step Four	Using Theological Reflection to Consider Current Issues from Different Theological Positions.	4 hours
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4. Read the Resources section, ‘An Example of the Four-Source Theory of Theological Reflection’, on pages 12-14.
 - a. Choose an example of a ‘Personal Action’ experience from your own life that focuses on a ‘current issue’ and work through a ‘Four-Source’ theological reflection on that experience, as the example demonstrates. Make notes about your thoughts and feelings at each stage under the four headings, ‘Personal Action’, ‘Personal Position’, ‘Culture’, and ‘Tradition’
 - b. Make notes about the ‘conversation’ between the four sources under the heading ‘Comparisons and Contrasts’, noting any similarities and any differences between the sources.
 - c. Finally, under the heading ‘Outcomes’, note any insights you have gained in this exercise, any questions you are left with, and any implications for future action that have emerged for you. You have now begun to develop the skills of theological reflection on your own life experience of ‘current issues’.

Optional Reflection Exercises:

Note: If you have already had some experience of theological reflection, or wish to extend your experience further than this module requires, then consider working with one, or both, of the two optional methods of theological reflection that follow.

This is not a requirement for the completion of this module, which is finished once you have completed Steps One to Four in the ‘What To Do’ section above.

1. Read the Resources sections, ‘The Microscope Method of Theological Reflection’ and ‘An Example of The Microscope Method of Theological Reflection’. Pick a life experience from your own life and work through the ten steps of the EFM ‘microscope method’ on your own, making notes of what you think of at each step. Follow the Example given if you have any difficulty. On reflection see if you can identify which theological position, or positions, as described in the Resources Section, were reflected in this exercise. Do the same exercise with a small group you are involved with, making notes about what comes up for you at each step. Obviously if you are part of an EFM course group this will be easier, but any study group, youth leaders’ group, or similar group would be suitable. Again note which of the described theological positions appeared to be reflected in this exercise. Remember none of these positions are right or wrong, they just reflect different contexts and world-views..
2. Read the Resources section, ‘A Liberation Theology Method of Theological Reflection’. Choose a ‘group of common interest’ to which you naturally belong and begin to work through the seven steps of the ‘Liberation Theology’ method of theological reflection.

RESOURCE MATERIAL

What is Theology?

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that there is no ‘one’ theology, no ‘one’ way of looking at or understanding God, but rather a variety of theologies, each one from a different position or context. As is discussed below all theologies are ‘contextual’, that is they relate to the position or context that they come from. In one sense each person has their own theology, their own perspective or viewpoint, though groupings of people with similar viewpoints, or from common contexts, may share a particular theology. More of that later!

Theology comes from two Greek words, ‘theos’ which means ‘God’, and ‘logos’ which means ‘word’. So, from the word ‘theology’ itself we can get some understanding of its meaning as being essentially ‘God-words’, or ‘words about God’. Theology is sometimes referred to as ‘God-talk’, or ‘discourse about God’, or even ‘reflection on God’. You may have already encountered the brief definition of theology given in the module “Exploring Youth Ministry”, where theology was described as, ‘talk about God, and relationships between God, ourselves and the world’. This suggests that theology is an action, it involves talking and reflecting, it is something that is ‘done’. So theology is the action which is involved in the task of understanding our life and our world in relation to God.

This action of ‘doing’ theology draws on several key sources in order to reach an understanding of *God, ourselves and the world, and how they are related*. These sources each, and together, reveal something to us of God, ourselves and the world, and how they are related, and are usually acknowledged as being;

- Scripture,
- Reason,
- Tradition, and
- Experience.

So ‘doing’ theology is going to involve;

- a) reading, studying and reflecting on Scripture, that is the Bible,
- b) using our intellect and current developments in understanding to Reason out what we think and believe,
- c) learning about and taking account of different Traditional understandings and insights throughout the history of the Christian church since the New Testament times,
- d) and understanding and reflecting on our own and other peoples’ particular context and Experience in relation to these things, so that our theology is relevant

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

One way into understanding theology is to begin with talk about God. So one might begin with something one thinks or believes about God, e.g. ‘God creates’, and then reflect on what that might mean about God, e.g. God created the world, God created people, God created me, etc. ‘Systematic’ approaches to theology begin this way, usually with reflection on God in light of the Bible and biblical scholarship, and current intellectual developments, to result in universal, and apparently static, beliefs that make up a “systematic analysis of the nature, purposes and activity of God”¹. Such ‘systematic’ theologies develop various beliefs about *God* like this, and then develop beliefs about *humanity* and about the *world* in the same way, so that they ‘fit’ with each other and do not contradict each other.

A theology is ‘systematic’ in that it builds up each belief about God in relation to other

¹ McGrath, A.E., Christian Theology: an introduction, 1994, Blackwells, Oxford, p. 118.

beliefs about God, and then in relation to beliefs about ourselves, that is humanity, and about the world, resulting in a comprehensive and all-embracing statement, or series of statements, that make up a Christian theology².

‘Systematic’ theologies usually include statements of belief about the following sorts of things:

TITLE:	EXAMPLE:
God	the person, nature and characteristics of God
Christ	the person, nature and characteristics of Christ
the Holy Spirit	the person, nature and characteristics of the Holy Spirit
the Trinity	biblical and historical understandings of the relationships of the trinity
Creation	relationship to God, nature, ongoing creation
Revelation	how, where and why God is revealed
Salvation	the place of the cross, the role of Christ, who is saved, how, and when?
Human nature	the nature of humanity, sin, grace, and faith
the Church	its nature and role, how it is one, holy, catholic and apostolic
the Sacraments	what they are, how many there are, and how they function
Liturgy	why, how and what we mean in worship

The agreed faith and belief of the Christian church, as much as ‘one’ such understanding can be identified, is called ‘orthodox’ theology, and this is an example of a ‘systematic’ theology. ‘Orthodoxy’ comes from the two Greek words, ‘orthos’, which means ‘right or straight’, and ‘dokeo’, which means ‘to think or suppose’, so means something like ‘the right thought’. Though note here that, as is discussed below, there is always the question to be asked, ‘*Who* determines what is ‘right’?’, which makes even ‘orthodox’ theology a contextual theology. More of that later!

‘Orthodox’ theology understands God, humanity and the world, as revealed in Scripture and described by the historical creeds of the church, like the ‘Nicene Creed’ and the ‘Apostles’ Creed’, which we sometimes say in church services. This ‘orthodox’ theology is one that has been systematically developed over the first several centuries of the Christian church’s existence, and attempts to build up a comprehensive and universal understanding of God, humanity and the world, and how these things relate, so that all the statements about these things ‘fit’ together somehow. ‘Orthodox’ theology understands God primarily as ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’.

It is important to acknowledge that ‘orthodox’ theology developed over the first few centuries of the Christian church as a result of the process of the early church trying to work out how it understood what it believed. This process involved some early theologians developing theologies that challenged those of other early theologians. For example one theologian might suggest an argument that goes as follows:

“God is so different from humankind, so much the divine ‘other’ in

² McGrath, A.E., (1994), p. 50

comparison with us, that if God was incarnate in Jesus Christ, if Jesus was the eternal Son of God, part of who God is, then Jesus can not have been ‘really’ human, because God is ‘other’ than human. So Jesus must have just ‘appeared’ to have been human, looked human so we could relate to him and understand him, but not really been human at all”.

Other theologians who disagreed with this view would then respond to these ideas about God and Jesus by suggesting a counter argument that goes as follows:

“God is ‘other’, but God can and did become incarnate in Jesus Christ in a special way, so that Jesus was uniquely the eternal Son of God in his own human form. He was mysteriously both God and human, so did not just ‘appear’ to be human, but really was human.”

You might recognise this theology in the Nicene Creed, where it states:

“We believe in ... Jesus Christ, the only Son of God ... true God from true God ... of one Being with the Father... became incarnate ... and was made human.”

So then, if this second view was the view of the majority of theologians then it would become ‘orthodox’ theology, the ‘right thought’ of the majority, and the other view would be deemed to be ‘wrong thought’, called ‘heterodoxy’, which comes from the Greek words, ‘heteros’, which means ‘other or different’, and ‘dokeo’, which means ‘to think or suppose’.

Unfortunately, such was the culture of the times, and the religious / political climate, that often those theologians who had suggested the ‘wrong’ theology, those deemed by the majority to be ‘heterodox’ rather than ‘orthodox’, were exiled and banished to far off places, or excommunicated from the church, or put to death. So ‘orthodox’ theology is a theology born out of conflict and as a result of the majority ‘mainline’ theological position of the early church managing that conflict so that their theology was accepted as ‘right’. Though, without the different theologies being suggested and the disagreements being worked out there might not have been the need for the early church to have developed what became ‘orthodox’ theology to the extent that they did.

As well as the early church leaders and theologians who developed the creeds and the understandings behind them, historically there are some renowned theologians who have devoted years and years, even whole lifetimes, to developing such ‘systematic’ theologies. You may have heard of ‘Thomas Aquinas’ of the thirteenth century, or ‘Karl Barth’ of the earlier part of the twentieth century, who are two theologians who have done this and then published their ‘systematic theologies’, which take up at least several volumes each!

Systematic theology takes the view that one works out a theology first, how one understands God, humanity and the world, from within the context of what the ‘Good News’ might mean in the world, and then uses that understanding, that theology, to interpret one’s own life experience. It is a deductive process that begins with more abstract and universal ideas and propositions, and then works towards the more particular and concrete context of life experience.

As noted above some people assume that ‘systematic’ theologies are static and fixed, but as can be seen from the brief example of how ‘orthodox’ theology developed, they are actually contextual, in that they reflect the context in which they were developed and serve the purposes of those who developed them. In the case of the ‘orthodox’ theology of the early church, the context is one of disagreement and conflict, and of trying to work out how the church understood what it believed, and the purposes are those of managing that conflict and

ensuring that the views of the dominant church patriarchs were accepted as 'right'. So even 'systematic' and 'orthodox' theologies are limited to their context, regardless of whether this is recognised and admitted or not.

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

Another way into understanding theology is to begin with one's own context and life experience, rather than with an idea or belief about God. This means that one person's theology will differ from other people's theologies, because of factors like, the specific time, place, culture, socio-economic status, and human groupings one belongs to in history. This is also sometimes known as 'historical' theology, and unlike 'systematic' theology it is not assumed to be static and universal, but quite the opposite as it results in a theology which is particular to a specific context, and so is provisional, conditional, dynamic and often reactive. It is a more inductive process that begins with concrete, particular, and incarnational experience and works towards the more abstract and universal ideas. Many of the more modern approaches to theology are of this type and you may have heard of some of the following theological positions, perspectives, or movements, and the resulting contextual theologies:

1. **'liberation' theology**, which comes out of the experience and context of being poor, oppressed and dis-empowered, especially in reaction to a wealth and power dominated society, church and faith understanding. Liberation theology seeks equality, and the freedom and emancipation of the poor and oppressed, and understands God as the one who sides with the poor and marginalised, against the powerful and oppressors, as liberator and revolutionary. It emerged in the 1960's in Latin America and especially within the Roman Catholic Church, though now has different forms in many different places throughout the world.
2. **'feminist' theology**, which comes out of the experience and context of being woman, especially in reaction to a male dominated society, church and faith understanding. Feminist theology seeks equality, and the freedom and emancipation of women in the Christian faith and the churches, and understands God in more inclusive or female terms, like as Mother, Lover and Friend¹. It is a form of critical liberation theology, about liberation from sexism and patriarchy, and emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century.
3. **'black' theology**, which comes out of the experience and context of being black, especially in reaction to a white dominated society, church and faith understanding. Black theology seeks equality, and the freedom and emancipation of black communities in predominantly white societies, and understands God in more indigenous terms, and as creating all people equal. It is also a form of critical liberation theology, about liberation from racism and bigotry, and emerged in the USA from the 1960's.

¹ McFague, S., Models of God: theology for an ecological, nuclear age, 1987, SCM Press, London.

OTHER THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS

reflecting different viewpoints, or developments in thinking about and understanding the world.

1. **‘liberal’ theology**, developed as a reaction to the above described ‘orthodox’ theology, and in response to a development in thinking about and understanding the world. This development came from the 17th - 18th century (known as the Enlightenment period) and saw a change in the way ‘truth’ was identified. Where ‘orthodox’ theology relies on the *Revelation* of ‘truth’ through Scripture and the Creeds, ‘liberal’ theology relies on human thought and *Reason* to identify ‘truth’. Where ‘orthodox’ theology believes that ‘truth’ about God, humanity and the world was fixed and static, ‘liberal’ theology claims that ‘truth’ can change and develop.

For example, ‘orthodox’ theology understands human nature as working against God’s will, and thus essentially evil. Whereas ‘liberal’ theology understands God as creating people essentially good and not evil, thus has a more positive view of human nature. ‘Liberal’ theology claims that humanity can improve and develop, rather than remain fixed and static. ‘Liberal’ theology recognises that over time life evolves, changes and develops, thus implying that ‘truth’ also evolves, changes and develops as new cultural and intellectual insights are gained.

1. **‘modernist’ theology**, also developed as a reaction to ‘orthodox’ theology and in response to a development of the Enlightenment. This development was the new understanding of history and the natural sciences that allowed criticism of parts of the biblical account, like the story of creation. For example, scientific thought and reasoning was questioning the literal, historical accuracy of the creation story of Genesis, ie. ‘Did it literally take only six days to create the world, or is the Genesis creation story more symbolic than that?’

So ‘modernist’ theology emphasises a critical and sceptical attitude to ‘orthodox’ Christian teachings based on literal interpretations of Scripture. It became all right to question the Genesis creation story in terms of scientific thought and historical possibility. It is a form of liberal religious thought that stresses the ethical (what does this mean for us?) rather than the more theological (what does this mean about God?) dimensions of faith. ‘Modernist’ theology would see the ‘truth’ about God, humanity and the world, as being able to be rationally discovered, through objective and scientific thinking.

1. **‘neo-orthodox’ theology**, or a ‘renewed orthodox theology’, comes out of the experience of reviewing and questioning ‘liberal’ theology’s involvement in twentieth century western culture and society (especially in post-war Europe and North America). This theology is in part a return to, or a reinforcement of, the ‘orthodox’ theology described above. ‘Neo-orthodox’ theology questions whether human thought and reason can reveal ‘truth’ at all; ie. whether there is any direct contact between God and humanity other than God’s initiative in Jesus Christ on the cross. ‘Liberal’ theology’s ideas of contact, or revelation of ‘truth’, through human intellect, reason, or moral sense, are rejected. The primary task of theology is seen as identifying God *only* through God’s self-revelation in Christ’s life, death and resurrection.
2. **‘post-liberal’ theology**, comes out of a North American context and understands Scripture as primarily stories that explain only the writers’ own perspective and understanding of God, humanity, and the world (known as the narrative approach). It

uses social scientific perspectives that emphasise the importance of culture and language in understanding all experience and thought. In this, it is a reaction against 'orthodox' theology and its claim that Scripture can reveal 'truth' about God. It is also a reaction against 'liberal' theology and its claim that culture and experience, while changing and developing over time, can still reveal 'truth' about God.

'Post-liberal' theology would see any image of God as only something that a particular people (a culture) has developed using its own language, to understand and speak about God. Anything we say about God does not actually describe God, but only describes what we think God might be like, within the limits of our own culture and language.

1. **'post-modernist' theology**, is a reaction against 'modernist' theology, as described above. It comes out of a recognition that human experience is varied and different for all people. It believes that because there is no sense of 'unity' or 'similarity' in human experience there can be no *one*, scientific, reasoned, rationally discovered 'truth', as 'modernist' theology claimed.

"Post-modernist' theology claims that the world, since about the 1960's, is so varied, and there are so many competing points of view, that no one view can be 'truth' on its own. 'Post-modernist' theology would see that everyone has a different and equally valid image of God, so no *one* idea about God is 'normal' or 'right' for all people.

1. **'evangelical' theology**, comes out of a response to many of the above mentioned theologies, in reaction against their emphases on various developments in ways of thinking about and understanding the world. It centres on the following four claims:
 - a belief that Scripture alone is sufficient and has the authority to identify 'truth',
 - that the only way to be saved is through the death of Christ on the cross,
 - that there is the need for personal conversion,
 - and, the necessity and urgency of evangelism.

'Evangelical' theology sees God as primarily 'personal saviour' and 'redeemer'.

What is Reflection?

Reflection is a basic human process that is going on all the time, even as you read this, where one looks back on what has happened and analyses it in order to make sense of one's life experiences. This process of reflection involves four distinct stages:

1. 'Experiencing' something - it can be any event in life no matter how small
2. 'Identifying' that experience - subconsciously or intentionally describing the event
3. 'Analysing' that experience - the actual reflection on the event
4. 'Generalising' from that experience and analysis - determining future action

For a simple example:

1. Experience - you tripped over in the hallway,
2. Identifying - you identified that you tripped over and that it was your coat which had been left on the floor that had caused you to trip,
3. Analysing - you noted that there was a hanger there but that you had not bothered to hang the coat up, decided that you would rather not trip over your coat next time you went down the hallway,
4. Generalising - you resolved to hang your coat up and remember to do so after the next time you wore it.

This shows how you would have undertaken the process of reflection on the life experience of tripping in the hallway.

Theological Reflection

This everyday activity of reflection becomes ‘theological’ when the process is done in the light of the Christian faith or ‘mythos’, by which is meant “that set of symbols, rituals, narratives, and assertions which, taken together, announce and mediate the presence of the sacred”¹. This means that after the ‘experiencing’ stage, and the ‘identifying’ stage, the ‘analysing’ of the experience is done in the light of the four sources of, ‘Scripture’, ‘Reason’, ‘Tradition’, and ‘Experience’. And out of this ‘theological reflection’ comes the ‘generalising’ of future action that reflects a commitment to the Christian faith and lifestyle.

There are a variety of methods and ways to do ‘theological reflection’ but any sound theological reflection will involve the above four stages, and analysis in light of the four ‘sources’ of theology. Such reflection seeks to discover a direction for living as one of God’s ministers in the world. It is an intentional process, though with practice can become partly intuitive, and involves hard work using your emotions and intellect, and being able to tell the truth, to yourself, and to others. The result of such an endeavour is the reward of seeking to live faithfully as a Christian amidst the ambiguity and brokenness of the world.

A FOUR-SOURCE THEORY OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION²

This theory of theological reflection is contained in the course known as ‘Education for Ministry’ (EFM). The EFM theory defines the following four categories of human knowledge that together describe the four theological sources that need to be part of the analysing stage of the reflection process. The first two categories are personal in nature so are particular to each individual undertaking the reflection process. The latter two categories are communal in nature and so in a sense exist before the individual and continue afterward, though each individual plays their part in shaping and forming the continuing nature of these two shared categories.

1. ‘Personal Action’- this is one’s own experience of life, like the events of the ‘experiencing’ stage, which are described in the ‘identifying’ stage. It includes any such description of what happens to people and how they feel about those events now.
2. ‘Personal Position’- this is one’s own opinions, convictions, beliefs, and attitudes, about experiences, people and things. It includes part of the specific and particular context of the ‘analysing’ stage.
3. ‘Culture’- this is part of the broader context of the ‘analysing’ stage, which includes the contextual elements of family traditions, political environment, social trends, values, national symbols, academic disciplines and ethics.
4. ‘Tradition’- this is the public content of the Christian faith including beliefs, Scripture, Creeds, Doctrines, Church History, Liturgy, Theology, etc. In the broadest sense it is

¹ Jennings, T.W., Introduction to Theology: an invitation to reflection on the Christian mythos, 1976, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, p. 2.

² Kinman, C., Learning Resource Guide, Common Lesson: Series A, Education for Ministry Course, 1988, Sewanee, Tennessee, USA, pp. 5-6.

anything to do with the biblical, historical, and ongoing story of the people of God. This category needs to take account of different theological positions, as described above, and not only the position, or positions, of the people experiencing the 'Personal Action'.

In this theory, sound 'theological reflection' involves a 'conversation' between these four sources, or categories, in relation to a specific life experience. This 'conversation' involves the *comparing and contrasting* of the different sources, or categories, to determine similarities and differences. Such conversation is the very stuff of theological reflection. One writer states that "dialogue ... is the lifeblood of theological reflection"¹. This dialogue needs to take place between the four sources and four categories, so that the perspective of any one source, or category, does not unduly affect the outcome. The outcomes of such a process of theological reflection are, the insights gained, the questions left unanswered, and the implications that emerge for future action.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE FOUR-SOURCE THEORY OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Note: This example focuses on the current issue of gendered language for God.

1. Personal Action:

I remember that I went to a worship service and part of the way through, during the prayers of intercession, I was struck by the exclusive use of 'male' images for God. Every prayer began with something like, 'Father God', 'Almighty Father', 'Our King', 'Lord God', 'Heavenly Father', and they asked for 'His blessings', 'His mercy', 'His love and goodness', etc. It really struck me in a way it had not done before, probably because this was such an obvious example of only male language being used, and all in a row one after the other, with hardly any other neutral images like, "Creator God", "God of Love", or 'Our Saviour and friend', and absolutely no female images at all.

I found myself becoming quite annoyed and getting a bit wound up about how exclusive it all was. I began to think of other images that could be used, and thought about having a word after the service to the person who led the prayers. Then I started to look through the service book and realised that there were a lot of male images for God in there. There were a few neutral ones too, but I could not find any female ones at all. Then I looked in the hymn book and it was even worse. By now I had lost all connection with the service and was quite angry about the way the service book, the hymns and the prayers were so biased to only male images of God. I did not speak to anyone about it afterward in the end but went away still annoyed about the whole thing and not sure what I could do about it.

2. Personal Position

I believe that God is neither male nor female exclusively, and probably incorporates characteristics of both male and female. So I think that it is quite appropriate to address God as either male or female, and in fact we should probably do both. I find worship that uses exclusively male terms for God makes me a bit angry, and I think it does not do justice to the breadth and depth of who God is, that could be shown through using both male and female images. In my opinion worship should use more of the gender neutral images for God, and should also try to balance out the number of male and female images used so that it does not reinforce the idea that God can be thought of only in male terms. Consequently, I do not think the answer is to do just the opposite and use only female images for God either as that still undersells God, if you ask me.

¹ Jennings, T.W., (1976), p. 5.

3. Culture

I was brought up in a church and family where God was always referred to in male images, and so I grew up thinking that God was some sort of old man in the sky, sitting on a cloud somewhere with a long white beard and surrounded by angels with harps. I always prayed to God as 'Our Father', and was taught the Lords' Prayer which starts that way, so that is how I thought of God. It sounds funny now, but the Sunday School and Children's' Bible images I grew up with depicted that sort of image of God. I know that most people probably had the same sort of experience of God images, and still many of the service books and especially the hymn and song books have mostly these sort of images of God.

I am aware though of some people in society and the church who use more female images for God, or try to use only neutral images for God, but they are still a minority in my experience. The trend in some places now is to look again at the language used for God in worship, and while some changes are being made in some places, the predominant image is still one of a male God.

4. Tradition

The Bible seems to mostly talk about God in male terms, as 'Father', 'Lord', 'King', 'He' and 'Him'. The Gospels have Jesus speaking of God as his 'Father', and the Lords' Prayer starts off with 'Our Father in heaven'. As I mentioned already many service books have male God images and most of the hymns and songs in church do too. The 'orthodox' theology of the Creeds define God as the trinity of 'Father, Son and Spirit', which is all pretty male really. All through church history God has almost always been referred to in male images.

Yet I am aware that there are other images of God in the Bible too, that don't seem to get included in services and songs so much, like the female images of God as 'Mother' (Num 11:12, Deut 32:18, Job 38:29, Ps 131:2), 'Midwife' (Ps 22:9-10), 'Mother eagle with chicks' (Deut 32:11, Ps 36:7), 'Mother hen with chicks' (Mt 23:37, Lk 13:34), 'Wise woman' (Prov 1:20-21, Prov 4:5-9), etc, and the neutral images of God as 'friend', 'sibling', 'lover', 'servant', 'supporter', etc. There are alternative readings and interpretations of the Bible that recapture and emphasise the female images and the more inclusive images. There are feminist theologies that explore beliefs like the trinity, in female and inclusive terms, rather than only in male terms. There are increasingly available service books and many songs and hymns that use neutral images of God, or use female as well as male images.

5. Comparisons and Contrasts

It seems that my own unease and anger about the exclusive use of male images of God in worship is shared by at least some other people in society and the church, especially the feminist theologians and biblical scholars, and those who are working on more inclusive theologies and liturgies and songs. Yet my own position about God being neither male nor female does run against my own cultural upbringing and the predominant cultural understanding. While I, and some others, might be upset about the issue many other people in society and the church are not.

While the Bible appears to talk mostly of God in male terms, there are many neutral and female images in it as well, which supports my own thoughts about God. Also modern biblical criticism would suggest that one reason for there being more male than female images of God in the Bible is because the books of the Bible were almost all compiled and written by men, and so they have a built in bias to understand God in their own male terms and images. The same could be said about many service books and hymns too.

6. Outcomes

From this reflection I can now put my annoyance into some perspective, and see the size of

the task before me if I believe that there needs to be further change towards a more inclusive and balanced use of God images. I am also able to identify some support for my own position from other people and can now read some of the theology and other things being written about the issue. I can become more aware of alternative readings of Scripture, rediscover some of the female and neutral images in the bible, and some of the worship and song resources being produced for more inclusive worship.

I am left with questions about how this apparently obvious imbalance has existed for so long in the history and tradition of the church, in its' theology and its' worship, though I have some insight into the influence that the dominance of men in forming that theology and developing that worship might have had in that. I am convicted to learn more about the nature of God as being without gender, or as incorporating both genders, and about alternative images of God. I am committed to trying to use a balance of images for God when ever I am involved in planning and leading worship, by the names I use for God, and the prayers and hymns I choose to use to worship God. I will also seek to talk to other people about the issue in a creative and non-judgemental way whenever I can so that I can see if others' share my views and wish to work towards the same goals of inclusive worship that uses balanced images of God.

The Microscope Method of Theological Reflection¹

The EFM course applies the above four-source theory in what they call the 'microscope method' of theological reflection. This method is designed for use in groups but can be applied individually as well. It is called the microscope method because it begins with a microscopic piece of one persons experience, which is then reflected on using the method by the whole group, to discover how God is addressing them through that type of life experience.

The microscope method is built around ten steps which give an outline for the reflection process. The steps are as follows:

1. A group member presents the group with a moment in their life experience that challenged their feelings, assumption or values.
2. The group help the presenter to identify specific 'shifts in action' or 'turning points' in the experience. Then one of these points is chosen as the microscopic piece of life.
3. The presenter recalls the cluster of thoughts and feelings specific to the chosen point.
4. The members of the group each recall a time in their own life experience when they have had the same, or a very similar, cluster of thoughts and feelings. The life experiences of each member can be very different so long as they invoke the same cluster of thoughts and feelings.
5. Together the group brainstorm and decide on an image, or metaphor, that expresses the cluster of thoughts and feelings. Eg. It is like 'a ray of sunlight', or 'a deep black hole'.
6. The group explore the world of the image/ metaphor, ie. the world of 'the ray of sunlight' or 'the deep black hole', or whatever image was decided on. They use perspective questions like, what is the world like?, what is negative in this world?, where is the judgement in this world?, where is God in this world?, what would be reason for celebration in this world?.

¹ Kinman, C., (1988), pp. 6-9.

7. The group brainstorms pieces of tradition which the image/ metaphor calls to mind. Eg. Where in Scripture, or church history, does a 'ray of sunlight' or 'deep black hole' type experience occur. They can then choose one and ask the perspective questions of it also.
8. The group compares and contrasts the perspectives of the world of the image/ metaphor with those of the world of the tradition, noting any cultural or personal perspectives that relate to the discussion.
9. Individually group members identify insights gained and questions remaining, and can share some of these with the group.
10. Individually group members decide on implications for future action coming from the reflection, and can also share these if they choose to.

Using this method in a group does depend on having a skilled group facilitator, or 'mentor' as they are called in the EFM course. It also hinges on the group finding a suitable and agreed image/ metaphor, as this component is central to this method. On looking at the ten steps one can see how it works through the four stages of the reflection process outlined above, with a particular way of focussing on the analysing stage. The Experiencing stage occurs before the ten step reflection process, then the Identifying stage begins at Step 1 and continues through until around Step 4. The Analysing stage overlaps with the Identifying stage and begins in Step 2, continuing through until Step 8, then the Generalising stage is covered in Steps 9 and 10.

AN EXAMPLE OF 'THE MICROSCOPE METHOD OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION'

1. A while ago now I went to visit a rest home for elderly people and met there a woman who was about to turn 100 years old. I got talking to her about her life and various experiences and discovered she had lived almost all her life in the same town that the home was in, and had grown up in a house just two streets away from where we sat. She had seen the town grow up around her into a small city and could recount many stories about the 'old days' and how things had changed. She had come from a large family and had worked all her adult life, never marrying, and leading a quite independent lifestyle until she had moved into the home just a few years previously. She now lived in a small single bedroom, with only a few of her things around her, unable to get out much and having most of her meals brought to her. Yet she was happy and rejoiced about the things she had done and the life she had lived thus far.
2. Some of the 'turning points' or 'shifts in action' in this experience were:
when she told me she was about to turn 100 years old,
after we had talked a bit and she said she had always lived around there and her family home was just around the corner,
when she told me she had only moved into the home a few years ago when she could no longer cope on her own at her home,
and, when I realised that she was really happy and rejoiced in her life even though she had now lost some independence and was restricted to one small room.

The point that I chose as the 'microscopic piece of life', because I had the most energy for it, was the last of these, when I realised how happy she was.

3. The specific feelings and thoughts at this particular moment were:
surprise, delight, awe, humility, a bit of wonder
not being sure if I could feel the same in her shoes, but hoping that I could
4. If I was in a group the others would now have tried to recall an experience in their

own lives that also involved the same cluster of feelings and thoughts, or as many of them as possible. These might be something like:
 watching a disabled friend win a wheelchair race,
 seeing the joy on my wife's face at the birth of our first child after a very difficult labour,
 getting something I really wanted as an unexpected gift from a friend,
 seeing someone open their exam results and passing after struggling with a subject

5. Some possible images or metaphors that help define this moment of experience and this cluster of feelings and thoughts are:

a sudden ray of sunlight beaming down through the clouds on me
 turning the corner in a stream to find a high waterfall tumbling down towards me
 having a film, or binoculars, come into focus, after being blurred
 lighting a candle in a blacked out room

The image / metaphor I chose to best capture this experience and cluster of feelings was 'a ray of sunlight'.

6. The world of the metaphor: 'a ray of sunlight'
- what is it like? - bright, revealing, surprising, focussed, warm,
 - what is negative? - it only shines on one place, doesn't last, can be blinding
 - where is the judgement? - it can shine a light on faults, show up inadequacies, there is no hiding from the light, it reveals all,
 - where is God? - in the surprise, in the self revelation, alongside to guide while temporarily blinded,
 - what can be celebrated? - the warmth, the light, the revelation, the new understanding, the clarity,

7. Pieces of tradition that are like a 'ray of sunlight' experience:
- Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3)
 - Jesus, the three disciples, and the transfiguration on the mountain (Mt 17)
 - the child moving inside Elizabeth when she met Mary (Luke 1)
 - St Francis before the cross of St Damiano, when it spoke to him

I chose the Elizabeth and Mary story to explore a bit further. (Luke 1: 39 - 45)

- what is it like? - joyful, revealing, surprising, Spirit filled, blessed
- what is negative? - it is a momentary experience, it could be a bit frightening,
- where is the judgement? - the response of the baby is revealing something the mother is not aware of, there is no avoiding the experience,
- where is God? - in the joy and surprise, in the revelation, in the Spirit and in the blessings, in the potential of the children yet to be born
- what can be celebrated? - the joy, the revelation, the blessings, the promise

8. Comparison and contrast between the world of the image / metaphor in step 6 and the world of the tradition in step 7:

- both are surprising and revealing, neither is lasting, both could have short term negative affects like the blinding and the fright,
- one is bright and warm, while the other is joyful and Spirit blessed,
- neither can be avoided, so both are beyond our control, and both reveal all
- God is in both, in the surprise and the revelation, shedding light and insight
- there are similar things to be celebrated in both, though there may be more long term promise in the tradition

Cultural and personal perspectives:

- light is usually seen as a good thing, though it is undiscerning in what it reveals, both good and bad things are 'brought to light'
- surprises can be both positive and negative, immediately and in the long term,
- sunlight is sought after, we go out in the sun, especially in summer, yet it can have negative affects of burning and skin cancer, etc
- babies are also a positive image, though are usually not credited with the ability to reveal truth, or to have a mind and will of their own
- we often don't like having our faults revealed, but in the long term it is probably for the best, if we can face them and deal with them in a positive way

9. Insights gained and questions remaining:

- often 'truth' is revealed in the most surprising ways, when we least expect it
- there is much in life to be happy about and to rejoice over, and so it is a lesson that we should try to recognise these things and make the most of them when they happen and in our memories later,
- we need to receive and count our blessings all the time, in each and every moment
- God is often with us when we least expect God to be, God can speak to us and reveal 'truth' to us through anyone, including a 100 year old woman and a yet to be born baby,
- how can I be better prepared for the unexpected revelation?
- what is there in my own life that I can rejoice about?
- what are the faults that life brings to light in me, and how can I remedy these?

10. Implications for future action:

- in my prayer life I am going to try to be thankful and rejoice in a new thing about my life each day
- it would be good to take time to reflect on what God has revealed to me in the experiences I have had and the people I have met, at the end of each day
- I am going to decide on one fault that has been brought to light and work at overcoming it

A 'Liberation Theology' Method of Theological Reflection

Many of the contextual and liberation theologies engage in theological reflection in a similar way to the EFM method above, using a method that turns orthodox theology's systematic approach on its head. Instead of working out how one understands God, humanity and the world, and then using that understanding, that theology, to interpret one's own life experience, they begin with their common life experience, and then reflect on that in light of the Christian tradition in order to determine what they believe, their theology. The EFM method above does this in a way, though 'liberation theology' would approach it a little differently.

Instead of starting with believing the right thing, 'orthodoxy', from the Greek words 'orthos', which means 'right', and 'dokeo', which means 'to think or suppose', they start from doing the right thing, 'orthopraxis' from the Greek words 'orthos', and 'prasso', which means 'to do, or practise'. This 'right practice' is the sharing in the life experience of those being oppressed and in need of liberation. So one begins theological reflection by being amongst those in need of liberation, thus making it a communal process. It is often called the 'theology by the people'¹, and occurs in small, local communities of people, who gather together to share their common life experience, to tell their stories of how life is for them and then

¹ Amirtham, S. & Pobee, J.S., Editors, Theology by the People: reflections on doing theology in community, 1986, World Council of Churches, Geneva.

together to reflect on where God might be found in their particular life experience, and to decide on appropriate action in response to that reflection.

This method of theological reflection draws on the Christian tradition as a source like the EFM method above, but it re-reads and re-interprets that tradition through the lens of the 'shared experience'. Some examples may be helpful to illustrate this different reading.

- 1. The 'shared experience' of the poor:

In reading the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29 - 37), many people might wish to identify with the Samaritan, as a model for a good Christian who loves and cares for all regardless of who they are. Yet if that parable is read by the poor and oppressed in Latin America for example, they might wish to identify more closely with the person who was attacked and robbed and then later helped and cared for. This would give them different insights into the parable.

- 2. The 'shared experience' of women:

Likewise, in the story of the woman caught in adultery and about to be stoned (John 8: 1 - 11), where Jesus challenges the Pharisees with, "the one who is without sin, cast the first stone", many people might wish to identify with the experience of the Pharisees, and acknowledge their own faults before they begin to judge and condemn others. Yet if that story is read by a group of women, they might wish to identify more closely with the woman who was being judged by men with power, without a fair trial, or the right to have her own say and defend herself.

So, such a method of theological reflection involves the following 7 steps:

1. Identify the 'community of common interest' with which one relates. Examples are communities of: the poor, the powerless, women, racial or ethnic groups, children, young people, the elderly, differently abled, etc
2. Gather together in a small group and begin to share each other's stories of what it is like to be, and live as, a member of that community, e.g. to be powerless, oppressed, marginalised. Maybe focus these stories around an issue or question, like 'when am I most reminded of being poor/ a woman/ black/ young?'
3. As common experiences emerge, begin to ask each other and explore together the questions, 'where is God in all of this?', 'how can Jesus Christ speak to this experience?'
4. Explore together some of the Christian tradition, eg. Bible stories, stories of saints, or stories from Christian history, or from the history of the community you are a part of. Be aware of the possible different ways of reading these stories as illustrated above.
5. Feel free to be critical about the traditional stories, to take a different view from the ones you might have usually heard (like the above examples of the views of the poor and of women), or to come to different conclusions than might be considered 'orthodox'.
6. Determine what action might be appropriate in response to the things discovered in the group. This becomes the new 'praxis', the way in which the Christian life can be lived out in that community. This 'praxis', or action, speaks of what the group believes, the group's own theology.
7. Continue to meet to share stories and reflect on life experience in this way.