

# Theological Reflection: Is This for Me?

Andrea Dean

Andrea Deane rsj was, at the time of writing (2002) a lecturer in religious education at Signadou Campus of Australian Catholic University
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*I found god in myself.* (Shange, 1977, p. 63)

## Introduction

Ntozake Shange's line from her dramatic prose poem offers enormous challenge to us, her readers. The line urges us to recognise the potential that ourselves (our lives, our experiences) have for revealing our God. Perhaps too, they urge us to remember how significant our life experiences have been in our coming to know God.

This quote suggests the direction that this piece of writing will take. For I, like Shange, believe that God is with us in a very intimate way, that God is indeed inside us. Thus, the first part of the paper will establish the significance that contemporary theology gives to personal experience.

Just as Shange refers to *finding* God, the second part of the essay will investigate just how one can *find* God. Section Two will outline features of theological reflection, a means of thinking about personal experience from the perspective of faith (Kinast, 1995, p. 6), and summarise some methods of theological reflection. A brief comparison of the methods will be made as I seek to identify one method that is suitable for individual personal theological reflection.

And lest the whole exploration be abstract and impersonal, I will trial the selected method and reflect on an experience from my own life from the perspective of faith. I will make a brief evaluation of my trial and sum up the strengths and weaknesses of theological reflection and suggest some reasons why others who are involved in ministry and religious education may well be interested in theological reflection.

## Contemporary Theology

In the past, theology has been distant from the lives of most Catholics. It has been a rarefied discipline, practised by those with specialised education. As it was the domain of the clergy, it took place in seminaries and other such institutions. Theology was revered but not understood by ordinary people. Indeed it was seen to be above and beyond, inaccessible. Being associated with the divine, there was a sense of theology being mysterious and powerful.

O'Collins, in reviewing changes in theology since Vatican II, notes the broader influences on theology today. While in the past theology worked hand in hand with philosophy, nowadays theologians engage in dialogue with cultural anthropologists, biologists, physicists, and so forth. Rather than being concerned with abstract thought and argument, he points out that "Concern for the spiritual life and pastoral activity has everywhere influenced the way Catholic theologians go

about their work.” (O’Collins, 1993, p. 7) Theology, in general, is becoming more concerned for the practical aspects of life, that is, pastoral and spiritual matters.

The “clerical monopoly” on theology has lessened and O’Collins recognises that “religious women, laymen and laywomen are much more involved as students and teachers of theology.” (O’Collins, 1993 p. 7) So the sense of theology being the preserve of the clergy is diminishing. More people have access to training in theology and thus the portion of the church who participate in theology is increasing.

Some contemporary theologians envision an even greater number of people being involved in theology. Neil Darragh (Darragh, 1995, pp. 13-27) describes a role for *everyone* in theology (Emphasis mine). He challenges the notion that theology is just for “professionals” and reinterprets theology in a way that makes it accessible and relevant. For Darragh, theology is simply “about God. It is about that which is most worth living or dying for” (Darragh, 1995, p. 15). He believes we all have an implicit theology, that is, a set of coherent convictions that guide our life decisions. In challenging us to get involved in theological reflection, he submits that we can make our theology explicit through a process of reflection. In this context, theology “deals with those things which are most important in our lives” (Darragh, 1995, p. 13). And theology “is the skill by which we make our decisions about good and bad, about what is worthwhile and what is worthless” (Darragh, 1995, p. 15).

The “professional” theologians are also attending more specifically to experience. Roger Haight in *Dynamic Theology* writes of the significance of experience and of the development of a methodology to interpret experience: “For many theologians today theology is hermeneutical. In this view hermeneutics is the discipline that defines the logic and rules for interpreting the meaning of human expressions of meaning and value.” (Haight, 1990, p. 12).

Various sources suggest then, that since Vatican II, theology is more inclusive and that it operates more inductively and experientially (O’Collins, 1993, p. 8). This new approach does not mean that theology or the substance of pre-Vatican II theology (an abstract approach to issues and concepts such as creation, life, death, church, sacraments and so forth) is under threat. In fact it appears that where efforts have been made to consciously attend to experience, methods of “theological reflection” have been developed to enable participants to simultaneously attend to experience and to what theology has to say about issues.

Kinast suggests that theological reflection is a means for “religious literacy” (Kinast, 1995, p. 6). Those who become involved in reflecting on their experience are motivated to explore and learn the tradition as they seek to make sense of their circumstances and decide on appropriate action. Attending to experience can give participants an entry point into tradition, that is, attending to the personal experience of suffering, can provide a starting point to discover more about the Paschal mystery. Over time they can develop their knowledge of tradition and acquire “religious literacy” (Kinast, 1995, p. 6).

In *Doing Theology Ourselves* Darragh balances the notion of “doing” theology (i.e., where the experience of an individual or group is prime) in the local context with “receiving” theology from other contexts. He envisions a dialogue or partnership between the reflection that occurs in

the local situation and the knowledge or experience which is the fruit of reflection from other contexts, that is, tradition or formal theology.

Theological reflection, which means thinking about practical life situations in society and relating them critically to the traditions of the church (Kinast, 1995, p. 6) provides a way to initiate dialogue between experience and tradition. Actual, lived, concrete, personal experience is the starting point of theological reflection. A chosen experience can then be related critically to the traditions of the church. 'Critical', in this context, suggests being oriented to openness, innovation, and creativity in the way that the resulting understanding is expressed.

O'Connell Killen describes this attitude as being in the standpoint of "exploration" (O'Connell Killen & de Beer, 1994, pp. 5-19). She describes three standpoints and names them as exploration, self-assurance and certitude. When we are stuck in our own experience and interpretations we are in "self-assurance". "Certitude", an opposite position, is when we are intransigent and closed in our understanding of tradition. If we are open to both tradition and experience and ready to initiate dialogue between the two sources we are able to "explore". O'Connell Killen suggests that this dialogue enables us to achieve a new depth of understanding of tradition and allows our faith to become more relevant and practical.

Theological reflection sees experience and tradition as "reciprocal", both having contributions to make to the process of reflection. The intention of theological reflection is making sense of experience. Once new understandings have been developed, new ways of acting result. Methods of theological reflection foster practical decisions at the end of the reflection cycle to enhance the link between reflection and action, that is, to encourage participants to become witnesses to their faith.

## **Methods of Theological Reflection**

Let us now investigate the specific methods of theological reflection as presented by Robert Kinast in *Let Ministry Teach*, Neil Darragh in *Doing Theology Ourselves* and Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer in *The Art Of Theological Reflection*. Brief comment on the first two will make clear the elements that are consistently present in theological reflection and disclose the similarities and differences in these three approaches: a more detailed consideration will be made of the work by O'Connell Killen and de Beer.

### **Let Ministry Teach**

Kinast in *Let Ministry Teach* proposes that theological reflection is about connecting faith with daily activity. His methodology is designed specifically for those involved in clinical pastoral education, ministry supervision, religious formation and similar ministries.

Theological reflection is "learning from one's experience" (Kinast, 1996, p. vii). While any event can be reflected on theologically, he focuses on experiences related to the practice of ministry. The three stages of theological reflection are experience, reflection, and action. Each chapter in his book offers methods, illustrations, commentary, practical suggestions and theoretical background pertinent to each stage of the reflection process.

Kinast sees “theological reflection” as action-oriented and change-oriented. It best occurs in a group where others are able to assist a person to grasp the events, draw conclusions and to remain honest (Kinast, 1996, p. ix). He details significant points about theological reflection which:

- best occurs in a group;
- focuses on a meaningful experience;
- occurs in a faith-theological perspective;
- seeks a practical outcome;
- is a continuous process.

In offering more detail about how to do theological reflection, Kinast breaks the stages of experience, reflection and action into more detailed steps, thus providing a comprehensive and sequential method for theological reflection.

The “Experience” stage details steps about selecting an experience, describing an experience (through verbatim, case study, critical incident, role play, interview, or journal) before entering more deeply into an experience by attending to players, plot and place; to linguistic images, physical objects and spontaneous gestures.

The “Reflection” stage, where one is to explore the message from Tradition, presents various ways that tradition can connect with experience, that is, as Illustration, Application and Interpretation, but the only connecting link to this stage appears to be the question “What does this remind you of?”

Action or “Enacting the learning” has potential for effect in the arena of the personal, ministerial, theological and practical. This is one of the briefest chapters in the book but the attention to the various arenas for action makes it very challenging.

Kinast outlines a method that has been developed in training men and women for ministry. It relates directly to their experience and attempts to balance experience with formal, abstract theology. The model relies on the dynamics of a group with the leadership of a skilled facilitator. An imaginative appropriation of tradition is encouraged. This model, and others that focus on ministry, foster a personal, practical interpretation of tradition in the context of a person’s ministry (Kinast, 1996, p. 9).

### **Doing Theology Ourselves**

Neil Darragh, a New Zealander, writes in *Doing Theology Ourselves* of his need to bridge the gap between his theological training and the issues of society which concern him most, for example, racism, housing and poverty. He outlines a method whereby people in relatively new contexts can engage in their own process of theological reflection, dealing with their own issues and their own priorities. He takes issue with theology being abstract and remote, and being in the hands of “professionals”. Darragh is sensitive to the importance of context, believing that much theology has been “received” from other places (generally the more dominant cultures) and that local churches have been treated like “serfs” or “colonials” (Darragh, 1995, p. 23). Key to

Darragh's method of theological reflection is a focus on experience that includes wider experiences from society or culture, and respect for theologies from other contexts.

Darragh's method is for those seeking a theology that takes account of the local situation and who want to reconcile their commitments with their actions (Darragh, 1995, p. 9). He describes a method that spirals through involvement, issues and scripture. Starting points for the process can be cultural values, personal or family history, myth and legend and so forth, as well as involvement in the world (Darragh, 1995, p. 32).

The steps to follow in the process are:

- telling our stories;
- looking for themes;
- moving from themes to issues;
- looking for help from other sources;
- framing pivotal questions;
- reading the scriptures;
- interpreting the scriptures;
- broadening our options;
- choosing our action.

Darragh's method is characterised by sensitivity to the cultural setting in which theology is done. Experience, within a particular culture, is the starting point and guide for theological reflection. The relationship that is sought with tradition or theology is that of partnership. The method focuses on scripture as the source of the Christian message and gives more regard for scripture than other sources of revelation, for example, church documents.

A group keen to preserve the integrity of various cultures and to foster multiple, vibrant responses to the gospel will feel at home with Darragh's model. Darragh's model will assist groups to analyse their situation and devise practical responses. The process is cyclic and will enable groups to continue to refine and adapt their responses as they "do" theology in their place.

### **The Art of Theological Reflection**

O'Connell Killen and de Beer's book, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, is particularly in tune with the needs of people of faith today. They consider the challenges of our time and encourage us to engage in critical and conscious theological reflection in order to maintain the Christian community's authentic witness and faithfulness to the gospel (O'Connell Killen & de Beer, 1994, p. viii). They see theological reflection as a valuable resource for all, especially for those engaged in ministry.

As mentioned earlier, the starting point of their theory is the stance towards tradition and experience. If one is entrenched in tradition, the standpoint is described as that of 'certitude'. If one stands firmly in experience the standpoint is that of 'self-assurance'. Neither of these allows for genuine theological reflection. If one stands however between these two extremes in the position of 'exploration', it is possible to seek the answers to significant concerns by being faithful and open to God's presence in both our experience and in our Christian heritage.

O'Connell Killen and de Beer offer this definition of theological reflection: Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may confirm, challenge, clarify and expand how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living (O'Connell Killen & de Beer, 1994, p. vii).

They build on what is called the "movement toward insight", a construct suggested by the ordinary human process of making meaning. The movement from experience to feelings, images, and insights to action is a precursor to their framework for theological reflection. Thus they name the stages:

- focusing on some aspect of experience;
- describing that experience to identify the heart of the matter;
- exploring the heart of the matter in conversation with the wisdom of Christian heritage;
- identifying from this conversation new truths and meaning for living.

Experience is divided into categories according to the source. The four sources are action (events that make up our life), tradition (including Scriptures, doctrinal teachings, church history, official church documents and so forth), culture (including patterns of organised interaction within human groups and the physical environment) and positions (the attitudes, opinions, convictions that one holds). In order to reflect a manageable piece of experience, a single event or issue, is selected from this range of sources.

Guidelines and nine sample processes are offered for personal theological reflection: they can be adapted for use with a group. The starting points vary and include tradition, life situation, cultural text, theme, and a theological text. Supplementary information is provided for guiding groups in theological reflection and the initial framework is revisited to point to ways that new designs for theological reflection could be devised.

*The Art of Theological Reflection* is supported throughout with excerpts from sample theological reflections. Each section of the movements is adequately explained. Simple exercises are included to enhance one's skills of reflection. There is a broad understanding of tradition and provision for dialogue with aspects of tradition beyond scripture.

The attention to several aspects of experience as a source for reflection is impressive, making the process suitable for a variety of purposes. The detailed examples for personal or group reflection are clear and touch on significant issues for our time, for example, attitudes to older persons. I find the open attitude of the authors to further designs for theological reflection a genuine illustration of their belief that the designs are not the ultimate goal. They are but a vehicle to aid the movement toward insight.

It is this presentation of theological reflection that appeals most to me. As well as providing a simple design for reflection on life events it offers the chance to explore theological reflection using other sources, for example, culture and position. O'Connell Killen and de Beer leave the reader with the sense that doing theological reflection at the personal level is worthwhile and manageable. Even the concept of leading a group for theological reflection seems workable with the level of practical support, including sample questions that are provided.

The theory presented by O'Connell Killen and de Beer compares favourably to those of Darragh and Kinast yet speaks to a wider audience. It provides a framework that is flexible and practical. Using the sample "Beginning with a Life Situation" I shall use an incident as a basis for theological reflection.

### **Sample Theological Reflection**

*Beginning with a Life Situation* (O'Connell Killen & de Beer, 1994, pp. 88-89). The method has been interspersed with my responses.

*Narrate the situation or incident for reflection by writing it out or speaking it out loud. (Remember to remain close to the event and set aside current judgements about the situation. Use the "who, what, when, where, how" guidelines for entering experience.)*

From the beginning of 1993 until the end of 1996, I lived and worked in Papua New Guinea. My job title was 'Diocesan Christian Education Coordinator' and I largely worked with the Catholic Schools of the Vanimo Diocese. Vanimo is the provincial capital of Sandaun province, one of the remote and least developed areas of the country.

Towards the end of the school holidays in September 1995, two teachers from Imbrinis came to ask me for help with transport for part of their journey. They wanted to be back in the village in time to start classes for the new term. I drove them as far as Seme, a village about one hour drive from Vanimo, where the road finished. The teachers unloaded their gear from the back of the utility and I took a walk around the village. I had a friend from Australia with me and it was an opportunity for her to see the people, the style of housing, the nearby river and the vegetable gardens.

When we were ready to return to town, a villager approached me and asked if I could take a sick child to the hospital. I agreed and asked who would accompany him. I was told that his father would come too. Soon the child and various brothers and sisters began to pile into the utility. A woman appeared, she was nursing her forearm, which appeared to be broken. She also was carrying a baby, slung in front of her body inside a cloth sling, and a bilum (a string bag) full of goods was hanging down her back. I asked what was wrong with her arm, she didn't reply even though I had spoken in Pidgin English. Her arm appeared to be broken.

I helped her into the car and set out for town. When we got to town the family wanted to be dropped at a settlement on the edge of town where they had relatives.

The following day I called in at the same area and looked for the family. I had some of my clothes to give them. The father, [B], had taken the boy, [J], to the hospital but the woman, [M],

was at the house. I asked why she had not been taken to the clinic too, and someone said that they did not have enough money to pay the fee.

I said I would take her to the hospital and pay the fee, which I did. The staff attended to the arm, which had been broken, when she attempted to fend off a blow from [B].

In the following days [B] came to see me a couple of times and asked for money to pay for the medicine that [M] needed. In a week or two, [J] fully recovered from malaria and the family returned to Imbrinis where they lived.

During the next year whenever [B] was in Vanimo he would come to my office and see if I was there. Often I would be away visiting schools in other parts of the Diocese. [B] would ask for money and if I had some, I would give it to him.

We began to have longer conversations. I found out details about his life, for example, that he had been to school, that he hoped his son would be able to finish through to Grade Six. He talked about how he could get some money, perhaps from the Malaysian Timber Company that was coming to log his family's area, and that he would pay me back. We also talked about how [M]'s arm was broken and I asked him to try not to do this again.

Sometimes I would catch a glimpse of [M] in Vanimo too. I was able to spot her easily because she would be wearing some of the clothes that I gave her.

*Listening to the narrative and attending to your physical sensations, identify the one or two central feelings that you experience most strongly in the situation. (Remember that these feelings capture the heart of the matter of the situation.)*

I felt the burdens of [M]'s life. The fact that she had not replied when I spoke to her, that she was silent became the most important aspect of the narrative. In my body I felt a constriction around my throat, a sense of not being able to speak freely. I felt oppressed and burdened, disheartened.

*Remain with those feelings in your body. Let them evoke images. List images until one comes that most captures the feelings. Use that image for the remainder of the reflection.*

I thought about the burdens of her life, the bilum that she carried, full of all the essential items for the family, for example, cooking pots, plus the baby. I felt that she herself was enclosed in a bilum, a network of cords that kept her enclosed and trapped.

The sense of a constricted throat stayed with me and the phrase “no voice, no choice” went round and round in my mind. Bilums are carried hanging down the back with the handle resting on the forehead. In my image, the bilum is round the throat and the burdens are causing the choking sensation.

*Sit with the image and explore it gently. Consider and question it in ways that open up new perspectives.*



*Listen for how God may be present and calling. Consider what existence is like from within the image. Notice what is broken and sorrowing in the image. What possibilities for newness and for healing are present or implied?*

*Write down the answers. Many enlightening thoughts may flow through your mind; note them briefly so you don't forget them.*

This is what I wrote:

*No voice, no choice  
Bent, burdened  
Bilum weaver and bearer  
You are bowed down  
By the pattern of life  
No voice, no choice.*

Existence within the image is painful and full of struggle. The broken and sorrowing aspects of the image are very obvious to me. I cannot see much potential for newness and healing within the image though it has enabled me to feel the harshness and the pain of [M]'s life. It helped me to consciously recognise [M] as a person, not just a vague 'somebody'. I have a sense of God being right there in the suffering, in the life of [M].

*Go back to the image and sit with it again. To what does the image take you in the Christian tradition? Brainstorm a list. Avoid asking why the image took you there or trying to decide whether the piece of tradition "fits" with your original situation. If the image evokes something from the tradition, trust that a possible connection exists.*

My image provoked these images from Christian tradition:

The healing of the dumb man (Mk 7: 31) – who was without a voice.

The Syrophonecian woman (Mk 7: 24) – who was passed over by everyone and could have been passed over by Jesus except that she spoke out.

Ruth and Naomi (Book of Ruth) – who had no rights without a male protector.

The suffering servant (Is 53: 7) "he did not open his mouth".

*Pick one of the pieces of tradition that draws you. Explore that piece of tradition using the same questions that you used to explore the image. (If you want to explore more than one you can, but do not do more than two or your reflection will become too large and complex.)*

I chose the passage from Isaiah (53:7). "He was harshly treated, but unresisting and silent, he humbly submitted. Like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearer he did not open his mouth."

I feel very uncomfortable with the lack of resistance to pain in this image, yet I know that God is present in this passage and I identify it with Jesus accepting the painful circumstances of his death. It seems that God is challenging me to a more accepting attitude to pain and suffering. Maybe there are times when pain is not to be resisted but is to be humbly accepted.

Today I had news of an elderly friend who has been having treatment for cancer; she has been so weakened by the treatment that she has decided not to continue. I wonder if her attitude of now facing the inevitability of her death is an example of facing pain courageously and without resistance.

*Begin the conversation between the meanings in the image and in the tradition, using the two sets of answers to your questions.*

*What are the similarities? What are the differences? Is there a theme coming through both of them? Is there a tension between them that is enlightening?*

Both the scripture passage and the narrative describe someone who experiences pain and suffering, and bears with it silently. The Suffering Servant passage is linked in our tradition with the redemptive suffering of Jesus.

I am wondering whether in recognising God as present in [M]'s life, I am seeing that there is a value in humbly submitting to the inevitable suffering that life brings. The tension is that it cannot be good to submit to abuse, and it cannot be good to stand by and let someone suffer when we have the possibility to bring them to safety. When should I resist, when should I submit humbly?

*Organise the results of this conversation. What emerges for you in this conversation? What insights or questions does it raise for you? Does anything out of this conversation shed light or provide a new angle of vision on your thoughts and actions and feelings in the original situation? On how you think or feel about it now? Are you being called to some concrete action? The next time you are in a similar situation, what do you want to remember or do differently?*

Emerging from this conversation are questions about the place of suffering in my life and in the lives of others, particularly in the lives of the poor and weak. It raises questions about what involvement I should have with those who are “without a voice”.

When the original narrative came to mind, I expected to focus on [B]. I was aware that my feelings of anger and disdain for him lessened as I came to know him and realised that his actions, his power of choice, were limited by his culture and environment. Looking at [M] was a whole new aspect that I had avoided before.

Now I wonder about what life is like for those who are really poor and powerless, trapped in situations of abuse. I need to recommit myself to assisting the powerless and to continue to be alert for opportunities to support those who cannot even call out for help.

Next time I am in a situation like this, I want to do more than help at the time of crisis: I also want to be sensitive to what life is like for the person. I plan to treat them with great respect, to think of them as if they are like Jesus who bore pain for the sake of others.

Regarding the place of suffering in my own life, I wonder if I am called to be more accepting of pain. I wonder if I have to “submit humbly” to some pain for the sake of others.

*How will you take the learnings of this reflection into your daily living? Write down your intention. Are you ready to take concrete steps to put this intention into practice? What specifically will you do? When will you begin? Who will support you?*

I’m going to listen more, I’m going to make time for some people that I haven’t had time for. I’m going to hear more voices and be sensitive to their pain. This week I’ll contact people whom I have avoided contacting and make an effort to listen to them.

I’m going to look at the role of suffering more, read more about this and endeavour to develop a more accepting attitude to the place of pain in my life. Right now, fresh from opening a letter from a friend who is about to take leave from her religious community, I wonder if a courageous and unresisting attitude is called for as I accept the pain of what her decision means to me, particularly the sense of loneliness.

## **Reflection**

This was harder to do than I expected! Ordinarily, this reflection could have been private and perhaps that would have taken some stress out of the process. Also I don’t feel as if this reflection has finished. There are aspects that I will return to and continue to unravel, for example, the attitude to suffering in my own life. As I listened to the readings at Sunday mass, I found myself particularly attentive to the scriptural references to suffering. It seems that my attempt at theological reflection is more like a spiral than a step-by-step method. Although I went through to Step 9, I will have to circle back through some of the process at a later date. Also the time it took was longer than I expected. This is not a process that will fit into a set time slot, or something that can be hurried.

I can see that working with a skilled facilitator and/or a group would be valuable in helping one to move through the process. It is a struggle to write down feelings and images but I think this helps to bring clarity to the reflection. I presume that the process may have more relevance if one is reflecting on a recent experience. In this instance, the characters who featured in my narrative are now remote so my final decision for action could not have a direct link to them.

I wonder whether the suggestion about deciding on an action is better dealt with after one has had time to adjust to the new concepts that the reflection offers. Rather than rushing to decide on a shallow response, it may be better to dwell with the ideas and gradually come to more authentic response to the reflection.

In general the procedure was easy to understand and follow. The only way to gauge the success of my application of the method is by my own judgement about whether further insight resulted and I believe it did. I will continue to use the procedure and other samples from *The Art of Theological Reflection* to make meaning of experience in the light of faith.

## **The Potential for Educators and Ministers**

Theological reflection does justice to experience while being fully informed by scholarship and an understanding of the Christian traditions of faith (Green, 1990, p. 5). It is inclusive of the diversity of people and their experiences and gives us a way to address pressing concerns in our lives and society. It encourages a growth in faith by providing an opening for engagement with the tradition of the church. It incorporates reflection and action, leading to a commitment to be a genuine witness of the Gospel in today's world.

Doing theological reflection is hard, requiring attentiveness to experiences that we may often prefer to forget. It challenges us to face the pain of life. Reflecting alone is even harder. While I believe one would grow more comfortable and skilled with the process over time, there would be advantages in reflecting with a group. As well as providing support, a group could broaden and clarify one's focus. Contributions from others could assist one to become more knowledgeable about aspects of the tradition. Reflecting together can unite people and create community. Based on these reasons and my own experience, I would suggest that theological reflection would be particularly fruitful in a group situation. Involvement with a group, similarly committed to theological reflection, would allow one to maintain links with the wider faith community and ensure that the group moderated interpretations.

Theological reflection cannot be controlled. Unconventional interpretations can result. Outcomes can be radical and prophetic. I imagine that those concerned with orthodoxy view the process of theological reflection with suspicion for there is the chance that the stance and actions of the church may be challenged.

Theological reflection presumes familiarity with scripture and with the other ways the tradition is expressed, that is, through customs, values, practices, rituals and so forth. O'Connell Killen and de Beer (1994) suggest that participants call to mind images from the Christian tradition, Kinast (1996) asks "what does this remind you of?" and Darragh (1995) says just start reading the scriptures and keep on working your way through in a systematic way. The point at which participants turn to the Christian Story is potentially very weak and risky. Unless those who participate in theological reflection are committed to developing their knowledge of scripture and the other ways the church transmits "all that she herself is, all that she believes" in her "doctrine, life and worship" (Dei Verbum, 1965, # 8), they will struggle to balance their reflection on personal experience with an informed understanding of Christian tradition. Participants could have access to only a small portion of the wealth of the Christian Story and/or have a limited understanding of events and circumstances. Participants, even those who are well qualified, will be more able to tap the resources of the Christian story if they are dedicated to the study of tradition and open to the new perspectives offered by modern scholarship. Without this wider input the process could be shallow and poorly informed.

A commitment to prayer will also assist those involved in theological reflection. Those drawn into theological reflection do not undertake the activity as if this were a religious version of scientific method. It arises, as O'Connell Killen and de Beer put it, out of desire to witness faithfully to the Gospel in our day. So as participants participate in this "movement toward insight" there needs to be openness to the voice of God throughout the process as befits a faith-theological activity.

Theological reflection is ongoing process, leading us to a greater depth of knowledge and commitment. It allows us to be open to the interplay between experience and tradition. Greater consonance between experience and tradition can be established if we enter courageously into the dialogue. In the dialogue, we ourselves “do” theology and make our beliefs explicit. This action of building on our experience makes the church tradition and formal theology accessible and relevant.

Theological reflection enables us to affirm, with Shange, that God can be found in our own lives, and to know that this realisation makes all the difference to how we approach our work in religious education and ministry. I am hopeful that religious educators and pastoral ministers will be particularly helped by this exploration into theological reflection. Not only do they seek to recognise the signs of God's presence in everyday life and shape their lives accordingly (Kinast, 1999, p. ix) but they endeavour to pursue the significant issues in the tradition, and to identify “the heart of the matter” in order to facilitate purposeful education and authentic ministry.

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