“The place of personal experience in theological reflection”

Including a) discussion of the part personal experience plays in practical theological research, and b) a critical comparison of some major approaches to theological reflection, and on this basis develop your own preferred method.

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**Introduction**

Most people can run; fewer people call themselves ‘runners’. Many can cook, while not all are chefs. It is one thing to climb – it is another thing to see ourselves as ‘climbers’. In other words, takes time for a verb to become a noun; to move from something that we ‘do’ to something we ‘are’. Yet there is more. Returning to our opening images, the runner can take on longer runs; the chef more engaging meals, and the climber more challenging climbs. That is, uses what has formed in them to deliberately take on new experiences and challenges. So the cycle of formation continues, as the ‘noun’ becomes a ‘verb’ again (for a while).

This paper is about that cycle – from ‘experiencing’, through to being ‘experienced’, and then re-engaging experience in light of our learning. On a wider scale, this paper is about our human agency; our ability to learn from life and make choices that effect positive change. It implies our ability to respond; to move towards formation and growth. Human agency invites us to use experiences to form us, sharpen us, and make us more fully human. At times this will mean assimilating a sense of self that is consistent with the experience (participating in the birth of ones child, and then wanting to be a ‘good’ parent); at other times we may come to define ourselves over and against the experience we have had (such as experiencing violence, then wanting to work for peace and reconciliation). Experience includes opportunity to gain and grow; and the opposite is also true - an un-reflected on experience is a lost experience.

However this paper is not about how to be a better runner, chef, or climber –(though that may be one result). As a pastor and a theologian, I want to explore theological formation. If theology in its primary from is indeed what Edward Farley calls ‘the activity of
reflective wisdom in the believer’¹, then this paper aims to make theologians – ones who then re-engage life with the reflective wisdom they have gained. I call this process ‘theological reflection’. It is the task of taking life’s experiences, choosing how our own faith and life are formed, and then go on to engage life afresh. It is a process of action, reflection, formation and action. My hope is that as people of faith do theology, they may become in some way theologians themselves, and then re-engage faith in more life-giving ways for themselves and for others.

To work this agenda through, I will move through several areas. First, explore the term ‘experience’; second, locate the idea of ‘experience’ within practical theology, and third, discuss ways of naming ‘experiences’ through qualitative and quantitative research. From there I will explore the idea of theological reflection, and the role of experience to form those beliefs and actions that together make up ‘faith’.

‘Experience’ in a theological context.

Can ‘experience’ be grasped at all? There are some points to make here. First, ‘experiencing’ is both inner and immediate for the person going through the experience. I concur with sociologist David Yamane’s comment:

Like a stream, experience is an ongoing temporal flow of reality received by consciousness, where consciousness is understood more broadly than simply as cognition (Bruner 1986: 6). Experience involves not only cognition but feelings, expectations, and bodily states (Merleau-Ponty 1964); reality presents itself to us not simply in language or linguistic categories, but also in images and impressions (Fernandez 1986).²

In some ways it is particular to that moment, and inaccessible to anyone else. This makes me pause before claiming to know about another person’s experience. The very act of translating ‘experiencing’ into language that describes the experience implies interpretation by the one sharing their experience, as it does for the one hearing it as well. Therefore what we are working with is not the ‘experiencing’, but rather what comes to be understood as the experience, "the intersubjective articulation of experience". In fact it is **this very process** of articulation and interpretation that I want to engage with deliberately and carefully.

David Lamberth asserts that ‘Experience… is accessible only mediately', or upon reflection, rather than directly through perception or sensation…Experience is by its nature *interpretive*.' As we interpret our experiences and test out our perceptions of life, we gain a firmer grip of life and faith. Drawing on the earlier work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lamberth suggests that

> ‘Experience is an active process, a process of criticism by which we both have and **gain purchase on life itself**…This elaboration of “experience” harkens back to the antecedent Latin *experiri*, an active verb meaning to try or to test.’

David goes on to say, “We can use the gerund "experiencing" to emphasize the ongoing quality of experience in this sense. Sociologists cannot empirically study experiencing, thus understood, for it is a wholly private, individual affair inaccessible to any currently known methods of social scientific research.”

Yamane’s in-text references:

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3 Ibid.
4 That is, not direct or immediate.
6 Ibid.: 74
I suggest this is seminal – by interpreting our experiences we have the opportunity to gain purchase on life. We gain purchase on life through building what Schillebeeckx calls ‘competent experience’. “Experience has authority only in reflection on experience… (and) although reason perhaps does not stand at the beginning of experience, competent experience includes reason, critical rationality.”\(^7\) The grip which meaning offers us is also shaped by how we have interpreted prior experiences. That is, prior experiences create what Edward Schillebeeckx calls a ‘framework of interpretation’. In his words,

> Our experiences are always within a pre-existing framework of interpretation. And in the end this is none other that the cumulative personal and collective experience of the past, in other words, a tradition of experience…(this framework) gives meaning to that experience: and as a result, it becomes an experience of meaning.\(^8\)

This tradition of experience lives in dynamic tension with current experience. New experiences can reshape the rubric of meaning we have built up through our tradition of experiences. For example, the healthy birth of a second or third child is both an experience in its own right, and has added meaning from the perspective of siblings and other generations. The end of a long-term relationship may lead partners and children to reinterpret their sense of identity and possibly the shape of their faith. Whether this reshaping of the rubric of meaning we have built is a positive step is the task of each one who lives on through the experience.

So far I have largely looked to the value that reflection on experience has for those living through the experiences. However, in terms of faith and spirituality, I strongly suggest that appropriating meaning from experience is the foundation of collective faith and of

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\(^8\) Ibid.
revelation itself, as well as for pastoral wellbeing. In Lamberth’s words, ‘Experience is faith’s context and substance, its inescapable collaborator, its inquisitor, and also its gentle guide, offering disclosure, however unclear, of the wonder within which we find our lives.’

While it is beyond the scope of this paper, I would suggest that the faith tradition we encounter in the Bible is formed in this same way- from the raw materials of common life worked together to form rubrics of meaning for people in their own time, and offered to later generations for guidance and reformation.

As this work has begun, so it can continue. Developing our ability to build ‘competent experience’ will stand us in good stead for the challenges ahead. In words that invite us to this cause, Schillebeeckx says, ‘With critical reflection, human experiences, as a revelation of reality…in fact have authority and validity; they have a cognitive critical and liberating power in the long-lasting search of humanity for truth and goodness, justice and happiness.’

‘Experience’ and Practical Theology.

So far I have given a broad definition of experience, and I have pointed to its significance for making meaning and theology. By competently drawing on experience we build a framework of experience, which together with wider traditions help develop and reshape a rubric of faith and meaning. Now I turn towards the more specific discipline of practical theology. One leading writer in this field, Edward Farley, challenges the wider

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9 Lamberth, "Putting Experience to the Test," 75.
10 Schillebeeckx, Church, 21.
church with the thought that we lack theology in its primary form, what was called earlier
‘the activity of reflective wisdom in the believer’. 11 He goes on to say that
‘(T)he reflective activity of the believer gathers together several
fundamental activities of interpretation, all evoked by “the situation of
the believer.” The believer’s interpretive activity is not simply in one
direction, for instance, towards Scripture. Faith itself is an existence in
situations, and that existence involves interpretive acts of everything
that structures faith’s situation.’ 12

How can we encourage believers in this ‘interpretive activity’, to see their faith as an
existence in situations? One way is to offer an accessible way of interpreting experience.
Farley points out that other fields of theology have their own interpretive disciplines that
may be applied to the sources at hand. Operating from theory to practice ‘bypasses most
of the structural elements of the situation of the believer’ 13. Theory that is incongruent
with experience may just be fantasy. Furthermore, theologies that seem to overly focus
on a narrow range of belief or experience seem inadequate as well. Therefore, noting the
specialisation of auxiliary disciplines within practical theology, Farley points out that
there was ‘no general theology of being-in-a-situation which provided a method for
discerning the major components operative in the special situations of these fields’. 14 He
goes on to call for and describe a hermeneutic of situations, for ‘interpreting situations
from the viewpoint and in the context of faith does create a special hermeneutic task’ 15.
Farley offers four aspects of a hermeneutic of situations:

1. Identify the situation and its elements – ‘simply identifying the situation and
describing its distinctive and constituent features’ 16

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12 Ibid., 10.
13 Ibid., 10
14 Ibid., 11.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 12.

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2. Read the situation’s past. What presents through to today, and what has been repressed?

3. Be aware of abstractions that come with focusing on a single situation; ‘Situations occur within situations’.

4. Discern the demands that the situation creates, and the theological themes implied within those demands.¹⁷

Farley’s approach suggests some helpful steps for theological reflection, and we will return to this. For now, I will turn to ways of gathering together ‘experience’ further reflection.

**Experience in Qualitative and Quantitative Research**

Farley’s call for a ‘hermeneutic of situations’ implies that we need some form of ‘text’ to analyse and interpret. I suggest that qualitative and quantitative research methods have some value in generating a ‘text’ that we can start to interpret. The data we gather through both research methods may become part of the text we interpret. We are invited to look for what's actually there, and discern themes, and to appreciate the context we are working with. We also need to recognise how the sources of the material have affected which material is now available to us, and appreciate how material has been edited as it comes to us.

In what follows it will be clear that I am following a constructionist or subjectivist approach to the research task. I have already noted that shifting from ‘experiencing’ into

¹⁷ Ibid., 12-14.
terms of experience is itself interpretation. Therefore I hesitate to insist on finding objective meaning; (though subjective meaning may seem objective in the person’s own experience). I err towards meaning being existential, built up from lived experience and expressed in specific contexts. In fact it is human agency, our ability to both construct meaning and make choices that makes this task so important. As such meaning is constructed and articulated, it becomes a window for the research participant to see himself or herself through, and that same window offers a way for others to appreciate their own point of view. I am less inclined towards positivist approaches that try and articulate objective truth based on data at hand, for this runs the risk of prescribing a perspective for others which may not ring true for them.18

Qualitative and quantitative research methods both have their own contribution to the task of interpreting situations. Qualitative research unpacks something of the nature of an experience, and quantitative research measures the frequency of an experience, circumstance, or idea.

**Qualitative research**

Qualitative research is described by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin as

> ...any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons’ lives, stories, behavior, but also about the organisational functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships. 19

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While I affirm much of the ‘grounded theory’ approach, I hesitate from fully affirming the claims made by Strauss and Corbin, that ‘its systematic techniques and procedures of analysis enable the researcher to develop a substantive theory that meets the criteria for doing “good” science: significance, theory-observation compatibility, generalizability, reproducibility, precision, rigor, and verification’.

19 Ibid., 17.
Similarly, Norman Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln describe qualitative research as ‘a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. (They) attempt to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.’ 20 This gives a very broad ambit for research, yet it is the **approach taken** to the material under investigation that gives qualitative research its character. In Strauss and Corbin’s words, ‘we are not referring to this process (of coding data), but to a **non**mathematical analytic procedure that results in findings derived from data collected by a variety of means.’ 21 These means include observation of group activities, one on one interviews, and focus groups, which may be more or less structured according to the methodology the researcher is using. The kind of data may be verbatim or intuitive. Verbatim-like material can include transcripts of conversations and videotapes of conversations or group events. Intuitive data collection includes notes by the researcher on their own responses during the research process. There may also be some reason to comment on material that was not made available for research – e.g. proportions of people unavailable for the research process, or personal and institutional influence in the research gathering process. This data collection can be supplemented with numeric data from questionnaires, published surveys, and census data (which will be discussed later). 22

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Qualitative researchers use semiotics, narrative, content, discourse, archival and phonemic analysis, even statistics, tables, graphs, and numbers. They also draw upon and utilise the approaches, methods, and techniques of ethno-methodology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism, rhizomatics, deconstructivism, ethnography, interviews, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, survey research, and participant observation, among others.
I mentioned earlier that naming experience is an intersubjective task. This is illustrated in Denzin and Lincoln’s claim that ‘Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry’ \(^{23}\). To this end they use metaphorical language to express the role of the qualitative researcher. They liken the researcher to a person who ‘produces a bricolage – that is, a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation’. One form of bricolage they name is quilt-making \(^{24}\). To expand on this in my own terms, the research process seeks to gather swatches of what we may call ‘fabric of experience’; it is not completely at the discretion of the researcher just what material they will have to work with, for that unfolds during information gathering. With this material laid out before them, the researcher seeks to arrange it in a way that is consistent with the warp and weft of the experiences.

From this image I suggest that the shape of the research process is not set before the research unfolds. In qualitative research we are not \textbf{starting} with a hypothesis to prove or disprove; that is we are not starting with a pattern that they need to gather pre-determined colours and shapes of experience for. Rather we start with a field of enquiry, from which a methodology unfolds, and findings are offered.

In my view a major agenda of qualitative research is to grasp the nature of the personal experience under discussion as accurately as possible. ‘…(Q)ualitative researchers are concerned with \textbf{accurate description} when doing their analysis and presenting their

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 4.
The challenge here is to re-present the data in a summarised way that is still consistent with the experiences being discussed. This is part of the intuitive task the researcher faces.

At this point I suggest we start to see the significance of qualitative research for exploring experience, as it seeks to ‘re-present’ experience in a way that we can respond to. While the researcher may offer one interpretation of the material, they also make that material accessible for others to explore. The researcher hopes that this interpretation would resonate with those in the process, and offer some analysis that may be applied more widely than the research group itself. At the same time such research will hopefully allow for varied perceptions, and hold ambiguity with respect. (Much as a quilt will hold differing shapes and colours together). This whole task is intersubjective, that is, one persons subjective appreciation of another’s subjective contribution. Therefore the researcher also needs to be articulate about how ones own stories shapes the research project.

**Grounded theory.**

Grounded theory provides one approach to qualitative research that can be used to gather experience together. One strength of this approach is the depth of analysis it looks for in the gathered data. In her discussion of grounded theory, Kathy Charmaz says: “We tend to look at slices of social life. Like other forms of qualitative research, grounded theories can only portray moments in time.” This approach leaves open the prospect of appreciating the depth of experience within and among those providing the material for the research. As data is gathered through the various ethnographic research

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methods mentioned earlier, the grounded theorist looks to make connections across the material that reflect something of the experience. “However, the grounded theory quest for the study of basic social processes fosters the identification between events… a qualitative researcher constructs a picture that draws from, resembles, and renders subjects’ lives.”[27] The interconnectedness of researcher and subject is close at hand throughout the process. In grounded theory, the researcher may remains aligned with a constructivist rather than a positivist approach. “A constructivist grounded theory distinguishes between the real and the true…. It remains realist because it addresses human realities and assumes the existence of real worlds.”[28]

The grounded theory approach encourages seeking personal experience because it offers a method of analysing the rich and thick data of qualitative research. The story that unfolds informs us about both the subjects and the researcher. That story then becomes part of the material for others to consider.

Quantitative research

Quantitative research helps us to appreciate experience by suggesting how frequently events or opinions occur. Quantitative research can be used to gauge the strength of a variable, not just its presence or absence. It is a false dichotomy to assume that only qualitative research methods are fitting for this task. As Michael Crotty comments, ‘quantification is by no means ruled out within non-positivist research. …When we think about investigations carried out in the normal course of our daily lives, how often measuring and counting turn out to be essential to our purposes.’[29] Two examples from

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 523.
separate fields may help show how quantitative research can shed light on aspects of religion and spirituality.

David Larson, a research psychiatrist, has compiled results from several quantitative studies into a relationship between spirituality and health. In his recently published study he comments that

> During the past decade an upsurge of quantitative research has investigated the relevance of the role of the spiritual/religious dimension of life to physical and mental health (Koenig, George, & Peterson, 1998). A once frequently misunderstood factor among many mental health professionals (American Psychiatric Association, 1990; Larson & Larson, 1994), spirituality/religion emerges in research as an often beneficial source of coping strength in helping in prevention, coping, and at times recovery from physical or emotional illness…(E)ven with what may be viewed from a theological perspective as simplistic measures, significant links between spirituality and religion and physical and mental health are still found. (Larson, Swyers, & McCullough, 1997).\(^{30}\)

The studies Larson refers to are quantitative studies that ask people to measure their perception of their faith and its impact on their illness. Quantitative research can be used to gauge the strength of a variable, not just its presence or absence.

Another example of quantitative research is the Australian Community Survey in 1998. In a paper on social capital in Australia, Dr. Philip Hughes draws on findings from the Australian Community Survey. He comments that Australians identify with ‘spirituality’ while resisting the institutional aspects of religion. ‘The Australian Community Survey found that two-thirds of Australians consider that 'a spiritual life' is important to them,

and for one third it is very important.’ 31 This implies that religion is a more
individualistic endeavour for Australians. At the same time, ‘the level of general social
trust was higher in the upper half of socio-economic suburbs in the large cities than in the
rural areas.’ 32

**Assimilating qualitative and quantitative research.**

That we have various models of research suggests to me that we have various ways of
**knowing.** We have the ability for measurement and for intuition, and we can draw on
both to form our perceptions. Indeed the two fields can overlap; for qualitative research
can be transformed into measurable data, and even computer programs such as Wordstat
can measure the frequency of phrases in interview material. One term used for the
working relationship between quantitative and qualitative is ‘triangulation’, which I
understand to mean endeavouring to place a concept by seeing it from two separate
positions. However this seems more positivist that I am comfortable with. To start with,
making claims about something at a distance from ourselves (be that a landmark or an
idea) requires us to be clear about our own standpoint to begin with. Position is always
relative.

In light of this I would stress two points about research and experience. First, when
engaging personal experience, I assert that the first step is that the one travelling through
the experience **locates themselves** in this situation. This perception may change over
time, but I believe the first step is for one to name where they think they stand now.

Second, using more than one method of research can add further dimension to the matter

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31 Philip Hughes, "Social Capital and Christian Community in Modern Urban Society," (Melbourne:
Christian Research Association, N.D.). at
32 Ibid.
at hand. For example in pastoral care for the family of a person with heart disease, it may help to know the part heredity plays in this illness as well as receiving their own specific experience as fully as we can. Yet two perspectives do not make for a compete picture of any matter; it simply illustrates the object or topic more clearly and invites later analysis.

**Summary**

I want to establish a context for experience in the task of theological reflection, and so my discussion of ‘experience’ has been deliberately wide-ranging. At one level experience is an action we are engaged in, with some immediate interpretation at hand. Qualitative and quantitative research methods help us to gather together and find some expressions for this experience.

Yet at another level experience is a state, or as said earlier, something of a noun. To be experienced, to be helpfully shaped and formed by our experiences, requires a longer road. This is the challenge of theological formation; a sense of self and our context that rises from within our experience, and is informed by other related disciplines as well. We turn now to establishing a meta-theory of theological reflection, and how this may be applied to individual and communal experiences.

**Theological Reflection – Meta-Theory and Method.**

In my view, theological reflection is a way to build what Schillebeeckx called ‘competent experience’. Through theological reflection we work on an aspect of experience with a
range of tools available to us. Different methods of theological reflection will draw of different experiences, apply different tools, and imply different outcomes. We will touch on two models of theological reflection, and adapt them for different pastoral challenges.

**Author’s Perspective**

In what follows I should be clear about my pastoral priorities that inform what I am looking for in a process of theological reflection. My interests include establishing forms of Christian life and practice that are sustainable for the minister and for lay people alike. I believe that effective theological reflection can serve to support ministers and lay people, as it helps them to process their experiences in light of wider Christian tradition, relationships, and other resources and perspectives available in society. The insights that unfold from theological reflection can lead to more intentional pastoral practice. This is the pastoral expression of the human agency I raised earlier; it is profoundly humanising to take up whatever opportunity for choice and growth are available in the circumstances at hand. I believe this approach is also true for communities of people; as they apply theological reflection to their current experience, they may open new ways of praxis that affirm their collective sense of self and their role in wider society, and indeed in the world.

**Introduction to Theological reflection**

Two significant authors for contemporary work in theological reflection are David Tracy and Bernard Lonergan. In the early 1970’s David Tracey gathered together what he saw as theology’s task.

The major insight remains the insistence present in theological reflection at least since Schleiermacher: the task of a Christian theology intrinsically involves a commitment to investigate critically both the
Christian faith in its several expressions and contemporary experience in its several cultural expressions.  

Tracy goes on to name five core ideas in theological method. These are that:

1. The two principle sources for theology are Christian texts and human experience and language. 2. Work towards critical correlation of investigations in each of these areas. 3. Experience is investigated through phenomenology of everyday religious and scientific experience and language. 4. Tradition is explored through historical and hermeneutical investigation of Christian texts. 5. A metaphysical or transcendental mode of reflection is needed to explore the results of our investigation into tradition and experience.

The significance for theological reflection lies in the authority Tracy expresses for experience alongside religious tradition. Furthermore, the theological challenge is to find what he calls ‘critical correlation’ between them. Each area has its own hermeneutical method, yet as we noted earlier in Farley’s work, the Christian community has not been as articulate with a hermeneutic of situations.

To these thoughts I would add that seeking critical correlation does not simply mean finding parallels and connections. To put this simply, there is more to theological reflection than trying to connect the experience of Jesus at a celebration with our own celebrations, or Jesus on the cross with our own suffering (though some connection may be made). I think theological reflection needs to allow for our feelings of dissonance from the biblical narrative as well; voicing doubt about providence, or struggling with the call to love one’s enemies when within conflict.

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33 David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order, the New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 44.
34 Ibid., 43ff.
Bernard Lonergan work is significant for contemporary theological reflection because it spells out a way of knowing, an epistemology, that makes room for experience.

When we are judging and deciding, we are experiencing ourselves. When one is reflecting, weighing the evidence, judging, one is experiencing one’s own rationality. When one is inquiring, understanding, conceiving, thinking, one is experiencing one’s own intelligence. When one is seeing or hearing, touching or tasting, one is experiencing one’s own sensitivity.  

Lonergan offers theological reflection a strong conceptual framework for appreciating and spelling out one’s experience as a way of knowing.

Both these sets of ideas are implied in the models of theological reflection I will now explore. Many other explicit models of theological reflection have developed since the 1970s – though clearly the process was underway well beforehand. One accessible survey of theological reflection methods is in Robert Kinast’s book ‘What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?’ There he explores the ministerial model of James and Evelyn Whitehead, the Spiritual Wisdom style of Thomas Groom, and of Patricia Killen

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and John de Beer, the Feminist style, the Inculturation style of Rob Schreiter, and the Practical style of Don Browning.

**Models of theological reflection - the Spiritual Wisdom model**

Killen and de Beer’s model of theological reflection is wide and inviting. Their opening questions point to their scope of interest.

- What path should I choose to live today? How can I discern a direction?
- How can I ground my decisions in the values that are important to me?
- ... Is there a way to find meaning in my life so that my choices do not seem random but reflect an integral pattern? Is the meaning in my life only my private possession or is it connected to others?  

To this end they draw on the two sources Tracy mentions – our tradition and our experience. Therefore the definition of theological reflection they offer 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…. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.  

Early on they highlight two challenges to theological reflection. One is **certitude**, which grounds itself too fully in the tradition. The other is **self-assurance**, which puts too much weight on one’s individual experience. Both positions fail to engage adequately in dialogue beyond their own circles of interest. A middle way is what is called **exploration**. We may come to this point willingly, or because other standpoints do not

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39 Ibid., viii.
sustain us. From the place of exploration we are able to step forward to form what I have called new rubrics of meaning; their term for this is movement toward insight. 40

Killen and de Beer identify a pattern in this movement toward insight. The five parts to the pattern are experience, feelings, images, insight, and action.

When we enter our experience, we encounter our feelings. When we pay attention to those feelings, images arise. Considering and questioning those images may spark insight. Insight leads, if we are willing and ready, to action. 41

Starting with experience draws us to explore their definition of the term. Killen and de Beer divide the term experience into four facets: tradition - being our experience of scripture, doctrine, history, and popular lore; culture – our ideas and artefacts, social structure, and physical environment; positions- our convictions, beliefs, and opinions; and action – our actions, thoughts, and feelings already within our life. 42

Therefore theological reflection for them involves re-experiencing specific issues or situations, and getting in touch with the feelings that arise in this situation. The process makes time for images to arise that are congruent with the feelings we are naming. Reflecting on that image may lead to new insights that give perspective on oneself and the context. Such insight may result in deliberate action that responds in and to the experience we are reflecting on.

40 Ibid., 20.
41 Ibid., 21.
42 Ibid., 60.
Integral to this process is identifying ‘the heart of the matter’. This is often depicted in the image we discover, and expressed in the insight we arrive at. This may well provide newfound clarity that makes action more practical. In terms of theological reflection, the challenge is to engage ‘the heart of the matter’ with the Christian tradition. Then as new insights emerge, we will also be able to spell this insight out in theological terms as new truths and meanings for living.  

**Reflections on the spiritual wisdom model.**

In light of this paper, this model has several strengths. It self-consciously validates experience as a starting point for theological reflection. One is encouraged to make explicit the feelings that arise from our experiences, and use that affective energy to work towards insight and change. I also affirm the group work dimensions of their model, for this task needs the support and accountability of others to sustain us towards and in the actions we aspire to.

I think their model can be further strengthened in several ways.

First, Killen and de Beer’s work is the most similar to the spiritual formation tradition of any of the theological reflection models I have encountered. Therefore one could do well to draw on the guided imagery and spiritual traditions available in spiritual formation.

Second, I think it would be helpful to recognise the role that cognitions – thought patterns- have in feelings. The psychological discipline of cognitive behavioural therapy suggests that feelings are the result of cognitions – thoughts we have about ourselves and our environment that lead to the feelings we experience. I suggest many of our feelings in fact have thinking running underneath them, often quite unconsciously. Part of naming

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43 Ibid., 74.
the heart of a matter is *what we think about ourselves* within this situation. This opens habitual opinions and perspectives to deeper scrutiny, and therefore to revision. For example, in the experience of public speaking, one may feel nervous, dry in the mouth, and shaky. The *thinking* underneath this may be ‘I think I will not do this well’, or ‘Others will not be impressed’. At a deeper level our unspoken or even unconscious cognition may be ‘I need them to like me!’ Once named, we can reframe these ideas into terms like ‘There is more to me than just what happens now’, ‘What I say matters to me, and that’s worth a lot –I like myself when I thoughtfully say what I think’. Such comments may reflect some kinds of insights that their model encourages us to discover.

Third, I would encourage the theological reflection process to specifically include those with theological training, as well as encouraging each religious person to build their resources of theological perspectives.

We move on now to explore our next model of theological reflection.

**Models of theological reflection – the Ministerial model.**

James and Evelyn Whitehead developed a model of ministry specifically for congregational ministry. The Whitehead model of theological reflection has been extensively described and applied since ‘Method in Ministry’ was released in 1983. Their model particularly addresses the contexts of congregational life, and the role of the pastoral leader in the congregation. Therefore it has potential to address many of the issues I raise at the start of this section.

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This model suggests that theological reflection is born of an interplay of three sources; **religious tradition, cultural information, and personal experience.** Each provides a pole from which we may orient ourselves.

The following diagram illustrates their point of view:

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**Religious tradition** in this model refers to ‘the beliefs and convictions imbedded not only in Scripture and the church councils at Nicaea and Chalcedon but in the denominational history as well, with its theological statements and pastoral guidelines.’ Consistent with our earlier discussion, the Whiteheads see that the scripture ‘originated in a people’s experience, our religious ancestors’ encounters with the mystery of God… our religious heritage brings to the conversation of contemporary faith not sound-bites of salvation but

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46 Ibid., 6.

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privileged metaphors”. These metaphors include covenant, stewardship of creation, and the paradox of the cross. Indeed the process of theological reflection invites us to find connecting points with the metaphors, as well as to form our own. We will return to this later. Diverse as it is, we may befriend our tradition; it need not be a shackle or unwelcome weight on faith. In often quoted words,

> For both minister and faithful, the goal is not mastery (of tradition) but befriending – an increase in intimacy with the tradition. The image of befriending suggests more than intellectual grasp, a familiarity that includes both appreciative awareness of the tradition and comfort with its diversity and contradictions.

Noting that the term escapes ready definition, experience in the Whitehead’s model “refers to all those ideas, feelings, biases, and insights that persons and communities bring to the reflection. Experience embraces not only life events, but the conviction and apprehensions and hopes carried in these events.” Experience has authority because revelation is registered in experience, as it was in earlier Christian tradition. Confidently interpreting our experiences is a communal task, as we ‘submit our experiences to the patient scrutiny of seasoned Christians’. The experiences we draw on are not simply rational processes, but also *extra-rational*, including emotions and imagination and may be accessed through reflective exercises and guided fantasy. Experience ought also to note that it is not complete, as others have experiences different from our own which may go unheard, and that privilege may lead to some experiences being overly apparent. The voice of the oppressed needs to be listened for as well.

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47 Ibid., 7.
48 Ibid., 9.
49 Ibid., 43.
50 Ibid., 46.
51 Ibid., 48-9.
The Whitehead’s third facet of theological reflection is **cultural resources**. These are the ‘attitudes, values, and biases that constitute the social milieu in which we live’.  

52 This aspect of reflection needs deliberate discernment, for much of it is overly common and therefore its significant influence easily overlooked. Cultural resources may be as day-to-day as the media, or may be more specialised disciplines such as the social sciences. In this model, such forces are not seen to be innately positive or negative for the purpose of theological reflection. While not reducing faith to a social science itself, “Mature sociological awareness… can assist the faith community to be accountable for the structural consequences of religious belief and behaviour.”

53 Both qualitative and quantitative research methods find their contribution to theological reflection at this point. Other tools that become available here are sociology and group work for understanding society, psychology for pastoral recruitment and support, and management skills for organisational development.

The Whitehead model comes with a method of application. In short the key terms are **attending, asserting, and pastoral response**. Attending means listening to the situation we are considering, and suspending premature judgement (and I would suggest premature interpretation as well.)

54 As I understand it, we are also listening for the contribution each pole of authority is playing in this experience, as their influence may not be evident at first. From this point the participants in the conversation go about asserting their understanding and perspectives on the situation at hand. “Pastoral reflection requires

52 Ibid., 11.
53 Ibid., 60.
54 Ibid., 14.
assertion at both a theological and an interpersonal level.” 55 From here the participants form a pastoral response to the situation.

In terms we mentioned earlier, drawing on the competent experience they have built up through listening and asserting, participants will hopefully have gained a better purchase on life, and be enabled to effect their own pastoral responses.

Developing a Model of Theological Reflection.

While I find great value in the models described so far, I suggest a variation on the two models discussed above.

First, when pastoral workers are engaging in theological reflection, it is important for them to be clear about the role they are engaged in at the time. These can include pastoral carer, group worker, and community development worker. In the paradigm I am working with, pastoral care often attends to the experience of individuals, group work involves some shared experience within a self-defined set of people, and community development work involves the experience of groups with other groups and institutions in the wider community. Each ministry context has its own shape of experience. Therefore it is important to adapt our model of theological reflection to address the context we are dealing with.

55 Ibid., 16.
The ministerial model seems to relate mainly to what I have called ‘group work’, and secondly to what I term community work, in that it attends primarily to the theological reflection of a group in relation to its own context. The spiritual wisdom model refers mainly to the individuals ‘movement towards insight.’

My interest here is to draw on and adapt both models towards the task of pastoral care, which I describe as working as a reflective companion through another’s personal journey of theological reflection and practice. Therefore the kinds of experiences, relationships, traditions and cultural information we draw on are ones that are significant for the individual. Through encouraging this ‘reflective wisdom’ we try and build a foundation of competent experience in people we work with.

The following diagram illustrates the way I view the interplay of the sources of theological reflection, and adds a relational dimension through the community environment. We will refer to it in the following discussion.
Second, I would reinforce the emphasis both models place on experience as the starting point for theological reflection. This is the reason for the centre circle in our diagram. To me, experience is indeed at the forefront, for it provides the impetus for theological reflection in pastoral contexts – we are responding to some kind of event that has had an effect in our life. Experience becomes a source in theological reflection because the person or group we are dealing with already has had some kind of experience that contributes some meaning to the current moment. For example: news of a friend’s injury in a car accident may trigger memories of their own vehicle accident; another person’s
celebration of love in their wedding may be informed by their own experience of relationships. As we mentioned earlier, a ‘framework of interpretation’ has already been built up that informs current perspectives; this framework needs ongoing deliberation and testing. In addition, we could suggest that the biblical tradition is itself a testimony of other people’s lived experience.

Third, I would stress that experience is both the impetus for theological reflection and the context of theological reflection. Experience is more than a source of theological reflection; experience is also the context for theological reflection. Whatever happens, it is in some way happening here, within the person, at this time. Healthy theological reflection is locative – that is, it names how we are affected by our current experience, it grounds us within this experience, and it can imply options for responding to this time and place. Life is lived in present tense. Though future and past have their sway, human agency, our ability to make choices can only apply in the present. Killen and de Beer’s model seems particularly strong at this point.

In light of these thoughts I suggest a practical definition of experience in theological reflection. This definition begins with distinguishing between events, affects, and experiences. While this model risks oversimplification, it is nevertheless a starting point in this process.

An experience is more than an event. I suggest we see an event is a specific occurrence or sensation, such as feeling the touch of someone hand, seeing a person enter a room,
hearing a siren, or the smell of a building. Clearly we have many events every day, and some are more notable than others. Furthermore, related events may gather together around a single circumstance. A single or collection of events have an affect on us; we may be comforted by another’s touch; relieved by someone entering the room, agitated by the sound of an ambulance siren; perturbed by the smell of the hospital. Taken together, these affects have an impact on our sense of self and the environment around us. Gathering together these effects is one way to describe an experience.

Therefore I suggest this pastoral perspective on experience. Experience is meaning we draw from the gathered affect of one or more events for our sense of self and our environment. This definition allows for a ‘short’ and a ‘longer’ view of experience.

The short view is to say that I ‘had’ an experience. In the case of the events and effects noted earlier, I had the experience of my father having a heart attack in the middle of the night while I was still living with my parents in their home. As you may tell, I felt warmed by my mother’s hand on my shoulder as we knelt by Dad’s bed. I was relieved to see the GP walk in the front door. I was agitated to see the ambulance in our driveway in the pre-dawn light. I was perturbed by the hospital. This shorter view may well be the kind of experience that Killen and de Beer have in mind. The longer view of experience grows out of the shorter view, perhaps as ripples in a pond (though not as inevitably). The longer view usually lives in present or perhaps the perfect tense; I have had experience in this situation that shape my sense of myself and of my environment. For example, from this experience I see life as more fragile now; our family has a medical history that I have to respond to; our family events work around my parents need for rest. I can re-
experience the affects of these events to empathise with others in similar situations. I would also note that creating boundaries around experiences is a very subjective exercise; the affects in an experience may continue for a long time, and suggest that the experience itself is not over. Affects can change as other events unfold as well.

I think the Whitehead model would extend this longer view of experience out to the experience of the wider Christian community as well.

This alerts us to several challenges of using experience as a source in theological reflection. To start with, it is important to discern the differences between a current experience and previous experiences. One’s personal and material circumstances can change, and other life experiences have also unfolded in the meantime. It is also vital that pastoral carers follow the Whitehead’s call the ‘suspend premature judgement’, for they too will have probably have had related experiences. The pastoral carer aims to locate and empower the another within that person’s own context and experience, and not propagate perspectives born out of one’s own reflection.

Fourth, I suggest that one’s experience of community is another distinct source of material for theological reflection in it’s own right. I think we are shaped by both what we think and by who thinks about these matters with us. Theological reflection has the opportunity to appreciate both individual perspectives and wider community life. On the one hand, facilitating a person to validate his or her own perspective can help in forming an integrated and practical theology. There is a time to see someone appreciate how their ideas connect with and contrast other peoples’ views. On the other hand, opening a person to new relationships and their perspectives widens their circle of relational
experience and therefore their resources for theological reflection. Including other people in the theological reflection process is important for the time when we need to make and implement pastoral plans, for others can play a part in implementing those plans.

Fifth, I see the Whitehead’s ‘poles’ of theological reflection as open sets of resources for theological reflection. This is the reason for broken lines around each circle in our diagram. Echoing the earlier work of David Tracy, the Whiteheads affirm this view as they encourage correlation between the poles of authority.

…effective and enjoyable interplay (that is, graceful correlation) happens only if these authorities really engage one another…. Critical correlation happens only as we gain some insight into what kind of, and how much, authority each pole contributes to any practical question of our Christian life. 57

When seen as open sets, the ‘sources’ of theological reflection may be seen as resources for theological reflection. There are more resources for theological reflection in each of these areas of authority than any one person may have drawn on so far. There are some aspects of cultural information, tradition, and community that are currently outside a person’s own experience. One cannot ‘befriend’ an aspect of life and faith if it remains an unknown stranger beyond the edge of our knowledge. The pastoral carer can have a role in introducing these resources. Some examples of new resources include: introducing a person to the spiritual direction tradition may help in response to dilemmas around prayerfulness (religious tradition); referring someone to a psychologist and following up their new learning (cultural information); introducing a new mother with post-natal depression to a support group on this topic (community).

Sixth, the ministerial model encourages working through attending and asserting on to pastoral response, and the spiritual wisdom model encourages action. An alternative term for this could be ‘praxis point’. At this point people are integrating their self-understanding in light of each aspect of authority. This place of affirmation and perspective can then give rise to their own pastoral plans. This may be the starting point for orthopraxis, acting in ways that are more congruent with our expressed beliefs.

**Guide questions for pastoral encounters.**

With this meta-theory in mind, we turn to attending to the person in the pastoral encounter, asserting some aspects of life and faith, and deciding their own perspectives and action.

These pastoral questions may help with gaining insight to how each pole does affect one’s Christian experience. This is not meant to be an exhaustive or prescriptive list, but rather to open some avenues for attending to their situation.

**Attending to the Situation**

Some questions regarding experience that may help attend to the situation are: What has happened? When? Who else is involved? What have you done about this experience? What images come to mind in this situation? Have there been any similar experiences in ones own life?

Some areas for questions that help attend to cultural information include mental or physical health issues; their ‘hierarchy of needs’ (cf Maslow’s heirachy); their self-awareness (cf Myers –Briggs Temperament Indicator, Enniagram, Johari Window); and their vocational identity.
Some questions related to religious tradition could include: If any, what parts of the bible are at the front of their minds at this time? Does their point of view of these passages help or hinder them? What aspects and stories of the Bible may be new for them, or at least new in this situation? What is their impression of the life of Jesus? What has this person’s own experience of God been like, if any? What do they anticipate the future to be like?

Some questions that relate to community environment include: What groups does this person identify with; does this inform values or choices? Does any cultural background, customs, or resources inform this situation? Who else could be a resource or support for them in this situation? What personal roles does this person identify with in this situation? (Father, child, friend, stranger etc)

Furthermore it is worthwhile exploring matters like: Is the person in this encounter drawing mainly from one source of reflection? How can the implied priorities in this situation help them? What might the other poles offer to them?

**Assertion**

From this discussion a person may come to their own view of themselves, and the way they interpret their background, heritage, and relationships. This may be couched in positive statements about themselves, and perhaps positive statements about God and/or other people.
**Decision (or Praxis point)**

In connecting theological reflection with pastoral plans some of these questions may be helpful: What terms does this person use to describe him or herself in light of this conversation? What would be most helpful for this person now? Is it also helpful (or at least not harmful) to others? Who is sharing the journey from this point? What is achievable in the new few hours or days by or for this person?

**Discovering Metaphors and Images in Pastoral Encounters**

The spiritual wisdom model makes room for images to emerge from the feelings in the experience. I strongly reinforce this approach; using the imagination and intuition allows images to arise that depict the current moment, or even metaphors that illustrate the wider situation we are in. These images and metaphors may of course have heritage of their own in our religious tradition, culture, and relationships.

The pastoral task includes creating room for imagining – people need the physical, emotional, and spiritual ‘room’ to allow images to arise, and to recognise the implications of these images for their own formation.

For example, **images** of overloaded bridges, rough gems, and toy boxes have all been part of my own theological reflection at different times as I found myself within these pictures. The scriptures provide a ready source of images, especially with Jesus appreciation for simile (the kingdom of God is like…) While these provide a ready resource for theological reflection, contemporary images will also help a person to depict their situation.
Images and metaphors readily prompt questions to aid attending and asserting, and it is important to let the metaphor raise its own questions.

To take one example, life has frequently been described as a pilgrimage. Jesus’ life story is told as a journey to Jerusalem; Bunyan portrayed Christian life as a journey. Depicting a journey connects our memories, our current experience, and our sense of future hope.

Some questions that arise can include: Where are you on this journey? Who is also part of this journey, if anyone? How did you get there? What have you brought into this moment, and what has been left behind? What details can you see in this picture? Do they add further meaning? Metaphors offer a freedom that propositional faith struggles to match. However one would hope that metaphors also show growth and change over time.

Once again, we can look for one or more ‘praxis points’ implied by the images and metaphors. What is needed now for support or movement? What is the view forwards from here? Who is or could come into the picture? What will be specific signs of movement in this picture?

The Christian tradition offers a number of more elaborate metaphors that can help a person locate themselves in relationship to their situation and their faith.

Writers like Sallie McFague and Margaret Miles have discussed the power of metaphor in systematic and historical terms respectively. 58

Conclusion

This paper has sought to work through two related tasks.

The first is to unpack the idea of experience, and show how it is expressed in practical theology. To this end I suggested that experience is not easily limited or confined; however, it can be interpreted and appreciated. As we take time to appreciate our experiences we can indeed become more experienced. We build up a framework of interpretation based on our understanding of previous experiences. When we seek to build this framework rationally, we establish competent experience that can stand us in good stead for ongoing reflection, decision, and action.

There are tools at hand to help gain a wider grasp of this competent experience. These include qualitative and quantitative research methods. We are in a better position to make wide-ranging decisions when we can describe both the nature of experiences and their frequency for groups of people. This work is in itself very intuitive, and can be strongly influenced by the researcher; it may be akin to assembling a patchwork quilt from assorted fabric.

My second task has been to take our insights about experience and use them in developing a model of theological reflection. In this task I explored two models of theological reflection; the spiritual wisdom style of Killen and de Beer, and the ministerial style of the Whiteheads. Based on this I developed my own model. I emphasised experience as both the starting point and the context for theological reflection. This experience can be affected by other sources. The boundaries between experience and wider sources are permeable in both directions; we may choose to take on...
new relationships, ideas, and beliefs in light of our reflections, and we may choose to ‘offload’ some relationships, ideas, and beliefs that we previously held on to.

The result of this is a clearer definition of self that includes a sense of agenda and purpose. Images and metaphors may well grow up during this process that depict the meaning we have built up in the process of theological reflection.

The work that remains for pastoral carers is to adapt our models of church to allow more room for theological reflection. Robert Kinast has done some writing in this field already.

This is particularly important for the Australian context, where we have an openly multicultural and multi-faith community. This offers a wide range of life experiences, traditions, and metaphors for theological reflection. Learning from our experiences of being the church in Australia is an important step. The next step would be to create images and structures of who we are now, and of what our preferred future could be.

From here we could re-engage the Australian community in a way that is true to our own experience, culture, tradition, and relationships. This could be the subject of another paper.

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Bibliography


