Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing
Pastoral Practice and Public Theology
by Helen Cameron, John Reader, Victoria Slater, with Chris Rowland


Practical theology is a discipline committed to a reflective and active engagement in the situations and issues that affect today’s churches and communities. It is a theological methodology committed to theological reflection. Therefore, when a new practical theological text on theological reflection is published, it is bound to get noticed. Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing: Pastoral Practice and Public Theology is the latest practical theological text from a collaboration of authors, which include Helen Cameron, John Reader, Victoria Slater, and Chris Rowland. Short but remarkably insightful, SCM Press’s latest practical theology does not disappoint.

First and foremost, this text is about the process of theological reflection. With the use of specific examples, the authors seek to equip both pastors and other church leaders with the skills to handle issues frequently overlooked by the church. Rather than present theological reflection as a static linear tool, the authors demonstrate the organic and sometimes tense process of doing theological reflection in churches and communities. To best accomplish this goal, the authors stress that the book should be about something specific. In this case, they have chosen the relationship between pastoral practice and public theology. Using their process of theological reflection, the authors used conversations gathered from two groups of pastors and church leaders over a forty-eight hour period. The two groups that the authors highlight are those in church-based pastoral ministry who also work in outside institutions and chaplains and Christians who work in institutions as professionals. Commenting on the isolation felt by members of both groups, the authors use theological reflection to bring these groups into dialogue and increase human flourishing for both.

The book is divided into seven chapters that explore theological reflection along with specific
case study examples for those interested in practical application. The chapters follow the themes of reflection, description, and engagement. Chapters one and two present the arguments for theological reflection along with the difficulties or “blurred encounters” that challenge the process. Chapter three explores specific “blurred encounters” where theological reflection can be used. Chapters four and five engage these encounters by way of identifying key themes and using scripture. Chapter six along with the conclusion bring into focus the lessons learned from these encounters with important takeaways for ministers and other Christian professionals.

The authors begin with a look at the process of theological reflection and their vision of how it should operate. Drawing from Donald Kolb’s cycle of learning, they employ a hermeneutical pastoral cycle consisting of: identification of issue, ‘thick’ description, critical reflection, decisions and planning, implementing action plan, and continuing the cycle. The authors admit that “the process will usually be much more complex and messier…However, this does not detract from the value of keeping a model of the process of reflection in mind” (8). Models are both helpful and useful in what the authors describe as “blurred encounters” where experiences present questions of meaning and identity. These encounters occur when “people of faith find themselves engaged with events and experiences…which lead into strange and liminal spaces that can be disorientating and may even feel disempowering” (11). These are pastoral situations consisting of a boundary line, which a Christian may need to cross in order to determine the best action to take. These “blurred encounters” can be found both in the parish and the outside world and may involve physical, ideological, or psychological boundaries. Using such encounters, the authors attempt to show how to remain committed to one’s faith while being open to new insights and understandings. Essentially the goal is to demonstrate how these encounters can be viewed as opportunities of “potential insight, creativity, transformation and witness rather than places of difficult challenge” (13).

In chapters three and four, the authors use several encounters gathered from the study that highlight the process of theological reflection. In reflection, the authors bring into focus voices and stories that may never have been described before. To present these “blurred encounters,” the authors organize specific experiences found in professional-client relationships, organizations, and communities. Through engaging and exploring these experiences, the authors bring out several themes, which they list and describe. Drawing from the encounters previously described, the authors expound upon these themes, including the relationship between a pastor’s role in society and his or her sense of self, living with uncertainty, and practices as life-affirming or life-denying. In addition, the role of the minister in the community and the relationship between the secular and the sacred are issues found in the themes presented by the authors.

Moving from description to engagement within the Christian tradition, the authors use the Bible as a dialogue partner. Working within the pastoral cycle, the authors recognize that experience is the starting point for theological reflection. The experiences and encounters presented by the authors are brought into conversation with broad themes found in scripture. By use of a thematic approach, the authors acknowledge that, while the Bible is composed of several authors and
genres, its account of God is consistent. After exploring these themes, the authors present a concluding commentary about the problems that can occur when one uses scripture. In their study, the problems they encountered were hermeneutical in nature, which they grouped into three categories of historical/critical, genre and language, and the experiences and concerns each reader brings to the text. A helpful addition to this chapter was the concluding commentary from Chris Rowland. Rowland reminds the reader that the Bible never speaks to contexts directly and that “we are all contextual theologians now” (88). When using the Bible, theologians must take in account all the particulars of a situation. Rowland believes this entails that theologians must be “sympathetic” and have a “hermeneutical awareness of the problems and opportunities of such boundary crossing… exploring the struggle to relate Bible and life, and facing up to the fact that the Bible may be a hindrance rather than a help” (90). Essentially what Rowland is reminding us is that interpretation and imagination is important when using the Bible. The challenge, the authors point out, is to demonstrate how the Bible can speak to life outside the church.

Moving towards the conclusion, the authors see the end result of the pastoral cycle as a change in practice or belief. The authors’ goal from the study was to record the practical wisdom of the group participants. By bringing together the tensions and solidarities discovered from the pastoral cycle, the authors sought to show how a “from below” conversation of Christian practice “might be a more faithful witness to the kingdom of heaven” (117). In anticipation of future encounters, the authors conclude the book with recommendations on how to handle such situations. The authors emphasize that theological reflection “is a practice that needs practice” (119) as well as a “creative process whose outcome cannot be predicted at the outset” (120). To effectively engage in group dialogue and theological reflection, there must be a willingness to challenge established beliefs and practices. The authors believe and emphasize that theological reflection develops self-knowledge and improves skills in understanding encounters. Above all, the authors hope that a critique of theological reflection will encourage others to take the risk of genuine dialogue and expecting the unexpected.

Overall, Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing is smart, insightful, and engaging. The authors’ use of case studies highlights and brings to life the pastoral cycle of experience, reflection, theory, and action. The authors’ use of case studies successfully integrates theory and practice into a brilliant example of the way practical theology should be done. Rather than becoming stuck in a linear mindset, the authors’ use of a spiral or cycle methodology is well done and brings to life the various “blurred encounters” in the text. Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing seems to have found the perfect balance between theory and action, satisfying the needs of both scholars and ministers. A must read for practical theologians, this book should be able to find a home in any practical theology program.

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