

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE 'DOING THEOLOGY' SPIRAL (from *Let's Do Theology*, Laurie Green 2009)

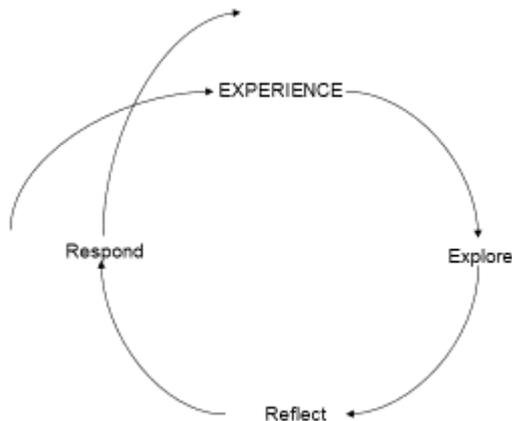
Some people believe that the Pastoral Cycle was first invented by the Liberation theologians of Latin America, but this is not entirely true. They had developed a model which had in fact been originally created by their Roman Catholic cousins in Europe. Father Joseph Cardijn, a Belgian priest who had been the inspiration of many Catholic workers and students between the two World Wars, had found ways for Christians to make a careful theological analysis of their situation by asking them to 'See, Judge and Act' upon their experiences. So it was that Juan Louis Segundo published *The Liberation of Theology* in 1977ⁱ in which he refined the European model considerably. In 1983 the focus moved to the United States where Joe Holland and Peter Henriot inspired a movement for Social Analysis there by publishing in 1983, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*ⁱⁱ, whilst in Europe, such organisations as INODEP sponsored similar routes into theologyⁱⁱⁱ. I was intrigued to find so many parallels between all this work and what we had spontaneously been developing here in the UK. I was therefore even more convinced that we were mutually on the right track.

Although my spiral diagram conforms largely to the Latin American Pastoral Cycle, the way of working which will be described in this book is very much home-grown, and has been developed from my hours' experience of using the model with a variety of Christian groups in Britain and latterly on my travels around the world.

The Doing Theology Spiral

Let me now present, in diagrammatic form, how I think we should go about the business of doing theology. As I have suggested, I have found it most helpful to think of the process as a circle, cycle, or even better, a spiral, which moves around continually from action to reflection and from reflection to action; it is this constant interplay between the two that I have earlier called 'praxis'. To earth my description it may be useful to make reference to an example so that we can see how the spiral works in practice. Freda, whom we mentioned in

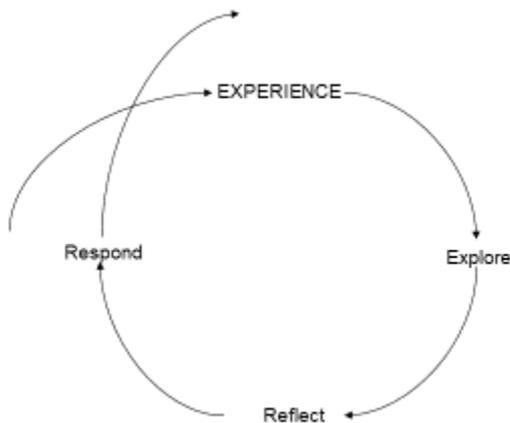
Chapter 1, presents an ideal example, because her situation of having to make a decision at work about a staff redundancy is a typical starting point for doing theology. Thus the spiral starts with experience.



The encounter with experience is fundamental to any earthed theology, so we begin by trying to become as conscious as we possibly can of the real situation that surrounds us. We will not be wanting at this stage to engage in a thorough analysis of that situation, but instead simply make sure that we really are conscious of the feelings, emotions and impressions that the experience engenders in us. It is therefore best to choose an experience which really does concern us. It may be a very active experience, like running a rowdy youth club evening, or it may be more passive – more a predicament than an activity. It may be best if it is a situation demanding a response, like that of Freda hearing that an employee has to go, for it seems true that the best raw material to work with is a situation which has an element of worry or anguish about it. 'How are we going to cope with this?' or 'what on earth can we do about that?' This may have something to do with God's special concern for those who are marginalised or otherwise in trouble; but, in any case, it is a fact that good theology is more likely to derive from a problem than a statement – just as the New Testament epistles were more likely to be written from a prison than a palace.

At this stage of the Doing Theology Spiral, we simply share with one another how the experience feels and hear from others in the theological group how they are feeling, and

what sort of experience it is for them. Of course, no one comes to the experience as if from nowhere, and so at this early stage opportunity is also made to explore some of our prior feelings and prejudices, for good or ill, about the issue in question. As Christians, we will also want to express something of our inner understandings of what meanings and values lie behind our immediate perceptions of the situation and, as Freda found, this can often be done by joining in prayer and worship, as well as through discussion or non-verbal exercises in a group. In any event, at this first stage the group needs to identify clearly just what the experience is, and begin to develop a feel for something of the significance of the experience. Already they may discern what some of the issues are that are at stake, and the questions that are begged by the experience. When the anecdotal work of the Experience phase is complete, they can move quite naturally around the spiral into the Exploration phase where they more carefully explore the experiences.

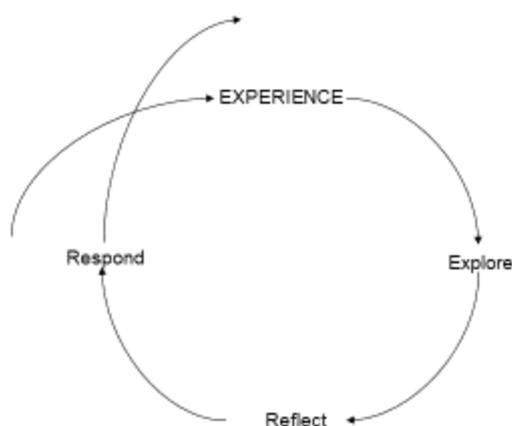


Exploration is key, and yet it is a stage often skipped by those who are too hasty. Having first, in the Experience phase of the cycle, shared how they feel about the situation they have chosen to address, in this phase group members now seek to bring more precision to their understandings. They do this by immersing themselves in a thorough analysis of the situation to go alongside their preliminary anecdotal evidence. Here, the group gathers factual information to put alongside their stories and allows their early feelings to open up new lines of factual enquiry. If Freda had heard only the first couple of words that her boss had spoken to her and had addressed her anxious feelings, but had not taken time to read up

on employment law, she would never have registered the wider implications of her predicament. So, like her, we too have to use all the means at our disposal to get right under the skin of the situation about which we are endeavouring to do theology. It makes very good sense to use people from the fields of sociology, psychology and the humanities, who often are surprisingly keen to help. They mustn't be allowed to let their own agendas dominate the group's life however for it's the local group that must always be in control.

This is a phase of the circle which groups usually love. It brings them together and is so illuminating. They itemise, analyse, search back through the history, and gain perspectives from all sorts of other sources, always remembering to ask the 'power' questions of the situation – 'who decided it should happen?' or, 'who benefited most from that?' They may even be able to put the experience into a national or global perspective if they ask the right questions. It will be important to see what values are or are not operating, and in what direction the whole issue seems to be heading. The group will find that, if they can excel at this Exploration stage, then the more their later theological reflection and activity will go to the jugular of the experience.

Having 'Explored' the 'Experience', the next stage is to 'Reflect' about it all.

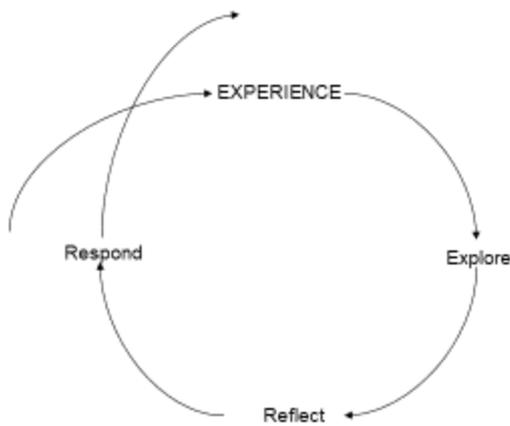


At this stage in the cycle the group works concertedly to see how the Christian faith directly relates to the experience at issue. They check all that they now understand about the

situation, including the major issues that are standing out, to see how the treasures of the Christian faith might relate to what they've found. Bible study, prayer, worship, hymns and songs, the creeds and councils of the Church, the theologies of times past, the present social teaching of the Church^{iv}, the great themes of the faith like salvation, creation, sin, thanksgiving, and so on: all these and much more will be at the group's disposal as it engages in theological 'Reflection' upon the Experience and Exploration phases of their work. Just as Freda went to her church to worship and to her Christian house group meeting, and talked it through with the vicar and read some literature about the subject, so the group will need to reflect carefully upon its experience in all manner of ways. Freda may well have considered some of the Old Testament prophets' injunctions about the nature of justice in society, or been helped by hearing a prayer about human responsibility and God's grace. The stories of creation and the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis may have thrown light on the difficult balance that must be struck between being productive and being responsible stewards in God's world. Jesus' discipleship group may well have modelled to her something of the sort of solidarity that she and her colleagues were striving to emulate at work. Just as Freda did, so the theological group will try to bring into the light those treasures from the Christian heritage which seem to resonate with the experience that they are currently exploring. This is the Reflection phase of the Spiral.

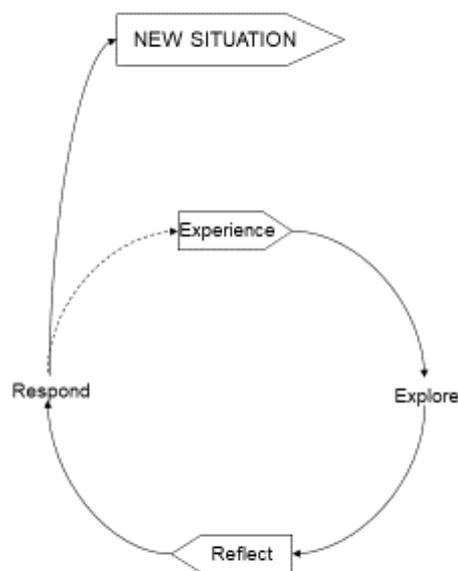
Many people will not of course have all this 'religious' information at their finger-tips and this is one of the reasons why theology is best done in a group. The group helps in a whole variety of ways and not least because – although at first sight it may not appear to be the case – the theological depth of most Christians is quite astounding, and the group is there to help each member find their voice. This is not to say that a group is an absolute necessity when doing theology, for sometimes a theologian has to work alone, whether they wish to or not. But a group is a great boon as we shall see, and it is always good practice for the individual theologian to be also in a group if possible in order to gain from it all the advantages that we will later enumerate.

After the Reflection phase comes the moment to 'Respond'.

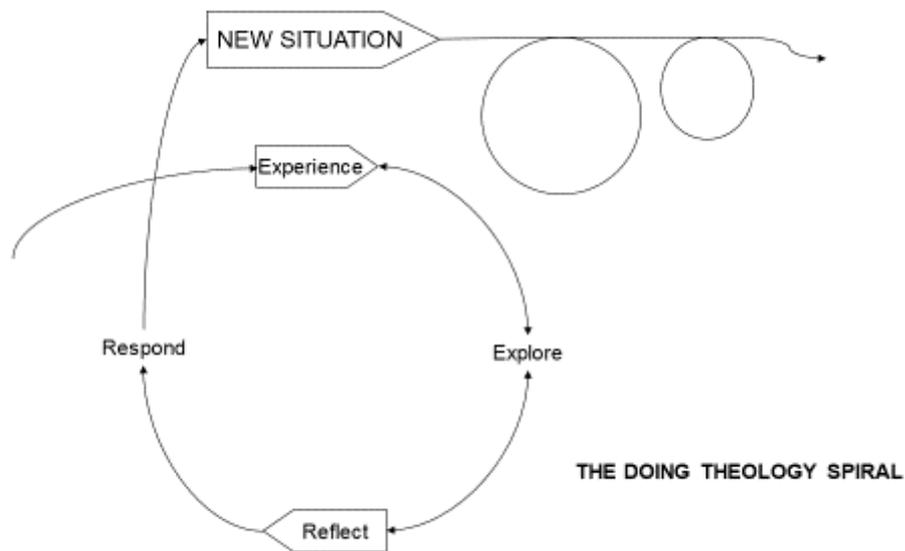


We can sit and reflect till the cows come home. If that's all theology is ever going to do for us, then we would be right to ignore it, for, as St James writes, 'do what the word tells you and don't just listen to it.' (James 1:22) To this end, the group asks itself, at this point around the circle, 'in the light of all the Experience, Exploration and Reflection about this issue, how does God want us to Respond?' This is where faith and action really do go hand in hand as theology becomes concrete again, and cashes out in experience. The group sets about experimenting with a range of different responses to see which one works best in practice, given the new insights derived from all their theological reflection. Freda, you will remember, had many options. She could choose to sack one of her staff, or reflection may have prompted her to try to engage in new negotiations with her employer. Like Freda, a group's responses can take a whole variety of forms, from tough action to silent presence, or indeed it may even be a group will determine to continue doing what they had been doing in the first place, but this time with much more insight and understanding. Whatever the choice of action, it will be a response based in the faith, and therefore worthy to be called a 'spiritual' activity, because however practical and down to earth, it will derive from a hunger to see God's will done. Indeed, all around the circle the activity will have been under-girded by that same spiritual quality – an openness to the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout.

Once round the Doing Theology circle, things are never the same again. Even if the group have decided that their Response will be to continue much as before, for now they will be doing so with new insight and understanding, and so in fact they will have arrived at a new situation.



This New Situation is itself worthy of exploration and reflection just as the first situation prompted them around the circle the first time. Like a wheel on a bicycle, the circle itself can continue around time and again, but by doing that it propels the bicycle to a brand new place at every turn. So the theology group makes its journey, and as the wheel continues to turn, new insights move them to new actions and ever greater fulfilment. In view of this, it seems best no longer to refer to the process as a circle or cycle, but rather as the Doing Theology 'Spiral'.



Some health warnings

Any diagram will have its limitations, and I am all too aware that this diagram shares that problem. In reality the process it seeks to express is far more free-flowing and natural and much less prescriptive than a line drawing can express. Also the diagram does not take account of many detailed matters – but to make the diagram more complicated by adding more details would simply exacerbate the problem. For example, an obvious thing which is not included in the diagram is celebration. Some have thought to add a fifth ‘celebration’ phase to the cycle but that would in any case simply not be true to experience. Groups find that they are celebrating at all points around the process, not just at the end of the cycle – indeed parties seem to be a constant feature of all the groups I’ve belonged to. In similar manner, the important matter of evaluation is not specified on the diagram, for again, it is integral to each phase of the process.

We must also be aware that the distinctions between each phase of the cycle are certainly not always as clear in practice as the diagram might imply. For example, the diagram makes the distinction between Exploration and Reflection much sharper than it is in reality. However, if we had not separated them out clearly in the diagram, it would be all too easy to forget the

importance of analytical exploration. We are prone to jump to conclusions, leapfrogging the Exploration phase, much preferring to work only with preconceptions and ideologies that we bring with us rather than engaging with the observable and 'awkward' realities of the matter. Having stressed how important it is to experience and explore, I nevertheless find it helpful sometimes to draw the arrow between the Exploration and Reflection phases as a two-way link to remind us that as long as we do both, the order is not cast in stone. The diagram is drawn as a logical circle as if during one phase the group is not allowed to venture into another, but this is simply not the way of imaginative groups. The diagram is there to make sure we undertake each task and don't do too much leapfrogging about, but the group must live its life naturally, trying to keep to task but not getting too worried if imagination and unexpected creativity lead in a slightly different direction.

This brings us to another factor that cannot adequately be represented in the diagram, but which will certainly become apparent in the subsequent chapters. It is simply that experience can play a very significant role in all the phases of the cycle and not only in the first phase. The work in each and every phase must constantly refer to the lived experience. Also, the work that is done through every phase of the spiral can be 'experiential' when that is appropriate, for by using the insights of adult education and learning theory, there is no need to limit ourselves to a distanced or theoretical style of operation at any time, as I hope to make clear as the book proceeds.

It is also important here to clarify further my use of the terms 'doing theology' and 'theological reflection'. I like to reserve the term 'theological reflection' for that aspect of theological activity which is centred upon the Reflection phase of the cycle, where the explored experiences are brought into engagement with the great traditions of the faith. I save the phrase 'doing theology' for the whole process. You'll find that many commentators call the whole process 'theological reflection' but my reason for keeping them separate is for clarity's sake and also, as we'll see, the disharmony between activists and academic

theologians may in fact have been worsened by a confusion of terms and definition.

Finally, you may have noticed that the Parables in Action group that I mentioned earlier, actually started their work not in the 'Experience' phase of the cycle but with a Bible Study – the 'Reflection' phase. Yes, it's possible to bite into the spiral almost anywhere – it's as flexible as that – but it is essential that we allow the diagram to remind us that there are phases which work pretty well in logical order and certainly must not be missed out altogether, lest we ride slip-shod into action which is not theologically sound.

Our aim is to become so acquainted with the spiral progression that it becomes second nature to us, and we find ourselves following the cycle quite happily, without having to make constant reference to a complicated blueprint. The cycle moves along into new discoveries and new places at each turn of the theological wheel, and in this way it reminds us that theology is a vehicle on a Christian journey, which never allows us to remain for long in one secure place. The Doing Theology Spiral is just one more supportive tool for following Jesus in the Way.

I hope the diagram is helpful, but let us now get away from diagrams for a while, as I offer a few examples of how this style of doing theology actually operates. The first example comes from South Africa^v.

ⁱ Segundo, J.L. (1977), The Liberation of Theology. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Holland, J. and Henriot, P. (1983), Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice. Maryknoll: Orbis. Also see the work of the Center of Concern, Washington, DC 20017, at www.coc.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Paris-based Ecumenical Institute for the Development of Peoples (INODEP) facilitated programmes of training in the techniques of education developed by Paulo Freire.

The Center for International Education at www.umass.edu/cie/index.html continues the work.

^{iv} See, for example, Bishop R. L. Guilly, SJ. (1988), In Pursuit of Human Progress: An Outline of Catholic Social Teaching. London: CAFOD. Christian denominations produce their own synodical papers and special published reports. Such teaching will be particularly interesting for groups wishing to find out what various denominational authorities are saying about the theme they have chosen to study.

^v This example is drawn from the South African Institute for Contextual Theology which is now at 8th floor, Auckland House, 185 Smitst. P.O.Box 32047, Braamfontein, AFRIQUE DU SUD 2017. It has published a whole range of material drawn from their own African experience.