Christian Reflective Practice: Prayer as a Tool for Reflection and Application in Theological Education

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Abstract: Reflection and application are integral for deep learning and for bridging the theory-practice gap, especially in Christian formation. A survey of the literature in both general education and Christian education deepens the theoretical understanding of the impact of reflection and application. Prayer, which can cultivate the reflection and application needed for deep learning, represents an under-utilized tool for learning integration and learner formation.

Introduction

Christian formation, as well as moral and character education in general, faces a methodological challenge in achieving its ultimate goal of consistent deep learning.[1] For most of Christian history, the Church has relied heavily on preaching for its authoritative transfer of knowledge and assumed that knowledge automatically leads to changed lives. Dallas Willard highlights the contemporary dissatisfaction with this approach and acknowledges that the approach has failed, as it has not produced the expected results:

> We have counted on preaching, teaching, and knowledge or information to form faith in the hearer and have counted on faith to form the inner life and outward behavior of the Christian. But, for whatever reason, this strategy has not turned out well. The result is that we have multitudes of professing Christians who well may be ready to die, but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly get along with themselves, much less with others (2014, 69).[2]

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[1] For a discussion linking formation in the field of theology to affective learning, see Graham, "Instructional Design for Affective Learning in Theological Education."

[2] Similarly, Farrah, in her assessment of lecturing as a method for adult education, concludes that lecturing is a well-suited method if the aim is cognitive or information transfer, but that a "lecture is not the best approach...to modify attitudes" (*Lecture, 228*).

Thus, Willard questions the assumption of guaranteed spiritual growth. The assumption is that the proclamation of cognitive knowledge would lead to faith, which would automatically lead to transformed hearts and to corresponding action.[3] This view has multiple significant shortcomings. It assumes first that teaching equals learning; second, that cognitive knowledge automatically leads to faith; third, that faith automatically develops into spiritual maturity; and finally, that knowledgeable faith automatically results in correct praxis. Such a view reflects a misunderstanding about the nature of Christian formation.[4] This is one of the gravest mistakes that theological educators can make: to assume that the cognitive teaching about a subject will lead to an all-encompassing mastery of the subject – that cognitive teaching about morality will lead to moral practitioners.[5]

In some Christian quarters, Paul's Damascus Road experience is viewed as the "method" for deep or formative learning – the Holy Spirit comes down and ignorance falls away like scales from one's eyes (Acts 9:18).[6] Yet, it is widely recognized that Christian formation is a participatory process (similar to the images of journeying or growth) through which an individual grows in action and attitude. An important element in learning and spiritual formation is the active participation of individuals. It seems that too strong an emphasis has been placed on cognitive formation through information transfer. It also seems that too strong (or exclusive) an emphasis has been placed, in some Christian circles, on divine works, thereby removing participatory formation from the human sphere.[7] Neither of these two schools of thought has thus far delivered the anticipated deep learning required for spiritual formation.

Willard is not the first to question this automatism. The prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel explore the very same question: how could Israel have failed in their love for and obedience to YHWH if they had access to the Torah of Moses?

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[3] For a discussion on the educational theory behind transformational learning, see Young, "Transformational Learning in ministry."

[4] There are significant Christian traditions that tried to overcome the assumption of guaranteed maturation as evident in some forms of monasticism, Methodism, and others.

[5] It is significant that the ATS (Association of Theological Schools) in the USA has adopted five key program standards for the MDiv, one involving theological reflection on ministry: "The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts" (ATS 2015).

[6] Similarly, Paul's statement that "faith comes from hearing" (Rom 10:17) may also be used, as is often the case in preaching literature, to limit Christian proclamation and witness to the pulpit. Although Paul makes the point that faith is a response to hearing the Gospel, he does not say that faith comes through pulpit preaching.

[7] I am not denying that instant cognitive and behavioral transformation of individuals takes place, like on the Damascus Road, but I am questioning whether it should be seen as the primary formative approach available for spiritual formation.

The initial assumption was that the presence of the Torah in Israel should have (automatically) led to love and obedience, and should have kept the nation close to YHWH. This was not the case, as the biblical history repeatedly shows. It is most tragically seen in the failed reforms of Josiah just decades before the Judean exile (2 Kings 22-23).

The prophets provide two significant biblical correctives to the automatism assumed by some in Torahic and formative learning. The first corrective emphasizes student-centered learning (or learner-centered education). It is exemplified in the vision of the godly king who embodies divine wisdom in Deuteronomy 17:18-19.[8] The king is not to passively receive instructions regarding YHWH. Rather, he is to become an active and self-directed student of the Torah: he is to copy the Torah and he is to read the Torah daily. YHWH himself gives similar advice to Joshua. In preparation for entering the land, Joshua is not to passively receive the Torah, but rather to "meditate on it day and night" (Joshua 1:8). Ezekiel offers the second corrective in his vision of the heart of stone being removed and replaced by a spirit-enabled heart, which allows for the Torah of YHWH to be written directly on the hearts of God's people (Ezek 11:19-20).[9] Thus, the correctives identified by the biblical authors are the active participation of the learner and an active engagement with the Holy Spirit. Formative learning requires that learners actively participate in their learning, especially in their formational learning, and allow God to shape them.

Church communities highly value cognitive as well as behavioral formation as a sign of genuine character formation. Yet, formational learning goes beyond conformity to agreed-upon norms, and aims at the genuine and lasting transformation of individuals and communities. Formational learning takes place when values are not merely explored intellectually, but rather embraced by learners as their own values and demonstrated in subsequent action (and not simply in speech). Patricia Cranton adds an important insight when she highlights that people create meaning from their experiences: "they build a way of seeing the world; settle on a way of interpreting what happens to them; and develop the accompanying values, beliefs, and assumptions that determine their behavior. Much of this framework is uncritically absorbed from family, community, and culture" (2016, 19). She notes that a transformative learning experience takes place through the critical examination of formative childhood experiences. This examination often takes place when the individual is challenged through an

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[8] It is interesting that kingship does not play a significant role in the Pentateuch and in the setup of the covenant community which the exception of these few verses.

[9] Other ingredients, like community and the participation in a learning community are other important element often utilised in theological education for transformative learning and are exemplified in the New Testament (Acts 13:1-3).

unexpected life event that does not fit expectations, thereby requiring a modified response.

Cranton's observation offers significant insights into formative theological education. Formative childhood experiences determine one's worldview and actions; yet, good theological education strives to challenge these experiences and their underlying cultural assumptions. The aim cannot be a simple intellectual deconstruction, but rather a significant encounter with the Divine (either directly or through the medium of Scripture). The aim of this encounter is to encourage learners to question and reflect on their own sets of expectations, their uncritical beliefs, the principles that guide their behavior, and their own formative experiences; and to assess their continuous validity in light of the challenge of the Gospel of Christ. The aim is not simply to reflect, but rather to reflect in the presence of and in fellowship with God. Thus, prayer is an essential tool in Christian reflective practice for participatory, learner- centered, formational learning.

Terminology

Jennifer Moon (2004) points out that a definition should stay as close as possible to the popular meaning of a word.[10] This is especially important for teachers of theology who do not necessarily have a background in education and pedagogy. The adjective "theological" in "theological reflection" adds to the concept of reflection a dimension that is not exclusively concerned about one's own personal life, but rather how the whole counsel of Scripture informs a biblical and theological response to one's present life. In this article, "reflection" refers to personal deliberation upon present existence, and especially how the present is influenced by the past, in order to intentionally influence one's future. This is not an exhaustive definition, but rather one that will help in the present discussion in relation to formation.[11] The emphasis is on the personal process that examines present action; recognizes the influence of the past (experiential or in terms of life

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[10] Moon suggests that "a common sense definition of reflection" is preferable; otherwise, the concept will bring confusion to listeners. See Moon, *Reflection*, 1.

[11] Ministerial theological reflection might need a slightly different definition as its aim is different. This essay is limited in its scope and therefore cannot satisfactorily address all the different biblical terminology that could further inform a theological understanding of reflection. How is reflection different from "meditation," "critical thinking," or "thinking things over"? Is not "praying over an issue" or "seeking the council of the Holy Spirit" similar to reflecting on life or oneself in partnership with the divine? Is it possible that reflection and application are so intrinsically linked that they cannot be separated, especially in spiritual formation? Taylor and White insist that reflection is "primarily confined to the application of 'theory to practice,'" thereby making the point that reflection and application are an intrinsic unit (see Taylor and White, *Practising Reflexivity in Health and Welfare*, 198).

principles); and modifies, affirms, or agrees to action for the future. Reflection has similarities with biblical wisdom, which also examines the pattern of human life and draws principles for future action from it.

Theological reflection is an appropriate response to the problem of pharisaism. Pharisaism is the preoccupation with, adherence to, and veneration of selected biblical truth in negligence of the wider counsel of Christian Scripture. Pharisaism is a potential stumbling block for formative learning, as it undermines deep reflection and instead emphasizes a superficial reflection on (personally) selected truth. It is not personal and self-directed, but is rather focused on external appearances, too often focused on the "speck in someone else's eye," while neglecting personal shortcomings.[12] Surprisingly, theological education has not often directly addressed the issue of pharisaism, even though confronting it was unmistakably central to the ministry of Christ on earth, whereby he sought to liberate the people of God from all types of misinformed, self-justifying religious adherence.

Background and Case Study

My initial interest in reflective practice and growth arose from my own background in Theological Education by Extension (TEE), specifically from my observation of the gap between the theory of TEE and the actual practice of TEE. This article therefore focuses on TEE, but will offer suggestions for residential theological education as well. Theological education in all forms must concern itself with integrating Christian reflective practice into its academic programs, as well as its spiritual formation.[13]

TEE arose as a direct result of the growing self-assertion of Majority World churches in the 1960s and 70s. During this time, educators questioned the exclusive use of Western academic seminary-type education for the ministerial training and formation of clergy, and emphasized the need for practical ministry-orientated education.[14] At the same time, theological educators started addressing the need for the democratization of theological education, moving away from an exclusive concentration on ministerial formation to include the theological formation of the laity (Pobee 2013, 19). TEE began as a process of decentralizing theological education to train ordained ministers in Guatemala in the early 1960s.

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[12] See also Moon, *Handbook on Reflective and Experiential Learning*, 95-102, where the problem of superficial reflection is addressed.

[13] For a similar concern about fragmentation, see Farley, *Theologia*; Cannell, *Theological Education Matters*; Banks *Reenvisioning Theological Education*; and Naidoo, "The Call for Spiritual Formation."

[14] See Bernhard Ott, Understanding and Developing Theological Education, 132-133.

Instead of having students come to the seminary, the seminary went to the students, who were predominantly part-time ordained ministers in rural areas. TEE utilizes a blended learning approach, traditionally comprising three elements: "*self-study materials, regular seminars*, and *life experience and ministry in the students' own context*" (Harrison 2004, 319). For its educational methodology, TEE builds on a multi-directional reflection-application conversation.[15] This ongoing conversation is the continuous interaction between the learning content and the application of that content in practice through reflection. Reflection and application are foundational for formative deep learning. The methodological significance of TEE is that reflection is intentionally used in every learning event: first there is reflection on the lesson content, then reflection on practice (or, in other words, on the application of the learning content), and finally reflection within a learning community on everyone's reflection and practice. Reflection is on ongoing process that does not have an end, but rather points to the need for lifelong learning.

Unfortunately, there is a gap between theory and actual practice within TEE. Several factors contribute to this gap: the reliance on Programmed Instruction (PI), a method of writing self-study material that initially offered high hopes for transforming learning; the conflation of schooling with "proper" education (which undermined non-traditional forms of learning); the widespread underfunding – and under-appreciation – of church-based theological education for the training of laity, especially in the Majority World; and the overemphasis on the three elements of self-study, application, and group meetings, which unfortunately downplayed TEE's own educational method of reflection and application. Ott offers a good assessment of TEE's potential, highlighting that TEE can deliver high-quality theological education if the learning is ideally set up and organized (2013, 119).[16] To succeed, the actual learning environment must correspond to the methodological assumptions; the theory about learning needs to be reflected in the actual learning that takes place. Within TEE, more often than not, the two did not meet. TEE practitioners theoretically subscribed to the TEE learning methodology, but through their actions contradicted that theory. Though Ott's comments refer to TEE specifically, there is a wider recognition that the very same dichotomy also exists in residential or other forms of (distance) theological education. High-quality theological education will always require careful attention to both the content and the form of pedagogical delivery.

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[15] For further discussion on defining TEE according to its learning philosophies, see Glissmann, "Theological Education by Extension."

[16] See Ott, 135. Ott links the failure of many TEE attempts to the improper use of the methods. Of TEE, as well as practice-oriented forms of theological education, Ott writes: "the benefits of these models can only be realized under ideal circumstances."

The under-theorized use of reflection in TEE also features in residential and distance theological education[17]. At times, residential and distance educational models require students to participate in reflective activities. Students may be asked to keep and write reflective journals as part of both spiritual and academic formation. However, in my own experience, I never received instruction on how to reflect, what reflection is, what the object of my reflection should be, or what ideal reflective practice looks like. A non-representative survey among friends involved in theological education indicates that my experience is the norm, rather than the exception.[18]

In TEE, as within the wider field of theological education, reflection and application remain under-theorized und under-utilized. This leads practitioners to subscribe theoretically to a learning method without a sufficiently deep understanding of how such a method is applied to an actual learning event. Practitioners simply associate concluding lesson/unit/topic questions with reflection. However, such questions are often ineffective. To elicit responses that will promote reflective learning, questions need to be specifically tailored to the learning outcomes, to the overall curriculum, to the learning tasks, and to the main teaching. It is easier to ask content-driven questions because they are easy to assess. Furthermore, reflection is often relegated to an independent activity after the course when students are sent home to think (reflect) about the lesson without any follow-up. When reflection is pushed into the null curriculum, students learn that reflection matters little because the teacher and the grade system do not attach value to it.[19] The lack of follow-up on reflection conditions students to diminish its meaning, consequently hindering their ability to achieve deep learning and become reflective Christian practitioners. Students need to develop the skills needed to be reflective Christian practitioners so they can bridge the gaps between head and heart, and between school and life. Only then can they address the common complaint that theological training lacks relevance to life and ministry.

The Importance of Spiritual Formation

A further challenge to reflection is the assumption that the process is self-evident – that potential practitioners inherently know what reflection is and how it should be used. The word "reflection" sounds simple and familiar as a word that means "deep thinking." The use of reflection as tool of deep learning is undermined when the reflection is not informed by extensive educational research and best practices.

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[17] "Under theorized use" means that an idea, theory, or concept is used without understanding, or without utilizing its full theoretical importance and intended application.

[18] A positive example of where reflection is actually taught to students as a module is Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS). See Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 11-12.

[19] See also the discussion in Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 88-89.

For this reason, the concept of reflection, and especially theological reflection, requires careful explanation in order for reflection to contribute fully to formative deep learning. Similarly, the idea that learning should be applied might appear self-evident. This is surely true in technical and vocational fields, but it is less self-evident when it comes to values, attitudes, or theological concepts.

Traditionally, theological education focuses on theological knowledge exclusively in the cognitive domain, ignoring both the affective and the behavioral domains. Beside the fact that this reflects a misguided understanding of humanity, it is also separates theological education from spiritual formation, which has traditionally placed a much greater emphasis on the affective as well as behavioral domains. Ideally, theological education and spiritual formation would be seen as different, but joined tools at the disposal of theological educators seeking to empower learners through formational learning. I propose that reflective prayer is a tool that unites theological education with spiritual formation, while at the same time aiding formational learning.

Throughout Christian history, the quest for a formative understanding of God has been closely linked with the ideal of Christian spirituality/formation. The core assumption about spirituality is that it is "the outworking in real life of a person's religious faith" (McGrath 1999, 2). Christian formation has implications for character formation and is closely associated with the concept of sanctification, which refers to the renewal of the image of God in mankind.[20] Simon Chan helpfully links Christian spirituality to its core theological concept of Christian perfection: "the Christian life is an intentional process aimed at a goal that is variously called union with God (Catholic), deification (Orthodox) and glorification (Protestant)" (1998, 18). Spiritual formation, therefore, posits a formational, non-static (because it is ever changing and ever developing) understanding of human life lived toward the goal of Christian perfection, and ever-closer union and conformity with the character of God.[21] Christian formation's focus is on how best to achieve or internalize learning that will help learners toward the goal of Christian perfection.

Reflection-Application in the General Education Literature

TEE builds its educational methodology for formative learning upon the reflection-application conversation.[22] The unfortunate under-theorized use of TEE merits a

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[20] The Westminster Shorter Catechism (question 35) describes sanctification as "the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness."

[21] It is often said that children are "works in progress" and therefore should be treated with grace, as they are still developing. However, it is illusory to believe that grown-up humans are finished products. They also are works in progress, and are growing, developing, and changing. See also Dan Gilbert, "The Psychology of Your Future Self."

[22] In these sections, I refer to the reflection-application cycle in TEE and most forms of theological education. The emphasis on "action" corresponds to the "application" of learning in ministry.

wider engagement with the theories that link formative learning with reflection and application in the education literature.

The publication of Dewey's *How We Think* in 1933 marked the beginning of a theoretical engagement with reflection as a tool for learning. His starting point is the observation that thinking (or learning) is related to experience. His approach is well summarized by an aphorism attributed to him: *We do not learn from experience…we learn from reflecting on experience*. Dewey distinguishes between a primary experience, which is an interaction with the environment, and a secondary experience, which is a "reflective experience in which the environment is used as the object of reflection" (Panda 2004, 64). Mietthinen highlights five phases or aspects of reflection according to Dewey: (1) The indeterminate situation: the habit does not work; (2) Intellectualization: defining the problem; (3) Studying the conditions of the situation and formation of a working hypothesis; (4) Reasoning – in a narrower sense; (5) Testing the hypothesis by action (2000).

Paulo Freire builds on this theory through his influential concept of *praxis*, which he defines as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (2000, 120).[23] Similarly, Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory uses a process of critical reflection to put transformed insights into action.[24]

TEE's cycle of reflection-application draws heavily on David Kolb's widely used cycle of experiential learning, which emphasizes the recurring experience of reflection followed by action as a way of deep learning. Kolb identified four processes that are needed for learning to take place. He describes them as: 1) concrete experience, 2) observation and reflection, 3) the formation of abstract concepts, and 4) testing in new situations (Smith 2010). Though the learning process is described chronologically, ideally the learning process is ongoing, like a "continuous spiral." In Kolb's learning cycle, a learning event takes place and is then improved via reflection (observation, analysis, review, relating the outcome to known theories, and conceptual experimentation to modify the initial approach) and application (testing the modified approach).

Another interesting theory for further reflection within Christian formation was developed by the influential education theorist Donald Schön. In his book The Reflective Practitioner (1983), he developed an approach known as "reflection-on-action," as well as "reflection-in-action," to address the theory-practice gap in professional knowledge (the very gap we wish to address within Christian formation).

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[23] It is important also to highlight that TEE, as a method of theological education, was conceptualized in the 1970s in South America and is clearly influenced by the work of Paulo Freire.
[24] See King, "A Journey of Transformation."

Jürgen Habermas' theory on the construction of knowledge is widely used in contemporary research on reflection. In a constructivist view, learners construct meaning and knowledge by interacting with existing knowledge, and allowing it influence their views and actions. This does not happen automatically, but only through reflection. Habermas' interest is in the question of how humans process ideas and construct knowledge from them. He identifies reflection as key for the construction of knowledge (Moon 2004, 2). Habermas (1971) classifies knowledge as instrumental knowledge, interpretive knowledge, and acting knowledge. Acting knowledge is a kind of formative knowledge that acts on the intellectual insights of instrumental and interpretive knowledge. Habermas thus highlights the importance of both reflection and application in the construction of knowledge.

Jennifer Moon (2004) focuses on reflection as learning, which, though largely cognitive, will lead to application or action.[25] As previous concepts encounter new ideas, reflection brings old and new together through a process that integrates new ideas into the "existing body of previous ideas and understandings, reconsidering and altering... [the learner's] understanding" (5).

In their professional role, teachers have embraced the concepts of action, reflection, and application to enhance their classroom teaching. However, as Petty (2004) points out, their efforts have not always translated into improving learning. As an educational model grounded in the "action" of ministerial application, TEE (and other forms of theological education) can benefit from a deeper understanding of the theoretical frameworks upon which their models are based.

Reflection-Application in the Christian Education Literature

Christian educators have also addressed the importance of the reflective process from a faith-based perspective. Thomas Groome has developed the influential concept of "shared Christian praxis."[26] Groome writes, "Christian religious education by shared praxis can be described as a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their

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[25] Moon gives a common-sense definition of reflection: "Reflection is a form of mental processing – like a form of thinking – that we use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding and possibly emotions that we already possess." To this she adds, "Reflection/reflective learning or reflective writing in the academic context, is also likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection, with an outcome specified in terms of learning, action or clarification..." (*A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning, 82-83*).

[26] Sylvia Collinson uses some of Groome's insights and highlights how action (which could be a teaching event) is followed by reflection in gospel recollections of Jesus' ministry. Her identification works especially well in the Gospel of Mark. That seems to be because discipleship in Mark is always active, in contrast to the formal pedagogical style of the rabbis. See Collinson, *Making Disciples*, 37-38.

critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith" (1999, 84). Groome understands praxis as action and reflection with the aim of the formation of an individual (1998, 405). He describes the transformative goal as follows:

> I have been convinced for some time that the learning outcome for Christian religious education should be more than what the Western world typically means by "knowledge"; that it is to engage the whole "being" of people, their heads, hearts and life-styles, and is to form, inform and transform their identity and agency in the world…our aim is not simply that people know about justice, but that they be just, not only understand compassion but be compassionate (1998, 2, 8).

Influenced by Freire's concept of praxis, Groome describes five movements (or components) in shared Christian praxis: (1) present action, (2) critical reflection, (3) theological reflection, (4) internalization of the Christian Story, and (5) living the faith. The fifth movement offers "participants an explicit opportunity for making decisions about how to live [their] Christian faith in the world" (1998, 148). The decision to live faith is "primarily or variously cognitive, affective, and behavioural and may pertain to the personal, interpersonal, or socio-political levels of their lives" (1998, 266). The decision can also be described as an application of learning (as well as a commitment) to future practice.

Another example of faith based reflective practice is Patricia Lamoureux's integrated approach to theological education, in which she builds on the image of the spiritual journey. The approach is holistic, as opposed to purely cognitive, and is focused on "ways of being, thinking, deciding and acting" (1999, 142). Methodologically ,she puts theological reflection at the heart of her approach because she recognizes that formative learning requires critical theological reflection. She describes theological reflection as a process whereby people learn from their experience through intentional and critical reflection on God's presence. Theological reflection enables the learner to identify and correct any "distortions in feelings, perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviour" that we might hold about God (Lamoureux 1999, 145). Her approach consists of three parts: a) engaging the story (reflection on human experience through narratives, like novels or movies); b) interplay between experience and theology (how course material or a theory relates to the human experience), and c) appropriating the learning (which can be implemented in a group setting). The aim of appropriating learning is for the learner "to draw insights and implications for personal life, ministry, and/or theological understanding" (1999, 150). Lamoureux continues, "The most profound expression of appropriating the learning is conversion. By conversion I mean a basic transformation of a person's ways of seeing, feeling, valuing, understanding, and relating" (1999, 151). The highest goal for appropriating learning is reached

when the implications of learning are applied to change an individual – not just his thinking, but also his being – through reflection, observation, and application.

In summary, reflection and application are recognized as integral to formational learning in the field of education broadly, as well as in theological education. All surveyed learning theories agree that becoming a reflective practitioner is important for formative learning. Theological education needs to utilize these insights to train Christian reflective practitioners in order to overcome the widespread theory-practice gap.

Prayer as a Key Tool for Reflection and Application

When supported by prayer, the complementary results of reflection and application lead to more significant learning.[27] In Spiritual Theology, Simon Chan writes that "prayer is the first act that links doctrine to practice" (1998, 126). Prayer applies theology to the actual world of the learner. Therefore, prayer has the potential to become a central element in theological education, and especially in spiritual formation.

The importance of individual prayer as a distinct, active, and powerful learning tool cannot be underestimated. Prayer is perhaps the essential ingredient for Christian spiritual formation. Even the other essential elements, such as worship and Scripture reading, are often supported and enhanced by prayer. Theological education should utilize prayer more intentionally, as it is rich in its silence, is purposeful with words, enhances meditation of biblical passages and theological insights, provides space for reflection on life's events and encounters, and makes room for the learner to commit herself to act differently in the future – all while seeking divine council in individual worship. Prayer, as an intentional and habitual activity, requires repetition and time. Christ compared the Kingdom of God to a slow-growing tree, which takes time to grow and to develop its full glory (Mt. 13:31). Intentional prayer has the potential to be an important act of reflection, as well as a tool for application in formational learning.

Therefore, the question that underlines this article is: how might prayer support, enhance, and deepen reflection and application in theological education? Prayer is often included as a component in the keeping of a reflective journal, but could it also serve as a learning activity in itself, whereby learners seek the Holy Spirit's counsel on classroom learning content?

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[27] Reflection is one aspect of prayer, among many other aspects. In terms of spiritual formation, prayer is more active and participatory than worship. Prayer is a reformulation of experience and theology in conversation with the divine. Prayer is also the means by which practitioners can struggle with the implications of their faith.

Prayer offers a rich and beneficial context for reflection and application in theological education. In prayer, reflection is done in the very presence of God, or more specifically in the presence of the holy and resurrected Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). Prayer is a purposeful encounter with the Divine, the ultimate source of knowledge and insight. It is done with the assumption that learners will pay close attention to the divine voice speaking into their lives. The holiness of Christ is, therefore, both an unmasking reality, as well as a reassuring comfort spurring spiritual formation, and growth into the high moral and behavioral ethics of the kingdom of God.[28] The holy presence of Christ means that the worshiper's true self (without deception, masking, and self-justification) engages with the transcendent holy God himself. The holiness of Jesus also acts as a countermeasure to sin and unbalanced self-love, while continuously offering meaningful restoration after failure through forgiveness. At the same time, Christ's nearness is a comforting reality as the acceptance of the worshiper into the very presence of the Divine is due to the sacrificial love of Christ himself.

In order for prayer to be an effective tool for formational learning, it should intentionally provide space for reflection in the following areas: reflection on God; reflection on self, and reflection on neighbor. The threefold division follows the Greatest Commandment to first love God, and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mk .12:30-31, Lk. 10:27).[29]

Reflection on God

Reflection on God is not limited to the human capacity to detect patterns of divine behavior in the life of the people of God. Rather, it is done in partnership with the Holy Spirit in order to progress in understanding the mysteries of the life of faith. Too much of the Church's reflection does not progress from reflection on God's being to reflection on how this impacts the life of faith. Reflection on God is fundamentally a reflection on God's self-revelation in Scripture. God's self-revelation is discovered not in abstract philosophical terms, but rather in a developing and maturing relationship with the people of God through recorded history. The highest divine self-revelation is the giving of Godself in the person of Jesus Christ for the restoration of humanity into the image of God. Reflection on God is reflection on his moral self-revelation, his nature, and our nature in the process of being liberated to reflect God's character – with his concerns absorbed as our concerns, and his action and our action aligning as a result of God's action.

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[28] **"Thy will be done on earth…"** (Mt. 6:10) indicates that the will of God, as well as his reign, is breaking in through the deeds of the "royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9), which is the Christian community.

[29] **"Love your neighbor as yourself."** The order implies that loving the neighbor is dependent on the love for and understanding of oneself. Loving oneself leads to loving one's neighbor.

Reflection on Self

Reflection on self participates in the restoration of humanity into the full display of the image of God. It is not simply a new term for self-help. Sin and self-deception unfortunately undermine and distort the image of God in humanity. Reflection on self is the reflective tool that allows for the restoration of the image of God in the individual. Reflection on self should not lead to self-rejection, for the Great Commandant makes it clear that it is the self's experience of the Divine that flows into the self's kindness toward the neighbor. We ought to ask: are my actions, speech, emotions, and behaviors consistent with the whole counsel of God's word? Reflection on self is reflection on the patterns of life: patterns of sin, patterns of emotions, patterns of motives, patterns of behavior, patterns of actions and thoughts (both the ones done, as well as the ones left undone), and patterns of likes and dislikes. Current behavior is often the result of past experiences and of one's unique character.

One must also recognize that one's greatest strengths often relate to one's greatest weaknesses. Reflection on self should be done with the recognition that humanity has an intrinsic preference for self-deception,[30] as well as for elevating individually preferred Scriptural truth to universal applicability, in negligence of the whole counsel of God's word. The self is fundamentally self-justifying in the sense that it easily recognizes others' faults while remaining oblivious to the self's own faults (cf. Lk. 6:41-42, Mt. 7:3-5). This intrinsic tendency needs to be recognized, addressed, and corrected; otherwise, as Jesus said, one's spirituality will remain hypocritical. The corrective is a reflective application of the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk. 6:31, Mk. 7:12). One ought to consider: "I see a fault in my neighbor, but don't I act just like him/her in similar situations?" It is not surprising that the Golden Rule is found in both Luke and Matthew in the scene where Jesus narrates the bizarre story of the individual who seeks to help remove a tiny fault (a speck of sawdust), while being blinded by a huge plank.

Finally, reflection on self makes space for acknowledging faults or sins so we can subsequently seek forgiveness and restoration through Christ. When necessary, this is followed by seeking restoration of a damaged relationship with a neighbor (Mt. 5:23-24). It may also lead to future action and/or to modified behavior in a similar situation (covenanting).

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[30] For a treatment of the subject of self-deception, see Hauerwas, "Self-Deception and Autobiography."

Reflection on Neighbors

Reflection on neighbors aims to build up the restorative community of God's people with communal concerns for a shared wellbeing. It also directs specific actions to the restoration of the image of God in the neighbor. Such actions are specific and intentional because concern for the neighbor can never be passive or accidental. One begins by considering who might be one's neighbor at any given time (Lk. 10:36). A neighbor may be those closest to oneself (spouse, children, and family members), those unknown to the self, and everyone in between. Reflection on neighbor questions the self's actions, speech, emotions, and behaviors toward the neighbor. Reflection on neighbour also spurs commitment to future actions that will benefit the neighbor. Reflection leads to action, whereby a theoretical concern for the neighbor finds its practical application.

Prayer as Activity

Prayer has the potential to be a powerful reflective tool for formational learning in spiritual formation. Like reflective writing, prayer can provide reflective space for participatory reflection about one's own life lived before the Divine. It gives space for participatory learning, whereby the learner fully and actively participates in achieving his/her own internal formation. The meaningful encounter with the Divine opens up a safe environment for encountering and questioning formative experiences, renews the image of God in mankind, and leads to forgiveness and new future commitments.

Prayer as a reflective learning activity could serve as theological engagement with a topic. The learning task could be: "reflect and pray in light of God's presence (his light that exposes everything hidden and his available forgiveness) on improving a (troubled) relationship." This example focuses on repairing relationships, but it could also focus on God's forgiveness, God's covenant, God's concern for the poor, etc. Initially, learners should be provided with detailed questions guiding reflection on the three foci (God, self, and neighbor) and listening to the Holy Spirit:

- Upward focus on God: What am I learning from God's revelation about relationships and especially my relationship to God? What does God say about the importance of relationships?

- Inward focus on self: What is causing the problem? How can I improve the relationship? Is there a need to seek forgiveness from God or from the other person? Do I need to recommit myself to the relationship that God has placed me in?

- Outward focus on neighbor: What does God say about the other? How can I bless the other?

Conclusion

Learning approaches surveyed in general education literature, in Christian education literature, and in spiritual formation all recognize reflection as a key element for internalizing learning. Reflection is used in all the surveyed approaches to arrive at deep or formative learning. This is especially significant for spiritual formation, which shares a deep commitment to formative learning. Reflection is not the end of the process, but rather a tool for internalizing learning. Cognitive knowledge is not the automatic magic bullet for faith formation. Rather, it needs to be utilized or applied in order to be internalized. As Graham states, "The more a value or attitude is internalized, the more it affects behaviour" (2003, 59). It is not surprising then that within spiritual formation, reflection and application are used to promote (gradual) spiritual growth in the journey toward God. Spiritual formation is never accomplished; it is always a process of human life aligning itself with the Godhead, using new experiences and encounters to restore the image of God in oneself. Lamoureux warns that reflection is countercultural in our age of the immediate available information (1999, 153). Therefore, reflective skills need to be developed, time for reflection integrated into the educational process, and learning applied contextually.

What is now needed in theological education (TEE and residential or distance education) is recognition of the importance of theological reflection as a tool for formation, for bridging the theory-practice gap, and for deep learning. Prayer is key to helping learners bridge the gap between theory and practice, and between their studies and their spiritual formation. Prayer places the process of reflection within active communication with God, allowing for deeper understanding, listening to God's voice, and commitment to action.

The goals of theological education require time and are best achieved through participatory learning. Learners need clear guidance (based on best practices) on how to reflect. They need the opportunity to practice reflection, to talk about their reflections, and to share their reflections with others in order to become Christian reflective practitioners. Theological schools will need to incorporate reflection as a key part of assessment in all subjects in order to create Christian reflective practitioners. More importantly, students need to be given time to reflect (this is perhaps easier to achieve in TEE, as the learners live in their original communities while engaging in theological learning). Once students engage in reflection, they will also need space for sharing their reflections. It is my hope that instead of adding a module or a course to the (most likely already overloaded) curriculum, reflection could instead serve as a core learning activity to increase the impact of existing courses.

In conclusion, reflection and application are vital tools for aiding formative

learning, and especially spiritual formation. A brief survey like this one can only skim the surface of best practices for reflection, and especially theological reflection. A lot of refined contemporary thinking is available to practitioners to help them better utilize these tools, and avoid un-theorized or under-theorized uses of reflection and application. As a unique form of reflection, greatly facilitates Christian formation.

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