

Notes on human experience and theological reflection...  
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What are the connections between our faith and our lives? What can theological reflection look like in daily contexts, in the practice of our faith?

Kathryn Tanner suggests that:

"The meaning of Christian beliefs and values becomes apparent with reference to other beliefs and values that Christians hold, and with reference to the way those beliefs and values figure in further Christian statements and actions. One does not know what Christians mean by God without also knowing what they mean by Christ or by human existence lived religiously. What Christians mean by God is made clear by what they go on to do with the notion -- whether it figures, for example, in actions characterized by anxiety-ridden fear, or joyful risks for the sake of others; whether, say statements using the notion are confident of their capacity to refer to God or signal their own inadequacy. Similarly, in the course of daily life or in theological argument, a particular belief or value will seem right according to how well that belief or value hangs together with others and with the rest of Christian social practices." (p. 77)

[*Theories of culture: A new agenda for theology*, Kathryn Tanner, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997]

She argues the specialized academic theology, of the kind that we might practice in a seminary or university environment, has much in common with the day to day theologizing that occurs as Christians struggle to figure out, each day, what it means to be Christian. The differences between the specialized practice and the everyday practice have more to do with questions of consistency and focus, and with the languages and power structures within which those questions are answered.

How might we learn from our practices, then? How might we enter into theological reflection in ways that take seriously our daily modes of practice, the languages and contexts in which we live and work?

Stephan Bevans, a theological scholar who has specialized in missiological issues as they intersect with doctrine, has sketched an

interesting map in relation to theology and culture that I think is useful in this context. He has focussed on the academic theologians, but I can fill in the ways in which religious educators, for interest, tend to work in these modes.

He begins by sketching out a spectrum, along which he places five models of what he terms contextual theology. This spectrum is by no means definitive, and like any map, calls attention to some things at the expense of others, but I think it's useful nonetheless.

His five models are as follows:

**translation:**

- dynamic-equivalence
- Christianity is supracultural
- there is a "gospel core"
- comes to radically change a culture
- God's revelation is supracultural and unchanging
- benefits: witnesses to the fact that there is a core message, realizes that much of Bible is tied to its cultural origin but is not bound there
- disadvantages: very naive view of culture, sees culture as a husk covering a kernel, rather than as the matrix within which meaning abounds and is constructed

RE: culture as a means of communicating something (find new ways to get Christian content out there)

**anthropological:**

- God speaks through culture, God is always revealing Godself
- human nature, and therefore human culture, is good, holy and valuable
- looks for God's revelation and self-manifestation in the values, patterns and concerns of a culture
- God's revelation is a personal and communal encounter with divine presence
- benefits: regards human reality with utmost seriousness, revelation is not "just" a message, but an actual encounter with God's loving and healing power in the midst of life; it is a model that starts

where people are, rather than by imposing questions from other contexts

disadvantages: easily falls prey to cultural romanticism, often ignores or shoves aside the richnesses of tradition and history in favor of the present moment

RE: culture as a source of meaning (find new meanings in the Christian message, new revelation in culture)

### **praxis:**

acting and then reflecting and then acting again  
the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing  
faith seeking intelligent action

God's revelation is the presence of God in history -- God's presence is one of beckoning, inviting, calling men and women to cooperate with God's work of healing, reconciling, liberating

liberation theology grows out of this mode

benefits: underlying epistemology that breaks with a preoccupation with rationality and meaning, to the expense of action; creates new energy for living one's faith in multiple contexts

disadvantages tend to grow out of being linked too strongly to only one form of knowing/acting (for instance, an uncritical Marxism, not recognizing gender, etc.)

RE: culture is a context in which God is acting, and in which we are invited to become partners in that action

### **synthetic:**

middle of the road practice between culture/social change and gospel message/tradition

composite nature of human culture or situation in which men and women live requires a composite understanding of theologizing  
every context or culture has elements unique to it, and elements held in common

one's identity emerges in a dialogue between uniqueness and complementarity

Christian identity then, emerges in a conversation between the "translation" and the "anthropological" models, if you will

God's revelation comes in the middle of this dialogue

benefits: openness to dialogue, makes an effort to see theologizing as an exercise in true conversation and dialogue,

witnesses to the universality of Christian faith, because every culture can learn something new from every other culture;

disadvantages: might appear to be too wishy-washy, being neither faithful to traditional concerns of Christianity, or contemporary problems of a particular society

RE: culture is incomplete in itself, and in need of the wisdom of other cultures; pop culture might be one such culture

### **transcendental:**

sees theology as not about producing a particular body of texts, but about attending to the affective and cognitive operations in the self-transcending subject (cf. Lonergan)

proposes a basic switch in the coming to know reality: instead of beginning with reality that is "out there," it suggests that the knowing subject is intimately involved with determining reality's basic shape

one begins one's quest for knowing what 'is' by attending to the dynamic of one's own consciousness and irrepressible desire to know

begin with the interior world of the human person, rather than the world of objects

God's revelation is not 'out there,' but rather the only place God can reveal Godself truly and effectively is within human experience, as a human person is open to the words of scripture as read or proclaimed, open to events in daily life, and open to the values embedded in a cultural tradition

presupposes that while every person is historically and culturally conditioned, the human mind operates in identical ways in all cultures and all periods of history

benefits: emphasizes theology as activity and process, rather than simply content: recognizes the contextual determination of the person who theologizes; universal structure of knowing provides common ground for conversation

disadvantages: too abstract and hard to grasp, is this really universality or a western notion of it? if authenticity is the primary criterion, who provides the criteria for authenticity? who judges?

RE: instead of taking others as the starting point, take ourselves seriously: begin with our own experience, our own struggles to make sense of our faith

[Sources: *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephan Bevans, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998; "Taking culture seriously in religious education," Stephan Bevans, *The Catholic World*, Sept/Oct 1994]