Introduction to Practical Theology  
LIM 703, Summer 2008  

Monday – Friday, 8:30 – 11:50 am  
June 23 – July 3, 2008  
Communications Building – Room 301  
Map of Loyola’s Campus:  
http://www.loyno.edu/neworleans/maps/maps-campus.php  

Barbara J. Fleischer, Ph.D.  
Stallings 110  
Email: fleische@loyno.edu  
865-3397  
Office Hours by appointment  

Course Description:  

This course seeks to help participants engage in a method of theological reflection involving a rhythm of discernment and action for the sake of the reign of God. The sociocultural, personal, and institutional contexts of one’s primary ministry praxis along with the Christian tradition form the matrices of practical theology. Interpretation theory and social analysis are key components of the conversation in which faith and daily life meet and build.  

Introduction to Practical Theology presents a methodological grounding for the entire Master of Pastoral Studies and Master of Religious Education programs. It describes key features of practical theology and then presents a model for understanding the contexts that shape our ministries. It also presents a method for reflecting critically on ministerial experiences and on the ideas and social forces that influence our spiritualities and interpretations.  

Course Goals:  

The specific goals of the course are to assist participants in developing:  

- an initial understanding of practical theology  
- a working description of their ministry praxis  
- an appreciation of the dynamic, hermeneutical, critical and transformative character of practical theology  
- a method for engaging in practical theology  
- practice of this methodology.  

Required Texts:  

Fleischer, Barbara et al. Introduction to Practical Theology. New Orleans: Loyola Institute for Ministry, 2008. (Important! Email instructor fleische@loyno.edu to obtain a copy).

Articles as assigned.

**Evaluation**

10% Class participation, including leading some class discussions, and presenting praxis-related projects as assigned.

10% Reflective essay 1: Description of "concern" and initial understanding of it. (3-4 pages). Due: June 26, 2008.

A "concern" is a situation that you can concretely observe (or gather data about it) and in which you are already involved in trying to address the situation. If you are not already involved in your situation of concern, it may be one in which you are willing to invest some of your energy to assist in addressing it.

25% Reflective essay 2: Practical Theology and its meaning for your own life. (4-6 pages). Due: July 7, 2008.

The central questions to address in this essay are: Drawing from your readings for this course and other resources, how would you describe the major facets of practical theology, and what does engagement in practical theology mean for your own life?

Note: Please use MLA style in citing sources. Examples of MLA style may be found in the LIM Guide to Written Theological Reflection.

55% Reflective essay 3: Reflection on your concern, using the method and model of practical theology presented in this course (10-12 pages). Due July 21, 2008:

Present your description and initial understanding of your concern as a starting point. Then, based on your research and on course content and models, reflect on the personal, sociocultural, and institutional contexts of your praxis concern and the theological perspectives from the Christian tradition (e.g., biblical selections, prophetic writings, church documents, or other theological sources) that speak to you in relation to this situation. Test your initial understandings against the new information you have gained through your research and the reflections that have emerged since you first thought about this situation of concern. Be sure to cite and document your sources. Finally, based on your analyses and reflections, discuss the implications of your new understandings for your future praxis in this situation and develop an imaginative pastoral strategy that responds to some of the issues you have uncovered as you explored your situation of concern. Total paper: approximately 10-12 pages (including your statement of your description and initial understanding of your concern [a polished version of your first paper for this course]).
Use MLA Style for citations and your Works Cited. (See the *Written Guide to Theological Reflection* for examples of citations and other important information for LIM papers. It is located on the Blackboard course web site "Course Materials")

Submit this paper as a WORD or rich text file (rtf) via the Blackboard course site “dropbox” or email your paper to fleische@loyno.edu. Graded papers will be returned to the student’s dropbox. (Note: If you would prefer to have your final paper mailed to you, please provide a self-addressed large envelop.)

**Grading Scale:**
A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D, F.

The Association of Graduate Program in Ministry Position Statement on Practical Theology
The Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry (AGPIM), an organization of Roman Catholic graduate programs, recognizes and supports the emergence of a new theological paradigm in graduate education for ministry. This theology, commonly referred to as practical or pastoral theology, is a mutually interpretive, critical and transforming conversation between the Christian tradition and contemporary experience. Historical, hermeneutical, and socio-cultural analyses are integral to this method of theology.
Pastoral or practical theology takes place in a community of faith, implies a spirituality that is both personal and liturgical, and is directed towards individual and social transformation in Christ.

**Tentative Class Schedule:**

*Foundations of Practical Theology*
June 23: *Contexts of Ministry Praxis*
- Introductions, syllabus review; overview of practical theology.
- Identify an issue of concern.
  
  *Before reading the assignments for this session, write a brief description of a concern or issue related to your ministry interests that you will continue to explore throughout this course. Jot down some notes on what dynamics you see at play in this situation.*
- Read: Fleischer, Intro to Practical Theology, Chapter 1
- Veling, Practical Theology, Chapter 1

June 24: *Conversation, Dialogue, and Spirituality in Practical Theology*
- Fleischer, Intro to Practical Theology, Chapters 2 and 3
- M. Cowan, “The Sacred Game of Conversation”
- Viens, Theology’s Search Inward Parts One and Two (syllabus)

June 25: *Hermeneutics and Theological Reflection*
- Fleischer, Intro to Practical Theology, Chapter 4
Veling, Practical Theology, Chapter 2 and 4
H. W. Stone and James O. Duke, “How to Think Theologically”

**Exploring the Contexts of Praxis**

**June 26: Sociocultural Considerations**

*Reflective Essay 1 is due.*
Read: Fleischer, Intro to Practical Theology, Chapter 5 (by M. Cowan)
Veling, Practical Theology, Chapters 9 and 10

**June 27: Personal Experience and Social Location**

Read: Fleischer, Intro to Practical Theology, Chapter 6
Veling, Practical Theology, Chapter 6
Complete the Keirsey-Sorter before coming to class

**July 1: Engaging the Christian Tradition**

Read: Fleischer, Intro to Practical Theology, Chapter 7 (by Goulding)
Veling, Practical Theology, Chapter 11

**July 2: Mediating Structures and the Institutional Context of Ministry**

Read: Fleischer, Intro to Practical Theology, Chapter 8
Wheatley and Frieze article: [http://margaretwheatley.com/articles/emergence.html](http://margaretwheatley.com/articles/emergence.html)
Review of Practical Theology

**July 3: The Natural World as a Meta-Context of Praxis**

Read: T. Berry, “The Viable Human”
*Oral Presentations:* Contextual reflections on a situation of your concern

**July 7: Reflective Essay 2 due.**

**Final Paper due: July 21:** “Send” in Blackboard dropbox, or email fleische@loyno.edu
(All papers will be returned via Blackboard Dropbox)
University Policy

Statement on Intellectual Honesty: Intellectual honesty is simply acknowledging, through documentation, all those sources that the writer has used in preparing any written work. Plagiarism, the obverse of intellectual honesty, is the use of any form of material, whether written or verbal, without formal indebtedness through documentation. The paraphrasing of any work, either written by other students or found in print or in an electronic form, without acknowledgement, is plagiarism. Not properly identifying the source of a quotation, even though the quotation is enclosed in quotation marks, is also plagiarism. Not only the exact language of a sentence or phrase, but any material falsely presented as one’s own – an ideal, a concept, data, graphs, or a line of argument – constitutes plagiarism. Any material that neither originates with the student nor is common knowledge among educated persons must be formally acknowledged.

It must be remembered that written work stands on its own, not on the intention of the writer. The burden of academic honesty rests on the student, not on the instructor. If students have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism or what is required, they should inquire before the work is submitted. Otherwise, they open themselves to charges of plagiarism.

The penalties for plagiarism are severe: a student who is found to have plagiarized or to have assisted another student in plagiarizing may be given a failing grade for the course on the first violation; a second offense may result in exclusion or dismissal from the university.

Statement of Incomplete Grades: Grades of “I” (incomplete) change to “F” automatically if the course is not completed and the grade changed by the sixth week of the subsequent term, excluding summer terms.

Disability Statement: Students with disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact the Office of Disability Services at 865-2990 as soon as possible to ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion.
Excerpts from Theology’s Search Inward

by Joachim Stanley Frank Viens
I believe that the Church in America, at this point in her history, is faced with the challenge of recapturing the Catholic vision of reality and presenting it, in an engaging and imaginative way, to a society which markets any number of recipes for human fulfillment. I think in particular of our need to speak to the hearts of young people, who, despite their constant exposure to messages contrary to the Gospel, continue to thirst for authenticity, goodness and truth. Much remains to be done, particularly on the level of preaching and catechesis in parishes and schools, if the new evangelization is to bear fruit for the renewal of ecclesial life in America.

Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the U.S. Catholic Bishops, April, 2008

Editor’s Note: The following essay presents the Preface and abbreviated versions of the first two chapters of a manuscript by Joachim Stanley Frank Viens entitled Theology’s Search Inward. We include it in this Intro to Practical Theology course because of its focus on adult “reappropriation” of faith (explained in Part One of this essay) and its exploration of the term, “theology from below,” which offers a pathway toward a renewed appropriation of Christian faith.

Preface

The experience of cultural pluralism and the consequent need for a reappropriation of one’s religious tradition is the central concern of the several studies constituting this essay. The Church of the future, according to Karl Rahner, will no longer be a cultural necessity as in the days of Christendom. There was a time when Church and culture were so unified in Europe that the whole was called Christendom. In that situation it was easier to believe than not to, because everyone else believed. The Church of the future, on the other hand, will be made up of people who have struggled against the cultural current to come to a personal, free, responsible faith; a faith continually formed afresh in “the ultimate experience of life and of God” (Rahner, Shape 25).

In addition to reappropriation, a second concern of this essay is that such a personal, freely chosen faith, continually formed afresh from its sources in the experience of life and of God, presupposes a search inward. Such an inward search is needed, first of all, because religion, including its theology, rituals or sacraments, even its “revelation,” is the expression of experience. Israel’s theology, for example, was the articulation of how God acted in Israel’s history (Wright). Religion has come to be seen, by both theologians (Rahner, “Theology” 221-52) and sociologists (Baum 11ff.), as a symbol system, a meaning system “that illuminates the ambiguity of life and expresses its ultimate meaning, thereby generating deep and abiding convictions and producing a commitment to action and a special life-style” (Greeley 14-15). The problem which this view of religion reveals, however, is that religion and its symbols so often express someone else’s
experience whose relevance to our own is not immediately obvious. According to Rollo May, this is a general cultural experience whenever a society is in process of rapid and cultural change (May 30). In such cases, it takes some effort to help people see in their own experience the correlates of the inherited symbols.

The present essay attempts to respond to this need for reappropriation of a religious tradition. It is the thesis of this essay that theology has turned progressively inward in its search for those “ultimate experiences of life and of God” which Rahner described as the sources of a personally appropriated faith.

Reappropriation of one’s religious tradition presupposes a search inward for another reason. Our inner experience is elusive and intangible, especially in a culture which is as active as ours. In the press of activity, experience tends to be trampled under foot. Such experience is as hard to cultivate as is a garden which has been trampled. This phenomenon is one of the presuppositions of Ira Progoff’s Intensive Journal Process (Introduction, At a Journal Workshop, Well). Specifically, persons frequently have some experience of God, but frequently also they are not in touch with such religious experience. The role of the religious educator, in tradition called the “Mystagogue,” is not to produce such religious experience, but to help a person recognize it for what it is. Theologians, particularly those studied in this essay, often take on the role of “mystagogue” in this sense (Rahner, “How” 231). (The early Fathers of the Church prepared the faithful for full life in the Church by “leading them into” the understanding of the sacraments, called in Greek the “Mysteries,” hence the word mystagogue. Since the sacraments express the deepest meaning of human and Christian life, to understand them is to understand the Christian view of human existence. A fine example of a theologian doing this kind of work is Joseph Powers in Spirit and Sacrament.) Such are the concerns which have shaped the present essay.

Part One of this essay describes the context of contemporary theology as a pluralistic world which causes us to lose our first naiveté, makes us historically and culturally conscious, and which is at the same time an invitation to the reappropriation of our inherited faith tradition. This is the context in which theology itself has been searching inward for the experiential sources of faith and of theological reflection.

“Theology from Below” as described in Part Two is an attempt to start with experience rather than doctrines in order to lead a person to both an understanding and an appropriation of traditional doctrines, sacraments, moral positions, and other key Church teachings. Theology from below begins with the experience of the earliest communities who first articulated their experience of God’s grace in words and rituals. It also explores the experience of Christians throughout the ages in living out their understandings of the faith they inherited. Theology from below thus invites us to explore our own experiences of God’s grace in dialogue with people of faith throughout history.
Reappropriation becomes possible when a modern person is able to encounter and enter into dialogue with his or her faith tradition. Theology’s search inward teaches us that this encounter and dialogue presuppose a sense of history, a sense of language and a contemplative spirit.
Intro to Practical Theology

Works Cited


Part One

The Context of Theology’s Search Inward

Theology’s search inward, traced in this essay, has been largely a response to a cultural experience. Today, many of us have personally experienced a plurality of religious and cultural worldviews. This is at once a threat to our traditional faith and an invitation to rethink and to reappropriate that faith. My purpose in this essay is to show that this is not an isolated experience, but the story of our times. The cultural situation I am speaking of is so well illustrated by a story told and discussed in Duska-Whelan’s book on Moral Development (70-71) that I wish to begin by recounting that story here.

Once there was a young man, I will call him Eric, who lived in a primitive society, a relatively small community surrounded by mountains and having no contact with the outside world. Eric’s community was highly organized around a system of strict rules, rituals and taboos. There were grave sanctions enforcing this order. Indeed the community believed that if one were to break a rule or a taboo he would become infectious to the other members. Eric did violate an important rule and was ostracized. While wandering in the mountains he became lost and eventually strayed into another small community. Here he encountered strange new practices, things which were forbidden in his tribe. Practices allowed in his own community were outlawed here. The members of this new community, however, were perfectly healthy, indeed, in many ways, they were even better off than the people at home. Imagine Eric’s wonderment and confusion! He became skeptical of his own community’s absolutes. He asked over and over if there could be any really ideal order. One thing was for sure, he would never again regain the naive confidence that he once had in the absoluteness and in the uniqueness of his own tribe’s rules, rituals and taboos, “unless of course he viewed these strange people as monsters” (Duska and Whelan 70-71).

When Eric returned home, after repeating his experience in several other small villages, his new experience of cultural pluralism was not appreciated by those who had never left the village. The authorities viewed this experience as dangerous. Eric became intellectually disillusioned about beliefs he had always held sacred. He was isolated and without emotional support. He was emancipated from a rigid belief system, but what would he do with his newfound freedom?

Eric’s story describes the experience of many Catholics and other Christians during the past several decades. It mirrors my own transition from a kind of ghetto Catholicism in New England to the wide open spaces, physical and spiritual, of western Colorado in the early 1960s. It portrays what Harvey Cox described as the transition from tribal religion to urban religion.
Cox views his own hometown of Malvern, Pennsylvania, “a town of fewer than 2000 souls,” as his tribal village. “Even the highway bypassed Malvern.” There may have been a few Jews or atheists in Malvern, but we do not hear of them in Harvey Cox’s description. He speaks of the pluralism within the Christianity of that tribal village, but one gets the impression that a rather homogeneous worldview reigned. That village, though, left its mark indelibly on Harvey Cox. He succeeds very well in evoking the atmosphere of a small town in which a boy grows up in a Christian world:

The tribe is gone, at least physically, especially for the people who still live there. But for me, Malvern will never change. The tribal village is eternal. The old Malvern which is gone forever is more real for me than the new one that now exists. It moulded impulses and instincts that still hurt me. It kindled longings I will feel until I die. Malvern was the place where, as I might once have said, and can still say in another way, “Jesus came into my heart,“ where the awful sense of the fathomless mystery and utter transiency of life first dawned on me, and where I discovered that in the midst of all that terror and nothingness I was loved. What more could anyone’s tribal village do for him? (Cox 52)

Eventually, this young tribesman, too, left home. He joined the Merchant Marine, and after he had crossed the ocean a few times “Malvern didn’t seem the same.” He lived in several cities, finally coming to rest for the present as a professor at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He felt the loss of the tribal village and the dangers inherent in that loss:

All people need symbols and stories for dealing with individual and corporate crisis. But stories stem from particular places – this bush and that precipice. So when the bushes and precipices are left behind, the stories are sometimes forgotten. In this way a tribe can suffer something comparable to what in an individual we call a nervous breakdown. (Cox 52)

John Shea is another theologian who speaks of this experience of transition and the challenge it presents to us. Shea compares the experience of Catholics over the past recent years to the Hopi Indian initiation rite of unmasking:

During the rite the children naively believe the masked dancers are really Hopi gods. The symbols of the Sacred (the masked dancers) are taken to be the Sacred itself. The unmasking conclusion shatters this childish faith and pushes the initiate into adult life with a profound religious question. Knowing what they now know – should the kachinas (and other cultic objects) be left behind with childhood, or is there a way of bringing them forward into adult life? The kachinas must be appropriated in a new way. (33)
In Blessed Rage for Order, David Tracy describes the theologians’ specific experience of pluralism. Tracy focuses on the pluralism within theology; and yet, as his first chapter makes clear, this pluralism is the present result of the pluralist culture (3-14). Tracy’s book is not directly pastoral, but, even so, it documents on a broad basis the cultural experience of all of us:

To repeat, the problematic developed here is principally one for intellectuals. Still, the dilemmas are less clearly but often more painfully present to the somewhat fictional ‘man-in-the-street’ who cannot but sense that something is askew when he tries to reconcile what he was taught with what he experiences (16, Note 4).

This is, in fact, the story of Christianity as it was confronted with the rise of modern science and the subsequent enlightenment (Barbour 98ff; for a more explicit discussion of the relationship between the impact of modern science and the empirical method, and theology’s need to deal with pluralism, cf note 12). Today, the college student who leaves a Christian home for the campus of a large university repeats and epitomizes this experience.

The result of these often traumatic confrontations with a pluralist culture is that our own stories can never be the same for us again, unless, of course, we “view these strange people as monsters!”

We have become historically and culturally conscious, that is, aware of the particularity of our own history and culture. This contrasts with the assumption of the classicist that his or her culture should be normative for all (Lonergan 4-9).1 We have lost what Paul Ricoeur called that first or “primitive naiveté.” John Shea explains:

For the pre-modern person there existed an immediacy of belief, a flush-tight relationship to religious symbols, a primitive naiveté. But the modern person, precisely because she is modern, is a critical creature. She is informed by philology, exegesis, history, and phenomenology of religion. Although each person may not be aware of these disciplines, they form the cultural matrix out of which she thinks and acts. Consequently she does not have an immediate and undifferentiated rapport with the symbolic stories. They do not instantaneously disclose for her the sacred and lead to the experience of God. For the modern person primitive naiveté has been irrevocably lost. (72)

The initial response to this experience is often agnosticism (Cox 59), or moral relativism. If our inherited stories, symbols, morals and doctrines are only one set among many, are any sets of stories really true? Who should know? This response is not necessarily conscious, but it accounts for many, young and old, who simply find church and religion less and less of a factor in their lives. One young woman said it clearly, “When we leave home for college we also leave the church.” When this happens,
however, one loses a whole cultural way of dealing with meaning, values, and with personal and corporate guilt and crises (May 30). In such cases, some other way must be found to deal with such deeply human issues. No wonder there is such a ready market for fads and cults, as well as more serious alternatives to one’s traditional faith.

Another common initial response to the experience of pluralism is the retreat into a narrow dogmatism or fundamentalism. This is, in fact, the historical origin of fundamentalism (Barbour 99-100). This response, too, is common on our campuses. The important thing seems to be to get everyone to say that Jesus is Lord and to follow a very simple set of rules. While affirming some basic truths, this second response does not integrate the religious tradition, even thus oversimplified, with the new worldview which is being acquired in the university or in the world of work and business. Moreover, it ignores the anomaly of accepting that new, all-embracing worldview from persons, who theoretically at least for the fundamentalist, actually know nothing of the truly ultimate meanings and values of life. This is in effect to treat “these strange people [our friends and acquaintances!]” as monsters.” Eventually, such religion is often discarded as naive and unrelated to the world in which life is actually lived.

A third response to the pluralism of the contemporary world is reappropriation. This is a response which returns to the tradition in an effort to rethink it, re-evaluate it, and finally to make it one’s own again, that is, to reappropriate it. A person who reappropriates his tradition does not simply turn back the clock to believe precisely as he did of old. Enriched now by a broader experience of life and by contact with other cultures and traditions, such a person critically evaluates and re-evaluates his tradition, bringing it forward into his present world. Such reappropriation is the central concern of this essay.

The experience of pluralism and the consequent need for reappropriation have long been at the heart of Karl Rahner’s theological concerns. As I noted in the Preface, the Church of the future, in Rahner’s view, will be made up of people who have struggled against the cultural current to come to a personal, free, responsible faith, a faith continually formed afresh in “the ultimate experiences of life and of God” (Rahner, “Theology” 18). Rahner spoke this way throughout the 1960s, but his words are as relevant today with increasing clarity and urgency. The faith can no longer be taken for granted; it has to be achieved, and not just once for all, but almost daily.

Is such a program of reappropriation elitist? It would be elitist to demand that a person undergo such a program before he or she could be allowed entrance into the Church. But that is not what is being suggested. What is being suggested, however, is that many persons who have absorbed the contemporary world’s pluralism have already left the Church and the Faith. They thus express a practical agnosticism, even when, as is often the case, they continue to attend church from force of habit or circumstance, and even when they have by no means lost what Aquinas called the mind’s natural desire for
God. Persons who do not feel the Church’s minority status in the world will not feel the need for what this essay attempts to do. Perhaps such persons have never had to leave the tribal village. This essay is not written for such. It is written for those who feel deeply the conflict between their secular world view and the form of religion they have inherited.

I have not tried to prove the need for reappropriation by means of statistics. The statistical prognoses regarding the future of religion are discussed by Greeley and by others. This present essay, however, addresses that significant group of persons, whose situation is epitomized by Catholics in the professions and in other contexts, who are already in need of the kind of theological reflection contemporary theology wishes to provide.
Notes

1 Lonergan explains briefly the difference between a pluralist and a classicist. A pluralist view of culture is the “product of empirical human studies. Within less than one hundred years it has replaced an older classicist view that had flourished for over two millennia. On the older view, culture was conceived normatively, etc.” (4-5). Lonergan describes how this has resulted from theology’s shift from a deductivist a priori discipline to an empirical discipline, in his article “Theology in Its New Context,” in L. K. Shook, ed., Theology of Renewal, 2 Vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 1:34-46. This article shows the relationship between the rise of modern science and theology’s confrontation with pluralism.

2 Rahner, “Theology and Anthropology” (18); Cf. also Karl Rahner, “The Present Situation of Christians in the Modern World” (3ff). For example: “Christianity receives no support, or very little, from institutional morality, custom, civil law, tradition, public opinion, normal conformism, etc. Each individual has to achieve it afresh for himself; it is no longer simply a heritage from our fathers.’ Each individual must be won to it afresh, and such a recruitment can appeal only to personal decision . . . , etc.” (23); cf also the reference in note 1 to Rahner’s article “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II.”
Works Cited


Part Two

Theology From Below

My own concern with a truly contemporary theology began in earnest when I attended a seminar in 1966 on the problems facing the Church at that time (see Burke). I was deeply stirred by the lectures of Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx. Both spoke of theology’s pressing need to address itself to the task of relating traditional doctrine more closely to the self-understanding and experience of the contemporary person. Schillebeeckx (41-42) pointed out that the questions raised by Modernism, and which went all the way back to the Enlightenment, were never fully dealt with, especially in the Catholic Church. It would be the task of theology, after Vatican II, to deal with those questions of our beliefs.

Theology from below flows from the Vatican II emphasis on going back to the original sources of our faith. It is a way of doing theology which begins with experience, the experience of the early and developing Church, and leads us gradually to an understanding of the Church’s doctrinal formulas. This way of doing theology stands in contrast with the more traditional or classical theology which can be characterized as “from above.” Classical theology took the Church’s doctrinal formulas as the point of departure and attempted to show how they were contained in the sources of scripture and tradition.

One of the principle criticisms of this theology from above is that it does not communicate doctrinal formulas in ways that are a natural expression of our experience. In the history of the Church, doctrinal formulas are the product of a reflective process. The Church must struggle with the meaning of events in history. The Church then debates the best way to formulate her understanding and faith. Only then is a formula accepted and proclaimed, a formula which is always historically and culturally conditioned. If we pick up the end of that process and simply repeat the formulas, not having ourselves been through a similar process, we cannot fully appreciate the contents of those formulas. We may repeat the formulas, but they often will have no resonance in our lives. In this case we are like children who repeat curses or sexual words without realizing their true content. We are like the little girl in the television commercial who asks: “Jeffrey, are you the opposite sex, or am I?” This danger of a lack of experiential resonance is an inherent limitation of the classical theological method. It is this limitation which theology from below wishes to address.

There is a place for classical theology; once the Church has established certain fundamental beliefs and doctrinal formulas, the Church is able to reason further from them and to seek deeper insight into them. As Rahner tells us so insistently in The Shape of the Church to Come, however, we can no longer simply presuppose acceptance of the
Church’s fundamental beliefs. Each person has to choose the faith personally and freely. In this case a dogmatic theology presupposes the work of a fundamental theology. This need for a fundamental theology is what we attempted to establish in Part One. Contemporary theology, for the most part, is concerned with fundamental theology: how can we facilitate acceptance of the faith in a truly modern person?

It is in reaction to the classical theology of Jesus in particular (Christology) that theologians such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Rahner have called for a theology “from below.” This expression comes from writings on Jesus, but the method is not limited to Christology, nor is it limited to those theologians who use the term theology “from below.” As I am using the term, and henceforth I will capitalize it, we have Theology from Below whenever a theologian begins with experience rather than with the doctrinal formulas. A Christology from Below follows the course of events in the New Testament. It begins with experience, the experience the early Church had of the historical Jesus, and gradually moves to an understanding of the doctrinal formulas about him.

In his book, The Human Face of God, John A. T. Robinson finds it necessary to spend the first third of his text convincing us of Jesus’ humanity. Robinson proposed that even though the Fathers of the Church thought it equally perilous to deny either the humanity or the divinity of Jesus, his divinity was more carefully safeguarded than was his humanity. In practice, those who denied the divinity were treated as heretics while those who denied his humanity were considered merely eccentric. According to Robinson, the classical formulas of Christology were used in ways which often seemed to cancel out the humanity of Jesus.

Traditionally, teaching about Jesus began with the statement, “Jesus is God.” Working down from this idea we fit the man Jesus into our notion or God. Even Aquinas, for example, found it difficult to simply accept the Vulgate translation of Luke 2:40. The text indicated that the boy Jesus returned home with Mary and Joseph, was subject to them and grew in age, wisdom and grace. Aquinas interpreted this to mean that Jesus could increasingly manifest the effects of his grace (Part III, Question 7, Article 12, response to third objection) and knowledge grace (Part III, Question 12, Article 1), but essentially he already had it all! The tradition went even further, reaching a dubious climax with the seventeenth-century Spanish commentators on Aquinas “who held that Jesus was the greatest’ as dialectician, philosopher, mathematician, doctor, politician, orator, painter, farmer, sailor, soldier, etc” (Robinson 71).

This Christology from above, then, seemed to cancel out, for all practical purposes, the humanity of Jesus. Robinson’s argument, on the other hand, is this: If Jesus is not a man, how can he be Our Man? If he is not one of us, but only one like us, how can he be a pattern, a trailblazer, a breakthrough for us? Robinson asks these questions in the context of his belief that “The fundamental affirmation of Christianity is that in Jesus is
to be seen the clue to the mystery of *christo* – of what the divine process is about and what the meaning of existence is” (Robinson 10). In a Christology from above, however, Jesus is not seen as a clue; rather, he is made to fit into a presupposed notion of God. The significance of the above reference to Aquinas is that he argued that since God cannot change, then Jesus could not have grown in knowledge essentially, Jesus being God. Such a notion of God, however, came as much from the culture as it did from revelation. There is a knowledge of God which we can gain from nature. Such a natural theology has always been defended in Catholicism. Specifically Christian revelation, however, is not natural theology but that knowledge of God which results from our encounter with the man Jesus.

In other words, the classical theology of Jesus took the product of the early Church’s experiences and reflective process, the doctrinal formulas about Jesus as the Son of God, and made them the starting point of its teaching. The inherent danger was that people did not experience the formulas as the expression of their own experiences and categories of understanding. Another danger was that the formulas themselves were no longer properly understood by theology itself. Often in the teaching of Christian faith, the formulas had been too far removed from their own origins in the human experience of God present in Jesus. This is why Robinson’s procedure is to first help us become aware of the reality of Jesus’ own humanity. He asks us to test our own belief in the humanity of Jesus. That accomplished, he develops, carefully and gradually, the Scriptural base for Jesus as a prophet and as a son of God. Robinson almost imperceptibly strengthens these notions until we see God so active and so present in Jesus as to be revealed in him. Gradually the insight is offered that Jesus is the very spirit and image of the Father for us. He is God for Us and God with Us. This new understanding is what the traditional formulas were meant to convey: God is active, present, revealed in Jesus. Jesus is God for Us and God with Us. One has to follow Robinson very carefully and sympathetically, but his book is a fine example of a Christology from Below.

Until his publication of *Foundations of Christian Faith* (cf. Chapter VI, “Jesus Christ”), Karl Rahner had not written a book expressing a Christology from Below. Nonetheless, in articles on “Incarnation” and “Jesus Christ,” he has clearly stated the case for a Christology from Below, defining it (Rahner, “Incarnation” 114-15) and showing its place in relation to the classical dogmatic theology and his own method of transcendental theology (Rahner, “Jesus Christ” 197). In the chapter on Jesus Christ in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner has taken up these themes more systematically, and although he is far more precise than Robinson, Rahner has issued a clear call for a Christology from Below and has now himself outlined the basic lines of such an approach (213ff, 298). I mention Rahner here as an authority because of his position in Catholic theology and because of the obvious differences between Rahner and Robinson. Unfortunately, though Rahner is more precise theologically than popular writers, his scholarly writings presuppose a theological and philosophical background which the general reader does not usually possess.
Theology from Below, then, does not start with the doctrinal formulas; rather, it starts with human experience, and it ends with the formulas. If we experience Jesus as God for Us, if with Saint Paul we finally realize that “God was in Christ Jesus reconciling himself to the world” (2 Cor. 5:19; unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the New English Bible), then such a faith is our faith. Theology from Below is an attempt to facilitate a truly personal faith, continually formed afresh from its sources in ultimate experiences of life and of God.

In the remaining portions of this essay, I would like to show that Theology from Below is not limited to Christology, nor is it limited to those theologians who have used the term Theology from Below. This method of doing theology characterized the 1970s and can still be found represented in many diverse areas of theology.

For example, in reflecting on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Spirit and Sacrament, Joseph Powers uses a kind of Theology from Below. He begins with the question, what do we mean by “spirit” on an everyday level? According to Powers we mean “the personal, historical background, horizon, perspective against which everything else is seen in a particular way” (Spirit 34). Powers unpacks the content of those words – horizon, perspective, background – and others such as milieu. Our spirit, as in family spirit, team spirit, national spirit, is like a setting, a context, a milieu. It is that which leads us to experience the world in our own special way. Ultimately, my spirit is that which allows me to say who I am.

The spirit of Jesus is spoken of in this way throughout the New Testament, especially by Saint Paul. When we experience the world the way Jesus did, when we approach, view, value the world the way Jesus did, then the spirit of Jesus has become our spirit. It is the spirit who moves us to address God as Father (Rom. 9:26). “Those who are led by the Spirit of God, they are the children of God” (Rom. 8:14). Indeed, “no one can say Jesus is Lord, except in the Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). In view of all this, “if a man does not possess the spirit of Christ, he is no Christian” (Rom. 8:9). The spirit then, our spirit and the spirit of Jesus, is not something we look at, but something out of which we see, a horizon which is not seen but determines what we see. Gradually, Powers identifies for us our experience of spirit. Within this experience he identifies the Christian experience of a deeper Spirit, underlying, enlivening our own spirit. This is the Christian experience of the Spirit of Jesus, and through this the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit (Powers, Spirit 79). This is the way in which Powers’ Theology from Below progresses.

The need for a Theology from Below in the area of moral theology is also clear. In The Shape of the Church to Come, Karl Rahner has called for a “Morality without Moralizing.” His explanation of this phrase calls for a moral Theology from Below:

We are moralizing if we expound norms of behavior peevishly and pedantically, full of moral indignation at a world without morals, without really
tracing them back to that innermost experience of man’s nature, which is the source of the so-called principles of natural law and which alone gives them binding force; we are moralizing if moral principles are not traced back to that innermost core of the Christian message which is the message of the living Spirit, the message of freedom from merely external law, the message of love which is no longer subject to any law when it prevails.

. . . Where someone has not had an initial experience of God and of his Spirit, liberating him from his deepest fears and from guilt, there is no point in announcing the moral norms of Christianity to him. He would not be able to understand them; at best they might seem to him to be the source of still more radical constraints and still deeper fears. If a person is not really genuinely and personally in the presence of God (and this cannot be achieved by a little externally indoctrinating talk about God), he may perhaps understand that offenses against certain moral norms relating to the concrete nature of the individual and of society are inappropriate; but he cannot understand and realize just what Christianity means by sin and guilt in God’s sight (Rahner, Shape 67-68).

This passage applies the same argument we have seen above with regard to the need for a Christology from Below. Rahner is saying that without an underlying experience of God’s call and its demands, we do little good by forcing people to repeat the formulas of the Church’s moral rules. One must first bring a person to be “genuinely and personally in the presence of God.”

A good example is the work of William H. Van der Marck, Toward a Christian Ethic. Human experience is more fundamental than ethics, even theological ethics. Ethics in a first sense means ethos. “. . . Ethos, is that complex of norms concretely in force in a particular community; it is the social language in actual use. In contrast, ethics in the second sense is like the study of linguistics” (Van der Marck 2). In a changing culture, the ethos evolves and even changes. In this way the formulations of moral norms get out of touch with the actual ethos, the actual values held in the society. How will we evaluate such changes? Van der Marck suggests that ethics will go back to the grounding values and reevaluate the new ethos in their light. Moral rules derive their force only from the values they actually express, and value comes from human meaning. First we clarify the human meaning of behavior, then we clarify the values such behavior embodies, and only then are we ready to speak intelligently about the morality of such behavior. To miss this point is to have what Rahner called moralizing instead of morals.

Finally, let me note, again just briefly, that Rahner has likewise called for and elaborated a sacramental theology which must be described as Theology from Below. He stated the principles clearly in his article “How to Receive a Sacrament and Mean It.”
To save these ceremonies, [the Christian] need not imagine that when they are performed God does something he would not do if they were omitted. Rather he must realize that they spring from, express, and lead to the divine depths of real life. Anyone who is afraid of practicing empty ritualism should recall the experiences of God and of grace which he has had in apparently profane life and say, “This is the experience I am ritualizing in worship.” Someone who thinks he has never had such an experience, however, should refrain from the Sacraments, for Christian doctrine forbids receiving them without faith. Actually everyone has such experiences and it is the duty of mystical instruction not to produce them but to bring them into reflex awareness. (227-34)

I added the emphasis at the end of the citation because that statement describes what I am calling Theology from Below, and specifically a sacramental theology from Below. This text is perhaps the single most important clue to my own theological ministry and search inward. Rahner has given us an example of this method in his own article “Marriage as a Sacrament.”

In this article Rahner begins with the secular reality of marriage. He finds that even the secular reality of marriage is best described as a covenant relationship which mediates God’s love through human love and covenant. The Christian sacrament makes this entire process explicit. It is the celebration of the deepest meaning of creation. In showing how the sacrament makes this deep meaning explicit, Rahner is practicing Theology from Below.

It seems clear to me, at the end of this review, that what Rahner and Schillebeeckx called for in 1966 has become a major concern of Catholic as well as Protestant theology since then. We have seen examples of Theology from Below from the major areas of Christian doctrine and theology: Jesus, Holy Spirit, God, sacraments and morals. I have been engaged in the past years almost exclusively in trying to communicate this approach to adult Christians in an academic milieu. It has seemed fruitful to many, especially those who are intellectually inclined.

Notes

1 Modernism is “a collective term for certain false or distorted theological views which arose about the year 1900 out of the legitimate desire (indeed the abiding duty) to proclaim the Christian faith to the men of that time in an adequate manner,” cf. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler 290.

2 Since I cannot avoid using a few technical terms, some brief definitions may be helpful. According to Bernard Lonergan, in Method in Theology, theology can be divided into various functional specialties. Of these, Dogmatics establishes the Church’s beliefs;
Systematics is a search for understanding of those beliefs, often with the help of a particular philosophical system; and Foundations establishes the horizon within which the Church’s beliefs can be grasped. Theology from below relates to “Foundations” in this sense. Theology from below begins with human experience, rather than with doctrines in order to lead persons into a renewed understanding of the traditional formulas.

3 In Christology, theology from below retraces the steps of the early Church’s experience. Secular theology and transcendental theology tend to be more a “pre-theological and phenomenological analysis” of contemporary experience (cf Joseph Powers, “Faith, Mortality, Creativity: Toward the Art of Believing,” Theological Studies 39, December 1978). In this sense, the writings to be examined in this chapter could be considered Catholic forms of secular theology or transcendental theology. However, secular theology, transcendental theology and theology from below have overlapping concerns in their relationship to fundamental theology. I have grouped the writings in the present chapter under the title “theology from below” not so much to define them as to highlight one aspect of these writings – their concern with relating Christian doctrine to lived human experience in the interest of reappropriation.

4 The term theology “from below” is found for example in Pannenberg: “A Christology from below,’ rising from the historical man Jesus to the recognition of his divinity, is concerned first of all with Jesus’ message and fate and arrives only at the end at the concept of the incarnation” (33). Rahner suggests a similar approach to the preaching of Jesus:

This, however, presupposes that the human nature of Christ, of the person of the Logos, must be understood in such a way that Christ in reality and in all truth is a man with all that this involves: . . . This means that present-day Christology (in preaching and theological reflection) must as it were reenact (and preach!) that history of the Christology of Ascent which in the New Testament itself, between the experience of actual contact with the historical Jesus and the descent formulas of Christology in Paul and John, was transformed with remarkable speed into a doctrine of the Incarnation of the preexistent Son and Logos of God. Preaching must speak of the Incarnation in such a way that it becomes the experience of that absolute and definitive presence of God to the world and to our human reality in Jesus, which is only consciously accepted without diminution or reserve when the classical formulas of Christology remain valid and are properly understood. (“Incarnation” 114-15)

In the same volume, in an article entitled “Jesus Christ,” Rahner calls this approach empirical, categorical, or a theology “from below” and compares it with his own transcendental method (197).
Works Cited


——. “Marriage As a Sacrament.” *Theology Digest* 17 (Spring 1969): 4-8.

——. “Theology and Anthropology.” Burke 17.


Course One Syllabus