Guidelines for Theological Reflection

Theological Reflection: How to process and write a TR

What is Theological Reflection? “Faith seeking understanding” has often been the phrase used to describe TR. It identifies the process in which an individual reflects on his or her personal or corporate experience in light of their faith. It is a means of integrating academic disciplines with ministry practice. Through a supervisory process that includes one-on-one supervision and a peer reflection group, student interns reflect theologically on their experiences in a Field Internship site. The process of TR supports faith formation, ministry formation, and spiritual discernment.

What is the purpose of Theological Reflection? The purpose of Theological Reflection (TR) is to identify and analyze a significant event and process the event from a biblical perspective in order to bring about character development and spiritual integration. There are at least two goal for doing TR. The first goal is to make sense of a situation and second is to determine how to respond to a given situation.

TRs are often referred to as case studies, since it looks at your involvement in a social interaction and the processing of the data based on your biblical knowledge. It is also important to make meaningful connections between academics, spiritual formation, and your current ministry position. The TR document should be designed not just to tell a story but to provide a learning environment for the audience to discuss and grow along with you.

The TR contains three main parts:

1. Description (the background and the event)
2. Reflection (the biblical perspective)
3. Action (the application and action plan)
4. Analysis (how did the plan go?)

Some important points to remember when preparing for the TR are:

* Pick a situation that you do not yet understand, so that there is still room to learn
* Keep yourself the central character of the story; please just include others as necessary
* Describe only one event and give only the necessary background information to help keep it simple
* Try to be concise in your background information but give enough so the reader understands the situation
* Don’t focus on blaming but instead look for ways to explore and learn
* Try to communicate an accurate plot without being defensive

This document will cover the following elements of Theological Reflection:

* 1. Preparation
  2. Description (details of the point of discussion)
  3. Reflection (widen the options)
  4. Construction (narrow the options until only one remains)
  5. Strategy (how)
  6. Analysis (results/reflection)

# Preparation

Many students realize quickly that determining the topic for their theological reflection can be the most challenging part of the assignment. This could be due to the unique structure of the reflection and the fact that it requires analyzing your own experience rather than the activities and thoughts of others. In a theological reflection, you are the text that you are studying—a new position for many students. This requires engaging your thoughts, motives and interactions as you reflect from a biblical point of view.

Another common obstacle in the topic selection process is that students want to present the best reflection they can. While this philosophy is not wrong, it can lead you to wrong thinking. This topic should represent a significant happening in your internship, but it does not need to be something overly interesting, complex or personal. It should represent a high or low point for you and an area where there has been significant growth or learning.

Since overanalyzing your life can lead to more questions than answers, it can kill the creative flow needed to actually do the theological reflection. Because of this tendency, here are a few suggestions that could help you think more clearly while selecting your topic.

A topic could be analyzed theologically if:

* You analyze an event more than once
* You are challenged by a social/cultural issue or value
* You are critical of something that was said in a conversation
* You debate over an ethical issue
* You have questions about your role or the role of someone else
* You use or hear phrases such as “I was led to…” or “I saw God work by…”
* You use or hear phrases such as “I learned the most when…”
* You look at yourself or your actions as insufficient or as a failure

We strongly suggest doing a theological reflection over an extended period of time—it will hold little value to you if you do it the night before it is due. We suggest interacting with the material at least 3-5 times (on different days/times of the day) to be able to fully process and reflect on your topic. If you still lack clarity on points of the reflection, simply admit it. This is not intended to be a declaration of having fully reflected on this topic, but it is a step in the growing process as you continue your ministry.

Remember to always begin this process with prayer. The Holy Spirit is highly invested in teaching you to process life through the filter of God’s Word, and He is more than willing to guide you in this venture. You should consult with your Field Instructor to see what they would like to give input into your areas of growth or challenges. A conversation with your Field Instructor may be able to spark some ideas or shed new light on an experience to help you get started.

# Description

Please remember that there are two samples of Theological Reflections on the internship website. Feel free to refer to them for structure and theological interaction. The link to that site is http://mmm.moody.edu/GenMoody/default.asp?sectionID=8C8472CAB5D14162982DCBF38B3D04DC .

Some people find it helpful to write out a very detailed description of the event and background in order to process the event well. Then they take the time to edit what is necessary to understand the story and what is not in order to construct this portion of the TR. As you do this, try to keep the facts of the story at the forefront and not allow the paper to simply reflect your own interpretation of the event.

Steps to begin writing your Theological Reflection:

Begin by analyzing the case study or situation.

* Start with separate lists for facts and your inferences based on those facts:

Facts: directly observable data (e.g. “the pastor shouted”)

Interpretations and Inferences (e.g. “The pastor was angry” or “the pastor was being mean”)

* Identify into which of these three categories your topic fits:

Interpersonal Issues

Organizational or Communal Issues

Theological or Spiritual Issues

* Does the case touch on any communal stories?

NOTE: communal stories can be stories from a particular community or congregation – or they can be stories from the larger culture.

If so, list them under the appropriate category (interpersonal, spiritual, etc.)

Are there pertinent stories about the characters in the story? e.g. “Sherry just went through a divorce” (Interpersonal) e.g. “Divorce is shameful in this community.” (Theological)

Are there important stories about the ministries involved? e.g. “The youth group has a lot more girls than boys.” (Organizational) or “Youth in this culture feel tremendous pressure to succeed.” (Spiritual)

Are there background stories about place or group where the case takes place? e.g. “The workplace the case describes is very hostile to faith.” (Spiritual)

Does anyone in the case reference a biblical story or passage? e.g. Stella mentioned “the least of these,” which is a reference to Matthew 25

# Reflection

The purpose of the Reflection stage is to expand your thinking to the point where you have a number of different perspectives on the situation. Reflection also helps to prevent thoughts of overconfidence about our spirituality or ministry skills and keeps our thinking sharp as we focus on the Word of God. Think of the process like this.

Pretend you have a roomful of advisors all sitting at large table. As you go around the table, you ask each advisor her or his opinion. One might suggest a Bible passage from Matthew, and another might point to a passage from Isaiah. A third advisor might suggest an article they once read on prayer, while another advisor might suggest a story about when they were a child. At the end of the reflection stage, you will have a long list of options for interpreting a situation.

A reflection should include:

* Thoughts on a spiritual practice you have that is clearly connected to the event
* An element of your character that relates well to the event
* The relevancy of a specific concept from an academic class (theology, Bible, ministry) that enhances the focus of the event.

Reflection Process

* Under the Theological/Spiritual category, list the passages from the Bible that address the theological/spiritual issue at stake. Look especially for stories where biblical characters had to address concerns similar to the ones in your situation.

You may want to reference something like the fruits of the Spirit.

* List theological ideas that you think might be relevant to the situation.

* Take time to investigate the Bible passages and theological ideas.
  + - * What is the most central meaning to the passage or idea?
      * What is the advantage and disadvantage of using that idea or passage with the case?

* How does your personality and character play into your reactions and your reflection process?
  + - * Do you have issues forgiving others? o Do you have a different sense of humor than those around you? o What is your learning style? How was this important in the event?
      * Do you have a heart for reconciliation? o Do you have lots of experience in culturally diverse situations?
      * Many other questions could be added here…

* Are there any stories that come to mind that might help illumine the case? Such as:

Stories from your own life, e.g. “This is like the time I got lost in inner-city of Chicago…”

Stories from the life of the congregation, or from the culture, e.g. “Last week on Saturday Night Live…” or “Last Sunday, after church, I was talking to a new member…”

Stories that form an analogy, e.g. “Once there was a man who fell in a hole…”

* Are there any secular sources that might help you?

On politics, you might think of a newspaper or the Internet

On psychology, you might refer to a book or article

* Now do the same thing for the Interpersonal and Organizational categories. Are there approaches to caring for each for each of the people listed under the Interpersonal category? What are the outcomes you expect from each approach? What are the various Organizational options you have for addressing each of the issues listed in that category? What outcomes do you expect from each?

# Integration

The purpose of the Integration stage is to design a single response to the situation or case. You do this by deciding which of the many interpretations you collected in the Reflection stage to keep, and which ones to discard. Think back to the Board of Advisors example. After you have heard all the suggestions made by your Board of Advisors, you have to decide which suggestions to keep and which to discard.

Think in terms of a:

* short-term plan
* mid-term plan
* long-term plan

Also ask questions like:

* Which of your goals is most important and which goals are subordinate to it?

Sometimes you have to make things worse in, say, the Organizational layer, in order to address a problem in the Interpersonal layer. If so, you might decide to work on the Organizational layer in the short term and the Interpersonal layer in the long term.

* How do the theological findings influence the possible choices for responding to the event?
* How do my responses reflect my view of God?
* How has this event changed my commitment to ministry?

At the end of the Integration stage, you should have a clear goal for action or an outline for what you intend to say.

* What is your short-term plan?
* What is your medium-term plan?
* What is your long-term plan?

Strategy

The purpose of this phase is to figure out how to enact the goal that you built. I emphasize this phase because seminary students are often tempted to think that once they have decided what they want to do that doing it is trivial. Figuring out how to do is often the hard part.

Make it a goal to identify and develop at least three areas that you know you need growth based on what you’ve learned during the reflection. Make sure that you also identify who will hold you accountable to this and how.

Be sure to separate technical from adaptive work before deciding strategy.

Technical problems: an expert can solve them for someone else

Adaptive work: only the person or group can change themselves, e.g. “You can’t quit smoking for someone else.”

Remember that you should end up with an action plan, not just good ideas. This should include things you learned about yourself and how you relate to others, changes for the future, and specific ways to implement these things into your everyday life in a practical, meaningful way. Keep in mind the long term goals that you have for yourself and how this action plan can support your life purpose.

Analysis

Once the action plan has been completed the intern should reflect on how well things went. This will require the intern to assess the outcome of their plan. Would they do this same plan again, alter the action plan or revise it completely. The last step in the process is very important because it brings the reflection full circle.

Always end your personal time of reflection with prayer.