

“Forming Theology through Options, Actions and Reflection”  
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***Abstract***

Religious educators in local faith communities may shy away from intentional religious instruction in theology, perhaps to avoid indoctrinating their members or in hopes that the community’s theology will rise out of its own contexts and practices. In the absence of any intentional theological instruction, however, voices in the popular religious culture often supply members with their own often narrow view of what the faithful are supposed to believe. What’s a religious educator to do?

This paper suggests a process for theological reflection in four movements. First, learners are generously presented with a variety of options and beliefs on a particular aspect of faith from their own traditions and others. Second, learners are invited to reflect on the implicit theology of their community’s practices. Third, learners are invited to place their beliefs and practices in dialogue. Finally they are invited to suggest changes in their beliefs and or practices based upon this reflection. The paper uses the issue of theodicy as an example, and reflects on the beliefs and practices of two mainline protestant congregations that responded very differently when tragedy struck families in their churches.

Many religious educators in local faith communities shy away from providing intentional religious instruction in theology, perhaps to avoid indoctrinating members or in hopes that a community’s theology will rise out of the context and practice of the community and its members. Some congregations have a rich practice of teaching their members, children and adult alike, to think theologically through programs such as *Godly Play* (Berryman 1991). In the absence of any intentional theological education, however, other voices in the popular religious culture often supply members with their own, often narrow view of what the faithful are supposed to believe. I met a life-long United Methodist, for example, who was very involved in her church’s educational ministry, who assumed that the eschatology presented in the *Left Behind* series of novels was the view held by all Christians and all United Methodists in particular. She had never been exposed to alternative views, and she was both surprised and grateful when I explained to her some of the other perspectives that United Methodists and others have had of the end times.

Whether the issue is eschatology, theodicy, the authority and use of scripture, soteriology, or any of a host of theological issues, the thoughts and practices of the faithful members of congregations often do not match the theology of its ministers or scholars. Most often, the people in our congregations are not consciously rejecting the insights of their pastors or the scholars of their traditions- many religious educators would welcome that sort of healthy theological dialogue- but rather they are simply unaware of the variety of beliefs and sorts of practices that are present in their traditions.

Many religious educators do not want to dictate theological beliefs to their congregations, but they do not want to leave them with no help or direction either. So what is a religious

educator to do? This paper briefly describes a process for theological reflection in four movements. First, learners are generously presented with a variety of positions on a particular aspect of faith from their own traditions and others. By doing so, the religious educator is inviting participants to think beyond what some popular voices say is the one way that people of faith are supposed to believe about the subject. Secondly, learners are invited to reflect on the implicit theology of their community's practices. Thirdly, learners are invited to place their beliefs and practices in dialogue. Finally, participants are invited to suggest changes in their beliefs and/or practices based upon this reflection. This process was developed with mainline protestant congregations in mind, but could be adapted for use in other communities of faith.

## **TWO CONGREGATIONS CONFRONT TRAGEDY**

One complex theological issue is that of theodicy, the question of why there is evil and suffering in a world with an all-powerful and all-loving God. Put another way, if God is all-powerful, then God could prevent all evil and suffering. And if God is all-loving, then God would want to prevent all evil. So why do evil and suffering still exist in the world?

The practical importance of theological reflection by congregations, even on such lofty questions as theodicy, was made evident to me by the very different responses two congregations to tragedies that struck families in each of the congregations. A few years ago, a good friend of mine and I both had children die suddenly within a few months of each other. Our two congregations, both members of the same mainline protestant denomination in the United States, responded to the tragedies quite differently.

My friend was a pastor who was relatively new to his congregation. His young daughter was struck by a vehicle and died. Members of his congregation were shocked by the incident. There were some who offered words of love and support to him and to his family, but a surprising number of members seemed more concerned with figuring out the mysteries of the will of God than lending support. While my friend was in mourning, members of his congregation went to him for help, asking him to explain to them why God had taken his daughter away. A deacon of the church told the local paper, "God has a reason for doing this; we just don't know what it is yet." They said things to his surviving daughter such as, "Your sister was so good that God needed her to be an angel." The implicit theology was that God had willed and actively caused my friend's daughter to die and wanted the congregation to discern the reason why. My friend had never taught or held to such views. He preached that we live in a fallen, vulnerable world. Many in the congregation, however, still seemed to assume that their response was the one that one faithful Christians were supposed to have to such a tragedy. It seemed as though that they were paralyzed from doing anything to help the family except to ask "Why?" Their discomfort with the whole subject was evident in the fact that a number of church members told my friend and his family soon after their loss that they should stop talking about it and "just move on" because it made members of the congregation feel uncomfortable to think about it or talk about it. My friend had a pastoral concern that if the members of this congregation really believed the sentiments they were sharing with him, that it may be harmful for their relationships with God if and when they faced hard times. He was also worried that such an attitude would stop his congregation from responding to other tragedies with acts of love and support.

My own experience was quite different. My infant son went down for a nap, stopped breathing, and never woke up. His death was determined to be a case of Sudden Infant Death

Syndrome (SIDS). In contrast to my friend's church, the church which my family and I attended surrounded us with words and concrete acts of love and support. No one from our congregation suggested that it was God's will for our son to die. They knew at least one way that God was present in the tragedy, that being through their intentional acts of grace and mercy to us. They saw their role in the tragedy as one of being loving and supporting. Besides their words of support they provided us with meals, groceries, financial aid, hands to hold, shoulders to cry on, listening ears, and much more.

There are, of course, many factors that could have led to the very different responses from these congregations. One factor, however, may have been the difference in the theological education and ministry practices of the two congregations related to the issue of theodicy. My friend said that he had not yet had any intentional teaching events on the issue of theodicy with his new congregation. Upon reflection, however, he suspects that members of his congregation had likely heard the sorts of views that they articulated on Christian television and radio programs, and that some members may have even heard those views expressed by others during informal discussions in Bible studies and Sunday School classes at the church. His sense was that the congregation was not intentionally rejecting his beliefs on theodicy for their own, but that they were under the impression that this was the approach to tragedies that all pious Christians were supposed to have, namely that God chooses whom to strike with tragedy and that our job is to try to figure out why God has caused it or allowed it to happen. In addition, the members of the congregation had no intentional ministries to people in crisis, whether in the community or to members of their own congregation. This was work that had been traditionally left up to the pastor. So as a congregation they had not intentionally embodied God's presence with those who were going through a crisis.

The church my family attended, on the other hand, had gone through an intentional process of exploring a variety of views on providence and theodicy in preparation for beginning an HIV-AIDS ministry at the church. They also had an intentional ministry to families in crisis. While the individual members of the congregation held to a variety of theodicies, they had reached a consensus in understanding that God was with people in the midst of the tragedy and that members of all ages were to help families that suffered tragedies. As a result, the members of the church knew and our family knew where God was in the midst of the tragedy, and they were able to reflect on it and their responses to it as they continued in their ministry.

Sadly, my friend's congregation is far from alone in their confusion over how to think about and respond to tragedies that strike members of their congregations or their communities. Happily, my congregation is not alone in their response either. Another congregation in our community with which we were involved also showered my family with words and acts of grace. The experience has led me to reflect on these experiences and to suggest four movements that congregations can use to engage in intentional theological reflection. These movements, as mentioned above, include offering options, reflecting on practice, engaging in dialogue between belief and practice, and, finally, suggesting changes in beliefs or practices. The four movements could be made over the course of two, four, or even more sessions. The length of time spent on each movement would vary depending on the topic chosen and the characteristics of the learners in the group. The theory undergirding this process owes a great deal to Thomas Groome's Shared Praxis Approach (1980 and 1991) and to Maria Harris's view of curriculum expressed in *Fashion Me a People* (1989), though it differs significantly in process and details from both of them. The issue of theodicy is used as an example in the description that follows, but the process could be used to reflect on other theological issues as well.

### MOVEMENT I: OFFERING OPTIONS

Before beginning the first movement of this process of theological reflection, religious educators should first orient participants by giving them an overview of the four movements, explaining that the first movement is heavy on religious instruction, likely involving a significant amount of lecturing by the religious educator, while the other three movements involve more group discussion.

During this first movement, religious educators present learners a variety of views on a particular theological issue. The goal is not to indoctrinate members to a particular view or even to correct them from a perceived faulty view. Instead, the goal is to offer options to participants who may not be aware of the variety of beliefs on the subject. Some participants may not have felt that they had permission to hold to any view other than one they have heard in the past, and this movement may allow them to consider other options.

The religious educator takes upon herself or himself the responsibility of researching several views, presenting them accurately and fairly, and deciding which of the many views to introduce to those participating in the process of theological reflection. Choosing and preparing which views to present is not an easy task. Introductions to theology such as Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding* (2004) and Tyron Inbody's *The Faith of the Christian Church* (2005) are a good source for surveys of common views on a variety of theological issues. If the religious educator does not have any education in theological studies they may wish to consult with a staff member of the church who has a background in theological studies in preparing the lesson. It may help religious educators to consider that their goal is not to speak as an authoritative theologian on each view, but rather to make participants aware that there are several perspectives on these issues and to introduce them to some of the more common or intriguing ones. The religious educator should also explain that there are more views on the theological issue than can be shared during the session. While it can be helpful to explain which views have been prominent in the community of faith's own denominational tradition, the religious educator can generously invite participants to consider other perspectives and offer some of their own thoughts as well.

As mentioned above, if communities of faith do not intentionally inform their members of various views on theological issues, they are likely to receive their theological education from other sources. In many cases, a view expressed in television and radio ministries or popular culture on matters of faith not only fails to represent a consensus view on the issue, but one that is contrary to the views commonly held in the community of faith's own tradition. In the case of theodicy, for example, many people of faith assume that they are to suppose to believe that God causes or allows every tragedy to occur for a particular purpose. I recall a prominent televangelist taking credit for praying to have God turn Hurricane Gloria away from where it was heading towards his ministry headquarters in Virginia and up the coast towards the rickety cabin I was living in as a seminary student on the north shore of Boston. The implication was that God was actively and consciously directing the path of the destructive storm. More recently, some have said that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were God's judgment on the United States for personal moral failings and that Hurricane Katrina served as God's judgment on New Orleans. Even non-ecclesial voices present similar views on the subject of providence and theodicy. Popular films such as *Signs* (2002) and *The Grand Canyon* (1991) suggest that there are two choices in life: either to believe that life is totally random and there is no God, or to have

faith, which in these films means to believe that there are no coincidences and everything that happens on earth for good or ill is a direct, intentional act of God or fate. Offering several options that theologians offer on issues such as theodicy lets participants know that the views often expressed are not the only ones held by people of faith.

In the case of theodicy, the views of several theologians could be shared as alternatives. Contemporary scholars who follow a classical theistic view of God maintain that an omnipotent God *is* ultimately in control of the world, still stop short of describing tragedy and suffering as intentional acts of God's will. Many of them choose to emphasize St. Augustine's explanation that all evil, both natural and moral, is directly or indirectly attributable to the sinful choices of human beings with free will. Evil and suffering are a natural consequence of sin in the world, but God is not intentionally acting to cause suffering. Here religious educators could introduce Paul Tillich's concept of "finite freedom" (Tillich 1951-1963, 269).

James Cone offers another intriguing liberation theodicy. Cone rejects the view that God is the cause of evil, and instead finds meaning in joining God's struggle *against* evil and suffering (Cone 1974, 183).

Still others have rejected classical theistic theodicy in favor of a Trinitarian and Christological theodicy of the cross. In his book *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Daniel Migliore writes that he rejects what he calls a pagan notion of divine providence and evil that emphasizes the almightiness of God. Instead he favors a Trinitarian view of God that emphasizes the power of love at work in the ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus. This power of love is at work to counter evil and suffering where they exist, not causing evil and suffering to happen (2004, 131-138).

In his book, *The Transforming God*, Tyron Inbody offers a revisionary theism that is also shaped by a radical doctrine of incarnation, cross, and resurrection. In this approach God is not understood to be controlling suffering, but living inside of it. As Inbody suggests elsewhere, "God does not look on our suffering from the outside but from within, from the brow and hands of Jesus hanging on the cross" (2005, 160). This move away from classical theism and towards a God acquainted with our sufferings may lead us to belief in a more empathetic God, and a more fully incarnate Christ, who does not feel the need to assert authority and control in the midst of our suffering, but who helps us endure it. Inbody goes on to point to Christ's resurrection and the transforming power of God that not only endures suffering and evil, but can overcome it (2005, 178-180).

These are just a few of a number of thoughtful alternative views the academy of the church has to offer on theodicy. A complicated issue for the religious educator would be how to approach presenting the view often expressed in popular culture, and held by many believers, that God is causing or allowing tragedies to occur in order to punish people, to teach them a lesson, or for a secret purpose that people of faith are to discern or to trust in. The religious educator would be hard pressed to find a current Christian theologian in the academy of the church, evangelical, moderate, liberal, protestant, Roman Catholic, or otherwise, to represent that view, but it is one commonly held by people of faith such as those in my friend's church. This very issue could be brought up and discussed. There could be some discussion that theologians and scholars do not dictate doctrine to the people of the church, and people are certainly free to hold to their own views. It can be helpful, however, to honestly and generously let participants know which views are common and which are not common among theologians, and in particular among theologians in their tradition. The challenge for the religious educator is to honestly and generously pass on this information without giving participants the impression that those who

hold any particular view will be judged if they continue to hold onto it.

Near the end of this first movement, after several options are explained, participants are invited to share some initial, tentative stances on the issue. These can be revised later. Individual participants may choose different options as the ones that resonate with them the most. Others may express confusion or declare themselves as undecided. Some may offer new options that were not presented by the religious educator. The group should be allowed to talk and discuss the options with each other, with the religious educator setting discussion guidelines and facilitating the conversation. Notes on this conversation, including a listing of views that resonated with the participants present, can be written on butcher paper or a chalk board and saved until the next meeting.

This process of theological reflection and discussion of options can be difficult for some participants. Many people come to religious education events in their local communities of faith with the hope and expectation that they will be told what to believe, and that they will be given a firm, simple answer. The religious educator will want to take some time orienting their groups to the fact that several options will be explored. Even with this orientation, some participants may become troubled by the process and try to insist that the group recognize what they see as the one true position. The religious educator should be prepared to have a private conversation with these participants if necessary, explaining the process further before the next meeting.

At the end of the session, participants can be invited to start looking at several aspects of the community's practice and the theological views they may imply. In the case of an exploration of theodicy, participants could be invited to begin to reflect on the community's communal prayers and its ministries to help those in crisis before the next session.

## **MOVEMENT II: REFLECTING ON PRACTICES**

In the second movement, participants are invited to identify the implicit theology inherent in the church's present practices. The religious educator leads participants in examining and reflecting on several aspects of their community of faith's corporate life. In the case of theodicy, participants could be asked to focus on the church's communal prayers and their ministries to those who suffer. How is God addressed in the prayers? For example, does the congregation pray for the victims of hurricanes? If so, how? How do the prayers assume God is active in causing or allowing the hurricanes to occur and where they strike? Is there a significant percentage of time in prayer spent on invoking God's care for those who are sick or injured? In those prayers, what are the assumptions about how God works in the world? Is God asked to heal those who are sick? If so, how? Is God asked to prevent the effects of an impending tragedy such as a hurricane? Is God asked to empower the congregation to combat injustice or to help care for those who suffer tragedy?

Participants can also examine and reflect upon the ministries the congregation has to individuals or families that suffer death, injury, or other tragedies such as a fire in their home. What sorts of ministries, if any, are there that address global crises? What does the approach these ministries take imply about the sorts of tragedies God cares about and how God is involved in causing them or fixing them? If there are not any intentional ministries to those who suffer crises or tragedies, what is the implied theodicy of the absence of those ministries? Members of the congregation that my family attended, for example, often felt that they gained great insights into God's presence in the midst of suffering as they served dinner to, ate with, and talked to members of our community who were afflicted with the HIV virus and AIDS. Those insights could be shared during this movement. A congregation with views and practices similar to my

friend's church may reflect on their congregation's practices and lack of practices and be challenged by the image of God and the church that their practices suggest. On the other hand, some may see in their practices a faithful struggle to understand a God who works in mysterious ways.

The religious educator should be prepared to model this sort of reflection with a few examples if the group is slow in coming up with examples of their own, but should avoid dominating the conversation with insights and examples of what she or he sees as the implicit theology of the practices of the congregation. Admittedly, this is complex work, and requires a particular kind of critical and analytical thinking that may not be every learner's cognitive strength. The religious educator can still find ways for all participants to engage in the conversation, if not in critically identifying an embedded theodicy, then by recalling prayers, identifying ministries, and describing relevant experiences.

### **MOVEMENT III: DIALOGUE BETWEEN FAITH AND PRACTICE**

In the third movement of this process, participants are asked which of the congregations practices discussed in the second movement jibe with the views expressed at the end of the first movement. If the practices do not jibe with the beliefs of the congregation, participants should be encouraged to begin to have theory and practice inform each other. The religious educator can ask the group how the congregation's practices might help inform their belief. Are there practices of the congregation that seem good and right as they are carried out? What do these actions imply about the nature of God's actions in our world? What have members of the congregation learned in the process of praying to God or in the process of helping people in need? What insights has the congregation gained from their experiences in ministry and corporate life that might inform their beliefs about the theological issue being examined? The religious educator should also ask how the congregation's beliefs might inform its practices. What sorts of practices and ministries would be consistent with the views that have been expressed on the theological issue being examined?

### **MOVEMENT IV: REVISING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES**

The fourth movement follows directly from the third. Participants reflect on changes to beliefs and or practices based upon their reflections. Depending upon the group's perspective on theodicy, for example, perhaps lay leaders, Bible study leaders, and even clergy may be asked to be more precise in the way they ask God for things or thank God for things. Some participants might question if or how one might thank God for providing a sunny day for the church picnic in a newsletter article, if it might imply that God allows a devastating drought or deadly hurricane to occur elsewhere. Perhaps there are some ministries that could be refined. The participants may feel that, for example, if they have concluded that God works through God's people to confront tragedy and evil, that the congregation should launch new ministries that prepare members to help people in a time of need. By carrying out ministries of support to people in crisis, a congregation might embody and internalize a theodicy (whether they are all aware of the term or not) that sees God as being present and active in tragedies through people of faith who supporting those in need and comforting those who mourn. Of course there is no assumption that the participants will be unified in their theological beliefs or the practices they support, but such a conversation and theological reflection can be a rich one for congregations.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ideally, these four movements are presented as only the beginning of an ongoing process of theological education and reflection. If a particular theological view intrigues a large number of participants, for example, that view could be explored in more depth in later sessions. The congregation may also wish to revisit a given issue with a session or more a few months later to see how they are doing at implementing the changes that they suggested in their practices. At this stage of the process, these sessions could follow the process of shared Christian praxis outlined by Thomas Groome in *Sharing Faith* (1991).

Issues other than theodicy may be explored, of course. The issue of the nature and authority of the Bible is an important one for many communities of faith. Many congregants assume a simple proof-texting approach to the application of scripture in which a given verse makes a claim and believers apply it directly to their lives today. Scholars across the theological spectrum take a variety of approaches to the interpretation and authority of scripture, but most agree that biblical interpretation is more complex than proof-texting. Although the proof-texting approach is not a view common among the scholars of the church, however, it is the view of the Bible that seems to be modeled in many Bible studies, Sunday School curricula, and even Sunday sermons. Religious educators could present participants with several thoughtful perspectives on the nature and authority of scripture from various Christian traditions and examine how some other religions approach their sacred texts. Participants could then take initial stances, reflect on how the Bible is being used in their congregation's Bible studies, children's Sunday School curriculum, and Sunday sermons. Participants could then reflect on their faith and practice, and suggest changes or refinements to their view of the Bible or the way they use the Bible in the life of their congregation.

Several aspects of theology proper could be explored through this process. The question of what God cares about the most, God's priorities, could be explored. Several views of the priorities of God could be presented. The congregation could then examine the views on that issue implicit in the public prayers, hymns, and ministries of the church. Participants could then put their faith and practice in dialogue and then suggest changes or refinements in these beliefs and practices.

There are, of course, a variety of different approaches that religious educators can take to engage their congregations in theological reflection on their beliefs and practices. This four movement process, which begins by intentionally introduces participants to several alternate views on a given theological issue, is one that I have found helpful in my teaching in the church and in seminary.

[Author's note: I am still thinking through this process, and I would welcome any feedback readers may have before, during, or after our meeting.]

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