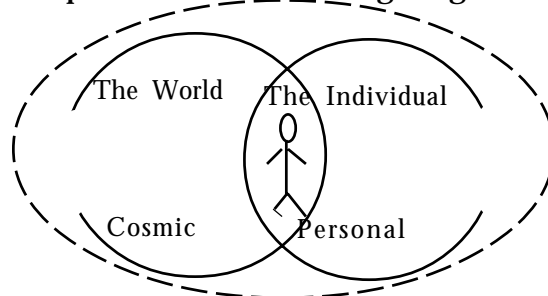


The EFM Four-Source Model for Theological Reflection

Sources have long been important for theological learning. Richard Hooker, a sixteenth-century Anglican theologian, used three sources: scripture, tradition, and reason. Paul Tillich, a twentieth-century theologian, indicated that the theologian's sources are the Bible, church history, history of religion, and culture. Contemporary theologian John Macquarrie, while disliking the term "sources," lists six "formative factors": experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture, and reason.

The EFM program suggests that theological reflection occurs at the juncture of our personal experience and the world we encounter. Both are enveloped by the divine milieu which we encounter in liturgy and spiritual points of our lives. Reflection occurs when we stand in the juncture as depicted in the following diagram:



The Divine Milieu

Our experience indicates that theological reflection is more likely to occur if we differentiate our personal experience and our experience of the world and are careful to distinguish among four sources: **Action**, **Position**, **Culture**, and **Tradition**. Our action and position sources reflect our personal experiences while culture and tradition are ways of identifying what we receive from the world.

The **Action** source involves that which we do and experience. The specific actions we take, as well as the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives associated with the actions, come from this source. In constructing our spiritual autobiographies, we work principally with the **Action** source. We remember past events and weave them into a pattern that tells our life stories. We say, "I remember . . ." or "My thoughts were . . ." or "I felt. . ." And we say, "Then I walked to . . ." or "I did. . ."

Action

The **Position** source refers to that for which we consciously argue—our attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and convictions. Phrases beginning, "I

Position

Culture

believe . . .,” “I know that . . .,” “That’s the way it is . . .,” and “It’s true that . . .” indicate that we are drawing from the **Position** source. Included here are tentative opinions as well as passionately held convictions.

The **Culture** source encompasses almost all the objective content available to us. The libraries of the world contain material that is in the **Culture** source. The attitudes and opinions generally held in a society also fall within this source. Culture includes movies, television, magazines, advertisements, law, architecture, customs, attire—in short, all the aspects of life we do not think of as part of our Christian Tradition. Culture is so vast that you can only deal with certain specific aspects of it; therefore, you need to identify specific items from culture on which to focus. Culture frequently sends us mixed messages and may be intertwined with aspects of our faith. These may sometimes even seem bizarre since disconnected elements may be used together. An example would be a picture that mixes the Christmas crèche with Santa Claus and a Christmas Tree.

Tradition

The **Tradition** source refers to the content of the Christian heritage. It begins with the Bible and extends to the liturgies, stories, documents, music, artifacts, and history of Christianity. The **Tradition** source contains the literature that the Christian community has designated as authoritative. In addition to conveying truth and meaning, the contents of the **Tradition** source evoke awareness of the Holy, experiences of awe, or a sense of God’s presence. Phrases like, “The Bible says. . .” and “According to the Prayer Book. . .” mark this source. The EFM program provides a four-year presentation of the **Tradition** through the students’ reading material.

It is useful both to distinguish among these sources and to notice where they overlap. We draw on each source as we try to make sense of the world around us. Each source functions as a kind of framework within which we interpret our experience. Often we keep these frameworks separate from one another. For example, what happens to us at work may lead to quite cynical conclusions about human nature. We may keep these conclusions altogether apart from how we view life as a family member or as a member of the church. In theological reflection we bring together these different ways of looking at the world. We look at each of the four sources so that our entire understanding may be informed by the Christian Tradition.