TITLE OF THESIS

Congregational Study: using an ethnographic methodology, the
Focus Group, and a post-modern position for theological reflection
after criticism of the critical correlation method.

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ABSTRACT

Describing a local congregational study, and placing it in context within the wider organisational framework of the larger institutional church, raises many issues about how the Church understands itself, and how it is viewed by the world around it. Studying a congregation also begins to question some of its basic assumptions: how it conditions the faith practice and experience of its members, as well as the ecclesiastical and theological tradition forming its sense of identity. A host of factors inter-relate.

The religious experience, spirituality, ethical considerations, sociological and psychological interactions of a geographical and historical group impact upon the gathering or congregation and form what is described by them as "church". This describes a fascinating and complex web of human interactions over a considerable time, which is worthy of study. It is made more fascinating by the knowledge that this group wish to practice and incorporate, within their own lives, a belief in the reality and coherent presence of a creative and redemptive God, historically incarnated through the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, fulfilling the idea of an eschatological community. A community convinced about living the life of the continuing Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus' death and resurrection. They desire too, to continue a tradition and identity that has shaped the essence and form of this community into an institution over a period of two thousand years. It is an institution, which, in that period, has markedly affected the culture, behaviour, and endeavour of human thought and understanding, as well as defining the practice of Christian theology itself.

Congregational study seeks to serve the direction of the rest of this thesis. Understanding the position of congregational study (Chapter 1) within the theological academic field, describes the engagement of the theological disciplines, with the social sciences and the actual situation, commonly termed the critical correlation method. It is a position that has many practitioners, and one exponent, Gerald A Arbuckle will be described (in Chapter 2). His writing offers a coherent strategy for examining the kind of changes congregations and organisational forms of churches are experiencing. However, the well documented and analysed condition of post- modernity (Chapter 3) may question the approach of critical correlation and suggest other methods of analysing the congregational situation using qualitative approaches (Chapter 4). Putting such a qualitative approach, Focus Groups, into practice (Chapter 5) offers a constructive way of developing congregational analysis and some reflection on the importance of the post-modern context, as well as introducing the idea of cultural specificity upon the ecclesiology and epistemology of what it is to be "church".

In my final chapter (Chapter 6) I will offer a post-modern position for theological reflection. This approach, as conceived by congregational study, produces a local theology. It is a theology that embraces the local context. It engages with the well-documented condition of post-modernity, and suggests an inter-disciplinary approach for the congregation and its leadership, which is one of "reflexive praxis". Rather than producing a critical correlation methodology, coherent within its own structures of plausibility, I suggest an approach that is more fragile but recognizes ambivalences and contradictions within the historically situated, embodied and contingent congregation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

Introducing Congregational Study & The Search for Methodology.

In this chapter my intention is to introduce congregational study from three perspectives. The first is to position congregational study within the academic theological field as a descriptive product of local practical theology. The second perspective seeks to place congregational study in context as an emerging aspect of the local understanding of what it is to be "church" within the life and conversation of a changing Scotland; in terms of how two institutional churches, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland, recognise the impact of cultural change upon congregational life. This introduces the third perspective of questioning how one seeks a methodology within congregational study for the theologian to interrogate.

I am interested in how a congregation interprets that which informs it and gives direction to its congregational life, for this ultimately expresses the character of Christian witness in a local context. Such interpretation is dependent upon its members mutually exchanging ideas, communicating significance by reference to shared experiences, and sharing in deeper symbolic ritual. Finding a method of "reading" this information, I suggest may help those, like myself, in positions of leadership and ordained ministry. I would like to suggest that the congregation and its leadership are involved in a "reflexive praxis". This term will become defined later in the thesis.

1.1 Introducing congregational study

Congregational study as a descriptive product of local practical theology has gained ground in recent years as a branch of practical/pastoral theology. It is a heuristic tool, and allows the formation of a descriptive theology. One of the main protagonists in recent times of this theology has been Don Browning applying the insights of the applied human sciences, including psychology, sociology, and anthropology.[1] Through the interpretation of the actual practices of congregations, progress can be made from descriptive to historical to systematic to strategic practical theology.[2] In other words congregational study is an example of practical theology drawing on the insights and challenges posed by historical and systematic theology in understanding practice and at the same time, it offers new perspectives on the Bible and doctrine out of its experience.[3] This process of practice to theory to practice

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[1] Browning, D. S. *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals.* Miinneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

[2] Bennison, C.E. *In Praise of Congregations.* Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1998. p109.

[3] Ballard, P. & Pritchard, J. *Practical Theology in Action.* London: SPCK, 1996. p15.

recognises the local faith community as a place of discourse, constructed around the common life of participants engaging in their traditions, values and visions. It emphasises the context of this activity and regards this activity as something that can be read like a text. Hence the observer or theologian can interrogate the "thickness" of meaning, (defined on page 19) which informs and gives direction to congregational life and self -understanding. It is a process concerned with understanding the communication of tradition and practical enactment and the conveying of meaning, intention and truth-claims guiding the congregation's purpose.

Robert Schreiter describes it well:

The contextual models, as the name implies concentrate more directly on the cultural context in which Christianity takes root and receives expression... a local theology begins with the needs of a people in a concrete place, and from there moves to the traditions of faith. ... [4]

There are two kinds of contextual models described by Schreiter; the ethnographic approach concerned with cultural identity, which best describes the local theology of congregational study;

(Its)...strength lies in beginning with the questions that the people themselves have - not . those posed immediately by other Christian churches or those necessary for a systematic understanding of faith... [5]

as opposed to the liberation approaches concentrating on the need for social change and the cry of the oppressed.

Typically, such a theological approach is an engagement between the theological disciplines, the social sciences and the actual situation, and is commonly termed the **critical correlation method**. It is a method stemming from the original thought of one of the most creative and influential philosopher-theologians of the 20th century, Paul Tillich.

Tillich, [6] as the philosopher-theologian also spoke as an ordained minister responding out of his particular church community. He identified the constant tension between being a theologian of culture and being a church theologian. It is this tension that has created a continual appreciation of this issue, especially within the heterogeneous context of North

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[4] Schreiter, R. *Constructing Local Theologies* Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985. p12
[5] Ibid; p13.
[6] Kline Taylor, M. *Paul Tillich - Theologian of the Boundaries.* London: Collins, 1987.

America. Since Tillich's death in 1965 there has developed a renewed sense of both the necessity and risk of a "theology of culture" that seeks to relate the church theologian's tradition to categories of human discipline. I claim that these tensions underpin this dissertation because they are as conspicuous today in the church and within the current theological debate. Within all those concerned with effective ministry is the "apologetic" concern of Tillich: to seek to render the Christian message in new terms that effectively convey its meaning. This has inspired many theologians in recent years to relate the church's tradition to various categories particularly in North America: hermeneutics (David Tracy[7], Sallie McFague[8]), process thought (John Cobb[9]), general philosophy of science (Langdon Gilkey[10]), feminist culture theory (Rosemary Radford Ruether[11]), sociology (Gregory Baum[12]). In South America: political analysis (Gustavo Gutierrez[13]), and in Europe, anthropology (Wolfgang Pannenberg[14]).

Tillich was the impetus for congregational study especially in North America. It is a natural extension perhaps of his premise that religion was the "substance" of culture. For a gathered religious community such as a congregation, it is perhaps the natural setting for direct concern about what makes the human quest for and creation of truth, beauty and good possible. A religious congregation may offer the conditions with which the existential anxieties and terrors of the human state are conquered and the creative possibilities of being human are opened. This is especially apparent, for Tillich, in the Christian gathering, where the living God, the creative power of being and meaning, has manifested itself in the new Being, centered in Jesus as the Christ, accepting the unacceptable, overcoming separation and thereby destruction and despair.

This theological position encourages its subject; the presence of a gracious God, to widespread public debate, and a rational and open argument is fostered between human disciplines, politics as well as the wider culture. In the UK the best recent example of this approach was the Faith in the City[15] report questioning a response from the church to the debate on urban poverty. In Britain practical theology, in the sense of theology's relation to

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[7] Tracy, D. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism.* NewYork: Crossroad, 1981.
[8] McFague, S. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language.* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982.
[9] Cobb Jr, J. *Christ in a Pluralistic Age.* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975.
[10] Gilkey, L. *Religion and Scientific Future: Reflections on Myth, Science and Theology.* New York: Harper & Row, 1970.
   Radford Ruether, R. *Sexism and God -Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.
[12] Baum, G. *Religion and Alienation: Atheological Reading of Sociology.* New York. Paulist, 1975.
[13] Gutierrez, G. *A Theology of Liberation.* Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1975.
[14] Pannenberg, W. *Anthropology in Theological Perspective.* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985.
[15] Faith in the City. London. Church House, 1985.

culture, is not as consolidated because the emphasis here has been on historical and philosophical enquiry, as the theoretical basis of theology. And it is from this historical and philosophical perspective, both here and across the Atlantic that Tillich and his pragmatic following in North America have been criticised. Warnings come from those who consider cultural analysis takes away the distinctive text, belief and practice of the historical church. Extra-biblical or non-theological categories can erode a sense of Christianity's distinctive narrative and cultural-linguistic tradition.[16] Further, the foundational quest for applying collective universals to our human situation may, in its seeking for common ground, miss the specific location of consciousness, positioning or standpoint, within say, ethnicity, gender or social group. Nevertheless, even within these reservations it is worthwhile considering some examples of congregational study to sense the breadth, and the variety of tools that allow a congregation to be described and then reappraise its activity, mission and conversation with the wider community.

Anthropological, sociological, psychological as well as ecclesiological enquiry and their encounter with the gospel in the context of a congregation cannot be brought easily together and analysed as a unified whole. This is the exciting but exasperating reflection on studies, which are contextual, specific and may only describe one encounter within a particular human discipline. One approach may be an historical survey, although this would not underline the main emphasis of this dissertation which is one of examining the contributions of the human sciences and the subsequent conversation with theology concerning the congregation as an important description of what it is to be "church". Such a conversation has implications for the epistemology and ecclesiology of the Church, especially when one considers the suggestion that this conversation is underpinned by cultural assumptions that are themselves in the process of criticism (Chapter 3).

I will begin not an exhaustive survey, but a representative survey, noting the historical importance of any main work, concentrating on the sociological, psychological and anthropological descriptions of congregations. As expected, because of Tillich's influence, it is a mainly North American approach, concentrating on three areas of interest. First the nature of a congregation, in other words: What is a congregation? Second the context of a congregation: Where and how does a congregation operate? Thirdly, the culture of a congregation: Why does a congregation express itself in observable and less perceivable ways to form its identity and offer its participants meaning? These three questions have been asked,

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[16] Frei, H.W. *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology.* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975.
    Lindbeck, G. A. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Doctrine in a Postliberal Age.* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984.

answered, and reflected on theologically in each case, using various approaches from the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, and sociology.

1.1a Correlation with Sociology

Sociology can be described as the study of human social relations or group life. Human interaction both creates and is governed by social norms, rules or imagined models of conduct present in people's consciousness that guide and control their interactions. These norms are part of learned behaviour forming the culture of a society or social group. Not all norms apply to every member, but members can be expected to conform to norms and then they display social roles. Quantitative and qualitative methods are used to gather data, the former based on statistics, opinion and attitude surveys, the latter range from ethnographic fieldwork to documentary historical research, giving priority to the method of everyday experience and of ordinary language over the quantitative measurement of human conduct.

Sociological descriptions of a congregation usually define typologies and classify categories of the social grouping. Several studies are mentioned in Bennison's *In Praise of Congregations[17]*. A significant work, setting the scene for many was H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture[18]* stating the importance of a congregation's relationship with its surrounding culture. Niebuhr's typology offers five distinguishing features.

1. "Christ against culture", where the surrounding culture is considered to be corrupt and in need of redemption.

2. "Christ of culture", where the culture itself gives expression to Christ as its fulfillment and represents God's reign.

3. "Christ above culture", where the imperfect present culture is a stage within the perfection of the world in Christ.

4. "Christ and culture in paradox" where culture cannot be ignored as the necessary place for God to act graciously against sin.

5. "Christ the transformer of culture" where Christ's power directs the fallen culture to a state of grace and fulfillment under the reign of God.

These distinguishing features give expression to the way the congregation is identified and identifies itself.

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[17] op.cit., p 122.
[18] Niebuhr, H. R. *Christ and Culture* New York: Harper, 1951.

Other studies use categories to offer explanations of how a congregation might identify itself or be identified. Bennison[19] offers the social analysis model developed by sociologists Hargrove and Nesbitt Six categories are used:

6. people:- constructing a demographic profile of the congregation is useful.

7. social context:- requires gathering geographic, social and historical information.

8. behavioural systems:- patterns of interaction, opinion forming, boundaries, norms, sources of conflicts are all necessary for analysis.

9. meanings:- making sense out of the congregational environment. Stating the rituals, feelings and symbols of a congregation that reinforces its identity.

10. ethos:- the inclusive and exclusive treatment of participants defined by moral categories. This affects the behavioural systems and meanings.

11. personal reflection:- distinguishing between the positive and negative effects of the above as an individual, thereby helping analyse possible points of conflict.

This kind of taxonomy continues in several other studies. David Roozen, William McKinney, and Jackson Carroll in a study of Hartford, Conneticut churches cited in Bennison[20] offers four types of congregations and four cultural contexts to be considered in studying a congregation. The four types are:

12. civic - engaged with social justice, family life personal growth and private morality. Use traditional worship but liberal thinking and vulnerable to radicals.

13. activist - neglect focus on worship but concentrate on community issues. Radical.

14. sanctuary - indulge in traditional worship seeking safety from the world.

15. evangelist - seek to transform the world by inviting others into their community.

These are also influenced by the local and national contexts as well as any denominational or institutional traditions. There is an active exchange and flow of communication and work that interacts with a congregation's specific typology. Socio-economic and cultural background, as well as geographic position, also influences any categorising of congregations by type. Anderson and Jones[21] outline six types of congregations based on its locality:

16. the neighbourhood church

17. the metropolitan community church

18. the downtown church

19. the special-purpose church

20. the small-town church

21. the open country church.

And the stages in development of the locality are also assessed and categorised.

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[19] op.cit., pp124-126
[20] op.cit., p128

22. a newly developing community

23. a stable community

24. a pre-transitional community

25. a community in transition

26. a post -transitional community

Sociologists have also tried to comprehend the realities of their discipline within the congregation rather than its relation to wider society. In 1976 James Gustafason[22] argued that congregations were a valuable source of sociological insights as communities of memory, language, interpretation, understanding, belief and action, which offered sources for theological reflection. Also, at this time the Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, formed the *Centre for Social and Religious Research* and throughout the next decade supervised over fifty projects in congregational studies assisting over two hundred congregations with planning and assessment surveys. In 1986 a Handbook for Congregational Studies[23] was published after the initial interest in the subject gathered momentum following a conference in 1982 in Atlanta, Georgia. The main contributors to the book and conference were Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, Loren Mead (Alban Institute), and Barbara Wheeler. Wheeler published James Hopewell's anthropological study of congregations shortly after his death in 1984. (More will be said of Hopeweil's contribution in the next section). After fourteen hundred interviews with church members Warren Hartman[24] also concluded that attitudes and expectations based on social grouping are worthy of consideration and more determinative of a congregation. He recognised five differing, dominating and characteristic "audiences" of a congregation. These were; supportive fellowship groups, traditionalists, study groups, social action groups and multiple interest groups.

Sociological research into congregational study also leans heavily on the behavioural science interest in human organisations. As mentioned Mead's Alban Institute drew on the increasing dominance of the behavioural sciences and organisational theory in the mid 1970's within North America. The following categories follow, sociologically, from organised human behaviour; management, structure, group, individual, technology and economics.[25] Therefore, a congregation could be described using some of these terms. According to Martin Saarinen[26],

[21] Anderson, J. D. & Jones, E. E. *The Management of Ministry.* San Francisco: Harper &Row, 1978. p 116-130.

[22] Gustafson, J. *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community.* Chicago; London: Chicago Univ. Press, 1976.

[23] Carroll, J. W. *Handbook for Congregational Studies.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1986.

[24] Hartman,W. *Five Audiences.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1987.

[25] Pugh, D. S. Ed. *Organisation Theory, Selected Readings.* London: Penguin, 1971.

[26] Saarinen, M. *The Life Cycle of a Congregation.* Washington D.C.: Alban Institute, 1986.

each congregation has its own life cycle, P Hershey[27] also theorises that an organisation reaches maturity as its goal and leadership is required to balance task with relationships. Tuckman's theories[28], of a life-cycle having four stages; "forming"or coming together. "storming"or agreeing on purpose, "norming" or settling disagreements and "performing"or establishing tasks based on the norms, have also been used to offer heuristic tools for congregational activity.

1.1b Correlation with Psychology

Psychology is the systematic study of human and animal behaviour and as a human science has its field of study common with sociology and anthropology. The area of human interaction, communication and emotional exchange between humans are natural fields for social psychologists. A social psychologist attempts to formulate knowledge about interpersonal processes into hypotheses derived from general principles that constitute theories about the nature of an individual in society. The nature of a congregation, to a social psychologist, is therefore a suitable subject for testing some of these hypotheses. The processes by which people work together in congregations can be claimed to be psychological and they influence behaviour, development, decision-making, and leadership.

Bennison[29] uses the work of social psychologist Wilfred Bion[30] to state that congregations are "basic assumption" groups requiring "valency", the capacity for the instantaneous, involuntary combination of an individual with others for the purpose of acting out the congregation's basic assumptions. Different people have stronger or weaker valencies or sentience to feel profoundly what others are feeling and to understand the group's perspective. A congregation may place more emphasis on these feelings that grapple with the basic assumptions of its key participants or leadership. Fantasies then replace any objective assessment of the group's purpose. This therapeutic community responds to its participant's needs rather than seeking a wider vision. This recognises the tension of a congregation taking on the characteristics of a sect rather than the wider implications of being Church.

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[27] Hershey, P. *The Situational Leader.* New York: Warner, 1984.
[28] Tuckman, B. W. Developmental Sequence in Small groups. in Psychological Bulletin. 1965,63. pp 384 – 399.
[29]op.cit., p155
[30] Bion, W. R. *Experience in Groups.* London: Routledge, 1991.

Edwin H Friedman[31] has interpreted the psychological dynamics of both congregations and synagogues in terms of "family systems theory" conceived by Murray Bowen, trying to understand the impact of family emotional processes over generations. Peter Steinke[32] has also used Friedman's work for the Alban Institute. According to Friedman, a family always seeks homeostasis or steady state, but this is altered by a range of human experiences and the emotions that stem from these changes of loss, grief, or anxiety. This can have positive, creative, imaginative responses or negative, depressive or stressful influences to the family seeking to recover its homeostasis. Bowen describes individuals who are "differentiated selves" who are able to maintain emotional objectivity within the turmoil and the anxiety of the system. This, Bennison[33] argues, is required in congregations if they are to respond to change "healthily".

Such language leads to the emphasis on the study of difference and on consideration of a unified whole, in congregational study, which is similar to the description of personality in psychology. It brings into relief what is stable and unstable, internal or external, as well as emphasising and contrasting the constructive and destructive aspects of human nature. It also leads to an assessment of behaviour being conditioned by the unconscious as well as the conscious experiences of human life. The complexities of the human mental and emotional state incorporated within a personality and the factors that affect it are very relevant to those who participate in a religion, and congregate together to practice that religion. Therefore it is not surprising that this should be an area for psychological interest regarding the personalities that are attracted to such behaviour. This brings into view other psychology disciplines such as psychoanalysis.

Isabel Briggs Myers and Peter B Myers[34] have expanded and popularised the theories of Carl Jung's psycho-analysis: that people have in their mental functions two contrasting ways of perceiving, sensing and intuition; and two contrasting ways of judging or interpreting what is perceived, thinking and feeling. By developing the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, they considered it is possible to offer a typology of personality using these four categories in combination with one's extroverted or introverted approach to perceiving and how one relates to the wider world generally as a perceiver or judge. If an individual's personality can be categorised in this way, however discretely, the next logical step is to analyse the function and

[31] Friedman, E.H. *Generation to Generation: Family Pressures in Church & Synagogue.* New York: Guildford, 1985.
[32] Steinke, P. L. *How your Church Family Works.* Washington D.C.: Alban Institute, 1993.
[33] op.cit., p 159.
[34] Myers, I. Briggs.;Myers, P. B. *Gifts differing: understanding personality types.* Palo Alto, California: Davies-Black Pub, 1995.

behaviour of organisations. A congregation could then be described in terms of its participant's personality, identifying the dominant traits of its key personalities and leadership.

Robert Randall[35] cited in Bennison[36] also draws on the insights of psychoanalysis assessing the psychological needs of people who become involved in conflict or the decision making of a congregation. People appear to have three "archaic" or underdeveloped selfish needs, the satisfaction of which moves them toward maturity. They correspond to a need to find their "self-psychology" affirmed, by mirroring, idealising or leveling their relationships with others, most notably the leader. The leadership also has similar felt needs that are required to be met. The effects of an observed reciprocity to satisfy needs can be observed as a congregation pursues its vision for identity and purpose. Often this can be mutually acceptable and the results positive, but it can also lead to fantasizing and forms a therapeutic community, as mentioned above. The worst case is of total pastoral breakdown within a congregation because needs perceived or unperceived are not being met by any of the participants.

1.1c Correlation with Anthropology

Anthropology has also offered its resources to congregational study, because it is interested in analysing and comparing societies and groups in search of theoretical generalisations and patterns of causal connections and co-variance. Such searches also cast light upon differences and through them, it is hoped, on human nature and universals that underlie diversity. Anthropological perspectives differed historically from the sociological, and psychological sciences because their initial concern was non-Western society, thereby concentrating on a concern for kinship and community as a basis for cultural difference rather than the relationships of the individual. The comparative study of social and cultural systems is commonly referred to as cultural anthropology, also called ethnology. In anthropology the term *culture* denotes a heritage of custom and belief. A culture is a system of ideas that have been transmitted down through generations; assumptions about an understanding of the world, rules and ways to act, goals and ways of achieving them. A culture incorporates a distinctive philosophy of life, a view of the world, and a system of values; the findings of anthropology are therefore an important resource both for philosophy and social science.

The concern for meaning and symbolism has been a unifying theme in modern anthropology, with the work of Victor Turner[37], and Mary Douglas[38] in the British tradition of social

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[35] Randall, R. L. *Pastor and Parish: The Psychological Core of Ecclesiastical Conflict.* New York: Human Sciences Press, 1988.
[36] Op.cit., p 149.
[37] Turner, V. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure.* New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977.

anthropology and Clifford Geertz[39] in the American tradition of cultural anthropology. Schreiter, as already mentioned, has pointed to the importance of local theology and the context of the congregation; so it is not surprising that anthropology is drawn upon to describe and analyse the complex processes of human interaction in search of faith and meaning within a theological world-view. The congregation is a context where history, experience and encounter of the Christian faith produce a culture, and the wider culture also impacts upon the congregation's worldview and values.

These cultures represent a way of life for a given time and place, replete with values, symbols and meanings reaching out with hopes and dreams, often struggling for a better world. (Schreiter [40])

There are many ways to theorise about culture and this will form a key element later in this dissertation, (Chapter 3 & 4) that post-modernity has changed theories of culture which impacts on contemporary theological reflection. For the moment it may be of interest to note where the main influences of anthropology have related to congregational study and a local theology.

Functionalist approaches to culture describe the British and American social anthropology direction of this century following the work of the major founders of modern sociology Emile Durkeim and Max Weber. They are concerned with how the various aspects of society are constituted and interrelated to form a cultural whole, requiring a strong empirical analysis of observation. Structuralist study of culture, following the work of Claude-Levi Strauss concerns itself with uncovering the unconscious structures of identity, meaning and classification, and how myth and ritual may be constructed. Leading from these structuralist and functionalist approaches are more elaborate syntheses of ideas. An example of this is another main influence, which Schreiter [41] considers may be of more promise to congregational study, that of the *semiotic or symbolic study of culture*. This area of study will be described in the next chapter when describing and analysing the work of the correlational theologian Gerald Arbuckle who draws heavily from his own anthropological background.

Other anthropologists important for my discussion later, particularly with regard to Gerald Arbuckle are the work of Victor Turner and Mary Douglas. Turner developed the idea of "liminality" from his "symbolic studies" which described a position between two sign systems in a culture, experienced as a threshold or a state that redresses the culture to its next stage of

[38] Douglas, M. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology.* New York: Pantheon, 1970.
[39] Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* London: Fontana, 1993.
[40] Schreiter, R. J. *Constructing Local Theologies.* Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985. p 21.

development. Arbuckle[42] develops this idea within a congregation or religious communal culture. Embedded in the daily life and stories of its participants, this idea of liminality is cogent because the congregation's identity is held by this tension between its world view and the prevailing culture. The stage of liminality is the threshold to change and possible conflict or a peaceful transition to a new understanding. Mary Douglas' work recognised the tension of group and individual in a culture, between the social pressure to conform and the individual's need to exercise freedom from social constraint.

Mention should also be made of James Hopewell's[43] particular contribution using ethnographic methods specifically to congregations. He analysed their identity as being symbolic of their continuing unfolding narrative. He uses the literary critic Northrop Frye's[44] theory of the four narrative genres that define the narrative world: the tragic, comic, romantic, ironic and associates these with corresponding ecclesiastical description; canonic, gnostic, charismatic, empiric.

A canonic congregation submits or sacrifices itself to a revelation of God's word for the world and is hence tragic, as it seeks to submit itself to divine will. Crisis or anxiety is understood as the weakness to conform even by making sacrifices to maintain the held knowledge. A gnostic congregation rejects the canonic, by accepting all that is tragic is resolved by an access to new knowledge that will resolve crisis and offer assurance of contentment, the comic. The charismatic congregation would venture forth romantically, risking heroically, confident that intervention by the divine will resolve crisis. The empiric congregation cautiously realises that any resolving of a crisis is a measured one, and is more willing to understand that tensions cannot be resolved. In this way, Hopewell correlates the types of story with four kinds of world-view. The canonic/gnostic and charismatic/empiric are held in polar opposition and are therefore grounds for conflict within a congregation of competing understandings of the story. The conclusion is that a congregation is likely to contain groupings of people who understand their contribution in this literary way. The congregation will therefore act in accordance with its dominant self-image as reflected in its perceived story.

Understanding congregations then as distinct cultures as well as part of a complex web of stories, symbols, rituals, interpreted history creates not only a distinct identity but offers opportunity as this dissertation recognises for theological inquiry.

Congregational studies can also be defined more openly as the interpretation of the history and culture of the congregation and with that comes a wider correlation with the human sciences.

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[41] Ibid; p 49.
[42] Arbuckle, G. A. *Grieving for Change: A spirituality for refounding Gospel Communities.* London: Chapman, 1991.
[43] Hopewell, J. F. *Congregation: Stories and Structures.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
[44] Frye, N. *Anatomy of Criticism.* Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957.

In more recent years organisational developmental research has been employed and such institutions as The Alban Institute, founded by Loren Mead in 1974, have taken advantage of this kind of research and offered it as a corporate tool of analysis for the larger institutional church. It is this kind of approach that will be outlined below as it is used in the institutional church of which my own parish is a member. In this guise congregational studies may be a misnomer for organisational management of congregations concentrating on empirical, managerial and structural methods to aid a congregation take on the objectives of the larger institutional church. There has also been an interest in congregational leadership and how it performs within the sense of what is considered to be the dynamics of a congregation. Leadership in recent years has not been restricted to the ordained, or to the idea of a professional clergy, but widened to incorporate the considerations of the baptised lay members in developing the patterns of ministry exhibited by a congregation. Overarching this is the wider culture of the world in which the congregation finds itself. Both the leadership and congregation relate their identity and tradition to the wider culture and convey their understanding of the Christian message, but because the wider culture may undergo profound changes over time the communication of the identity and tradition of the congregation may have to interpret the consequences of change and particularly potential conflict.

1.2 Congregational Study in Scotland

I now turn to Scotland to place congregational study in context as an emerging aspect of the local understanding of what it is to be "church" within the life and conversation of a changing Scotland; in terms of how two institutional churches, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland recognise the impact of cultural change upon congregational life.

In Scotland unlike North America, practical theology in the sense of theology's relation to culture is not as consolidated, because, as mentioned earlier, the emphasis in Britain has been on historical and philosophical enquiry as the theoretical basis of theology. Any pragmatic approach to theology in Scotland has stemmed from discussions on ethical and public issues and considerable progress has been made in the last twenty years at raising public awareness of theology within the social and political landscape; for example the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at Edinburgh University (CTPI).

Gradually and spasmodically this approach, has encouraged the institutional churches and its congregations to see themselves in their local contexts as places for theological reflection. encountering issues that create meaning and question purpose for the wider community. The emphasis in Scotland, in the past, which is different from North America, has been that congregations are not entities in themselves, but part of a greater whole, Dioceses or

Presbyteries connected to a national and global understanding of what it is to be Church. This overarching identity paradigm of church and nation is being re-assessed because of cultural change and transition that requires explanation. Yet when explained and understood, I feel, may allow the place of the congregation or local faith community to be aware of its own identity and gradually relate to its local situation. It will therefore become more relevant and important for a local congregation to have the tools of analysis that may equip it for understanding its own cultural position.

Interestingly an awareness of this, although not explicit for congregational study, comes out of a CTPI conference paper[45] "Seeing Scotland, Seeing Christ". The paper is primarily concerned with a social vision of Scotland, addressing, sociologically, the changing culture from modern to post-modern, and questioning the relationship of church and nation in the light of this change, before offering emerging glimpses of the developing local church. The sociologist, David McCrone, reiterates that the passing dominance of the modernist paradigm means that social identities are reformed making more things unpredictable and amenable to choice with looser relationships between economy, society and policy. He considers that the more flexible term "community" as a social identity will become a principal frame of reference for social analysis because it will be essentially symbolically constructed and such communities will be places to understand our own predicament and to work out our own solutions. Will Storrar follows this by seeking to free the church from captivity to the historical paradigm of the Christian nation and the institution of the national church. Post modernity may offer the opportunities for a more open position, sociologically and theologically, thereby affirming his statement;

" *This liberative (biblical) narrative, sustaining, renewing and challenging the life of the marginal church as a 'story-formed community', will also make its own disturbing and prophetic impact on the life of the nation.*"[46]

Storrar seeks to recover and develop a theology of citizenship determined by the eschatological horizon of God's justice for the oppressed.

Following this Michael Northcott[47] examines congregational numerical decline and assesses the complimentary statistical information as an indication of how the church, over the last forty years, has struggled with the contemporary context. He describes the church in Scotland

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[45] CTPI Occasional Paper No.28. *Seeing Scotland, Seeing Christ.* Edinburgh: Univ. Edin, 1993.
[46] ibid; p 29
[47] ibid; pp 43-64

and its constituent membership in tension with the challenges of secularism and the developing critique of modernity.

Whilst the organizational structure of the church adapted to modernity's ability to rationalize, differentiate, and plan; the decline in membership is, according to Northcott, a failure to recognize contradicting components. Over this recent period, the church has been uneasy to support or even criticize the values of modern secular society. This apparent stalemate or at least a holding tension has been maintained and responsible for severe decline in membership and an inability to proclaim the prophetic witness of the gospel. The tension in the mainstream church reflects its liberal yearnings of progress, rationality and commonality which characterizes a vision of modernity; in contrast to both a conservative older membership uneasy with the values of the modern secular and permissive society and a younger generation critical and increasingly fragmented. Many of this new generation seek to reform the abuses of modernity's value of progress, and rationality, understanding the oppression and abuses of this overarching vision of modernity, whilst coping with their contemporaries who delight in the progress of consumerism. Yet the whole of this generation is affected by the decay and loss of modernity's overarching sense of narrative, which has underpinned their understanding of society and culture. Consequently, the mainstream liberal churches now struggle to find meaning and direction within these uneasy tensions.

This inability of the institutional form of church to release itself from the tension of the past half a century leads Northcott to describe the emerging post-modern church as one that will express itself more sharply in terms of distinctive identity, holding values defined in terms of a Christian choice amidst the post-modern selection of life-style. He already sees this happening amongst the defined doctrinal churches. This emerging church would feature communities countering the emerging alienation and meaningless, left by what they understand as the myopic vision of modernity, and at the same time allow for the expression of flexible styles of worship and religiosity using contemporary as well as traditional forms. The post-modern church, he considers, must not loose the priority of the Gospel or the story of Jesus Christ.

Northcott, sees my own denomination of the Scottish Episcopal Church displaying a flexibility and managing to show evidence of a levelling out of churchgoing decline. This is, in part, to flexible concepts and patterns of ministry, less reticence to liturgical change, and adaptability to contemporary music in changing forms of worship. Northcott does not comment on whether this is indicative of a post-modern church responding to the cultural changes he describes.

It is worth noting also a recent development in this small Scottish denomination. In 1995 its leadership was concerned about the decline of congregational growth and sought to connect congregational life with the realities of the present context and plan a comprehensive denominational strategy. Consultation was begun with the North American Alban Institute based in Bethsada, Maryland, which over the last twenty-five years has sought to analyze and study congregations using the model of correlation with the human sciences. It was considered that they had particular expertise in helping congregations assess their history, norms, and practices in association with spiritual formation of congregational life.

The Alban Institute, in their publications recognize, like Northcott[48], the trends associated with a period of profound change characterized by increasing social, ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism. Individuals and groups are facing unprecedented diversity and transience in areas of life with easier access to information and communication causing new ways of association and groupings. It is a period of history in the modern economically dominated world, marked by no defined authoritative value system, a disenchantment with authoritative institutions, increasing globalism with an attendant concern about local issues, multiculturalism, and concern or perceived fears about poverty, crime, gender and sexuality issues. These trends or distinguishing features of a changing modern world are used by the Alban Institute[49] to engender a response of engagement by congregations to their context and understand further the possibilities of growth and development.

Set alongside these observations about a congregation's context, is the important recognition of congregational culture and congregational identity. Research in this field, following from sociological and anthropological insights described in the above sections of this chapter, has also developed within the North American context. These developments suggest that the culture and identity of a congregation gives boundary and limit to the practice of its membership, as a group or as individuals, to the task of understanding theologically their purpose in Christian ministry and mission.

As Hopewell[50] recognized in 1987:

"Mission begins with a greater appreciation of a local church's own
finitude....particularized in a cultural pattern specific to its own corporate life.

The correlation of human sciences and theology has developed rapidly offering educational resources for those in positions of congregational leadership. This endeavour is rapidly

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[48] Northcott M *The Church and Secularisation.* Frankfurt am Main: PeterLang, 1989.

[49] Mann, A. *Can our Church Live?* Maryland: Alban Institute, 1999.

[50] Hopewell, J. F. *Congregation: Stories and Structures.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987. p16.

attracting participants on this side of the Atlantic as a method of sharing issues of practice between congregations, denominations and their leaders.

This thesis recognises the benefits to congregational study of this correlation method, yet wishes to understand the limits of this methodology. It is a methodology increasingly attractive to the church as an organization, but its enthusiastic practitioners may be failing to see that this methodology has its own cultural specificity. It is not as objective as might first be understood. I will give an overview of the well-documented and analysed condition of modernity (Chapter 3), which will suggest that the organizational church ought to take care about the assumptions of such approaches. I would like to refer to an alternative qualitative methodology to interpret the congregational situation, and take seriously the concerns about modernity. In doing this there may be new and refreshing theological insight as to the future epistemology and ecclesiology of what it is to be "church".

Already in Scotland there are possibilities of alternative methodologies being used to understand properly how congregational culture functions. Alan Dowie[51] is beginning to use ethnographic methods to reflect upon congregational identity. In contrast to the methods deployed above, seeing the church in organizational terms, Dowie states,

It is inappropriate to speak of the culture of a community, since culture is mediated through symbols to which people are to relate differentially.[52]

Although Dowie does not state this, I feel that this perspective of *difference* is a very important development and relates to the criticisms about modernity. A community, Dowie considers, is not necessarily about consensus but a diversity of meanings appropriated *differentially*. Culture is mediated and there can be both closure, stable or fixed with what the community considers significant, or it can be open where significance is deferred by what is not said as much as what is. There is more fluidity in the identity of a community than may, at first, be realized. This brings into focus the power positioning of individuals and groups within the community, the social segmentation of its constituency, and the conflict over symbolic boundaries, which have established a sense of authority over the community's identity.

Correlational methods used in congregational study benefit those who seek to understand the church as an organization with component congregations and regard their activity, history, norms and practices as something that can be created or at worst manipulated, but organisational approaches misconceive culture in terms of consensus, shared values and

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[51] Dowie, A. *Identity and Culture in Congregations.* Contact.1998, 125, pp 10-16.

beliefs. It is in the interests of any organization to structure the consensus; so that the power of direction and management may be maintained.

Organisational theory follows from a functionalist and structuralist approach, which are key ideas of modern sociology, following from its founders Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (funtionalist) and Claude Levi-Strauss (structuralist). They were concerned with the observation and empirical analysis of how a society is constituted and interrelated to form a cultural whole, and revealing how the unconscious structures of identity, meaning and classification, as well as myth and ritual may be constructed.

The critique of modernity as described fully in Chapter 3 is a reaction against this kind of universalism and certainty. Theology may actually benefit from losses of certainty by reporting and accepting the differences between congregations rather than hoping they may display a central, organizing, unitary, coherence or standard in matters communicating morality or knowledge of God.

The role of the theologian, like the sociologist or anthropologist, is then under question for is it a role that simply observes and does the mapping or is this kind of practitioner also involved in the process of finding significance and creating significance? It is this development, which is now meriting investigation. For the theologian it will bring together the tools of anthropology and sociology, but also a realization from these disciplines that the doubtful certainties of modernity question the methodology employed to inform and give direction. This thesis recognises that any study of a congregation for theological reflection cannot ignore the prevailing critique of modernity.

1.3 The search for methodology

Shifts in anthropological understandings of culture, by practitioners such as Clifford Geertz[53] give rise to approaches that question established methods of observing culture. Geertz saw culture as a text and recognized an ambiguity of meaning drawn from such texts. Meaning appeared to be dependent upon interpretive movements; as much from the surface reading of the event or ritual. He describes this as the "thickness of meaning" appropriated by deeper symbolic references. A term signifying the richness and complexity of sign systems in action by inspecting events, showing how messages are understood as significant rather than the structures that make them possible. These interpretive movements are communicated and enacted by those bringing the text to the observer or audience, but meaning depends on an

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[52] Dowie, A. ibid; p12
[53] Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana, 1993.

exchange of mutual understanding. This cultural drama requires interpretation by both the subject and the observer but the meaning is drawn from a mutual reflexivity.

In this thesis (Chapter 4& 5) I suggest that it is worthwhile for theologians to consider this requirement of anthropology to examine the context of this drama or cultural reproduction and develop, from the sociologist, methods of articulating this reflexivity, [54]which analyzes the event or cultural text, under observation. By doing so an aspect of religious belief, and its social forms construed to display belief, such as liturgy or the community of faith may be better understood.

In his enquiry, he has to render himself to account as much as his subject matter. A degree of self-interrogation is required that depends on the questions that emerge from a particular field. Reflexivity has become of prime importance in sociology because it is a property that shapes self- understandings of culture. The sociologist has to become reflexive if the condition of post modernity is to be understood.[55]

This notion of a shared reflexive practice between sociology, anthropology and theology has much to do with the critique of modernity over the last twenty years. The recognition of the reflexive character of social research, that the researcher has no external, absolutely conclusive standard by which to judge the object being studied, but has an analytical place on the landscape being mapped, is illustrative of the critique of modernity. [56] The premise of an a-historical subject of knowledge, the social researcher or even the theologian amidst a congregation, is becoming, to some, indefensible.

It is becoming clear that such a critique could abandon methodologies about the nature of knowledge and theoretical discussions about the nature of action or change. I will attempt to show this by reference to the discussion by Gerald Arbuckle in the following chapters of this thesis. Arbuckle is a good example of anthropologist and theologian combining the disciplines with the critical correlation method. He has also written extensively about his work and is easily accessible. Yet this approach, with insights from Roman Catholic methodology, is restricted by its own presuppositions from modernity. The theologian requires different or at least complementary tools to understand the community of faith and the levels of meaning that are occurring within the life of such a community or congregation.

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[54] Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. *Ethnography Principles in Practice.* London: Tavistock, 1983.
[55] Flanagan, K. *The Enchantment of Sociology – a study of theology and culture.* London: Macmillan 1996. p27.
[56] Davie, G. *Religion in /Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

Methodologies interested in correlating the nature of knowledge may be severely challenged by qualitative methodologies attempting to attend to the pragmatics of knowledge.[57] Disciplinary boundaries will blur and domains of knowledge once separated will intermingle. and as suggested the sociologist and theologian may share a different kind of discourse than envisaged by theories of correlation. For example, as James Clifford[58] suggests. with respect to the structure of knowledge, there is little difference between ethnographic and literary texts. Richard Brown[59] also offers a textualist approach to sociological method, implicating sociology in a political engagement with society. It is not difficult to make the connection for theological reflection within the context of a congregation; for in a congregation or religious community the social, political and moral impact of its discourse would challenge modernity's precedence of current organizational theories about the importance of a coherent history, norm, and practice of received knowledge with reference to a belief in the Christian God. Such a reflection may liberate the church from the stagnation Northcott described above.

Feminism, too, has embraced the critique of modernity by analyzing constructions of meaning and relationships, bringing into question unitary and universal categories. A body of theory broadly defined as post- structuralist has been central to this critique of modernity. *Language* provides a starting point for understanding social relations because words and texts have no fixed or intrinsic meanings but acquire meaning by usage in specific communities. This reveals the constitution and operation of power in these communities. Information about these interactions is gathered by reference to the *discourse* between a community or organization. The elaboration of meaning involves conflict and power and legitimisation by appeals to authority within discursive areas, which are contested locally and called "fields of force". Michel Foucault illuminated how such discourses within communities compete for dominance as "truth". Such a theory provides creative thinking about contextual construction of social meanings and also indicates within post-structural analysis the importance of *difference* and *deconstruction.*

Difference, as mentioned, shows how language derives its meaning from established contrasts rather than from inherent or pure antithesis. Binary opposites such as presence/absence or universality/specificity provide insights as to how meaning is constructed. According to Jacques Derrida the primary term derives privilege from suppression of its opposite. Derrida suggests that meaning cannot take binary oppositions at face value but analysis must *deconstruct* them for the processes they embody. For example the binary opposite

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[57] Seidman, S. *Contested Knowledge-Social Theory in the Postmodern Era.* Oxford: Blackwell 1994. pp 299-341
[58] Clifford, J. & Marcus. G. Eds. *Writing Culture -- the Poetics and Politics of ethnography.* London: Univ. California Press, 1986.
[59] Brown, R. *Social Science as Civic Discourse.* Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1989.

equality/difference hides the interdependence of the two terms, for equality is not the elimination of difference, and difference does not preclude equality. Such observations have been crucial for feminists to confront conflicting arguments in their own discursive field. This critique builds upon a host of post-structuralist writing from Michel Foucault. Jaques Derrida. Jean Francois Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu.[60] Consequently, the practical theologian is confronted with finding a methodology that may indicate this wider field of view, that the congregation produces an ecclesiology and epistemology that performs as well as one that represents the nature of Christian knowledge.

An exploration of these issues involved in this thesis might help those who are involved in congregational study to rebuke the criticism of sociologists.

Theologians seem to have a curious inability to recognize that the problem of belief lies in their ill-formulated understandings of culture[61]

The methodology chosen for this research may indicate, following Barthes,[62] that the congregation is a field of practice replacing the modernist couplet, *subject* (author) / *object* (work) and the current situation of a theologian observing and mapping congregational life. It replaces it with something, which has the appearance of a new active, creative and practical couplet – *practice* (writing) / (intertextual) *field*; that the congregation is a place of play an open ended field with the possibility of challenging the social domination of ecclesiastical social traditions that have, in part, produced a particular and specialist epistemology and ecclesiology. It also raises questions about how a congregation establishes and refers to authority.

In chapter 4, I will describe the method of exploring a small group of the congregation using the Focus Group, a group discussion exploring a specific issue. The method is useful for discovering people's experiences, opinions, desires and concerns. Whilst in -depth ethnographic work would be more appropriate for broader issues, the focus group is suited to the study of attitudes and experiences around the specific issue of change and loss.

It is an invaluable method for examining how knowledge, ideas, story telling, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges within a cultural context.[63]

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[60] Seidman, S. Ed *The Postmodern Turn* Cambridge: Univ. Cambridge Press, 1994.
[61] Flanagan, K. ibid., p98
[62] Barthes, R. *From work to Text,* in Hariri. J. ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism.* Ithaca: Univ. of Cornell Press, 1979.
[63] Barbour, R.S. & Kitzinger. J. Eds. *Developing Focus Group Research* London: Sage. 1999. p5

A complete introduction to the use of Focus Groups will be given in Chapter 4 and analysis of their results in Chapter 5 but I now turn to a full description of a particular exponent of the critical correlation method within the Roman Catholic church, Gerald A. Arbuckle.

CHAPTER 2

An Exponent of the Critical Correlation Methodology – Gerald Arbuckle

2.1 Introducing the work of Gerald Arbuckle

Gerald Arbuckle S.M., Ph.D. graduated in cultural anthropology from Cambridge University. His work initially combined an interest in cultural anthropology with his vocational Marist religious life. He has served as the Rector of a Roman Catholic Seminary in New Zealand, an assistant general of the Marist Community, an adviser in cultural anthropology to the Pontifical Commission on Religious life in the United States, and as pastoral anthropology professor at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila and recently founded the Refounding and Pastoral Development Research Unit in Sydney, Australia.

His initial concern developed and expanded upon in later books, was the changing culture of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II and its effect upon religious communities. Communities that mirrored a pre - Vatican II sensibility offered the view that the Church was changeless, a subculture of stability and security, and were set apart from a changing world. These ideas were threatened in the late 1960's by the expression of a desire to change from within the Church itself as well as from the world around it. This expression of change begins for Arbuckle with his description of the birth pains of post-modernity which he calls the "Revolution of Expressive Disorder" which coincided with the associated changes and reforms sought by Vatican II.

"The most common characteristic...., was the symbolism of anti-structure, anti-order, anti-predictability. It was essentially an attack on boundaries, limits, certainties, taboos, roles, systems and style, form and ritual. It was an attempt to make ambiguity and uncertainty ... a way of living in itself"[1]

Arbuckle seeks to gain insight from his anthropological studies by analyzing what he considers as the effects of these major cultural changes both in the church and the world; and the necessity to have a relationship of exchange and dialogue between culture and the Gospel. Before looking at Arbuckle's analysis in depth it may be worthwhile to describe the effect of

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[1] Arbuckle, G.A. *Strategies for Growth in Religious Life.* New York: Society of St.Paul, 1987. p. 6.

the Second Vatican Council upon the Roman church thereby explaining how this event gave impetus to his work.

2.2 The Second Vatican Council

The Vatican Council sought to renew an apparently inward looking and comfortable Church and make it aware of the changing realities of the world around it. Arbuckle considers that the Second Vatican Council proposed a major theological shift that emerged from a reappraisal of an ancient symbol of the Church as a tent of the pilgrim people of God.

Arbuckle quotes Rahner *" A tent of the pilgrim people of God, pitched in the desert and shaken by all the storms of history, the Church is laboriously seeking its way into the future, groping and suffering many internal afflictions, striving over and over again to make sure of its faith."* [2]

This contrasted with the nineteenth century Roman church withdrawing from the world within the securities of neo-scholasticism and a coherent intellectual framework. The Catholic Church had become closed, defensive and protective, as a reaction to the impact of the Industrial revolution and modernity with its Enlightenment values of empiricism, historicism, naturalism, rationalism, liberalism and democracy. These values and the reforms of Protestantism meant the Catholic church saw itself increasingly as a societal entity on equal terms if not superior to the other societies and states around it because it alone possessed the purity of the Gospel.

The main theological thrust of the Second Vatican Council was that the Church must appreciate the significance of history in a religion concerning incarnation; that is the importance and affirmation of a realised eschatology was vital for a renewed Church. Accordingly the reign of God as a present reality for Jesus is also a reality for the Church, that the Church serves as an anticipatory sign, it heralds and anticipates the coming completion of the reality of the reign of God already present and proclaimed in and through Jesus Christ. Other writers reflecting on the significance of Vatican II also understand this theme. In 1968, Hans Küng, for instance, indicates this pressing concern of eschatology for a renewed ecclesiology in his book "The Church".

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[2] Rahner, K. *Concern for the Church.* New York: Crossroad, 1981 pp. 152ff.

For Küng, the history and origin of the Church is always significant and important to its present understanding and future, but the present and future must always be subject to the reign of God, an event now, and at hand; therefore change is vital and necessary, not immobility.

"it (the Church) must commit itself to each new day (giorno) afresh, accept the changes and transformations of history and human life, and constantly be willing to reform, to renew, to rethink.[3]
"....For the believer the eschaton takes place in the present, in the past, and in the decision which has constantly to be reviewed"[4]

This emphasis of Vatican II, particularly the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium,* dissociated itself from its traditional ecclesiology. The Church has no fixed abode, it is temporary, and it proclaims its own transience as fleshing out the mystery of God's presence in the world. David Bosch notes that this argument is new, the Church no longer presenting itself imperiously and proudly but defines itself as a sign and an instrument of service within the world, a missionary ecclesiology.[5] It is a tented people, a dwelling place for God's word, thereby re-emphasizing the *corporate and personal* spirituality of the Johannine Gospel with its importance upon the mutual indwelling of God's love between Father, Son and those who seek to become disciples.

Arbuckle is intrigued by the proposal of *Lumen Gentium* for a radical change in emphasis within the theological outlook of his church. It apparently made a deep impression upon him, as to his own vocational outlook, and to those around him. As a student in 1961,at the time of the Second Vatican Council, he comments upon the effect of the extraordinary affirmative pronouncements of Pope John XXIII which signified this dramatic shift in the Church's thinking.

"Gone is the overriding negativity of his predecessors towards the world" [6]

Yet whilst those within religious communities, pursued their role as educators and teachers within the larger institution, many were severely challenged. They were being asked to relate

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[3] Kung, H. *The Church.* London: Search Press, 1968. p. 14.
[4] Ibid; p. 60
[5] Bosch, D. *Transforming Mission.* New York: Orbis, 1991. p. 372.
[6] Arbuckle, G. A. *Refounding The Church.* London: Chapman, 1993. p. 24.

to the findings of the Council at the same time as their own background and formative understanding was being challenged. Formation and education for the religious communities prior to Vatican II focused attention on conforming to the institutional status quo. There was no tradition within recent history of a more dynamic and radical missionary church interacting with the world around it. Many were often unable to comprehend the desire for renewal in the Church and unable to acknowledge anything positive within the expressive disorder characterizing the wider world. The interpretation of what was happening in the Church and the World was conflicting, at the same time, with the interpretation of what was considered to be required and understood of the Church in its relationship with the World. If this distinction was being challenged, then so too was the notion that religious communities were called to levels of spiritual perfection obtainable only by religious and priests. The Second Vatican Council affirmed the role of laity, as a call to spiritual life. This left many religious with an identity crisis. Religious communities were beginning to be undermined by these changes both from within and without. In 1966 recruitment and retention to religious communities was at an all time high, but only two years later the situation had dramatically reversed. Arbuckle finds this information and background a good place to begin his anthropological analysis and theological reflection.

"The combined effects of the theological and cultural changes of Vatican II and the cultural revolution left Catholics breathless, lost in what seemed to be an ever increasing malaise, a loss of direction. People felt stunned, rootless benumbed, never sure what was to happen next within the Church that for Centuries seemed unchanging."[7]

Arbuckle and many others Catholics were energized by this new direction towards a missionary church. It was a church that understood the requirement for a more flexible relationship, an exchange in dialogue between the bearers of the Gospel and the societies and cultures where the Gospel was proclaimed. Ten years after Vatican II a new theological term would define this relationship - termed *inculturation.*

2.3 Arbuckle's Anthropology

Arbuckle's interests in cultural anthropology meant that he was well equipped to make an analysis in two specific areas, recognizing that anthropology is about how people understand and communicate with one another within and across cultures. First, he offers an

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[7] Arbuckle, G. A. *Strategies for Growth in Religious Life.* New York: Society of St.Paul, 1987. p. 13.

anthropological examination of the effects of change within a culture, for example within the institutional Church, and within religious communities after the Second Vatican Council: an analysis of the meaning systems, symbols, myths and rituals of a culture and their corresponding breakdown of meaning due to the effects of philosophical change. Second, a more specific analysis of how the dialogue between cultures and the gospel -inculturation - takes place. When these two analyses are combined Arbuckle suggests that the Church is a specific culture, which demands the inculturation of the Gospel to be practiced well. Yet there are stages to inculturation that causes a serious re-evaluation of meaning affected by initial chaos and change. It is a process that leads to, his term, "refounding". It requires a particular personality of leadership for the process to succeed, for individuals are required to devise ways of bridging the gap between the Gospel and culture.

It is now time to describe these two analyses in detail, providing the main impact of Arbuckle's work.

I shall consider first how Arbuckle understands the importance of meaning systems, the symbols, myths and rituals of a culture. Several academic anthropologists are situated by Arbuckle to give credence to his analysis. In his first book, *Strategies for Growth*, Arbuckle immediately cites Clifford Geertz's definition of culture

"an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbol, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life"[8]

In order for a culture to be established and perpetuate meaning there has to be a repeated symbolized behaviour that enshrines an understanding of human purpose and existence. A symbol offers a reality of meaning to those who share in the dynamic or power that symbol offers through the imagining or retelling of what the symbol represents to those of a culture. The repeated symbolic behaviour is called *ritual* and the explanatory verbalisation is called *myth*. A myth is the framework of language for understanding phenomena outside ordinary experience. Ritual allows a means of participating in the experience of culture and its repeated action perpetuates the meanings, which explain the purpose and existence of the culture. People generally search for meaning identity and security within a particular culture and find them through symbol, myth and ritual. Difficulties arise when the symbols, myths and rituals are undermined by another culture or subculture; the search for meaning is now uncertain and can create meaninglessness and eventual chaos.

Arbuckle defines this process of cultural analysis rigorously with reference to the British anthropologists Vincent Turner and Mary Douglas clarifying the nature and types of myths; describing the theories of mythology, interrelated myths responding to our social, economic and psychological needs; understanding a myth's function, how it changes and how they can influence us. He then offers four models of culture to describe the different cultural forms one might experience, illustrating the behavioural emphasis common to most analyzed cultures. These models seek to explain folk culture versus associational cultures; grid versus group cultures; consensus versus conflict cultures and finally the culture of poverty.

Concluding his analysis, Arbuckle examines cultural change and the importance and influence of chaos, as well as the influence of social movements. He identifies the 'culture change reaction model' describing six exaggerated features of a process of change that moves through the following: consensus:

initial stress - political reaction - chaos - revitalisation - new consensus and integration. Arbuckle is struck by the cyclic and repetitive nature of this process as refined by Mircea Eliade[9] who claimed that cultures undergo cyclic regressions to a state of chaos before entering a new stage of creativity.

Victor Turner[10] is also cited as representing a model of culture that understands the dynamic of change. Turner distinguishes two types of culture: *societas* where there is structure, role differentiation, segmentation and an institutionalized system; *communitas* occurs at a stage of change or development called *liminality*. When roles and status within the segmented life of a culture break down and people react positively to the normal structures and symbolic supports being removed or minimised, Turner argues that cultural life is then in a process of change passing from societas through *commnunitas* to *societas*. Liminality is required to initiate the transition to a new *societas*. It is an occasion for anti-structural components, or alternatively a reassessment of the essential necessary values, to re-define *societas*. There may well be a feeling of chaos or culture shock at this stage. This stage of liminality creating communitas is not normally sustainable because structures, status and roles are soon re-established for societas to regain predictability or a new stable outlook. Interestingly this process of cultural change has been likened to the journey of life itself by Turner, a social drama distinguishing

[8] Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* London: Fontana, 1993. p. 89.
[9] Eliade, M. *Myth and Reality.* New York: Harper & Row, 1975. pp 39-53
[10] Turner, V. *The ritual Process: Structure & Anti-Structure.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977. pp.94-203

behaviours of individuals or groups occurring during periods of stress or readjustment. Liminality breaks in when one is confronted with fundamental questions about meaning, identity, purpose or security.

2.4 Arbuckle's Correlation of Anthropology and Theology

Arbuckle uses this anthropological analysis in all his books as the basic tool for explanation and correlation with the observations he describes concerning the Roman Catholic Church and religious communities. This is particularly evident in his first book *Strategies for growth* and his second book *Out of Chaos*. These attempt to communicate his ideas initially focusing on religious congregations. He describes them as congregations giving the impression of large institutional bodies as opposed to the local religious community. His main concern is the regeneration of religious congregations in the wake of the theological shift of the Second Vatican Council. Once the state of these congregations is described in terms of the above anthropological analysis using case studies, Arbuckle then concentrates on correlating biblical studies to the articulation of his anthropological analysis. By this means Arbuckle seeks to outline the role and qualities required for leadership in religious congregations during periods of significant change. After this component he reinforces his ideas and argument by reference to those who offer organisational theory and business management analysis.

I think it is worth detailing this biblical analysis before expanding Arbuckle's method of argument further.

In his second book *Out of Chaos*[11], referring to the 'culture change reaction model' Arbuckle identifies the movement from chaos to revitalization as an important narrative in the Bible. Beginning with the biblical creation myth, chaos is overcome by order, meaning and hope. The symbols and myth of chaos are expressed and implied later by nothingness (Dt 32:10), emptiness, (Is 40:17; 41:29), confusion and darkness (Ps 88) and always contrasted with God's (Yahweh) own creative power and mercy, as well as co-operation with those who offer a dependency upon this life-giving authority and power. Chaos is seen to be either an affliction upon man, or a self-affliction, but always in contrast to the redeeming and continual revealing authority of God. The Exodus (Ex: 16-18) is offered as an *archetype* of the chaotic experience for the human state presenting the *liminal* stage, an intrinsically unstable and uncertain stage, bringing opportunity for reappraisal of the creative possibilities of Yahweh

and the positive existential *communitas* experienced in Yahweh's name required before the founding of a new society.

Arbuckle understands that throughout the Bible, God is presented as allowing chaos, misery, hunger or weariness; so that the faithful can claim the victory of calm, joy, sustenance, or rest in knowing this God.

Those who carry the honour of this faithful God into their culture are asked to relive these primal events; so others may understand this regenerative myth of faith and trust in God's overwhelming love first experienced in creation. The hearer of the Bible narrative is asked to recognise the same condition on their journey of life contrasting human weakness and fragility with the need to celebrate the creative love of God.

The reliving of a foundational myth, such as creation out of chaos, creates a belief in an absolute reality, both transcendent and immanent, it states what is sacred rather than profane, and underpins purpose and meaning. Arbuckle's whole argument rests on the idea of the regeneration of this myth, and gives further biblical examples to show this happening. Regeneration is not just celebrating the foundational myth but is a mechanism of allied myths that illustrate the events of re-creation. Most biblical narratives are written with the expectation that the hearer will undergo an interior or exterior change, or conversion, to experience for them a new creation, the original founding myth. Thereby their own lives will be *refounded.* Specific examples of the regenerative myth are given. The disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24); Abraham's journey into the wilderness (Gen: 12); the experience of Jeremiah, as the prophet of creativity out of chaos; a regenerated people and culture promised by Second Isaiah; the conversion of Paul, and finally, as Arbuckle states:

"God's regenerating love reaches its perfection in the humanly inconceivable re-creating love of Christ's life, his death and resurrection and the new covenant relationship foretold by the prophets."[12]

All these examples describe the regeneration myth as a moment for the repentance or conversion of a people or individual. The anthropologist's description of *communitas* moving towards a new *societas* is correlated to the biblical idea of 'repentance ' being 'born again' (μετανοια). A special place is also assigned to those people who have witnessed to or

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[11] Arbukle, G. A. *Out of Chaos – Refounding Religious Congregations.* London: Chapman, 1988.
[12] Ibid; pp. 53 -54.

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announced this process of μετανοια, such as the prophets, Paul, or Jesus. Arbuckle describes them as *refounding* people and characterizes them ideally as; helping their contemporaries remember the foundational myth, investing their lives to the culture they serve, listening to the culture's condition and responding imaginatively by their engagement with the vision of the foundational myth; enduring suffering and marginalisation for the sake of the culture. All this effort serves to bridge the divide within the culture between the historical reality and the vision of meaning, identity, security and purpose described in the founding myth.

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2.5 Inculturation

This leads appropriately to Arbuckle linking his anthropological analysis and biblical correlation to the theological descriptive term *inculturation*. Arbuckle devotes his fourth book *Earthing the Gospel* as a summary of inculturation describing the dialogue between cultures and the vision of the Gospel. When the mechanism of inculturation, anthropological analysis and biblical correlation are drawn together Arbuckle concludes by stating the main requirement for a religious congregation; that any regeneration or revitalization of a religious congregation is a cultural process requiring a particular type of leadership.
This leadership may require particular personalities, but nevertheless Arbuckle considers the organization requiring this leadership can assist itself to educate and train those required to establish the refounding process. He feels that there are people available, ready to equip themselves of the knowledge and processes required for dialogue between the narrative of God's revelation to humanity and the culture of the moment.

I shall now define and describe the process of inculturation, before outlining the profile of leadership required by Arbuckle for the refounding process to be accomplished.
Arbuckle cites the definition

"Inculturation is the 'dynamic relation between the Christian message and culture or cultures; an insertion of the Christian life into a culture; an ongoing process of reciprocal and critical interaction and assimilation between them"[13]

Inculturation is a process of exchange between the culture and the Gospel in which both are affected. The stress is on the community rather than the individual aspect of evangelisation.

In clarifying this definition the distinction is made between the sociological terms; *enculturation*, the process of learning that enables individuals to become integrated in a culture; *acculturation*, the acquiring by one society the cultural symbols of another society; *adaptation*, a dominant culture asserts itself by using parts of the inferior culture to projects its own symbols. This latter term is also described in Catholicism as *"accommodation"* or in Protestantism as *"indigenization"*, describing the concessions made by the dominant culture. Inculturation is understood to be more specific than (or even a type of) *contextualization*, the process of making a culture interact generally and non-specifically with another. This is a term often used in the Roman Catholic tradition to describe the general process of evangelism as an interaction with lifestyle or the challenge to lifestyle, which may modify itself to a process of adaptation or even inculturation. Inculturation is the more specific interchange of cultures, both learning from each other and willing to learn and change within a dialectic, an exchange, and an on-going process of interaction.

It is worth noting the difference of emphasis to the term contextualization by Protestant missiology, concerned more with the understanding of the biblical word. Contextualization in this sense is concerned primarily with communication of the Gospel as a means to making it more understandable using improved techniques created by anthropological research.

Theologically, the process of inculturation is synonymous with evangelisation, the combined mission and evangelism of the Church, encorporating into the community the Gospel in a process similar to the individual encounter of heart and mind with the person of Christ. The more intense the encounter, or the conversion, the more the requirement of individuals to bring the attitudes and structures of the wider culture into contact with the values considered to be "of Christ". The conversation and dialogue of inculturation has the same aim to bring the culture into recognition of Christ and thereby re-structure and change the social values in the light of Christ's teaching. Yet in its most liberal form the gospel-culture, often depending on its dominance, may adapt or even review its own cultural and traditional gospel assumptions.

Inculturation is structured christologically. It is concerned with the person of Christ, not only the historical person of Jesus, but the confession of faith elicited by a personal encounter with the reality known as Jesus, the Christ or the Lord. It is the experience of Christ described foremost by a mutual experience or encounter in terms of the incarnation, inquiring how it is in Jesus Christ that God is present and active both within the culture to be Christianized and

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[13] Azevedo, M.de C. *Inculturation and the Challenge of Modernity*. Rome: Gregorian Univ., 1982. p.11.

the Christian community. Christ is born and the church is born anew in each new context and culture, both cultures come to terms with this revelation of God, allowing faith to start a history of its own in each people and experience of Christ. This dynamic differs from the older historic models of evangelization, replacing the sense of controlled institutional mission with a process that respects the resources of the theologian/evangelist, engages with a local community, and respects the entire context; socially, economically; politically, religiously and educationally. Inculturation occurs as this interaction is enabled, but interestingly the local culture may emphasize a particular theological understanding, which will then encounter other cultural assumptions and theologies. As Bosch[14] illustrates the process of inculturation taken to its extreme removes the notion of one perennial theology that referees local theology. Western Theology cannot be considered to be the arbitrator over the theological outlook of other parts of the world. It must understand its own history of contextualisation and then exchange its theologies with others. Inculturation may develop into interculturation, emphasizing the unity and universality of the body of Christ, countering local cultural biases with the desire for reconciled diversity.

The following metaphor describing this process is a helpful reminder of the change inculturation brings
to the self understanding of the church. Arbuckle draws on the Vatican II *Ad Gentes*, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity when it likens the Word of God to a flowering seed planted into the soil of a particular culture alluding to the parable of Jesus (Lk 8). As the sower sows or "earths" this seed all are changed by the learning processes and an understanding of the importance of time and change are embraced. The culture, the theologian or evangelist and the understanding of the Gospel (the flowering of the Word) can interact dynamically, which is a considerable move, observed by Bosch[15], and development from an earlier missiology and self understanding of the Church's role as protecting and nurturing the kernel of faith whilst acknowledging the husk as the accoutrements of an expendable culture. It also signifies the move away from transplanting the European Western understanding of theology to developing a local theology; the emphasis changing from expansion to re-birth or in Arbuckle's terms refounding.

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[14] Bosch, D. ibid; p. 456.

[15] Bosch, D. ibid; p. 449.

For Arbuckle, inculturation is not only a process of interaction between cultures but offers "spirituality". I will first detail the process of inculturation and then describe how Arbuckle defines this spirituality of refounding.

Arbuckle presents the process of inculturation from the standpoint of the church, and this may be criticized later, even though his books are written for those working formally in the church. In essence Arbuckle presents the process in four stages requiring individuals to participate within a community that has Gospel values. Unfortunately Arbuckle never states what these are systematically, but offers the confrontation that faith offers.

Through faith the religiously converting person is confronted with the mystery of the cross as the way that God chose to act in cultures and history; the freely offered call of Jesus invites the person to live out the mystery of the cross - through detachment, service, love, justice[16].

The stages in the inculturation process are first to identify the aspects of a culture that are in conformity with Gospel values, then to identify those that are not, before choosing how to elevate or purify a culture to gospel values and then implementing a plan of action. He asserts, that no single person ought to make the decision for others as to what the action is. Inculturation must flow out of the free responsible faith decisions of individuals who are participating in the whole process.

Inculturation is in essence a missionary process with the aim of conversion. In other words, the flowering of this seed, the word of God has to impact upon those who are onlookers and also sustained and fed by the earth. Conversion is not understood specifically here as the moment of decision or choice, but as the general commitment to the dialectic offered by the culture incarnated through Christ. This experience enters into the many levels of decision and choice through life and reshapes and changes, converts, the existing or prevalent culture. This conversion has to work on many levels, intellectually, emotionally, and through social relations. Arbuckle sites Cohn[17] in stating that conversion is *self-transcendence*, the leaving aside of self centred attitudes that deny objective reality or the limitations of being human, assuming responsibility for the motives and consequences of one's own actions. It is a life

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[16] Arbuckle, G. A. *Earthing the Gospel.* Maryknoll New York: Orbis, 1990. p.193.
[17] Cohn, W. *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy &Surrender.* New York: Paulist Press, 1986.

long striving in response to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and 'integrated' when worked on at the many levels of human behaviour.

2.6 A Spirituality of Refounding

If the aim of inculturation is to achieve conversion of both the individual and community then, Arbuckle argues, this will produce a "style" of response to Christ and to life in a particular historical and cultural environment. It is his hope that inculturation will bring with it a Church that is vibrantly alive within a world that does not know of the detachment, love, service and justice of Christ. A spirituality of inculturation or refounding has the following characteristics. It is content with the faithful community interacting with the world as opposed to the earlier presumption that religion and religiosity protects one from the world and all that threatens one with chaos. This latter characteristic is of the ghetto church or of a privatized religion. Arbuckle understands the spirituality of refounding as nurturing hope in the world, not just within the enclosed faith community; for example, awareness of human rights, solidarity and interdependence, concerns for ecology and partnership, especially ecumenism. Indeed the very place for nurturing the fruit of the Gospel, hope, is amidst the places in the world which face disruption and challenge such as: political ideologies, economic and social oppression, poverty, unemployment, ecological crisis, and secularism.   .
This style of response and encounter with the world will be prophetic, incarnational, ecclesial, ecumenical, and will offer to individuals and communities detachment through prayer and many opportunities to serve the world amidst its confusion. Such a spirituality will require developing and nurturing, as well as require refounding people of commitment, creative imagination, humour, faith, patience, love, empathy and prayer. Again, according to Arbuckle the biblical foundational myth serves to underpin the commitment of these people with reference to those in scripture who invested their lives to the culture they served, even enduring suffering and marginalisation.

At this point, it is worth highlighting Arbuckle's fifth book *Grieving for Change*. This book expands his thoughts on the characteristics of empathy, and the pastoral necessity to understand the bereavement process. He considers this a vital and helpful aspect within a spirituality of refounding. Again, this book recognises the benefit to the Christian community of the social sciences and cultural anthropology in their analysis of the grieving process. The Western modern understanding of death deprives our culture of those structures and rituals that in traditional folk culture support the grieving process. The process again is similar to

that argued earlier, the chaos of death is redefined by the important stage of liminality. Questions about meaning identity, purpose and security can be encountered and resolved rather than denied. Again Arbuckle, correlates his thinking here with examples of such a traditional culture as the Israelite culture of the scriptures, and finds a people who understand through faith that loss should mean both an end and a transition to a new period of creative action. His purpose for the Church is to relearn the art of grieving and in so doing use this skill to equip those, in the congregations and organization, who are unable to appropriate the inculturation process, and who rather seek to revive the missionary methods and liturgical practices of a church culture that has died, totally irrelevant to the world as it is today, and retreat into a private religion or sect-like fundamentalist theological position that refuses any involvement with the context of Christian mission today. An essential task of the refounding spirituality according to Arbuckle is to find those people who must be "the ritual leaders of grieving for Gospel communities"[18] He describes refounding persons; as described above. but also creative change agents; people who feel drawn to follow the Gospel community vision of refounding persons; as well as the official appointed community leaders; those whose task is the day to day running of the organisation.

To complete this description of Arbuckle's work, it is important to note Arbuckle's use of modern organisational theory and business management analysis, as a tool for those seeking to develop refounding spirituality and begin the process of inculturation. In his sixth and seventh books *Refounding the Church*[19]and *From Chaos to Mission*[20] he examines the experience of chaos as an inevitable experience; it is the polar opposite of a revitalised and reborn condition offering fulfillment and peace and as part of the creation or founding myth of life, the effects of chaos cannot be described without reference to its polar opposite and vice versa. The scriptures constantly describe the tension between the positive and negative effects of these polar opposites in terms of the desire of God and a people to live in harmony. An anthropologist such as Arbuckle observes the same process occurring in other areas of human interaction. The founding myth of any human organisation from a nation to a large corporate body is adept at holding the tension between the contrary demands of these polar opposites. for example the rights of an individual versus community rights or the ethics required of a business. The Church is no different in this regard; in terms of its authority, it must hold in tension the principle of collegiality or collaboration in its work with the desires of those given authority to lead. In order for these tensions to be held for the benefit of the purpose of the

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[18] Arbuckle, G. A. *Grieving for change*. London: Chapman, 1991. p. 140.
[19] Arbuckle, G. A. *Refounding the Church*. London: Chapman, 1993.

institution or organization's work, a system of governance or management is created to give a structure of accountability. Whilst Arbuckle repeats his model of change, or life cycle for culture again using Turner's description of reintegration from one cultural consensus to another, he also considers a second model of corporate lifecycles by Ichak Adizes[21]. This distinguishes youthful cultures from ageing ones and characterizes the former as flexible, ready to take on creativity, but also carry assumptions of perfection that can be disastrous, described as the "utopian flaw". Ageing cultures have lost flexibility, seek predictability, status and enjoy prestige, and thus resist change and adaptation with the notion that nothing can be learnt that hasn't already been experienced. Again the emphasis for Arbuckle is on leadership to create a "prime" culture to control the balance between the control/tradition and flexibility/innovation. Other organizational and business analysts[22] using the terms organic and mechanistic cultures of organizations describe a similar cultural analysis. The former has few rules and regulations; the emphasis is on innovation, creativity, and evaluating feedback to meet the demands of a changing market. Here, decision-making is proactive, rather than reactive, creating and controlling change rather than being its passive agent. In mechanistic cultures the tasks are predictable and unchanging, creativity is discouraged, the leadership maintains the process of operation.

Arbuckle gives a thorough presentation of the forces that maintain a mechanistic or ageing culture in the Church, which fulfills the need for restorationism as opposed to his concept of refounding. He illustrates his defence of the necessity for refounding with reference to the typology of Mary Douglas, an anthropologist who offers two independently varying social criteria, the grid and group, to describe the set of rules according to which people relate to one another (grid) and the community identity in relationship to others beyond its boundaries (group). Douglas argues that the way grid and group relate or to each other, strongly or weakly, influences the connections between their social structure, regimes of authority and power, rituals and ultimately their cosmological ideals. For example a strong group weak grid system will produce a sense of belonging to the group alongside a lack of clarity about how individuals relate to each other; with an ideology of egalitarianism the characteristic of this system is an emphasis on suspicion, scapegoating, safeguarded by an authoritarian leadership maintaining the sense of belonging.

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[20] Arbuckle, G. A. *From Chaos to Mission.* London: Chapman, 1996
[21] Adizes, I. *Corporate Lifecycles: How and Why corporations Grow and Die.* Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall. 1988.
[22] Shafritz, J.N. & Whitbeck, P. W. Eds. *Classics of Organisational Theory.* Oak Park Il: Moore, 1978.

All this serves to qualify Arbuckle's sense of concern and anxiety about the Church as a culture coping with the experience of dramatic change internally and externally. Whilst he observes the dynamics of change, and correlates the models of cultural analysis, one could be forgiven for thinking the future is bleak. Either the Church will restore the practices and life of its past, rooting out those who dissent from the authority structures, and at the same time those who react to restorationism will see the Church as culturally irrelevant; or the Church will seek the refounding of its mythic self -understanding through the eternal hope of the scriptures. Arbuckle sets all his hope on the latter with a leadership having the courage to be creative, imaginative and transforming,

"the task of the transforming leader is primarily to foster a collaborative or participative atmosphere in which trust and mutality exist as the prerequisites for creative action or strategies for change. "[23]

offering dissent to the culture that cannot appropriate the Gospel culture, whilst at the same time having the commitment to use the knowledge and skills available across cultures. Yet the ultimate purpose of a refounding spirituality, and the skills necessary for inculturation is to experience conversion.

No leadership group within the Church will ever be prepared to face its own powerlessness and need for outside help if it is not open to an on going conversion to the Lord and his mission. It is only through a shared faith in the resurrected Lord that members can learn to find 'joy in the truth... to make allowances, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes' (1 Cor 13:7)[24]

This concludes the description of Arbuckle's work. I begin, now, to analyze how Arbuckle corresponds to the contemporary patterns of theological inquiry before offering any criticism.

2.7 Arbuckle's Correspondence to Contemporary Theological Inquiry

Arbuckle's initial concern is the epistemological challenge offered by the relatively new concept of *acquiring* truth by observation. Since the Enlightenment, there has been an increasing rejection of the pre-modern concept of *knowing* as the rational conformity to the

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[23] Arbuckle, G. A. *Refounding the Church.* London: Chapman, 1993. p. 99.

truth that already exists. This kind of classical understanding stemming from the Greek influence in the Western philosophical tradition, legitimized and conformed the world to a given object, and had an important initial impact upon Christian theology understanding its object, namely God, as revealed through Jesus Christ, the Scriptures and its faith tradition. For many centuries Christian self-understanding depended upon wrestling with what was the orthodox position of knowing the object of its belief and rejecting the unorthodox as heresy. Application and practice were secondary to principles and ideas; the latter being supra historical and supra cultural. [25]

Gradually deductive thinking, explaining the world, made way for inductive or empirical thinking. The observer could confront the world, and be immersed in ideas that could construct and transform meaning. Truth was seen, from the Enlightenment, as the end point of the inquiry rather than the given, a reflection upon experience, requiring rational argument. Consequently, theology changed from the classical account of how God acts for creation and became, in the modern era, a generic term for a number of interrelated disciplines offering a dialectical relationship between theory and practice. In this sense, theology, for Arbuckle and his modern contemporaries, remains provisional and hypothetical and is determined by the context in which it evolves.

Arbuckle's approach highlights the importance of this dialectical characteristic of *contextual* theology and the term *inculturation* that he applies illustrates this epistemological break of the Second Vatican Council within the Roman Catholic Church. The term "inculturation" is an expression that offers a construction and transformation of meaning for the world through the gospel rather than the old reliance of explaining to the world the truth of the gospel as understood and known by the Roman Church. Some modern theologians, for example Stephen Bevans [26] prefer the term *anthropological model* rather than *inculturation* to express the importance of culture in the construction of a true contextual theology because of the focus on the validity of the human as the place of divine revelation and as a locus for theology that is equal to scripture and tradition. On initial consideration Arbuckle fits well into this category of theological inquiry.

Although Arbuckle relies on his work as a cultural anthropologist to indicate the reality of social and cultural change on cultural identity, based around the concept of myth and

[24] ibid; p. 216.
[25] Bosch, D. *Transforming Mission*. New York: Orbis, 1991. pp. 262-274.

creativity, he also uses sociological analysis concerned with business and management studies: as well as illustrating his argument from contemporary scriptural studies. This suggests a more complex model of contextual theology discussed by Bevans and also Robert Schreiter[27] as the *synthetic model (Bevans) or semiotic model (Schreiter)*. Within this model there is a mutual enrichment of cultural observation and the integrity of the traditional message of a faith community. Arbuckle is describing the requirement to regain a sense of meaning and purpose after cultural hegemony is undermined. The only way out of this sense of chaos, for him, is to enter again into " a sacred time of founding". His observation that faith communities must begin this process of *"refounding"* is the beginning of a theological model that draws on a synthesis of ideas. Arbuckle is trying to preserve the importance of the gospel message, and the heritage of traditional church teaching, while at the same time acknowledging the vital role that culture can play in theology, even to the setting of the theological agenda for a faith community. Bevans describes this synthetic model as

"including the importance of reflective and intelligent action for the development of a theology that does not ignore the complexities of social and cultural change" [28].

Bevan also offers this model the name *"dialectical"* involving constant dialogue and employment of the analogical imagination (Tracy)[29]. Consequently, there are elements that one needs to keep in creative tension if one adopts this method of contextualising theology.

Robert Schreiter's *"semiotic model"* perhaps offers a map of how one would encounter in practice the complexities of this creative tension. Initially Schreiter suggests describing the local theology by "listening to culture", that is listening to a given culture in its entirety and not evaluating parts in isolation from the whole. Also, being aware of people's needs for identity and of their struggle to adapt themselves to change. Arbuckle describes this struggle constantly in his work, particularly with reference to case studies. Tools for listening are required in forming a practical methodology and Schreiter borrows again from the social sciences. He describes "functionalist" "ecological" and "structural" approaches and "semiotic" studies. It is the latter that probably best describes Arbuckle's approach.

[26] Bevans, S. B. *Models of Contextual Theology.*New York: Orbis, 1992.
[27] Schreiter, R. J. *Constructing Local Theologies* New York Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985.
[28] Bevans, S.B. *Models of Contextual Theology.* New York: Orbis, 1992. p. 82.
[29] Tracy, D. *The Analogical Imagination.* London: SCM Press, 1981.

Semiotics is the study of signs (from the Greek σεμιον = *semion* = sign), and formally dates from the work of Charles Pierce and Ferdinand de Saussure and may shed light upon culture as a vast communication network, of verbal and non-verbal messages, circulated along elaborate, interconnected pathways which create the systems of meaning. Central to this system are the bearers of the message within a series of sign systems. It stresses that "meaning" even when it seems natural or inherent is always the result of social conventions.

In the Anglo-American arena, the name of Clifford Geertz is predominent and is quoted frequently, by those involved in contextual theology, and as already mentioned, initiates Arbuckle's inquiry. Geertz in his seminal essays in his book *Interpretation of Cultures* is interested in a "thick description" of culture, a term signifying the richness and complexity of sign systems in action by inspecting events, showing how messages are understood as significant rather than the structures that make them possible. Schreiter[30] points out that there is no recipe for field investigation, or quantitative method, neither in Geertz's terms is it "intuition or alchemy"; but rather a qualitative assessment of description and perspective.

This points to the fundamental consideration of how meaning is addressed from the hearer as well as the speaker, or the "emic" (view from the inside out) and "etic" (view from the outside). It also points to the task of description, which is to read the culture "text" therefore analysing the messages that are conveyed. Examples of common culture texts are identity and social change, commonly described by celebrations or decision making respectively. Arbuckle uses the common culture text of loss as a main strand for developing his thinking.

Development of such a theological approach is obviously a complex interaction or dialectic and taking this contextualization to its ultimate conclusion produces a theology that is local and specific to a culture. There are though important issues to be raised here and in essence this is the concern of my thesis. This theological analysis stems from the interaction of a culture called "church" and the wider culture around it seeking *truth* for both. Whilst it is the concern of all "practical theologians" like Arbuckle, it is essential to understand the dynamics and essence of what is meant by church as it interacts with the prevailing culture, as well as understanding the processes and interactions that are occurring historically and in the present within the wider cultural setting of the church. This may well require the skills of an anthropologist, and so Arbuckle is well suited, but it also asks serious questions about theological method.

Arbuckle's theological method is one of critical correlation. Learning about God in the sense of the critical correlation method requires an appreciation of the skill and knowledge the human sciences can disclose and accepting that these sciences have a vital role to play in displaying the field of inquiry for theology. This is based on the assumption that God and God's meaning is already present in the world because of and through the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is also believed that God is incarnated within the world and therefore is actively engaged in its creative development primarily through the centrality of the human species. Jesus embodies the vision that the world is a place for God to reign and that people and society can partake in that vision, collaborating in the task, transforming the world to a place of peace and justice and thereby coming together to understand the revealed truth of what it is to be fully human in a restored creation. The human sciences may help to uncover the fact of human experience with the tools at its disposal and enable theology to reflect on that experience in the light of its own history, tradition, credal and biblical insights about God and God's intention and thereby offering direction for the fulfillment of human life.

For Arbuckle, using the critical correlation method, the church, its activity and life, incorporates the tradition, history and collected experience of a faith community, as well as being a place for this interaction, dialectic, or the process of theological inculturation. This process has also within it, space for ritual or ceremony and celebration of meaning, as well as motivating a faithful purpose of action to bring attention to the reign of God. At the same time, the church offers to the world around it a proper account of what it means to be a human being under this reign, and therefore its tradition, history and collected experience gives an ethical understanding to human action in every sphere of common life. It is incumbent upon all those participating within this faith community and theologians actively to take stock of human experiences of every kind and relate it to all that Jesus reveals about being human under God's creative reign.

However, one ought to be wary about the assumptions that lie behind theological methods such as critical-correlation used by Arbuckle. And this is the concern of my thesis. Such methods are conceived under a particularly European context and when one realizes this cultural specificity proper examination needs to take place. Are there ways for theology to pay proper attention to the experiences of people as the primary focus of concern rather than the

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[30] Ibid; p. 56

performance of theological discipline or scientific method coming from a particular historical perspective?

Further, if *refounding* is necessary for the Church, as Arbuckle argues, to begin the process of interaction or dialectic, then is he aware of Schreiter's observation that as local theology evolves there must be a *reappropriation* of its traditions and ultimately a change in its identity? Schreiter states that carrying out this project is an enormous task

"On the one hand one must engage in a semiotic study of culture, reading the culture texts to discern the signs, codes, and messages in the sign systems. On the other hand, one must reappropriate the church tradition in such a way as to make it available for the dialectic with culture, which will give birth to a genuine local theology[31].

Arbuckle's *refounding* and Schreiter's *reappropriation*, both consider theoretically how the relation of "theological forms" correlate with changes in culture thereby allowing church tradition to emerge as a series of local theologies for the sake of the encounter with the prevailing culture of the moment. This for Schreiter:

"lays the foundation for a more comprehensive theory of tradition and issues of change with the tradition.[32]

Schreiter describes four theological forms: Sacred Text, Wisdom, Sure Knowledge and Praxis which can be identified in relation to the reappropriation of tradition to begin discourse with a culture. In describing these implicitly rather than explicitly, I understand Arbuckle to be very close to Schreiter in signifying a general theory of these forms in his idea of *refounding*. For Arbuckle, in order to begin the process of "refounding", the importance of understanding the narrative and anthology of the Bible, and the "text" of life from within the community is vital. This corresponds to Schreiter's sense of the Sacred Text.

Arbuckle also appears to understand the loss of Schreiter's idea of Wisdom in pluralistic culture which reflects the present tension between modernity and post-modernity, and the requirement to understand the cultural significance of important rites of passage such as those involved in loss and bereavement. One of Arbuckle's ideas is to recapture an understanding of

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[31] Schreiter, R. J. *Constructing Local Theologies.* New York: Orbis, 1985. p. 78.
[32] Ibid; p. 78.

the important mythic stages in the grieving process and by doing this wisdom theology is being created and reinforced. Arbuckle is also well aware within the Roman tradition the effect of Schreiter's "Sure Knowledge" and its effect of communicating the church's theological position in relation to the local church and the changing cultural context for mission. Arbuckle's praxis is concerned with the ongoing reflection upon action, and is mainly focused on the problems associated with refounding or reappropriating religious communities in their life and work in a particular context.

Schreiter's term *reappropriation* or Arbuckle's term *refounding* are essentially beginning to tackle the development of an adequate theory of tradition and the development of criteria for Christian identity. For Schreiter, tradition contributes three things to the development of human community: it resources identity; it can provide cohesion and continuity; it resources innovation. Tradition deals with the need for change as it continues to arise. Tradition presents a way of life, providing pathways of signification influencing behaviour and thought.

For Schreiter, tradition can be analyzed *semiotically* as a means of seeing how culture functions. It provides basic messages (values) and codes (rules), which relate (signs) those messages to data in the environment. Together they create significance. Arbuckle like Schreiter is concerned with the interaction of these dimensions. Too many messages or codes, . inadequate to the message, make it impossible to promote cohesion and continuity. Arbuckle therefore emphasises this breakdown as *chaos* and seeks to find pathways out of chaos, highlighting the essence of refounding authority personalities within the leadership of a community. This latter expression of Arbuckle's links well with Schrieter's thoughts on what tradition needs in order to be able to carry out its task in culture; credibility, intelligibility, authority, and a means of affirmation and renewal. This latter point highlights Aruckles stress on the importance of how the narrative of a particular tradition needs to be retold and reaffirmed. Schreiter and Arbuckle also consider how understanding of the perspective of a tradition can affect how the tradition is perceived. Whether you are an insider, outsider, hearer or speaker will affect perception (Kraft [33]).

2.8 Criticism

This method of critical correlation offers the opportunity to analyze a context with all the skill and intention of a specific science. And one must appreciate the work of theologians like

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[33] Kraft, C. H. *Christianity in Culture*. Maryknoll. New York: Orbis, 1979.

Arbuckle, Schreiter and other exponents of the correlation method, such as Don Browning. It seeks to convert its initial descriptive approach, one of observation, to a general or universal principal.

Yet whilst appreciating its clarity of observation on how things are, the correlation assumes too quickly a scientific reasoning of what ought to be generally or universally known. The local situation described is offered as potential for all similar cases or experiences. Arbuckle's inductive reasoning is prone to over emphasise the empirical use of his case studies. The particularities of a local context are soon drawn out to offer a general theory. It might be argued that even if everyone's experiences of chaos or loss have the same similarities, not everyone can or does experience the process uniformly in the way Arbuckle presents.

Criticism might also be given to the way Arbuckle uses biblical texts to justify the founding myth. The Exodus tradition may be interpreted as one of hope for the Hebrews, but what does it say of a God who allows the Egyptians to be killed at the Red Sea. Perhaps, this method assumes a perspective that is too readily theologized to fit his traditional understanding, and the same could be said of the desire for a church with a refounded spirituality. Whilst most Christians would desire a church that is active, local as well as universal, attached to the · common concern of being human, practical and participatory, collaborative and with good ethical intention as well as seeking some conversion or transformation to a higher vision of human concern and a common relationship with God; the practical concerns of a religious community may well be more mundane but from their own aspect very important in offering insight into the condition of the church and how God may intend it to be. Is Arbuckle's intention to protect the authoritative wisdom of his tradition by seeking universal "truths" from other scientific disciplines to correlate with his theological perspective?

Elaine Graham sums this up well in her critique of another exponent of the critical correlation methodology; Don Browning.

"This is not a true unity of theory and practice......(it) is more interested in looking for metaphysical moral principles rather than in truly listening to the embodied, incarnational practical wisdom of the congregations" [34]

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[34] Graham, E. L. *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*. London: Mowbray, 1996. p. 90.

Another difficulty with the method of correlation is setting the width of the cultural frame for observation. In other words, how culture specific is theology? The critical correlation method argues for setting the widest frame, a view that says theology is primarily assessed with reference to the general task of constructing significance for human life. Theology is a particular version of this search for significance, searching for a pattern of categories (for instance conversion, as required by inculturation) that give order and guidance for human life. Theology is judged by how well it performs these wider cultural tasks, and the church is one of the instruments in culture that offers such meaning. Approaching Christian theology in this way means correlating the Christian message with a universal, and general theory that is at the foundation of all human behaviour. The method of correlation is a demonstration that theology connects with the best aspirations of humanity, and it therefore seeks approval and recognition of what it can offer in the quest for human knowledge. The key assumption here though is that culture itself is a summary of human universals that can be found and ultimately proclaim a universal truth. This is an assumption that requires further consideration in the next chapter concerning the development of Enlightenment ideals providing the outcome described as modernity.

This assumption faces serious challenge by the recent trend to view cultures pluralistically, as I will soon discuss in the description of the challenge to modernity. Interestingly, Arbuckle describes this as the "Revolution of Expressive Disorder", and while setting him on the quest for reclaiming a universal founding myth, I feel he is unable to accept the post-modern challenge which questions the key assumption that culture can be universalised. Rejecting the pre-modern classical church and its theology I think he hopes for the universalism to be rekindled because it is part of the authoritative Catholic founding myth, to which he has given his life as a religious.

If one understands the plurality of cultures, indeed this is the challenge of anthropology itself; one must take very seriously the particularity of local theology. Theology in this narrower frame of culture is viewed as specific to a particular community, or way of life. At this stage, Kathryn Tanner makes the important point

To say that Christian theology is a part of culture is to say that theology itself is a cultural production; theology is something shaped by concrete social practices, and those social

practices must be at least, and in their most important respects for these purposes, Christian ones.[35]

This lays down the challenge to the correlational method of inquiry and one must investigate further the comment made earlier that there is no recipe for field investigation, or quantitative method, (neither in Geertz's terms is it "intuition or alchemy";) but rather a qualitative assessment of description and perspective.

It is to such a qualitative method that I will turn (Chapter 4), after my description of post modernity (Chapter 3) as the context for our present theological inquiry. While Arbuckle offers a critique to the pre-modern church, Arbuckle himself must face the criticism that his method of analysis may not hold up to the demands of post-modern anthropology and theology.

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[35] Tanner, K. *Theories of Culture: a new agenda for theology.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997. p. 67.

CHAPTER 3

A Reappraisal of Modernity and its Implication for Theological Reflection

3.1 Modernity

The condensation of a number of different processes and histories, not a single process, provided the outcome described as modernity. The formation and emergence of certain distinctive features enabled Western European societies to shape their social, political, economic, philosophical, theological, and cultural outlook into a dominant form of expression and a major formative moment of this expression and process stemmed from the Enlightenment. Although, the moment of 'the modern' cannot be defined by time or place, historians use the term 'early modern' to mark the transition to newer conceptions, structures and models of how life and the world was perceived.

By 1600 we may say definitely that men (sic) are living and working in a new moral world.... There is a new social discipline which finds its sanction independently of the religious ideal. There is an independent state.... There is a new physical world.... new postulates are needed for its interpretation.... This content is material and of this world, instead of being spiritual and of the next. It is expansive, utilitarian, self-confident. [1]

It is worth noting, though, (and this point will be returned to) that as modernity has a long and complex history each succeeding period defined by historians - the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the nineteenth century has tried to capture the sense of modernity for itself. At this point, I shall simply outline the major characteristics of what defines modernity before any analysis of its meaning and implications for theology.

In the period of the Middle Ages (approximately 600CE –1500CE) there was a preoccupation with a theocratic vision drawn from the Bible, which constituted the divine order. Individuals, as well as communities understood their proper place in relation to God, the church, royalty, and to the natural world. The development of a universal human society, as an integral part of a divinely ordered universe in time and in eternity, in nature and practical politics, is considered to be the achievement of this Age.[2]

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[1] Laski, H. *The Rise of European Liberalism*. London: Unwin, 1995. pp. 57-8.
[2] Southern, R. W. *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. London: Penguin, 1970. p.22.

However, Europe was beginning to sense a new ideal at the end of this Age, which would challenge and at the same time reform. The impetus of intellectual discovery would take Europe beyond the alienation and indifference of papal and ecclesiastical authority and the isolation felt from the rest of the world by Islam. In 1453 Constantinople, the spiritual centre of the Eastern Church, fell to the Muslims. Consequently, there was an increasing restlessness in Europe. However, a seeking beyond its own isolation culminated with the Age of Discovery. The Portuguese outflanked the Muslims as they found new trade routes to India and America whilst the Italian Renaissance gave the impetus to find new expression for human thought from the ideas of classical antiquity.

The Italian Rennaisance, characterised by new interests in the classical languages, culture and literature (humanism) gave human subjectivity new importance. The Middle Age understanding of God's intention for humanity was changing. In Pico della Mirandola's 1487 *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, the creation story is retold to offer humanity an understanding that the heroic individual has no limited or specific nature, "in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being fashion yourself in the form you prefer."[3] In 1543 Nicolaus Copernicus, Canon of Frauenburg Cathedral, challenged the geocentric cosmology of the time, by proposing that a rotating Earth revolved with other planets around a stationary sun. This proposal severely challenged the dogmatically accepted position, held since the time of Aristotle. The centuries old power and unity of the Western Church was being threatened, and its ability to validate cosmology as well as the structure of society was being gradually eliminated.

People discovered, somewhat to their surprise at first, that they could ignore God and the church, yet be none the worse for it. With all the "supernatural sanctions" (God, church, royalty) gone, people now began to look to the subhuman levels of existence, to animals, plants and objects, to find authentication and validation for life. Humanity derived its existence and validity from "below" and no longer from "above".[4]

The sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century works of Galileo Galilei (1564 -1642), René Descartes (1596-1650), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Thomes Hobbes (1588-1679), and John Locke (1632-1704), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), Gottfried Leibnitz (1646-1716) and Isaac

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[3] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man;* trans. A Robert Caponigi (Chicago: Henry Regenery, 1965. pp 7-8) in Middleton, J. R. & Walsh, B. J. *Truth is stranger than it used to be.* London: SPCK, 1995. pp. 47-48.

[4] Bosch, D. J. *Transforming Mission- Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission. New York: Orbis, 1991. p. 263.*

Newton (1642-1717) received their most effective expression in the mid-eighteenth century producing a set of interconnected ideas, values, principles and facts which provided both an image of the natural and social world, and a way of thinking about it. In reacting to the failures of religion, particularly emphasised by the struggles and horror of The Thirty Years War (1618-48), the Enlightenment thinkers sought a new foundation for knowledge and progress in the power of human rationality, as epitomised by Descartes' in his famous precept *cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore I am." Descartes adopted the strategy of withholding his belief from anything that was not entirely certain and indubitable.

There was in progress a new intellectual understanding or *philosophes*, an intellectual elite of freethinkers, operating on the premise that human reason was primary and had a certain degree of autonomy. This combined to produce a significant movement of thought called "critical rationalism". It combined the application of reason and rationality to social, political, economic and cultural knowledge, tempered by experience and experiment, with a concern about progress, emancipation and improvement, and consequently critical of the status quo. All thought and knowledge about the natural world was based upon empirical facts (*empiricism*), things that all human beings could apprehend through their sense organs. Science, the knowledge gained from observable experimental methods was the key to *all* human knowledge and increasingly regarded as being in opposition to faith. Nature ceased to be "creation" but an object for analysis. Reason and science could be applied to any and every situation (*universalism*) producing general laws, which govern the entire universe without exception. The *res cogitans* (humanity and the human mind) could research the *res extensa* (the entire non-human world).

In principle, the physical world could be occupied, subdued, manipulated and exploited. Science was no longer teleological, as the ancient world believed; it could no longer answer the question by whom and for what purpose instead it was interested only in cause and effect, the mechanism. This allowed a tendency for *determinism* since unchangeable laws guarantee a desired outcome. The idea perpetuated was that the natural and social condition of human beings could be improved *(progress - modernisation)*, by the application of science and reason, and would result in an ever-increasing level of happiness and well-being. The individual was the starting point for all knowledge and action, and individual reason cannot be subjected to a higher authority. Society was thus the sum or product of the thought and action of a large number of individuals. In this way even the *res cogitans* could become the *res extensa*. Human beings could be studied from a variety of perspectives. The characteristics of

human nature were always and everywhere the same. Territories, both natural and human could be discovered or colonised. Individuals and societies could be convinced that they had both the ability and will to remake the world in their own image. The primacy of reason was presupposed on a new anthropological model denying a sense of the ontological and affirming that the only instrument for extending knowledge was disciplined observation.

The idea that scientific knowledge was factual, value free and neutral had significance. Facts were independent of the observer, and objectively true. Knowledge in the objective sense is knowledge without a knowing subject. This distinguishes facts based on objective knowledge from values based on subjective opinions or belief, which are a matter of preference or choice. Hence religion is assigned to the realm of value and can be separated from knowledge, as it cannot be proven. Universalism and this sense of the emancipated autonomous individual lead to a sense of toleration and indiscriminate freedom; that all human beings are essentially the same, despite their convictions, and that beliefs although inferior to knowledge may not be inferior to each other. Opposition to traditional or feudal constraints on beliefs, the creation of wealth, ownership, communication, and social interaction created a new sense of freedom within the constraints of accepted mechanistic argument. Whilst, the desire for knowledge over and above belief or faith led to a virulent form of anti-clericalism, opposing traditional religious authority and invoking an ethic of secularism. In the eighteenth century rationalism reached its most extreme form in the type of thought known as *deism*. The deists held that reason itself, for example Newton's mathematically ordered heavens, was capable of demonstrating a sensible belief in God as "the Intelligent Author of Nature" and the "Moral Governor of the World". Consequently, for the rational person there was no need of any sense of divine revelation.

It needs to be clearly stated that the attempt to concisely describe the content of the Enlightenment "paradigm", a set of interconnected ideas, values and principles and facts drawn together over time, provides a way of observing the general phenomenon. However, this description must not be mistaken for a definitive group of ideas, or outcomes that can be labelled *the* Enlightenment. [5] There were many *philosophes*, some conflicting, and many aspects of their work, which can only be summarised as a framework of ideas about humanity, nature and society. These challenged traditional conceptions of the former Middle Ages and

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[5] Porter, R. *The Enlightenment.* London: Macmillan, 1990.

began a critical inquiry applying reason to a world view dominated by a Christian theological position that no longer gave adequate answers to intellectual inquiry.

A communicating group of intellectuals in centres around Europe, especially Scotland, aided by a publishing industry and an audience for its output began an intellectual fashion which over time developed a world - view or sprit of the age (*Zeitgeist*) creating its own history and geography. The second and third generation of *philosophes* including David Hume (1711-76), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Adam Smith (1723-90) and Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) developed further the Enlightenment resolve to demolish and replace established forms of knowledge dependent on religious authority with those dependent upon experience, experiment and reason thereby emancipating humanity from the ties of superstition, ignorance, ideology and feudal social relationships.
For the first time, as described by Kant's motto, humanity could "dare to know" (*sapere aude*).

Modernity is explained in terms of these interactions set in motion from ideas of the Enlightenment, typically those creating and affecting the political, economic, social and cultural processes that have formed our modern understanding of the Western world and our place in it. This shift in Europe's intellectual and moral self understanding was dramatic and formalised thinking about the individual, society, nation states, consumption, markets, trade and labour as well as ethics, law and the construction of images and symbols that describe a progressive community.

Yet, it is surely this emphasis on progress, development and dynamic change stemming from the ideas of the Enlightenment, that offers definition and plausibility to the term "modernity" than understanding it as a historic period or form of social organisation. This explains why any period since the Enlightenment can claim the epithet modern; for following the rationale of the Enlightenment progress and improvement has its own momentum, which reshapes, transforms, displaces and dissolves as it pursues itself to improve further. Hence, nineteenth century industrialisation and urbanisation is a consequence on the desire to improve. seeing it as modern and progressive whilst at the same time the ambiguities of such a world including pollution, wastage of resources, overthrowing established institutions and authorities etc, become evident. This points to the paradox of modernity that at its most constructive in the pursuit of the ideas of the Enlightenment; reason, science, progress, individualism, uniformity of human nature, freedom and toleration, it can become destructive of that which is not

understood as developing or progressing. This destructive understanding is a consequence of progress being systematic upon the internal argument or reasoning of modernity, that progress is the effect of such reasoned causes.

As many recent writers have noticed, the Holocaust which ravaged European Jewry was perpetuated by a society which regarded itself as the summit of civilisation and culture. The troubled thought surfaces that modernity's triumphs and successes are rooted, not simply in progress and enlightenment, but also in fear, violence, oppression and exclusion, in the archaic, the violent, the untransformed, the repressed aspects of human life [6]

Consequently this paradox of modernity allows its foundations to be challenged. The self-confidence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, formalising the ideas and philosophy of the Enlightenment, is being replaced by anxiety, existential angst and despair. The myth of progress is losing its power whilst the foundations of modernity cannot bear the significant weight of universal self-determined freedom.

The promise of the Enlightenment and modernity was not insubstantial... Yet these claims about truth, progress and human nature were actually the outcome of particular sectional interests and perspectives masquerading as 'universal' axioms. [7]

3.2 The idea of 'post'-modernity

This gives rise to a new movement of thought now termed 'post'-modernity which is seriously challenging the old modernity. The predominant world-view or over arching narrative described above by the Enlightenment thinkers and experienced in the modern age is being criticised. It is characteristic of the post-modern analysis to seek to surpass the concepts, categories and terms that were first used to give rationale to the Enlightenment idea, by suggesting that the persuasiveness of its ideas and philosophical argument has an internal impact as much by its narrative, language, metaphors and rhetorical form than the rational logic of its argument alone. Even, as I have described the Enlightenment above, my example of narrative imposes a form of coherence that lends the account a certain 'authored' authority or truth. Perhaps it is time, as many think, to 'deconstruct' the foundational ideas of the Enlightenment and the thought processes or narrative which gave it unchallengeable authority or truth, particularly the role of knowledge in the improvement of the human condition.

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[6].Hall, S. & Gieben, B. Eds. *Formations of Modernity Vol 1.* Cambridge: Polity Press (OU), 1992.
[7] Graham, E. *Transforming Practice.* London: Mowbray, 1996.

In other words, criticising the epistemological assumptions of the Enlightenment; that rational knowledge can be attained and that such knowledge is universal, and thus objective. The post modern thesis involves either rejecting entirely or at least seriously questioning the view that our knowledge of society is ever rational, cumulative or progressive in character or that scientific knowledge leads to betterment or liberation.

A key figure in criticising the Enlightenment is Jean François Lyotard[8] who asserts that the Enlightenment picture of 'pure knowledge' or 'objective science' is nothing but a powerful myth, legitimised by a series of higher story-lines or 'metanarrative' than the essentially local, social or personal stories or narratives, fables or myths, religious, moral or otherwise that provide existential or ideological comfort. For Lyotard the objective aspirations to science are framed by three legends or metanarratives: 'the creation of wealth', that industrial and commercial growth is a precondition of well-being and civilisation; the 'working subject', that science ultimately serves the liberation of humanity; and 'the dialectics of Spirit' that humanity progresses as ideas progress leading ultimately to emancipation. Emancipation is the end of the story for the Enlightenment but it is the value laden metanarrative that takes us there, not the objective aspirations of science. Lyotard argues that the claim to objectivity and value neutrality as presented are false, and because of this the truth claims of all metanarratives are questionable. He defines the condition of post-modernity as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. The priority for post modernity is the diversity of the local narrative and difference, because as metanarratives are constructed they claim universality, which gives credence to unity and homegeniety rather than heterogeneity, otherness and openness and in doing so; their claim for universality becomes one of absolutism which can marginalise and suppress those whose experience does not concur with the higher story line.

Continuing in outline the French philosophical critique of modernity, as a reaction against the universalism and certainties of modernity and its confidence in objective truth, mention ought to be made of Jacques Derrida (1930-) and Michel Foucault (1926-84).

The loss of confidence begins with the study of linguistics and the discipline of structuralism thirty years ago. The structuralists held that the interrelations of human life conform to constant laws of abstract structure developing on the theories of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-) and the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Individuals are formed as much by language as they form language, whilst the language itself cannot be separated

from the social or cultural system that gives it currency. Language as a system of signs is interdependent on other signs which refutes the possibility of fixed and absolute meanings yet the structuralists considered that meanings could be mapped from use of such signs and clusters of signs. It was thought, using structuralist methods that the systematic features and functions of narratives could be analysed to find a finite set of rules for the infinite set of real and possible narratives.

At the moment when structuralist methodology was expanding into the discipline of semiotics, the field of study analysing, sign systems, codes and conventions, a critical reaction occurred as the post-structuralists or deconstructionists such as Derrida and Foucault offered their critique of structuralism. Derrida[9] argues against the structuralist's priviledge of speech over writing. A text is never stable or fixed with meaning, it is open and meaning is deferred by what is not said as much as what is. This deferral of meaning is termed *differance*. The modern tradition that assumes a simple and real correspondence between what exists and the language we use to describe it is challenged severely by the idea that we never get to the reality that is prior to the language. Word's do not represent existing objects or concepts in a reality outside language, but are always referential to other words. It is impossible to find the 'reality' or 'truth' beyond language which itself has no fixed meaning. His critical method is to deconstruct a text by exposing the linguistic and philosophical presuppositions concealed in it.

This kind of deconstruction inferring *différance* describes the possibility of openness, heterogeneity and otherness that is denied by modernity's aspiration for universalism and progressiveness. It rejects the epistemology of certainty, the autonomous self, and the consciously knowing subject celebrated by modernity and the Enlightenment ideals. The human subject cannot be separated from the unconscious, irrational, and relative relations of language and culture.

Foucault[10] was sceptical about the innocence of reason or pure knowledge, as he perceives all social relations to be dependent on relationships of power. Thereby objective scientific reason or pure knowledge as presented is never independent of the associated relations that seek to dominate and claim authority. His historical researches, be it on crime, mental disorder or

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[8] Lyotard, J-F. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: MUP, 1984.
[9] Derrida, J. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 1981
[10] Hoy, D. *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. New York: Blackwell, 1997.

sexual disorder, indicate the inevitable conjunction of power and knowledge. Innocent reasons for cure or help (e.g. of the madman) or the search for practical knowledge produce material effects rather than essential meaning. In other words what is conceived as knowledge is often resolved into oppressive forms of control or power that are thought necessary by the application of reason or knowledge (the asylum) but are misguided authoritative practices masquerading as knowledge.

3. 3 A reappraisal of modernity

At this point one could be forgiven for thinking that the underlying rationale for modernity has been debunked. However it is not so simple, and like the Enlightenment period itself which was the complex process of formation and the emergence of certain distinctive features, the on going criticism of modernity must be seen in the same way. Post-modernity may only be a term to describe the deep uncertainty and reaction to the optimism of modernity, a time of redefining the essential motive for reason. The challenge for some is not the abject deconstruction of the foundations of modernity but to readdress its failings constructively.

In Lyotard's work, Jürgen Habermas is cited as someone concerned to legitimate knowledge and reason in the classical Enlightenment sense. Habermas[11] reminds us that modernity, the Enlightenment ideal, was only ever an *ideal* not a reality, and that the ideal can be maintained by looking closer at the reality we perceive and understanding it further. This is done, first, by recognising the positive and progressive role of the Enlightenment in taking us beyond the pre-modern world-view. Secondly, that the criticisms of modernity are nothing new and part of the processing of learning outcomes in pursuing the ideal. Indeed Friedrich Nietzsche, Habermas believes, failed intellectually in his anti-modernist attempts by being so totally negative that the ambivalent and positive aspects of modernity, namely self-realization and self-determination, were forgotten. Thirdly, misplaced criticisms of modernity result in disillusionment and conservatism. The original intentions of the Enlightenment were to promote justice and even happiness. Whilst not succumbing to naïve expectations, the hope of the ideal can still be retained. Habermas constructs a theory of what he calls *communicative reason* for meaningful social interaction and emancipated relationships. He argues against the post-structuralists by affirming that language is used and exists to guarantee faith in the possibility of rational discourse and human community, whilst accepting that identity and self

hood are constructed by language. Inter-subjectivity establishes rational conversation in which the ideal of egalitarian, consensus and interaction can be preserved and promoted.

Defenders of the Enlightenment *ideal* may well understand the post modernist argument that the human subject cannot be separated from the unconscious, irrational, and relative relations of language and culture. However the fear for them is that cultural relativism naturally implies cognitive relativism, the view that there can be no such things as universal principles of validity, truth or rationality; for then where would one find commitment to intellectual inquiry. The debate also centres on the irreducible plurality or infinite discourses or 'language games' which criticise and are themselves being criticised by the continuing hope that this myriad and plurality can reveal essential meaning and purpose. Dews[12] notes that plurality of discourses does not necessarily infer that common standards of consistency do not exist, nor that such complexity of discourse does not obliterate the need for an overarching notion of validity which governs all of them. For Habermas all linguistic communication implies an 'agreement' of this sort - 'the ideal of rational discourse'.

The charge must also be met that relativism is in essence self - contradictory. Whilst holding onto the post-modern notion that discourses cannot be judged or compared against one another, (for example the western scientific world view against a primitive tribal culture when the standards and meanings within each discourse do not equate with each other, or worse still be matched to abstract concepts of truth or beauty), we can come to understand that there are some things meaningful across these discourses which may lead to common, shared truths. Therefore to say that all things are relative may itself be absolutist which relativists hold to be impossible. Defenders of the Enlightenment ideal then feel that hope lies in communicating across the boundaries of discourse whilst those who hold incredulity towards such notions as metanarratives are accused of atomising and fragmenting all cognitive and moral values, indifferent to meaningful, purposeful action or intent. The problem with outright post-modernism is also outlined by Bauman[13], in his subtle defence of the Western intellectual mode, as too vociferously stated to make a proper impact on those who recognise the increasing pluralization but seek to interprete intellectually the links between cultural outlooks. Post-modernism is self-defeating in that the dream of the non-absolutist is stated in

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[11] Habermas, J. *The Theory of Communicatice Action vol 1*. Trans by T McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
[12] Dews, P. *Habermas: Autonomy and Solidarity*. London: Verso, 1986. pp. 22-7.
[13] Bauman, Z. *Legislators and Interpreters*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988. pp. 140-4.

absolute terms and the future for intellectual inquiry seems futile if we are confronted with a hopless plurality that we can do nothing about.

Anthony Giddens[14] provides a balance to both arguments. He dismisses the claim of post-modernism that lets go of a proper seeking for knowledge, but celebrates a post-modernity for reformulating or clarifying commonly held theoretical views. In fact, he considers the endeavour of post modernity to have brought a degree of unity and coherence to the modernity idea of social evolution; paradoxically the very thing that post-modernism wants to abandon. Ironically, the very concept of post modernity as a general condition of society, which follows the rise and fall of another stage called modernity itself, embodies the idea that social theory can provide large-scale models of order and sequence. Modernity may have contained the critical aspect or moment of post modernity for some considerable time, which is now breaking out and giving new definition. Giddens does not favour foundationalism or the necessity for progress; grounding knowledge in a set of indubitable truths and methods, nor chasing epistemological certainties in a progressive search for teleological meaning. The Enlightenment is not best served by a secular providential view of history; rather reason must be the critical voice or moment within modern thought even suspicious of reason itself. Post modernity then is this inherently self- critical aspect or "reflexivity" drawing out ambivalences and contradictions. He also highlights that post modernity may reflect the Enlightenment conscience about the rise and more recently the fall of western industrialized capitalism. The Enlightenment idea built on reason, progress and historical advance provided the rationale for technological advance and all that went with it including the negative aspects, which now the reflexive process questions. The increasing questioning of modernist ideas from within parallels the general weakening of western imperialism. Post modernity raises the voice of the 'other', the previously excluded, within the vain attempt of a few (male, white, intellectual elite) to follow universal reason to its ultimate ends.

3.4 Directions for Theology

Modernity then is challenged as Graham[15] discusses to "offer vocabularies of hope and obligation for the future". Feminist thinkers and gender theorists have been an important voice in this debate. The above debate can be summarised as striking to the heart of (ontology) what it is to be human; authoritative knowledge (epistemology); the purposes and goal of

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[14] Giddens, A. *The Consequences of Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990. pp. 46-53

[15] op.cit 7. pp. 27-31.

history (teleology); personal identity (subjectivity) and the relation to the social and natural world (agency). A feature of contemporary feminism is to raise the voice of what the Enlightenment may have discarded as the 'other'; therefore gender difference must be included in ontology. Feminism is part of the discourse challenging the epistemology and subectivity of modernity, particularly regarding structures of power and gender which undermine the self's realization through interaction with others, culture and language rather than being scientifically determined. Feminist thinking has also helped understand agency as historically situated, embodied and contingent. Teleology is a product of patriarchy, a totalizing framework rendering to the margins those who are different.

In conclusion, before examining the theological implications of this debate, one may feel an increasing pressure to fall in line with one or other of the parties, which in itself illustrates the post modernist reflection that we can only be spectators and not judges, choosing as much between the aesthetics of contributions and discussions as the rational and intellectual argument. Yet we have to find some alternative to the despair of absolute relativism and restore self-critical faculties that may offer hope for a future world where the difference and otherness of post modernity are as important as the totalising universal freedoms and tolerance of the Enlightenment.

3. 5 Implications of modernity for theological reflection

The ideas of the Enlightenment had a profound effect upon the expression and thoughts of those who professed the Christian faith in the Western world. Later colonialism, itself a product of the Enlightenment, allowed this influence to extend to the rest of the modern Christian world.

Like the Enlightenment itself, the affect on Christian self-understanding and expression was a complex process over time with ideas competing against one another. As the world-view of Christian thought struggled to relinquish or keep the traditional or pre-modern ideas it also found itself defending or accommodating the rationale of modernity.

For theology, what appears to be at stake is the acceptance that differences in Christian belief over time can be attributed to differences in cultural influence. In other words, the Enlightenment offered the acceptable view that theology is something that humans produce

which is socially and historically conditioned, and as such theology is no longer confined to the beliefs or dogma of inherited tradition.

The Enlightenment allowed reason to move from beneath faith as the way of understanding truth. God became the object of inquiry, humans no longer the subject of God's providential plan, and theology became a scientific discipline comparable with other disciplines of human inquiry.

During the Middle Ages it was held that there were two sources of knowledge of God. Natural theology formulated those truths about the divine Being which could be discovered by the powers of human reason, Aristotle being the inspiration for this kind of human understanding accessible even to pagans. Yet this was not 'saving' knowledge, which could only be learnt from revelation held in the scriptures. This kind of knowledge was acquired by faith and supported by reason and then expressed in the doctrines of the Church. Divine grace was required by humanity to perfect natural knowledge. In the early sixteenth century there was a recovery of a genuinely humanist attitude by Erasmus (d.1536) to reconcile faith and reason, over against a scholastic dogmatism of the narrower kind of Aristotelian theology. This encouraged the rise of critical study. Indeed the protagonists of the Reformation paradoxically used such critical and disciplined study in order to stress the importance of divine revelation in a thoroughly biblical approach to Christian faith. By the eighteenth century The Enlightenment ideals had minimised the value of revealed theology and re-established the primacy of reason and rationalism. The truly rational man had no need of revelation at all. Hence the authority of the Bible was still the object of intellectual scrutiny. Protestant orthodoxy protected the objective truth by emphasizing the fact of inerrancy. Liberalism treated the bible as a historical object of possible facts about a former age, with applied relevance to the present, and the text was understood mainly as an object for studious examination and criticism. The Word as faith was eventually divorced from reason and located in human feeling and experience (Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith (1822)*), and thereby privatized and separated from the domain of public concern.

Christianity, though, could still be observed by moral reason as worthy of being the official religion for public and government support. It aided the provision of education and moral restraint within wider society and was required, or filled the vacuum of thought, in areas of life such as health, where knowledge was lacking. Christianity was becoming marginalized and increasingly considered as a system of beliefs, values and practices, relative to other religions. Humanity was considered to be emerging with maturity; human nature could be seen

as essentially good and interest in science restricted any sense of the miraculous. By the mid nineteenth century Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity (1841)* maintained that knowledge of God was really a form of knowledge of man himself. Man projects his thoughts on to an external object, which he calls God. In its most aggressive form modernity was set to dispatch the idea of God to the illusions of history, whilst human knowledge was awaited with confidence and in key areas life knowledge could be controlled, planned or developed. (e.g. Freud (mind), Marx(work) and Durkheim(society). Similarly the argument for the miracle of creation was also sceptically reviewed. A mature humanity made in the image of God was now increasingly confident in understanding itself as being the dominant steward of the natural world developing and controlling that world whose origins could not yet be determined.

The Enlightenment ideals though could be conducive for theological exploration. The emphasis on science, mechanism, ends, cause and effect, rather than the teleological question, by whom and for what purpose of history, had a great impact on theology, because this was theology's main question to gain meaning for the human endeavour in relation to God's purpose and providence. The emphasis for theology was eventually to share the same goals as modernity with a renewed understanding of progress. A subtle shift occurred, from God's providential grace for humanity to God's intention of progress for humanity. Humans could then work for God, making the right choices and acting ethically. The effect of this was to produce the remarkable spread and colonisation of Christianity around the globe. Reform, moral betterment, militancy, knowledge, education, and missionary endeavour were allied with progress. Although Christianity was reduced to the level of any other comparable faith with systems based on perceived values rather than objective provable facts, the Enlightenment's goal and modernity's pursuit of freedom, tolerance and universalism also provided Christianity with the ability to extend and define its values in pursuit of these same ends. Modern Christianity could align itself with the very optimistic anthropology that was replacing the pessimism of earlier Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation era of a sinful humanity requiring divine grace. Some expressions of Christian practice and worship particular those using a liturgical format also expressed itself quite content with the dichotomy between science and religion. It offered a ritual and religion for the 'religious', sought favour from the romantic and sentimental, enjoyed the categories given to it by the Enlightenment; and for those concerned with the non-scientific nourished a group predominantly preoccupied with the spiritual and inward feelings of the transcendent other worldly God. The Protestant embrace of the emancipated autonomous individual ideal of modernity also mirrors this self-confidence. For them the institutional church rested less on hierarchical forms of authority, but

on the will of the individual to know the will of God, emancipated, autonomous and confident enough to gather and make decisions collectively about what they believed and how they should express it in a congregation of believers.

This regaining of confidence by Christianity as it adapted to the Enlightenment world-view cannot be separated from the secular confidence of an expanding Western world with its feeling of superiority to the rest of the world. This superiority was based on three centuries of Western imperialism. It is only the critical reflexivity of post modernism that begins to describe the serious collapse in confidence of modernity. Consequently Christian self-confidence in its Western form, abetted by its syncretism with modernity, is also in a crisis of self-understanding.

3.6 Theological implications of post modernity

The cultural transition and historical passage of modernity has not ended, but it is being critically evaluated, and so post-modernity describing that criticism cannot be avoided. The criticisms of post-modernity also require a similar response from those engaged in theology. Hodgson [16] indicates two responses which he considers unhelpful. First, whilst recognising the authentic piety of evangelical Christian religion, a reactionary conservative response to the insecurities of post modernity espousing fundamentalist doctrine of a pre-modern age would be impossible. This may explain the recent phenomenon over the last half a century of a virile Pentecostalism. It may be described as a flight into religion away from the insecurities rationality may cause. It seeks out charismatic leadership upholding the tenets of the religious beliefs that withstand rational inquiry. Yet as Bosch[17] reminds us such religious reawakening reacts to the narrow perception modernity offers about the supremacy of rationalism. It seeks to readdress the reductionism of modernity and the failure of rationality to be the cornerstone on which to build one's life. Secondly, Hodgson also observes as destructive, the radical

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[16] Hodgson, P. C. *Revisioning the Church.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988. pp. 16-17.
[17] Bosch, D. J. op cit 4., pp. 352-353.

relativism of much post-modern criticism, already described above. Deconstructionist criticism raises serious and honest questions,

...But the temptation here is to retreat into intellectual games and hedonistic play - a mask for despair, cynicism, nihilism. Ironically, such play requires a stable order as its context, for it has no staying power against demonic absolutes and political oppression.[18]

The tension lies between the restoration and celebration of the human imagination, in the form of religious mythologies, metaphors, symbols, rituals and signs and their use in art, literature and music whilst holding on to the heritage of modernity which are gains to humanity's consciousness and identity; subjectivity, individual rights, political freedom and tolerance, critical rationality and scientific method. This tension is the very place for theological inquiry within the emerging and continuing post/modernity debate. In many ways the emerging debate allows an exciting reappraisal of how theology seeks its own future forms of expression. The post/modernity debate allows theology to reassess the subject speaking about and knowing God from the standpoint of faith.

Within this debate there is the opportunity for theology as a subject to enable practitioners of faith to voice and consider reflectively their own experiences within the experience of the post/modernity culture. Finding for themselves questions and answers about God, history, method, ecclesiology as they practice faith amidst the conflicting emphases of the debate itself: local/universal, national/global, public/private, equality/hierarchy, inquiry/authority, practice/theory, plural/monolithic, liberty/liberation, ecological/anthropological. All this calls for new models of relationship, leadership, and ways of communication the hope and obligation (Graham) of a faith community. The real problem of the debate is that any recovery of faith as a discourse of meaning cannot belittle some of the major presuppositions of scientific method, and alternatively the scientific discourse must come to terms with the faith perspective that is included even within its own rationale; neither discourses are mutually exclusive.

Bishop Leslie Newbigin pleads for a new encounter with post-Enlightenment culture. He rejects the privileged option of a faith community allowing itself, and being allowed, a private piety in church and home whilst at the same time regards the "modern scientific world-view as

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[18] Hodgson, P. C. op cit.,14 p. 16.

though it were a transcript of reality which we must -willy-nilly - accept as true"[19] , adjusting and syncretising Christian belief to this framework. He seeks a faith community confident in its own "fiduciary framework". This is a term taken from the post -critical philosophy of Michael Polanyi who asserts that knowing any reality is impossible except on the basis of some framework which is - in the act of knowing - uncriticised, and which cannot be demonstrated by reference to some more ultimate ground of belief.

We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence. However critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework. [20]

Newbigin desires the Church to live in genuine and open dialogue recognising the immense achievements of our modern culture but nevertheless shifting the balance between faith and the doubt of modernity. This is the commitment of the person oriented by faith, which is no different in essence for the commitment of the Enlightenment scientist. Both may convert one from the other and both may live with the plausibility structures that give each the interpretation of reality. Newbigin seeks not to reject the myth of objectivity for uncontrolled subjectivism. It is a tempered realism "one that remains aware of the contextuality of convictions, and operates in all disciplines."[21] Newbigin is similar to others who robustly defend the truth claims of Christianity in face of a postmodernism which in its equally defensive way asserts that truth claims from within a particular community (discourse) are relative to all other discourses and offer only perspective from within any tradition. Goodliff is equally robust in his defence of Christianity particularly in its relation to pastoral care and bases his response on the humility of the Cross and the community of the Trinity. He seeks the opportunity for a fresh discovery of the Scriptures as a metanarrative which is "non-totalising" in contrast to that of modernity's metanarratives and supports the "realist" ethical position of Alasdair MacIntyre who rejects the relativism of post modernity. Such a relativism, he considers, leads to moral statements that simply express our personal feelings and preferences and make no claim to truth.

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[19] Newbigin, L. *The Other Side of 1984.* Geneva: WCC, 1983. p. 32.
[20] Polanyi, M. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post -Critical Philosophy.* London: Routledge &Kegan Paul, 1958. pp. 256-268.
[21] Bosch, D. J. op.cit., 4 p. 360.

All this raises the stakes of whether our world can face the future *together* with any sense of commonality. Underlying the debate on modernity is a psychology of separateness in tension with an epistemology of participation. Can the "communicative" reason of Jürgen Habermas, as discussed above, be a practical outcome? The strong post modernist position claims that local human contexts are held within their isolation and with a self-description and a self-understanding that cannot be understood beyond that context. This has a theological consequence: it questions a single Christianity with a central metanarrative. However, a weaker post modernist position, that there is always an implicit metanarrative, may avail itself to combine the insights about the debate on modernity with the "story" of Christianity. Hence, a position in theology maybe one such as described by Gerard Loughlin of narrative theology:

They believe that our sense of the world is formed by the socially constructed discourses in which we find ourselves, and to which we contribute. We are embedded in language, as is language in us. There is a reciprocal relation between story and story-teller... I tell the story by which I am told. ... - I am the product of many inter-related narratives as is anyone else.[22]

If theology seeks to appropriate the criticisms of modernity and accept the presupposition of post-modernity -of no reality or truth beyond language which itself has no fixed meaning - then it has to work out within its own discipline whether the Christian metanarrative is subject to another primary metanarrative, the *human story*, which is a collection of many local and particular human narratives or histories. This liberal -revisionist position, such as David Tracy[23] would allow any human story to be correlated with the Gospel story as revealing a reality that can be assented to; whereas a post-liberal position such as George Lindbeck[24] would take a christological metanarrative as the story within which we find all human story and therefore determines humanity's true reality. This latter position is a weaker post modernist position as it accepts the idea of contextually understood metanarratives, and that there are localities in which the Gospel is proclaimed and understood as Gospel without the totalising concept of modernity.

There are of course positions that could be adopted theologically to counter the notions of post modernity. One could argue that post modernity makes the idea of divine revelation a self-contradiction. Revelation understood under the terms of post-modernity is always referenced

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[22] Loughlin, G. *Telling God's Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996. p. 18.

[23] Tracy, D. *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermenuetics, Religion, Hope*. San Fransisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

[24] Lindbeck, G. *The Nature of Doctrine*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984. p. 118.

to the community that interprets it or proclaims it. The community or the world from outside the community judges it, but it is never revelation as fact, which is what revelation is defined as; a disclosure rather than a discourse. This would be non negotiable for a realist who may consider that the facts can be argued and subject to the rigours of universal rationality, ethics or anthropology, or at least mediated with the hope that such truth claims can gain intelligibility and hence respectability in the modern world.

At the other end of the spectrum, whilst understanding the strong post-modern position, already described, as a human construction and just as destructive and nihilistic as strong modernism, Don Cupitt[25] considers that there could be a theological position emerging which seeks to embrace post modernity in a form that liberates the mind from both the discourses and disclosures interpreted by Western theology since the Enlightenment. Cupitt reappraises mythological, mystical and poetic Christian theology, encompassing post-modern philosophical ideas about language, taking faith and religion beyond the impasse of recent debate on modernity, and viewing all religion as strictly non-realistic. The hope is existential, that one might find a community of similar expression but how this lives in practice beyond the ideal of liberation from certainty has not yet been elucidated.

3. 7 Directions for Congregational Study

The practice of ministry within the Church is established deeply within this debate and within the real lives and experiences of people. The telling and re-telling of narrative and meaning is corporate and social and forms the context for theological inquiry and the life of the Church. It is my hope that the insights of the above debate will aid a better understanding of a congregation's life within the institutional church. For the effect of the post-modern description has caused a deep sense of loss, and subsequent grieving within the institution of the church and within its constituency of local faithful communities and congregations. This I feel requires analysis and understanding. The effects of the post-modern debate concern the pastoral realities of the church's practice. I agree with Clifford Geertz, as cited by John Patton, the intellectual distinctions of the debate manifest themselves in a lived and practiced reality that requires description.

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[25] Cupitt, D. *After God -The Future of Religion*. London: Weidenfeld &Nicholson, 1997.

"drawing of a line between what is natural, universal and constant in man and what is conventional, local and variable ....is to falsify the human situation or at least misrender it seriously" [26]

Patton[27] calls for this kind of detail "ethnography" to be understood within pastoral practice which, I consider, and hope to discuss and reflect upon in my subsequent chapters. leads us to insights that can further practical theological inquiry within the local congregation.

Having discussed the correlative or mediating theology (modern) of the applied anthropolgist Gerald Arbuckle, I understand Arbuckle seeks creatively to empower a religious congregation after analyzing the effect of change. As a comparison and possible alternative approach, I will, in the next chapter describe a qualitative, ethnographic. research method (post-modern) to listen and hear the story of members of a faith community. Conclusions will follow that may suggest practical alternatives to the criteria chosen by congregations and the institutional form of the Church for self understanding. often described as descriptions of success, or progress (modern). Unable to maintain these criteria, creates profound loss or feelings of failure and despair, especially alongside other cultural criticisms offered by the post-modern critique. An alternative future, of hope and obligation, may follow from the description of their own story, or narrative expressed not in the terms of modernity but as important within its own context. A context of a faith community that lives and believes in the language of its own expression fulfilling no other claim than to be faithful to the divine expression of love through Jesus Christ.

[26] Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana, 1993. pp. 35-36.
[27] Patton, J. *Pastoral Care in Context*. Louisville. Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993. pp. 43-45.

CHAPTER 4

Focus Groups as a qualitative Methodology for Congregational Study

4.1 Finding a Qualitative Methodology for Congregational Study

This thesis argues that the well-documented condition of post-modernity exhibits a critical reflexivity upon the certainties of modernity, thereby tempering the confidence displayed by the social, political, economic and cultural interactions set in motion from the ideas of the Enlightenment. As described fully in the last chapter the post –modern analysis casts doubt upon the certainties and persuasiveness of modernity's pursuit for progress and universality. Its impact is far reaching because, as I have stated, within the tension of this debate is the very place for theological inquiry. The post-modern analysis offers the opportunity for theology as a subject to enable practitioners of faith to voice and consider reflexively their experiences as a discourse of meaning or significance.

The importance of this exercise for the practical theologian, within a congregation, is in the listening and the interpretation of what is heard, and finding a method to do this is critical. I have argued that some exponents of practical theology, such as Gerald Arbuckle, seek reference to external authoritative standards by which to analyse the object of their study, bringing a modern and scientific approach to theological enquiry. However, as I have discussed post-modern analysis brings into question the methodology for correlating the Christian message with universal and general theories that are considered to be at the foundation of all human behaviour.

Whilst theologians such as Gerald Arbuckle correlate the disciplines of sociology and anthropology in their theology, I now seek to find an alternative methodology, which characterises the reflexivity required by post-modern analysis between the human sciences, and take seriously the shift in anthropology and sociology mentioned at the end of Chapter 1 by practitioners such as Geertz, Clifford and Brown. For their ideas recognise a different kind of discourse between the disciplines, and are critical about established methods of observation and analysis. They see culture similar to a literary text, and are interested in how the observer of a community, and the community itself, produces meaning from a specific situation, always drawing significance by deeper symbolic references termed the "thickness of meaning". A term signifying the richness and complexity of sign systems in action by inspecting events, showing how messages are understood as significant rather than the structures that make them possible.

For Geertz the task of social description is still a scientific anthropology and he seeks to maintain the distinction and an intelligible discourse between the "here" and "there" and does not want anthropology to become a branch of literary criticism.[1] For Clifford[2] this social description is the creation of the anthropologist employing many literary tools to establish the plausibility of his/her "scientific" questions, which are, according to Clifford, meaningless when considered in relation to the complexities and constructions arising from the "text" between the author and the subject under observation. Brown[3] also understands this textualist approach to sociological method and observes the political implications of his discipline. .

All this corresponds within the wider post-modern analysis described earlier in this thesis to a sense of the world formed by socially constructed discourses in which we position others and ourselves. Words and texts have no intrinsic meaning without a community reading and creating significance out of their usage. Language has no fixed meaning independent of social context and its use within social relations. Such post-modern analysis seeks to explain how individuals and communities compete for meaning and truth, establish privilege and authority, and have regard or disregard for difference and the other.

This post-modern analysis suggests that the discipline of theology ought to take seriously the particularity of the local context, especially the study of how a congregation performs, displays and constructs a theology from within its social context and social relations.

As stated in my first chapter, I shall describe a methodology where a group of the congregation can be experienced as a field of practice replacing the modernist couplet subject/author involving the current situation of a theologian observing and mapping congregational life.

The intention is to ask how one might hear and draw conclusions from a small number of a congregation discussing the experience of loss and change. This subject is chosen because it is a similar experience to the Marist religious community that led Gerald Arbuckle to correlate the sociological and anthropological explanations of such experiences in a community with the encounter of the Gospel. This led him to the conclusion that a faith community refounded by an authoritative reading of the Gospel could counter the sense of

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[1] Geertz, C. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as an Author.* Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1989.
[2] Rabinow, P. *"Representations are Social Facts: Modernity and Post Modernity in Anthropology"* in Clifford, J. & Marcus, G. eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* London: Univ. of California Press, 1986.
[3] Brown, R. *Social Science as Civic Discourse.* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989

loss, change and impending chaos documented by the experience of post-modernity upon the Roman Catholic Church.

My enquiry would rather find a means to hear the voice of these experiences, and ask how these experiences relate to a constructed theological reflection by the participants of the discussion. In this way the theologian reflecting upon this exercise may understand his own experience as a participative and reflexive one, supplementing the need to correlate the experience for significance in an authoritative way but having the tools to engage with the social setting already entered into.

As a minister and a congregation usually interact in a personal and intimate setting over many years, participating in the daily lives and relationships of a community oriented by a particular faith; so their theological outlook can only be related to the coherence of a narrative of identity and traditions known to them. The post-modern analysis would infer that such a community can claim no more authority than that, for the telling and the knowing is always contingent. Hence the implications for a post-modern theology are about how a faith community tells of what it knows in relation to its beliefs and symbolic actions and how it plays its part in the open field of discourse accepting the contested nature of its proclamation and purpose. My concluding chapter will offer a post-modern position for theological reflection in the light of my practical observations, a position that takes seriously the social context and the impact of post-modernity upon the setting of a congregation.

Finding a methodology required taking reflexivity seriously, the fact that we are part of the social world we study, and I wanted to find some way of reducing social discourse to a written form. I gradually became aware that I was becoming involved in the process of ethnography. As Geertz has characterised this core ethnographic process:

The ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscription and can be re-consulted. [4]

Rather than entering into the field of a trained anthropologist, which I am not, I sought a qualitative method that has been termed "structured eavesdropping"[5] which allows the researcher to study naturalistic talk elicited in relation to specific topics. I did not want to write field-notes in the manner of the anthropologist without specific training and

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[4] Geertz, C. *Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana, 1993. p. 19.
[5] Barbour, R. & Kitzinger, J. Eds. *Developing Focus Group Research*. London: Sage, 1999. p. 118.

understanding of what to write and how to write such notes. Untrained in this field left me in a quandary because I realise that the minister of a congregation, as pastor and occupying many other roles, now anthropologist, finds him(her)self untrained in this position between reflexive analysis and the practice and narrative of the congregation. In reading on this subject in the anthropological field,[6][7][8] I noticed the debate about the process of reflexive analysis upon the field of practice to the uninitiated is a controversial one, for it also reflects the criticisms of post-modernity.

The debate is an intricate one, its argument centres around the idea of realism; that research investigates independent, knowable phenomenon through experiments that put questions, by the principle of testing hypotheses through a comparison of cases. Such experiments are verifiable, reproducible and therefore reliable. Between realism and relativism is a "subtle" realism that accepts and states the assumptions and experience that sometimes must be relied upon when forming experiments and testing hypotheses, there is a standpoint that the researcher takes and makes known. Realism in both forms allows ethnography to connect meanings (culture) to observable action in the real world. Illustrative of the realist's approach is Malinowski's founding statement of the ethnographer's task

"Find out the typical ways of thinking and feeling, corresponding to the institutions and culture of a given community and formulate the results in the most convincing way"[9]

Counter to these realist positions is an approach, which takes its standpoint as one that views the historical moment, called the post-modern. In this sense, it is inappropriate to speak of post-modern ethnography but that post-modernity is ethnography's project. The ethnographer's task is now characterised by Denzin's comment:

In contrast to the realist regime, the new writers seek a model of truth that is narrative, deeply ethical, open-ended, and conflictual, performance and audience based, and always personal, biographical, political, structural and historical. Writing from a moving, unstable place, these experimentalists are neither insiders nor outsiders... travellers in interconnected physical, social, moral and sexual borderlands."[10]

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[6] Emerson, R. Fretz, R. Shaw, L *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes.* London: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
[7] Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. *Ethnography Principles in Practice.* London: Tavistock, 1983.
[8] Denzin, N. K. *Interpretive Ethnography.* London: Sage, 1997.
[9] Van Maanen, J. *Representation in Ethnography.* London: Sage, 1995. p. 6.
[10] Denzin, K. ibid; p. 266.

Taking the epistemological assumptions of this historical moment, as described in my Chapter 3, the realist considers such a standpoint to be non-scientific, it contains comment, assumptions and judgements often described as "moral" or "fiction". Such an approach considers the realist, is not science but art, it is not a study of lived experience, its protagonists are not participant observers, and their reflexivity is extreme to the extent that their observations are shaped by the irrational assumptions of post-modernity; fatalistic, absurd, nihilistic, an unashamed relativism.

The debate is about an ocular epistemology, truth that can be observed producing information and knowledge; versus an aural epistemology of participation, truth that understands the function of the visual regime participated in, and now seeks to hear the dialogue of constructed meaning.

Whether one chooses one epistemology or the other though is missing the point, for the above debate underlines that the whole truth cannot be seen or told. Just as other senses have to come into operation for each of us to fully experience reality, the debate about ethnography tells us that even the best practitioners are restricted by a partial interpretation, and the worst only hear or see what they want to. There is always more to be known, a new horizon of understanding, in the sense of creating opening to what historically and often authoritatively produced closure. Clifford identifies a number of factors such as rhetorical and allegorical devices in reporting, the contextual, institutional constraint of the work and the historical and political environment that restricts the ability of the ethnographer to give a complete account.[11]

Yet this debate also occupies the practical theologian. How does one relate to this hermeneutical gap between reflexive analysis and the field of practice appropriately? The method of critical correlation closes the gap abruptly whilst I seek to stay in this place, which occasionally can be crossed with ease but at other times opens before you. Paul Ballard and John Pritchard describe this perfectly

"This is what makes it so elusive and yet exciting. It is like coming back time and again to a favourite place which is changing with the light of day, the weather, the seasons and the years. It is always the same yet always different, familiar yet ever new." [12]

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[11] Clifford, J. & Marcus, G. Eds. *Writing Culture The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* London: Univ. of California Press, 1986. p. 6.
[12] Ballard, P. & Prichard, J. *Practical Theology in Action.* London: SPCK. 1996. p. 64.

Charles Gerkin, a professor of pastoral psychology, whose work on the "living human document"[13] helped my thinking when completing my undergraduate dissertation on the reflections of terminally ill patients, was first concerned with this hermeneutical task after hearing the story of lived experience and trying to engage theology and psychology within the realities of pastoral practice. Gerkin was influenced by the hermeneutical tradition of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer who considered the task of hermeneutics as a dialogical process, 'a fusion of horizons of understanding and meaning'[14] where in any situation different understandings, bounded by the horizon of particular experiences, can be brought into contact to seek out new meaning. But this dialogue according to Gadamer cannot take place completely objectively. There is no position of neutrality. Gerkin considers this relevant to the discussion between the counsellor and client in the pastoral situation and any resultant significance or meaning also depends on the horizons of meaning that theology and psychology can both bring to the situation.

Interestingly and relevant to my thesis, is Gerkin's latest work, which reviews pastoral counselling of which he has been a major exponent. He alludes to my own concern about the method of critical correlation with reference to his own field of enquiry.

"Most often the common human experience has been described in psychological language and then a theological symbol that correlates with this psychologically denoted symbol has been sought."[15]

Gerkin finds a solution to this closure in the theology of George Lindbeck [16] who, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, takes the reflexivity of post-modernity seriously by accepting the idea of the contextually understood narrative of a faithful community as a basis for his cultural-linguistic theology. Lindbeck is concerned with the nature and role of doctrine as the internal grammar within the language of the community. The concern of theology is ensuring that what is said and done within the life of the community is consistent with the overall meaning of a christological narrative which structures the community's life. Consistency is more relevant and important a factor in belief for Lindbeck than the truth drawn from correspondence with any objective reality understood through creedal formularies or the effectiveness and efficacy of communicating symbolic rituals.

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[13] Gerkin, C. V. *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Couselling in a Hermeneutic Mode.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1984.
[14] Ibid; p. 44.
[15] Gerkin, C. V. *An Introduction to Pastoral Care.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1997. p. 107.
[16] Lindbeck, G. A. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age.* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984.

Gerkin finds Lindbeck's approach suitable for his concern about pastoral care and the apparent closure that critical correlation can bring to what Gerkin terms the 'dialogical space'.

"To the degree that this storied context maintains its connection with all the varied stories of individuals, family and community life in the world, it (the cultural-linguistic model) can provide a meaning filled nesting place and thus provide the most elementary context of care... Practical theology becomes the task of maintaining the connections between the varied stories of life and the grounding story of the Christian community."[17]

The meaning or significance of any text like "the lived human document" described by Gerkin, as a pastoral counsellor, is provided in the narrative world presented to him as interpreter or reader. Similarly the biblical text is bound up inseparably with the story or narrative by which it is told, and the particular form in which it is told. We are invited to step into this story, or a whole series of stories to find coherence for ourselves, or the coherence of the accounts themselves. What lies beyond or behind the text is no longer the primary concern but its relation to reality, and of course reality is as Geertz discovered between the "here" and "there", a never world because we cannot get at the world 'as it really is' because of our contingent, historical, social, and physical being.

"We may move to view reality from somewhere else, either actively or imaginatively; but in doing so we shall simply have adopted another perspective upon it. In the final analysis, we commit ourselves to that perspective which seems to us to offer the most satisfactory account of the reality which lies beyond ourselves."[18]

For the theologian observing and partaking in the life of the congregation it is, for both, a question of faith in the narrative. We commit ourselves to a story as the one that works for us because it has the resources to shape and nurture our life through the imaginative processes we bring to it. The reflexivity of post-modernity simply asks us to critically assess notions of a contented authoritative faith, because if we are not careful a contented authoritative faith becomes a cosy faith furnishing a grand-narrative of life that cannot answer the hard questions of another's reality. It is always this hard reality that must test the validity, truthfulness, correspondence and coherence of the trusted story. If it passes this reality test of the onlookers then they will become participants who now dwell in the world described by the narrative rather than some other world.

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[17] Gerkin, C. V. ibid; p. 110.
[18] Hart, T. *Faith thinking- The dynamics of Christian Theology.* London: SPCK. 1995. p 145.

Whilst the Christian theologian's reality is concerned with the reality of God and the christocentric base to the narrative of the faithful community, I now seek to describe one method that may help to describe how participants in such a community describe their reality, their story.

It is a method of "structured-eavesdropping" which I think could be one method to maintain the connection across the dialogical space. I consider that it offers an approach to enable practitioners of faith to voice and consider reflexively their experiences as a discourse of meaning or significance and offer resource for a post-modern theology.

4.2 Focus Groups as a Qualitative Research Method

As a form of qualitative research, focus groups constitute one specific technique within the broader category of group interviewing, but not in the sense of an alternating dialogue between the researcher's questions and the research participants' responses. Focus groups rely on the interaction within the group, based on a topic of discussion supplied by a researcher who typically takes the role of facilitator or moderator. The data that focus groups produce are the transcripts of the group discussion.

Focus groups have been a powerful exploratory tool in marketing research, usually supplemented by quantitative analysis of representative samples. Historically developing from work in clinical psychology exploring motivation. Much of this work bears little resemblance to those methods that interest social scientists. The emphasis for market research is upon the "client" who seeks to promote a product and who is prepared to pay for focus groups and their qualitative information. Obviously the structural context in which they have developed and applied focus groups is very different from the constraints and goals that guide social science research. It is in this latter field, especially in the field of health education, and media studies, that focus group work has been innovative, and perhaps applicable to the concerns of practical theology. Only three church based projects have been found using this social science method[19],[20] two in the USA and one in the UK[21]; whilst Church marketing techniques appear to be developing rapidly.

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[19] Vogelsang, J. Compassion planted in Action: four focus groups discussing the question "Have we lost our compassion for the poor?" *Christian Social Action*. 1996, 9, 16. pp. 25-28 United Meth. Church USA
[20] Hamilton, H. Doing peacemaking holistically. *Church and Society*. 1990, 81, pp46-49 United Presbyterian Church USA.
[21] Hay, D. & Hunt, K. *Understanding the spirituality of people who don't go church.* Nottingham: Nottingham Univ. Centre for the Study of Human Relations, 2000.

The question of whether supplementary quantitative analysis is important to the social scientist, as opposed to market research, has been answered.

"Social science research is not, however, limited to such narrow goals, and there is no a priori reason to assume that focus groups or any other qualitative techniques require supplementation or validation with quantitative techniques". - Morgan [22]

And as Kitzinger states;[23]

"We are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities; we are part of complex and overlapping social and familial and collegiate networks .... It makes sense to employ methods which actively encourage examination of these social processes in action".

Because;

"all talk through which people generate meaning is contextual, and that the contexts will inevitably colour the meaning" -Dahlgren [24]

4.3 Characteristics of Focus groups.

As a qualitative method Focus groups lie midway between participant observation and individual interviews. The advantages of Focus groups to both these methods are their suitability to topics concerning attitudes and cognition in a short period of time, rather than on observing roles or organisation; and they are able to observe interaction within a group about a topic in a short period of time rather than control data gathering from individual decision-making.

Focus groups[25] highlight the attitude, priorities, experiences and perspectives, language and framework of understanding, as well as identify group norms, consensus and social processes in the articulation of knowledge. They can enable a variety of forms of communication, for example, story-telling, collating news, and encourage open conversation on sensitive issues, death, sex, health, poverty, etc.

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[22] Morgan, D. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, 1988. p.11.
[23] Kitzinger, J. The Methodology of Focus Groups: the importance of interactions between research participants. *Sociology of Health and Illness*. 1994, 16, p.119.
[24] Dahlgren, P. What's the meaning of this? Viewers' plural sense-making of TV news. *Media, Culture and Society*. 1988, 10, p. 292.
[25] Kitzinger, J, Introducing Focus Groups. *British Medical Journal*. 1995, 311, pp. 299-302.

A researcher can explore these processes, examine the areas of opinion, conflict and argument; analyse how forms of communication may clarify or confuse issues.

The disadvantages are: Focus groups are limited to verbal behaviour, consist only of interaction in discussion groups and must be created and managed by the researcher. They are artificially set-up situations, although this may be tempered in groups that meet frequently, such as a congregational group. Although in such well-formed groups, group dynamics may create a "group-think" censoring any deviation from group standards, which may be studied further by combining a one-to-one interview or questionnaire.
Focus groups are useful for orienting research to a new field, generating hypotheses based on participants insights; evaluating research sites or populations; developing interview questionnaires; recording participants interpretation of results from earlier studies.
The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less applicable without the interaction found in a group.
Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating what people think, but they also clarify sharply how and why people think as they do on a particular issue. Finally, participants can be encouraged to feel that they are an active part of the research process.

4.4 Planning and use of Focus Groups.

Practitioners emphasise the need to plan prior to doing focus groups. Apart from budget and time constraints, consideration will have to be given to a focus group as self - contained or linked with a questionnaire, individual interview, participant observation, or other surveys. This self-contained focus-group or structured focus group as used by Dicks[26] was probably the most likely option for my research.

Ethical issues unique to focus groups arise from the use of tape recorded material, and that the material being researched is in some senses owned by the group as well as the researcher. Duration of meeting is recommend to be no more than two hours, and only a narrow range of group sizes has been found to be practical. A group will typically contain between six and twelve participants. The researcher needs to be skilled at creating a relaxed atmosphere, leading group discussions and handling conflict, as well as drawing out passive participants. (The position of the minister and received training will hopefully help here!). Some investigators (Kitzinger[27] Philo [28]) use tasks or games to stimulate discussion.

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[26] Dick, B. Structured Focus Groups[On Line]. (1997)
Available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sawd/arr/focus.html
[27] Kitzinger, J. ibid;

Morgan[29] considers one group to be never enough, as the researcher may be observing little more than the dynamics of that particular set. His best advice is to determine a target number of groups in the planning stage considering the more homogenous in terms of role and background.

It is good advice, as Axelrod [30]suggests,

"(to) concentrate on those population segments that are going to provide the most meaningful information"

The result is that focus groups are often conducted with systematically selected samples but such bias is only a problem if it is ignored.

The level of facilitator involvement is important and is usually treated relative to the structured components. Some facilitators may play only a small part in the group task or discussion keeping their comments non-directive. Others such as Dicks may have a closely structured format eliciting discussion from open-ended questioning with probing questions later for clarification. Low levels of facilitator involvement are important when the basic issues are not known, existing knowledge coming from participants perspectives. If the goal is to learn something new then the participants must speak for themselves. Alternatively, high levels of involvement are more appropriate when there is a strong external agenda. If it is planned to use a highly structured format it may suggest another qualitative technique is more suitable such as an interview. A low facilitator involvement combined with a questionnaire and both analysed for content may be the best practice.

Considering the analysis required after the event, some thought should be given to the aim of the focus group in relation to the issue discussed. Merton *et al* [31] presents four broad criteria for the effective focus group interview. It should cover a maximum range of relevant topics, it should provide data that is as specific as possible, it should foster interaction that explores the participants' feelings in some "depth" and it should take into account the personal context that participants use in generating their responses to the topic. A successful encounter will lead to participants raising unanticipated issues for further reflection by the researcher.

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[28] Philo, G. *Seeing & Believing: The influence of television.* London: Routledge, 1990.
[29] Morgan, D. op.cit 21., pp.42-45
[30] Axelrod, Myril D. Ten essentials for good qualitative research. *Marketing News* 1975, 8, pp.10-11.
[31] Merton, R. K. Fiske, M. Kendall, P. *The Focussed Interview* Glencoe IL: Free Press, (1956).
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The interview content is an important function of the planning process. It is recognised that some consideration should be given to the kind of outcomes focus groups are likely to provide, in order that the preparation by the researcher is reasonable. At the end of the process the researcher is involved in analysing and searching for a resolution among the different experiences and perceptions of the participants; so again it is worthwhile preparing the ground for what has been called a type of "structured eavesdropping" (Powney)[32]. Planning then should take account of four aspects of group discussion that often serve as the basis for the later interpretation of cognitive processes in self-contained focus groups (Morgan)[33]..Attention should be paid to the difference between what participants find interesting and what they find important.

Differences in perspectives are also revealed through how questions get asked and answered. Questions can be more than requests for clarification, they may provide insights into thought processes. Therefore the open question is important, as well as probing questions later in the session.

Participants often become consciously aware of there own perspective when confronted with an active disagreement, or attempting to reach consensus. Keeping the discussion moving until points of disagreement and agreement become apparent can enhance focus group content.

Consensus may be limited or disagreement exacerbated by the need for knowledge of an issue. Yet such a need may inform how the group concludes its differences or continues to build mechanisms to explain their various experiences. The researcher may have to be aware of this group need, that it is part of the process and not necessarily a weakness. Again, like group-think the researcher may be involved in collusion or manipulation, but this is only a problem if it is ignored and not recognised.

The group discussion itself ought to begin with each participant making an individual, uninterrupted statement, often of an autobiographical nature. This might be after some written exercise or game to free expression when it comes to the group discussion. In low-facilitator involvement this draws others into discussion after hearing individual experiences, preventing initial group-think. These openings then determine the body of the discussion and question facilitator involvement. Low involvement means there is unstructured discussion

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[32] Powney, J. Structured eavesdropping. Research Intelligence. *Journal of the Brititish Educational Research Foundation.* 1988, 28, pp.10-12.
[33] Morgan, D. op. cit 21., p.29.

until a second broad topic is introduced. In high facilitator involvement, guides are planned to produce discussion on a number of linked topics; or issues from open discussion are remembered and used to produce later linked topics. This technique (tracking) is useful in low involvement to move people from the researcher's issues to hearing about their perspectives. It is also considered to be good practice to bring the session to conclusion clearly. In low facilitator involvement this may simply be by a movement or return of the researcher. In high facilitator involvement each person may be asked to give a final summary statement. It may be sensible to consider that not all participants have given their full opinions in the session, a questionnaire is often considered for all participant or a call to each participant to return and be thanked a day or two later whilst noting anything further they might like to add.

Individual questionnaires have a disadvantage in that their replies maybe influenced by the group discussion, but there are advantages, in that they can record background items of information, clarify issues, or give details about the participants. Although it is important to avoid survey interpretations given the small size of the group and possible non-representativeness of the sample.

Analysis of focus group content is currently strictly qualitative and ethnographic or a systematic coding via content analysis. Ethnographic approaches rely on direct quotation of the group discussion, whilst content analysis produces numerical descriptions of the data, using tallying. The latter is probably more useful in larger numbers of groups to produce evidence of attitudes amongst samples of a population. For this exercise it will be more appropriate to use the ethnographic approach.

4.5 An example of a structured focus group.

The following has been taken from a web-site:

Dick B (1997) Structured focus groups. http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sawd/arr/focus.html

This example gives a clear outline of the planning and preparation and indicates the importance of contextual information. It may be worthwhile considering this approach or the task/game approach of Greg Philo in his media research. Dick has a more structured method than the low facilitator involvement of Philo. Philo though uses individual questionnaires and a content analysis to generate quantitative data on a larger group survey.

Structured focus groups

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Abstract

Introduction

A: Preparation

B: Introductions

C: Contextual information

D: Key information

E: Probe questions

Abstract

A brief description of a variant of focus groups, described here as structured focus group, is given. As with conventional focus groups, a structured focus group is a facilitated group discussion in which open-ended questions are asked in a way to trigger discussion amongst a panel of participants. However, more effort is given to reducing the structure of the content so that the information is gained from the participants rather than being determined by the

questions asked. At the same time, the process is more structured than is common, to increase the quality of information and the time-economy of the procedure.

Introduction

Focus groups, or focussed group interviews, are facilitated group discussions in which an interviewer asks a series of questions of a group. The group members then provide a response to the question, and a discussion ensues. Focus groups are a method particularly suited to preliminary research where some time-economy is a need, and where a more structured approach may be premature. It is common for the group session to be audio-taped (or sometimes videotaped) for later analysis, though that is not my preferred option. Structured focus groups share with convergent interviewing the use of a structured process and unstructured content. They start in an open-ended fashion with the minimal questions that will keep the group members participating. By starting with very general questions, and little guidance about the topic from the facilitator, they provide some protection from allowing the questions you ask to limit the answers you get. The process, on the other hand, is structured. This gives a higher quality of information and more efficient use of time. In fact, the same logic underlies much of both convergent interviewing and structured focus groups. You may therefore find it useful to peruse a description of convergent interviewing to supplement this brief document. The process described is reasonably robust in inexperienced hands. A more skilled facilitator will get better information by asking better probe questions and by making more efficient use of time. Even in the hands of an inexperienced facilitator, however, the process will usually yield good quality information. In the form described here, preparation is needed. However, as most of the important differences with structured focus groups are in the group session itself, which is the main emphasis of this description. Detailed descriptions are available in a number of works. In particular, Sage publishers have brought out a number of high-quality works on focus groups as a qualitative research tool. The bibliography lists three of them.

The preparation includes the following...
    design the questions to be used in the different phases of the group;

    identify the population, and draw up a sample of people from it;

    in general a maximum diversity sample will usually give better
    information than a random sample for a particular group size;
    The group session itself can be regarded as having four phases..

an introduction;

a question to tap contextual information;

questions to tap the key information required; and

probe questions for follow-up or to elicit more specific information.

There will also be follow-up work, typically writing a report and circulating it to interested people. The design allows for the introduction of other information for which a response is wanted. This is fed into the conversation part-way through the process. It may come, for example, from prior focus groups, or from a previous round of convergent interviews. On other occasions it may consist of plans or the like for which you would like a reaction from focus group members.

A step by step description follows...

A. Preparation

(1) It is a great help if, prior to the focus group, you have a chance to meet participants face-to-face. They will then be more at ease when the focus group is held. You can also explain to them the purpose of the focus group, and what will be done with any information that emerges from it. At this stage you may or may not want to tell them what questions will be asked. Giving them prior notice allows them to think about the issues ahead of time. It may also mean that they attend the focus group with their mind already made up; if so, you lose the benefits of cross-fertilisation between participants.

(2) I assume that you have chosen the venue to be comfortable, and to offer visual and aural privacy. If group members do not know each other, try to   create an informal atmosphere where they are encouraged to talk to each other. It can help to have coffee or orange juice available. Greet them as they arrive, and provide some introductions to get them talking.

B. Introductions

(3) When the actual session starts, begin by introducing yourself. Let them   know briefly who you are, and what your role is in this. For example, are you collecting this information on behalf of someone else, or are you the person who needs the information...
Then provide a brief overview of the session and its purpose...

explain the purpose of the focus group, especially the intentions of you
and the other people who will be given access to the information

provide a brief overview of the process; a few sentences is enough, but
allow some time for questions

briefly explain what will be done with the information: how it will be
analysed, and what it will be used for

be clear about whether or not the participants will be identified when
the information is passed on to someone else.

(4) Have a quick round of introductions so that participants have a chance   to form a beginning relationship with other participants. Time permitting, it is also helpful to ask them to spend a little time talking to one or two other people -- some relationship with at least one other person will help. Then follow three phases, which have a close resemblance. In each, nominal group technique is used to ensure that all participants have a chance to think through the issues and voice their response. A discussion then follows. Finally, participants are asked to agree on the major opinions and themes which emerged. In this way, the information is refined during the different phases, and the participants help in interpreting the information.

C. Contextual information
The key question or questions are intended to elicit the information that you think you want or need. However, if you focus in too closely you may miss out on something by inadvertently excluding it with your question. The first round of discussion can be set a little broader to ensure that you collect enough contextual information for the more specific information to be interpretable.   So, for example, if your interest is in training programs your contextual questions might address job performance generally.

The aim is to trap information which will provide a context for the later phases.

(5) Announce that in this and subsequent phases, you are interested in
knowing the range of opinion held by participants. You therefore hope that
they will express their own views even when they are not in agreement with

other speakers. Say also that this is not intended to be an exercise where they try to persuade others to their own point of view. They will be most help to you if they note the span of opinion, and if they try to ensure that all views are expressed and recorded.

When they have factual information which is relevant to other people's opinions they will be given a chance to offer this. But, again, this is to be offered as information and not persuasion.

(6) After announcing that people will be given a few minutes to think about the issue, ask your contextual question. Encourage people to take brief notes as an aid to memory. This increases the likelihood that they will speak their own mind and not be unduly directed by the first speaker they hear.

(7) Announce that everyone in turn will be given a chance to speak. Ask participants to take notes on the variety of opinions offered. Say that they will also be given a chance to ask questions for clarification before an open discussion proceeds.

Then invite each person in turn to offer two or three sentences.

After everyone who wishes to speak has said something, allow a few minutes for questions for clarification. No debate is allowed: this is merely to give people a better chance to understand each other before the discussion begins.

Supportively and gently correct anyone who either speaks for too long, or tries to debate an issue. As this is the first information collection, what happens here will do much to set the style of the later phases. You have a better chance of collecting good information enjoyably if you can discourage bad habits at this point.

(8) Ask people during the discussion which follows to try to note down the opinions and information which are important. Remind them that you are interested in the range of views, and that you don't expect them to reach agreement.

An open discussion is held. As facilitator, concentrate on keeping the discussion going while discouraging people from talking too much or debating issues.

If this first discussion is slow starting, try asking people to talk briefly in pairs about their views, and then return to the large-group discussion.

The next step assumes that you will ask the participants to help you interpret the information. It is more usual in conventional focus groups to

record the information on tape and analyse it later. I prefer to include the interpretation in the session itself: it is much more time efficient; you have access to more help from the participants in interpreting the information; it helps to make them partners in the activity instead of just informants.

(9) If you are a skilled facilitator, ask people to summarise for you the main ideas to emerge from the discussion. If you are less skilled, you may prefer to write up your own summary and ask people to suggest amendments or additions. Then invite them to help you interpret the information by discussing what it means. In any event, the summary and interpretation is captured on newsprint.

At this point you may sometimes have to reiterate that it is not a debate, and you are interested in knowing the range of opinions and information.

D. Key information

This is the heart of the structured focus group, for it is here that you are most likely to collect the most valuable information. Therefore, in your planning, allow the most time for this phase.

The process is almost identical to that for the previous phases. The opening question is different. If you have multiple questions, repeat the process for each of them. You will have planned the question(s) beforehand to ensure that you tap all of the relevant information.

However, in the light of the contextual discussion which precedes, you may occasionally find it desirable to reword the question(s) in this phase.

There may also be an extra step during which you feed in results from prior focus groups or other information-collection processes.

(10) Ask the question.

(11) Allow individual thinking time, then encourage each participant to give a brief response.

(12) Open the discussion.

(13) Capture the summary and interpretation on paper.

Then repeat the sequence if you have multiple key questions.

This next step is used only if the structured focus group is part of a larger exercise, and you wish to integrate the information from the other parts. I describe here a brief version. If this is an important part of the process for you then it can be expanded into a complete phase. It is then similar in style to the other information collection phases.

(14) If you have information from prior activities, this is an opportune moment to feed it into the discussion. First announce the information, preferably supported by a brief list of key points on overhead transparency or the like. (Alternatively you can provide everyone with a single sheet summary of the information.)

Then ask people to provide their response, and discuss how this information affects their interpretation. Collect this on newsprint.

E. Probe questions

Use the same sequence as before for each probe question. On some occasions you may decide that it is more useful to ask several related probe questions at once, and then move into the discussion.

(15) Ask the question.

(16) Allow individual thinking time, then encourage each participant to give a brief response.

(17) Open the discussion.

(19) Capture the summary and interpretation on newsprint.

Finally, thank the participants for their information. If appropriate you may also want to offer them copies of any subsequent report.

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CHAPTER 5

A Report on the Focus Groups.

5.1 The Aim

The aim of the exercise was to seek response from two Focus Groups on the experience of change, loss and chaos. I sought to engender discussion and record the results, thereby enabling members of the same congregation to voice and consider reflexively their experiences on such a general subject. This would give me the opportunity and insight, using the recorded material, to reflect on how the reflexivity within the discourse created meaning or significance during the discussion.

I hoped to hear whether the groups referred to any biblical narrative before or after I introduced an exercise. The participants were asked to choose a Psalm(s) relating to their experience. It was also the intention to test whether Gerald Arbuckle was correct to state that theories about the process of change could be correlated with what he considers to be the narrative of order, meaning and hope presented in the biblical narrative. I was interested to know whether people would articulate the *liminal state*. an intrinsically unstable and uncertain stage bringing opportunity for reappraisal.

5.2 Method

I used the structured focus group method fully described by Bob.Dick, included at the end of Chapter 4. The participant's identities are not revealed.
Prior notice was given in an invitation to about twenty people. The people chosen were all members of my congregation, and all of them I knew, because of pastoral contact, to have personal experiences of change. Thirteen responded positively and I asked them to attend. The venue, the ancillary rooms to the Church Hall, was familiar to all the participants.

The first Focus Group discussion, held during the morning session, consisted of seven participants. The second Focus Group consisted of six participants and took place in the afternoon. Both sessions began with coffee in the large Hall for a general introduction and overview given by myself. The aim here was to relax the members and to encourage them to enjoy the experience, reassuring them about my research work, the benefit of sharing experiences and the requirement of a degree of trust. After this, the members of the Focus Group were allowed to pair off for discussion and make notes about the Context with the opening question: "Have you experienced change, loss or chaos in these areas of common life – in your employment, in the town, in church life, in your personal life?" This lasted for 15 minutes. This served as an opening exercise to begin the process of exchange.

The group then went to a comfortable room for recording purposes. Two tape recorders were switched on before my introductory question. I allowed the group to speak on my initial introductory question, Session A, which was the Key Information stage for 40 - 45minutes.

I chose to repeat the entire procedure after a 15-minute toilet, refreshment break.
The Context and opening question stage was repeated asking: "Would you understand change, loss, chaos as a process?" in preparation for the recording of Session B, again beginning with the same question as the Key Information. This session also lasted 40-45 minutes.

I inserted probe questions during both sessions to illicit discussion, but I kept my interruptions to a minimum and I did not comment or take part in the reflexive part of the discussions, although my questions did alter the direction of the conversation in order to keep the dialogue on track.

At the end of the second session I asked the participants to look at five psalms, Ps 145, Ps 29, Ps 88, Ps 73, Ps 74 seeking comment from them about how the related to the previous conversation.

Finally I asked whether the articulation of change and loss within the ministry of the church was beneficial. Unfortunately, in the the tape recording of the second Focus Group this part of the discussion ended abruptly, as we had gone slightly overtime.

5.3 Results
The recorded material was transcribed, which took over 30 hours of work, and was the most difficult aspect. Yet I consider this to be the field-notes of the discussion, written not from memory, but as a verbatim account.
The full accounts of both Focus Groups are available. They are labelled for reference FG1 and FG2, Sessions A and B for each Focus Group.
The participants are labelled by capital letters. For reference to a particular excerpt used in the analysis the following will be used, for example. FG2B 12 JL would refer to the second focus group, session B, speaker JL, and paragraph 12 in the verbatim accounts.

5.4 Analysis of the recorded discussion on the subject of change, loss and grief.

Feminist research methods have emphasised the importance of social context and suggested that human experience is constructed within specific social contexts: collective sense is

made, meanings negotiated and identities elaborated, through the processes of social interaction between people. They have also documented the merits of qualitative methods where "meaning-making" can be observed. Wilkinson[1] argues that focus groups are particularly suited to this by reducing the researcher's power and enabling research participants to assert their own interpretation, agendas and points of view. Focus groups offer the opportunity to observe the construction of meaning and the elaboration of identity.

I seek to analyse the product of my focus group research with recourse to the ethnographer's task of writing ethnographic text. I realise that I have only participated in the discourse by setting the subject for conversation and keeping the participants on track. However, the advantage of using the focus group results as field notes is that it allows a representation of the content of discussion, (by myself as an "untrained ethnographer), and reduces the power of the ethnographer to set out a specific point of view to the audience reading his/her text. Although such a *standpoint* will nevertheless be made from my interpretation, I am still allowing my audience to view the field-notes in their entirety themselves, thereby introducing some realism into the project, ethnography seeks to describe, called post-modern reflexivity.

My task is to observe members of my congregation considering reflexively their experience of change, loss and chaos. This is my topic, which will help me construct below a distinctive ethnographic story or "thematic narrative". I will select, explicate, sequence and edit field-note excerpts in order to build up a commentary. Doing this exercise implicitly privileges some voices and excludes others, but it will build up evidence, with what was originally recorded, for my own interpretation upon it. The excerpts will allow the audience to see for themselves the ground for my claim and interpretation.

The ethnography should provide a vehicle through which the voices of the field can, in their own distinctive ways speak; and at the same time, the ethnography should also speak the language of the readers, addressing their issues, theories and concerns.[2]

What I am about to do then is to reflect about the reflexivity of my congregational members, but in doing this I must not forget, that I am re-presenting member's meanings, creating, to paraphrase Geertz[3] "meanings of meanings" or "interpretations of interpretations". From

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[1] Wilkinson, S. *How useful are focus groups in feminist research.* In Barbour, R. & Kitzinger, J. Eds. *Developing Focus Group Research.* London: Sage, 1999.

[2] Emerson, R. Fretz, R. Shaw, L. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes.* London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995. p. 212.

[3] Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Culture.* New York: Basic Books, 1973. pp. 3-30.

my point of view, what I am about to do is a reflexivity of reflexivity. Obviously this becomes an infinite regress, but meaning comes from somewhere; so I am simply showing in a moment of time how meaning is represented and describing how and what members of a congregation refer to when trying to understand change, loss and chaos.

The question for the theologian is; if this reflexivity is apparent, does it suggest a post-modern position for theological reflection? I shall look at this in my final chapter. But first my analysis:

Reflexivity, the fact that we are part of the world we study and experience, also describes how social discourse transferred to written form implicates itself into reality-construction. I wish to show by reference to the focus group reports that as the participants create discourse, about the subject or domain called change, they construct a reality and infer significance about the subject to one another. This significance involves reflection about the experience of change and its constituents or categories: loss and chaos. As the participants enter into the reflexive process, significance is constructed which can be described as an epistemology of participation.

No one appears to have the answer or the full significance about what is happening, but the significance is being created together out of the mutual descriptions of the experiences and situation. I notice that there are five features that are operating in the social process. For illustration I shall refer to the excerpts, not exhaustively but as examples. My comments are in bold typeface to aid the reader.

First of all I notice that there appears to be initial moments of description to begin this reality construction. The description can be about a situation, someone recounts an experience that happens, that is real to him or her.
There are several at the beginning of FG 1A, but examples are found in each session; setting the scene, initiating conversation.

FG1A 7 AA: When I first moved to Hamilton everything was strange, the one thing that was constant was my work, and I found that there was nothing that was constant apart from work, the church was a change, a change in denomination, there was no familiarity in the area, no close friends in the area, everything was changing; so work at that point was the one thing that was constant.

FG2A 4 CC: *Life is at a much faster pace now. Everybody is just rushing here, there, rushing everywhere, where as at one time as a child I remember people out walking on a Sunday afternoon. I used to live in a nearby village before I moved to Hamilton and you would see people out just walking. And everyone seemed to know one another too. They would stand- they would talk. And I thought that was one way of getting to know people, whereas how many of us really know, apart from our immediate neighbours, how many of us really know the people who live up and down the village, er the streets or avenues that we live in? Very few of us.*

FG2A 7 SS: *With interaction being mentioned, the only interaction I've had as been on a racist level. And I find that that over the 38 years that I've lived here, hasn't particularly changed. People are still asking the same questions, "How long have you lived here?" "Do you feel hot or cold?" "How many yards of material in your garment?" which I will not mention or "Where did you learn English?" And I would have thought that in this length of time with the population of other communities growing, people would have learned more; the host community, I mean, would have learned more.*

Or there may be a statement about the domain or its categories, which encourages a response, either in agreement or disagreement. This excerpt from FG2A illustrates the point.

FG2A 49 JL *Essentially maybe this rapid change can be a negative thing and a thing to be feared, but maybe essentially it's also a way of actually, of people looking at themselves and finding out what they are really all about, and then maybe what society's all about.*

FG2A 50 PP: *So you think that's a method of managing change in your life?*

FG2A 51 JL: *Yes -no. Of not necessarily being afraid of it. Of when it happens. If internally you develop, and know why you do things its a lot easier to have an integrity within yourself and respect yourself. And change isn't as really threatening as all that.*

FG2A 52 IF :*Sort of written through it - yes. JL: Yes*

FG2A 53 MM: There's a lot of things happen in life though, that you don't have time to consider what you're going to do. It just comes whalp and that's you and you're stuck with it long and weary. As I know. Illness or something like that and you just have to cope with it the best way you can and hope you are doing the right thing. But you certainly don't have time to sit and say should I do this or do that or the next thing.

FG2A 54 CC: Yes you just instantly react and act on it and hope for the best

Alternatively, there can be a description of "what is not" rather than "what is", an experience which appears to seek validity and agreement by the others.

FG1A 2 J I think I must have led a very ordinary, if non eventful life. Whilst I think things have changed, and there has been grief, and there has been loss, I seemed to be almost immune in some respects, to any dramatic changes. As far as my job was concerned I had moved around it is true, and thoroughly enjoyed the work but the big changes that took place in the environment in which I worked took place just about the time I retired. Consequently I was able to wave bye - bye and walk away; so in that sense it was no big thing.

In this instance the speaker was unable to speak again until the group had told him of their experiences. He then joined the dialogue by a description of change.

FG1A 10 J ......Obviously things are not the same, I know myself as you get older things are different, things effect you... anyway.

Another example is PP in FG2A talking about a lack of authority and discipline.

FG2A 23 PP: I think, of course, there has been a change of outlook towards authority. A policeman had a much higher standing, as did most professions, but the attitudes towards policeman, and to teachers, and to other professions has changed dramatically over the last few years. I am not saying they should all be regarded in high esteem, but the majority were regarded as high esteem. And of course, when they said something or did something it wasn't argued about. And now today, of course, they would argue with you or fight with you, even, you know. And I think that's a big change in life.

Secondly the group enter into a series of interactions about the situation under discussion. These can be subdivided. The feelings about the situation are explored, such as guilt, the need to get away from it all, and the isolation incurred whilst trying to find or come to terms with the significance of the situation.

FG 2B 1MM: I would say what you feel is completely at a loss with the world. You have nobody to turn to really but yourself. You're the only one that can do it. You have nobody else to turn to, although everybody is sympathetic, there're all bursting to get home to make their own tea. And you're left with this person who's not the same person. I really feel that that's the worst part, you've just got nobody to discuss things with.

FG 2B 3MM .... a big sense of relief. Oh thank God I will get to my bed. I won't need to get up during the night. I really can do what I want to do. It sounds selfish, but I just had to get out and do things. You know, So I went away on holidays abroad like a mad thing, and I didn't give a two penny ticket if I ever came back. That's how it took me.

CC sympathises first

FG2B 2CC: That's how you were coping with your grief and your loss.

And then asks MM

FG2B 7 CC: Did you ever resent having to be there all the time? Did you resent that?

After the reply CC then offers a reflection on her own experience

FG2B 10 CC He was very capable, he was always in charge, he took control and now its me and if I ask his opinion of anything, it's you decide. Well we are now two years down the line now, and I'm still taking all the decisions, and there are times... I don't want it anymore, I want to be rid of it. Just the responsibility, the having to be there. And yet I feel guilty, I feel so guilty because I feel the way I do, I want to escape just for a little while; so I get in the car and I go away for a drive, and that's the only way, I find, I can cope.

And from PP

FG2B 9 PP I mean I had all this pressure from family and friends, I mean, the phone never stops ringing. You know, you hardly ever get anything to eat, and all this really got on top of me and I thought I can't do this any more. So I handed it all over and I said "I can't do it."

Within this sense of coping with the situation, I notice also that there may be an internalised self-reflection seeking resonance with the other participants.

FG2A 47 PP And there's really not a great deal, as you yourself, present in time, can really do about it, and some of these things when its worldwide feel so, gosh, I'm just a small pebble in this big ocean and there is really nothing you can do about it so you get frustrated, you worry, and over anxious. So I find the pace of change is really threatening at times. I get really threatened.

FG2B 14 IF That's useful as a reflection to go back on, there's a whole ton of stuff, you've probably heard earlier on that. I'm sort of mithering over at the moment, about all these changes and all the rest of it. And perhaps there is a process here, and I haven't thought of that. That some of these other things , you might come through at the end of it.
But again I relate a lot to this duty thing, my wife's not well at the moment and with 5 kids, they've all gone off...and I'm doing a lot of the extra load. And this feeling of duty...it's not as bad as you've had it, at all, but this feeling of duty and resentment sometimes comes in. I find it difficult, the ironing. I want a weekend. So I have a lot of sympathy with that. I understand that. It's quite helpful to here

Third, there are then periods of discernment, and open-ended discussion continuing the reflexive process, giving energy to it. Even silence is used.

Silence occurred after J had re-joined the discussion in FG1A mentioned under my first point above. He had reflected on his statement of not sharing the experience of change by finally agreeing the point. Silence followed and my probe question had to begin the dialogue again. The group reinforces the point with silence.

Silence was used to reflect upon AA's comment that there two different aspects of change, the random versus continuous or directed change, and moving the dialogue on to consider change as a process:

FG1B 12 AA There are two different changes, and there are two different aspects, one through unforeseen circumstances one is the scrap heap, you fear to be worthless, why me? Or the other side where you've the choice to go, you go graciously and then continue in life and take what comes.

Silence (Long Period) - one minute

FG1B 13 J: Have we really answered the question that we were asked about the process of change is it sort of a deliberate thing or is it just a chancy thing.

Another good example of silence, I refrained from intervening, is in FG1B. The silence aids the reflexivity after AA suggests that the process of change can be a healing process but JJ responds after the silence with reflection on this healing process.

FG1B 7 AA But there are ...in a healing process... there are scars left from the experiences. I also think you if can turn it in a positive way... and I've felt, found that I've been able to use my experiences to get beside people. You know folk that have lost people and say I know how you are feeling, because of...and sharing that. It's funny you thing you are moving on, as they say, and some circumstances or situations..

FG1B 8 DD: bring it back ...

FG1B 9 AA ... just bring things back so poignantly. It could be children singing in church, or it could be a hymn, or it could be...could be just something happening and.... it's just very strange.

Silence

FG1B 10 JJ: *Some changes though can leave you feeling very insecure, and kind of bereft in a way, and it doesn't need to be... it might be a change in not having a job to a change in having a job...mmm and how people react to you in say a situation where you had a job and then you didn't have a job. You feel that people quite often treat you in a different sort of way. And I, at first, assumed that that was because I had a husband who was also earning and in some way you were less worth than you were and so you're left with a feeling of worthlessness in a way that... that you didn't have... you had some sort of purpose then....then after you've lost a job you*

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have no sense of purpose or feeling of no sense of purpose, which is different from actually having a sense of purpose. And then what happens then is you have a period probably of rest whereby you realign your thoughts about your worthlessness and where you can go. So there is a growing period then that happens out of a loss, or an experience of worthlessness that takes place...a change in your attitude to things and your attitude to people

The last quote from JJ appears to identify the period of liminality. In my Chapter 2 Arbuckle uses Victor Turner's expression of liminality to describe when one is confronted with fundamental questions about meaning, identity and purpose or security, an intrinsically unstable stage and uncertain stage, bringing opportunity for reappraisal and creativity.

Participants are looking for significance within the reflexivity of open discussion, amidst continuous change and apparent moments of randomness.

FG2A 41 IF So we create...we go to work, get money and pay someone else to look after our children. And there are great pressures I think, on families; as to the dilemma ladies are in, these days. So I think it's intriguing, because there's a circle, here, and I do not know the answer, but I do know that it is causing ourselves, at home with our children growing up, a lot of concerns. My wife has now just started to return to work, but yea, and we are not sure if we're doing the right thing. It's very difficult.

FG1B 12 A You're still worth something and then life's O.K. Then until something unforeseen happens, then you have got to re-adjust. Sometimes you're then thrown back on your own environment which then to me is a burden, because you're there seven days a week, day and night, and you need to get away from that environment even for half an hour or an hour to charge the batteries, because there is jobs to be done, and you're looking at "oh not another one or another one"; and you need to get away from that environment - a holiday away, go climb the mountains or whatever, and visit garden centres (laughter).

Part of the interaction here, is to seek resolution to the situation, sometimes resolution can be found.

FG2B 14 IF I'm not sure that that feeling of guilt and so on is totally absolved. Except that I do remember, that I did come back to university and I was walking down, it was spring time, down a lovely walk at university, there was flowers and all the rest of it. And I had a feeling, and I think it was a feeling that Christ was walking on the other side of the path beside me, and that he sort of said "It's O.K. I'm here, it is all right you've come forward" And so that got resolved.

Sometimes resolution cannot be found

FG2B 24 SS But it is the fear in your culture here, which eats you away. I may be misjudging you, but I think it is that, because my children are born everybody comes; so why don't they come when they're dead.

Reflexivity is about a concern for resolution and stability set against or in tension with the questioning and anxiety that also appears to form the process of finding significance.

FG2A 46 JL: I think it's when things are fairly stable, it's easier to feel secure about things. But when things are constantly changing, constantly being questioned, in my life it leads to a bit of confusion and I really don't know. And confusion leads to anxiety and you say 'well am I doing the right thing'. And maybe not even anxiety about myself but anxiety as regards the next generation. If I'm feeling anxious, and I really maybe don't know how I feel, about well a lot of things. Maybe the certainty my parents had, for they knew what they felt and could lay that down, can seem to appear more attractive, but at the same time I really don't want to go back to that. But this area, which I find myself in now is a bit insecure and anxiety producing and I thinks that's the same in a lot of areas in life.

FG2A 49 JL: I kind of wonder in my experience of all this confusion and anxiety in my life is related to how I look more internally. Where I am as a person and who I am as a person. So in some ways you could see all these negative aspects, has actually motivated me to look into an area, which I wouldn't have looked into before, because I wouldn't think there's no need to do it. So in that way in my life I've had to take a look inside and see what kind of person I really was. And when I really get into it and actually you know interact with other people who are in the same position.

This searching for resolution could initiate conflict internally or within the group, as in the case of SS who feels obviously very angry about the white culture. Interestingly in these focus groups such conflict was not observed. They seemed to share a common understanding that the congregation was a place to find support even if resolution to the problem was not forthcoming. This brings me to my fourth point.

Amidst this process I find individuals and the group often seek or offer reassurance within the process of constructing meaning. As an example, the personal support offered by friends or the spiritual support by members of the church was often cited.

FG2B 24 SS And it was in this very low point in my life when I woke up in the morning on a Sunday and I felt I had to get to church, and the only place I knew that had morning communion was St. Mary's and I came. And I had only met (Name) about twice before, fleetingly, he had come to speak at our church once and once somewhere else before. And this man who didn't know me asked me "how are you?" and I bubbled and I told him all my story. The thing that he did...if he had just said to me
"Oh there you are, dear it all right", but the thing that he did was he hugged me, and he held me close.

FG2B 27 CC: No, you're never forgotten. Even today, walking in... (Name) greets you and everyone else did . "Oh how are you getting on?".. Its not "Where have you been?" There's no.. you're not being chastised in any way because you haven't been seen for a while.

FG2B 28 PP: People are just delighted to see you again.

There are some instances of biblical narrative being used to offer support, and the requirement for unconditional love to dwell within the narrative of individuals and the group.

FG2B 9 PP And that night, it was prayer for me because I prayed, being Christian I prayed, you see and I said I couldn't cope with this anymore and the Lord would have to help me, take this burden from me because I just couldn't cope with it. And that was the first nights sleep I had for weeks, months.
.... And that's how I coped with it. But that was spiritual for me.

FG2B 29 CC: They are and they accept you for the person you are. It's not conditional; it is not a conditional love in St. Mary's. . And yes there is that family feeling in St. Mary's. I know they are there and I know the day to day...and I know I have said earlier on I can't cope I need to get in the car; which is true. I waken up on a Sunday as well and I think I know I should go to church, and I know that goes through my mind every Sunday; but I just feel there are so many practical things. And maybe it was about time I was setting time aside not to....

FG 2B 30 MM: Come out tomorrow (Sunday) and we'll get these two lads to come and give you a cuddle.

FG2B 32 IF I think it was Isaiah 50 something or other. And like you were saying spontaneously I ringed this. Now I've done that in the past, and you suddenly get things about 6 dead sheep and various other things. Now this time it came up with that passage ' I will always be with you' there's a very nice part of that. Now that would be the closest I think I've felt to unconditional love, and that sustained me through the few weeks it was until it all came back together again. I was very fortunate. It was a lovely feeling. I do remember that again. I keep forgetting about it....

FG2B 33 JL And I remember his unconditional love for me in saying it was OK to be angry, and it was OK to question God, and it was OK not to accept a lot of things, and you know it was really good for me. And the next experience I had, he said "Would you mind if I prayed for you and anoint my head with oil. And he just put a wee bit of oil there and he said, "Can I just pray with you and then I will just leave you" And he just left me in a room and I sat there and I said OK God if your there you're going to have to do something 'cos quite frankly I'm really angry and really ...I remember sitting there and I had my eyes shut and suddenly inside my head there was this really, really blinding light inside my head; and inside my head it came and went down into a cross and then just disappeared. And I'm there saying Holy Sam... you know 'cos it weren't me because I was consciously saying I'm doing nothing here, absolutely nothing and You are going to have to show me you're real. And he showed me he was real at that stage and that changed me, then I was able to say I'm not accepting it, everything because I can't, I can't. But I do accept you are there, and I do accept that you love me unconditionally. You know and can go from there.

FG1A 43 DD I went on pilgrimage to Israel and Jordan in Oct /Nov and somehow we all sang the 23rd Psalm in Petra in the consecrated church, and somehow that seemed to start the healing process. I'd had the 23rd Psalm at my wedding and at (Name)'s funeral. I certainly didn't sing the first verse of it. I found by the time I'd finished I was singing and beginning to feel there was light at the end of the tunnel.

FG1A 44 NN So if it hadn't been for the tremendous support of my husband I don't know how I would have got through that. And I remember sitting trying to feed the baby one night and reading I think it was Psalm 42, I can't remember the exact Psalm "I shall yet praise him" and ...I'll never be able to do that again, but over the years, yes I did.

Finally there is a characteristic that the reflexivity draws on previous experiences as a preparation for the present construction. There were comments that self-esteem, love, worth, finding perspective, or a sense of direction was necessary to make meaning, deal with the situation, create answers to the difficulties, and aid resolution.

FG1A 41 JJ I think, a lot of the people that we see there are people who have had some sense of loss or some loss either loss of job or loss of family, close family and just have had no support, either through community or from family or from the church and have gone to pieces...

FG1B 23 JJ So people who have a normally secure life can have an advantage over people who have no security.

FG1B 26 J: Its a very leading situation isn't it, when you think about it. How does one define what you mean by change, because I think what I was tending to think earlier on was that life was pretty mundane, the changes were not all that significant, but listening to what you are saying now makes me think that probably that is the answer; that security and what have you, if you like, of home life diminishes the effect that change has, in other words you deal with it as you are going along whereas the sort of people that you're talking about would be absolutely stumped by that situation.

FG2A 45 IF: And yet I suspect our children who grow up...this is what they grow into, will sit around the table in another 40 years time and they'll say, "well you know when we were young things were an awful lot better". I do find a reflection now on

the changes that have occurred and I don't like it all that much. And I smile to myself because I think its a typical, as you get older, reaction.

FG2B 35 CC I do tend to go up and round and just hold them. I don't say anything, because to me you can never find the words ever to say to anyone. I think just to hold them is sufficient and maybe going through what we go through, like losing your dad, your brother, you understand and therefore you can give back. I don't know like you whether its unconditional love, but its a love of some kind.

5.5 Conclusion incorporating observations about the Biblical Exercise

The transcripts of the Biblical exercise with FG1B and FG2B are available although brief.

Gerald Arbuckle was keen to reassert that a faithful community reminds itself symbolically through ritual and re-reading of the narrative that the biblical creation myth brings meaning, hope and order to times of change and chaos: times which are a normal dynamic within the journey of life. He seeks a community that understands loss as an end but also a transition to a new period of creative action. This requires a collaborative return to the authoritative foundational narrative and the correlation of the story to the experience of transition which change brings. This transition involves movement from separation or disorientation through liminality to re-orientation. The members of the community may deny, resist, or seek escape from the chaos, but if they take the risk of engaging with the process then there will be a renewed sense of purpose and vision. For the biblical creation myth to be affirmed the community ought to seek this new goal, and it is the function of good leadership to ensure it happens.

Interestingly all the participants were able to identify one of the psalms with their experience, and reference was made to others during the dialogue. They engaged with the explanatory verbalisation (myth) of their community. Whilst the participants appeared to collaborate in reflexivity, constructing a reality, sharing the experience of change, loss and chaos as a part of their general experience, and possibly identifying the process of change with its stage of liminality, it cannot be said with conviction that the group operated in the clearly defined manner Arbuckle would hope for.

It appears that the biblical narrative has importance for the groups; after all it does give definition to the fact that they are members of a congregation. They are likely to refer to the biblical material because of their grouping. Yet it appears to act as only one source of

information, or one part of the construction that point to moments of significance and understanding about the resolution to issues of change. The psalms were used for both consolation and encouragement to make meaning in a participative way. Nevertheless, it is apparent that being members of a faith community had significantly affected the way they sought to find resolution to the phenomenon of unforeseen change through the biblical narrative, and there was one moment where two members of the group spoke convincingly about prayer, and a spiritual experience after an anointing. It could be said that such a group from a congregation have a mechanism to find resolution to change through their identity, and this identity appears to help individuals in this state of seeking resolution to the issue of change.

I am satisfied that this method of hearing the dialogue of two congregational groups has shown the resonance, discernment and openness of their reflexivity, their reality construction. I am convinced that the significance or "meaning making" comes out of this process, even the silence, of discussion. They have not shown a willingness to correlate the biblical narrative directly with their experience, or seek out an authoritative standpoint on how change could be managed. They have, however, shown a degree of "praxis", theological reflection starting from where they understand God to be found, in the concrete reality of their immediate situation. They have also accepted the distinctiveness of being part of that community of faith, which can help to make significant understanding of the issue, sometimes resolving the issue, or if resolution is not possible coming alongside another unconditionally. Their praxis then produces a performance to the listener of what they understand to characterise the issues surrounding change. It appears that such unconditional action performs or produces a sense of esteem, worth, perspective or direction. They have articulated the requirement to care about those effected by change.

The quality of reflexivity offered in this glimpse of congregational life raises questions for the pastoral ministry of the congregation. What appears to be happening is that in the discussion there is an opportunity for reappraisal of the individual participant's "standpoint". In discussing the domain *change*, there is the opportunity to change view and understanding at different levels. The reflexivity occurs cognitively as the participants think out aloud, attitudinally as they reassess or reaffirm their standpoint, and spiritually as they hear one another's experience or affirm their own. Whether such discussion fundamentally changes inter-personal relationships, or social and political standpoints would have to be tested further, but it is interesting that when the groups commented on the use of such focus groups in the wider ministry of the congregation there was awareness, tempered by hesitation, of the possibility, indeed power of such reflexive discussion. The fact that such reflexivity can

reveal and make a difference to real lives indicates how the text becomes an agent of discovery and also indicates that there maybe no fixed centre or authoritative statement about the issue under discussion. The onus is then on how one practices what one understands.

CHAPTER 6

A Post-modern Position for Theological Reflection

6.1 Conclusion

In this chapter I would like to suggest a post-modern theology stemming from the overview of the post-modern debate described in chapter 3 and combining my practical conclusions from the ethnographic description in the last two chapters.

In Chapter 3 I described how modernity was an outcome of different processes and histories, not a single process. Modernity was explained in terms of these interactions set in motion from the ideas of the Enlightenment. The shift in Europe's and eventually the Western world's intellectual and moral understanding was dramatic and it eventually formalised thinking about the individual, society, nation states, consumption, markets, trade and labour; as well as ethics, law and the construction of images and symbols that together described a progressive community. Rather than understanding it as a historic period or form of social organisation, the emphasis is on a progression of ideas underlining the idea of progress itself. Indeed, definition and plausibility to the term "modernity" is offered by the destructiveness towards anything that fails to develop modernity's own rationale of progress and purpose, particularly in the fields of reason, science, individualism, and the uniformity of human nature. Modernity seeks to offer freedom and toleration within this coherent structure of plausibility, supporting its own identity and self-definition. Indeed, it builds and develops upon a coherence of identity and universal self-determined freedom within the constraints of its own perpetuating coherence.

I also discussed in Chapter 3 how such an outcome as this, termed modernity, was open to criticism. This criticism called "post-modernity" is again not a single process but ideas and processes that point to modernity's internal flawed coherence. Modernity has a coherence that imposes itself by its narrative, language, metaphors and rhetorical form as much as the rational logic of its argument. The post-modern analysis accounts for this 'authored' authority or truth, by deconstructing the epistemological assumptions that rational knowledge can be attained and that such knowledge is universal, and thus objective. It rejects that our knowledge of society is ever rational, cumulative or progressive in character or that scientific knowledge leads to betterment or liberation. The priority for post-modern criticism is the diversity of local narrative and difference, heterogeneity, otherness and openness. This criticism counters the universality of modernity's absolutism and highlights its power and suppression over those whose experience is marginalized because they do not

concur or are "different". Post-modern criticism rejects the epistemology of certainty, and the autonomous self-consciously knowing subject celebrated by modernity, because it considers the human subject cannot be separated from the unconscious, irrational, and relative relations of language and culture. Post-modernity then is this inherently self-critical aspect or *reflexivity* drawing out ambivalences and contradictions.

Underlying the debate on modernity is a psychology of separateness in tension with an epistemology of participation. This overwhelming fear, for many, stems from the view that outright post-modern*ism* is the atomising and fragmenting of all cognitive and moral values, which ultimately allows and propagates an indifference to meaningful, purposeful action or intent. As the universal freedoms and tolerance of the Enlightenment ideals fragment under the intolerable weight of modernity's totalising effect and claim on progress, the future for the modern*ist* looks bleak. Alternatively for some post- modern*ists*, the debate is a participative and courageous one, for it seeks not to ground knowledge in a set of indubitable truths and methods, nor chase epistemological certainties in a progressive search for teleological meaning, but to recognise the ambivalences and contradictions which are historically situated, embodied and contingent.

Here is the ground for fresh understanding based on a new active and creative couplet: the reflection of practice amidst the field of experience.

I suggest here that the practical theologian, who is aware of the post-modern argument, will find the congregation a fitting context to examine the performance and practice of Christian faith within their field of experience and the wider experience of the local community. The local Christian community and the practical theologian may gain as much from their own performance of the Christian gospel, retelling the story and narrative through their own lives and participatory witness, creating and challenging their own and others understanding of ecclesiology and epistemology; as much as representing, protecting and defending the idea of Christian knowledge in any absolute sense.

If we agree that epistemological questions cannot be answered by reference to a single source of all knowledge, but are complex, we will go on to analyse and compare, interrogate and appraise a wide variety of different sources of knowledge. The practical theologian will take seriously the conversation or discourse within a congregation about its encounter with God and interrogate how a Christian community understands the significance of Christ, its Christology, how it constructs significance historically, how it affects and communicates its identity. Congregational study if effective will produce a theology from all those who

participate faithfully and recognise the ambivalences and contradictions which are historically situated, embodied and contingent.

If the impact of the post-modern criticism is taken seriously, the task of theology will also be one that takes critical account of how faith communities have represented the Christian proclamation authoritatively. The post-modern argument criticises, above all, how modernity has effected the definition and authority within its own constituency, which, as I showed in Chapter 3, has included the Church.

The kind of questioning and analysis that has given rise to the post-modern importance of *différance,* and a requirement to consider the position of *the other* recognises that an epistemology of participation requires a directness and honesty about the competing claims for meaning and truth. The post-modern analysis presents the proposition that there is no 'reality' or 'truth' prior to language, whereas the modern tradition assumed a simple correspondence between what exists and the language used to describe it. The post-modern suggestion is that language itself has no fixed meaning independent of social context. Such analysis of language provides insight into the importance of social relations. Words and texts have no intrinsic meaning without a community reading and creating significance out of their usage. A sense of the world is formed by socially constructed discourses in which we find ourselves, and to which we contribute. Individuals and communities compete for dominance and evolve relationships of power and weakness from the establishment of contrasts. As well as privilege and authority deriving from the establishment of such contrasts, it is the process of this establishment that derives significance and lends itself to analysis. It is this acknowledgement of process, which is historically situated, embodied and contingent that allows discourse.

Post modernity presented in its weaker form is inherently self critical, reflexive, and yet optimistic. Certainty in the process of reason is replaced by a faith and trust in discourse. An example would be the theologian George Lindbeck's[1] contribution that sees the theological task as descriptive and regulative: outlining the story offered by the faith community and discerning how that story has an internal grammar within the expression of the community. The stronger post-modernist position, however, claims that the local context is isolated, its self-description and self-understanding cannot be penetrated or understood beyond its own context. A theologian such as Don Cupitt reappraises mythological, mystical and poetic Christian theology in this way, releasing the community to express itself without inhibition. Post modernity though in its strongest form, without Cupitt's celebration, deconstructs

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[1] Lindbeck, G. *The Nature of Doctrine.* SPCK, 1984.

modernity's criteria for progress creating a profound loss and crisis of confidence, failure, nihilism and cynicism. Everything is relative. The content of the telling is arbitrary. There is nothing beyond the "local networks of signs that play out their patterns against the void" [2] The weaker position seeks to produce as much new creative forms of understanding countering the potentially destructive and dominant forms of both modernity and strong post-modernism. It is an aspect of reflexivity seeking to draw out the ambivalences and contradictions within modernity.

Continuing my earlier discussion in Chapter 3 this debate is the place for theology to offer its own discourse, and as I have already noted the discussion is taking place as much within its own discipline as with the wider community. The effects of the post modern debate are, as I have shown, far reaching, but I consider it also to be liberating for the practising minister and congregation. This reflexivity if encountered allows the practice of Christianity to contend with its ambivalences and contradictions, and seek a creative outcome from the acknowledgement of its historical situation, its embodied and contingent nature within and through faith in Jesus Christ. Further consideration of this position will allow the practice of Christianity to develop from the context of a faith community that lives and believes in the language of its own expression. Modernity's dominant questions about purpose and progress (teleology), which have certainly influenced the Church's self-expression about how God fits purposefully within the intention of humanity can be challenged by a new emphasis on eschatology. The Church need fulfil no other claim than to be faithful to the divine expression of love through Jesus Christ that is always in the process of being realised (eschatology). It gives the confidence for a congregation to be the place of play, of performance, an open ended field with the possibility of challenging the dominant ecclesiastical and social traditions that have, authoritatively produced a particular and specialist epistemology and ecclesiology.

In this thesis I have presented the position of a Roman Catholic theologian with a strong modernist approach to the practice of theology. Gerald Arbuckle continues a model that has been dominant for centuries, which although refined and crafted for a modern audience, sets the task of theologian, as the *interpreter*, to critically correlate the essential message of the Bible with the contemporary cultural situation in which we live. Arbuckle places the task of contextualising the gospel around the core task of Christian apologetics. The stated requirement or hermeneutical task is for the interpreter of the Christian faith and tradition to stand outside both his tradition and contemporary context in order to correlate the two. He is

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[2] Loughlin, G. *Telling God's Story.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996. p. 18.

the modern anthropologist, describing the scene, and reflecting upon the tradition of the community he belongs to, as much as the community he observes. He brings into play all the skill and intention of a scientist, developing a theory of tradition and the criteria for Christian identity. The chaos of post-modernity, described by Arbuckle as the "Revolution of Expressive Disorder" and the loss of authority and leadership amongst the Catholic religious will be overcome by an affirmation and renewal of the Christian faith formed by a credible and intelligible leadership. Authority shall be restored.

This requires a process called inculturation, which will dissuade the pre-modern notion of an eternal theology, *theologia perennis*, suggesting a double movement in this correlation between gospel and culture. The contemporary context understands and moves beyond its symbols of meaning, by taking on Christianity which itself incorporates new cultural expressions within its life, celebration and thought. According to Arbuckle the stages of inculturation seek to identify aspects of culture that are not in conformity with Gospel values. A plan of action is required with the aim of converting and committing a culture to the dialectic offered by the culture incarnated through Christ. This process is not mechanistic, but, Arbuckle considers, incarnational and christological in its working, a moment of grace. Not taking Christ to a culture, but experiencing Christ, the gospel en-fleshed, embodied, in a specific context, the church born anew rather than expanded. Arbuckle defends inculturation by the metaphor of the flowering of a seed implanted into the soil of a particular culture. Inculturation is the process by which the church and the culture can focus on the "new creation", the transformation, or *refounding* of the old. The new plant, having flowered from the seed, is fundamentally new when compared with that seed and represents the development from an earlier missiology and self-understanding of the Church's role as protecting and nurturing the kernal of faith. Arbuckle understands this inculturation as the development of a local theology.

I have already criticised this approach at the end of Chapter 2. Arbuckle seeks to fit his empirical evidence to the general universalising theme of *inculturation*. His interpretation of the local case study is universalising and all embracing and ignores the fact that there is no neutral place within theology and that theology itself is a cultural production, shaped by concrete social practices. The post-modern analysis suggests a reappraisal of such a position by practising theologians, especially the dominance of a religion that aims to convert. Surely, the intention is to find, and report, the understanding of what it means to live out the Christian faith as an authentic statement in contemporary culture. Interpretation is only partially successful in this for, as Arbuckle shows, interpretation is tradition dependent and

the dialectic between Scripture and Tradition is in danger of being self-contained within its own tradition.

Rather, I would claim that the opportunity is to record, announce and re-tell how the practice of faith may produce a theology which is in discourse with other theologies. The position is clear, a congregation's practice is either to be consonant with a traditional Christian narrative – *the meta-narrative*- that is naturally bounded, universal, constant, or even prescribed – or a congregation has the freedom to express the tradition conventionally and locally but also to display and perform, even construct its own narrative. This allows not only the development of a creative theological position but a discourse rendering an educative and communicative approach to congregational life. The members of a congregation would not be passive upholders of a tradition, interpreting the tenets of Christianity on behalf of the received wisdom of the historical Church, but would be participating in the possibilities faith presents, of a larger vision yet to come. The arbitration and authority of its position would stem from its praxis, how it applies its theology to the life of its own and wider community. The verification would stem from its own action. This can be observed in the Focus Group reports; an unconditional love is spoken about, witnessed to, and also found to construct an important reality for the participants.

The option for the congregation would be the requirement of belief and hope in the Christian faith, presenting a future of possibility, in tension with the obligation and responsibility to present and practice these beliefs in accordance with its own narrative, in discourse with other faith communities and the wider contemporary culture. The intriguing question is: What would be the key components of such a post-modern Christian theology? There must surely be components content with a community's own historically situated, embodied and contingent nature and its perception about the nature of God. And further, there ought to be components attesting to in our situation as human beings, for example; the loss, change, chaos discussed in my research, which when shared identifies a Christian response. Any and all truth claims about Christianity come from the entire form of Christian life, for according to this post-modern understanding there is nothing *beyond* in this world, except to speak and act in certain ways that attest to the Christian faith. Subsequently faith seeks understanding and eventually significance not by correlating our experiences with the biblical text, but by drawing out those components of the text that the faith community can submit to.

Unlike the correlationist the dialectic between Scripture and tradition becomes less self-contained. Reading involves the world around the text, and as the text reads the world, the

world reads the text. The world is viewed from a particular theological place with no neutral position representing the truth; so the question is not one of authority of the text, but one of listening to its resonance, of discernment: the old reading, as well as our reality, always being challenged by the new. The theology *indwells* the context and the context the theology. For the enquiring theologian, such a post-modern approach would require to develop the doctrinal understanding of the incarnation, Christology and eschatology, of which more will be said later in this concluding chapter.

This challenge of the new thought is occasionally almost too much to bear. There are occasions in the biblical text, when the characters within the narrative do not experience God's redemption or liberation. I have already mentioned in Chapter 2 how Gerald Arbuckle is to eager to use biblical texts to justify a founding myth. This method assumes a theologised perspective too readily, without grappling with readings that do not find the nature of God answering the call of his people in a way conducive to the thrust of the whole or overarching (meta) narrative. For example, there are moments when the reader of the biblical text must endure violence by the characters depicting the main story of God's redemption and liberation. There are moments when the nature of God does not seem to respond conclusively (Ps 39 and 88), and one cannot forget the four "texts of terror" studied by Phyllis Trible[3]. Here violence is perpetrated against women with apparent approval: the banishment of Hagar by Abraham and Sarah (Gen 16 & 21), the rape of Tamor by her brother Amnon (2 Sam 13), the death by gang rape and dismemberment of a concubine (Judges 19), and Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter (Judges 11).

Trible shows convincingly how these texts resonate within the Bible allowing the conflicting tension to call the reader into participation. Experiences of loss and chaos, even terror finds us all wanting, they are not easily resolvable, and yet seek out a resolution. The reader, who might well share the textual significance in their own experience, is asked to become involved in the resolution of psychological separateness with epistemological participation to seek the vision yet to come, of justice and compassion, of a solution to the problem of forgiveness. The reader is invited into the drama, not necessarily to re-enact it (!), but enact and perform the desire for liberation and redemption. The congregation submitting themselves, individually and corporately, to the text participate in the ongoing drama within a specific situation. Such a position which I consider fits well with the argument of the weaker post-modernist begs the faithful community's practice or performance of the biblical and gospel story to have a self-critical integrity, a reflexivity, and even an open-ended ness.

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[3] Trible, P. *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives.* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.

It is my thesis that the method of correlation based on modernity's ideal of the rational autonomous-self (rejecting authority outside of itself) produces closure, rather than disclosure in order to protect and not to question a position based on tradition.

This self-critical, reflexivity, and open-endedness allows arguments about Christian practice and doctrine and the moral implications of how we live. It allows consideration about the proper orientation of human life and personhood in light of the claim for God's existence. It discloses the very essence of discipleship, and even the crucial significance of Jesus for knowledge of God. As Kathryn Tanner acknowledges there cannot be disagreement about everything, but it is only *situational needs* that re-work theological positioning.

To some extent, then Christians in their particular situation out of which it (practice) arises are the best judge of it – not their fellow Christians at a distance[4].

The existence of conflict, a corollary to chaos, is to be honestly recognised, as a process to resolution, but disagreement, indeed chaos, may continue. This does not relinquish the sense of reconciliation and forgiveness integral to the Christian faith, it simply reasserts that Christians can only remain open to the text for disclosure, and not control the nature of God they hope to recognise and serve in love. A faithful community, as congregation cannot take itself for granted, neither consider itself the fount of all truth, it plays its part in the open field of discourse accepting the contested nature of its proclamation and purpose. All this liberates the congregation to a respectful hearing of the text, which they claim to be the Word, and encourages them in the mutual exchange of dialogue and of understanding with the world around them– a participatory epistemology. The psychology of separateness is dispelled by a commitment to the argument, strengthening the bonds of agreement but always aware of the partiality of its claim, searching for significance in the faith of the significant one, the subject, Jesus Christ, with the intention of serving his object, love and reconciliation. Whilst revelation is discursive within this contested argument of discipleship, revelation can still be distilled as fact. Subject to human discernment, this does not necessarily imply revelation is subject to human judgement.

Christian theology has to work out within its own discipline the significance of the christological meta-narrative that interacts, as revelation and ultimately judges all human stories. At the same time as allowing no rendering of Christ to be ever complete or undistorted, and accepting the Christian is never Christ-like enough, Christianity must be

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[4] Tanner, K. *Theories of Culture.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997. p. 174.

critiqued on its own terms by coming to understand what the necessary constitute parts are to its own self-definition. As the post-modern reflexivity prevents modernity making Christianity subject to its own totalising rationality and universalism; so the Gospel allows itself to be interpreted by the art of practice. The reflexive process outlined in the Focus Groups could illuminate the elements of worship and liturgy, for example and continue into the habitual workings of a faithful life.

Yet having said this, the reflexivity and discernment necessary for this post-modern theology must identify its own origins. All the above suggests, that even though the emphasis is on the field of practice, of reading the text of scripture and the text of the human subject, sense must be made of it. Its sense, even authority, must come from what it measures itself with, in comparison to other measures in the quest for truth. Such a Christian theology points to its own centre and its locus, and its own Christ centricity. The congregation's commitment or allegiance to the significance of the incarnation is its own christocentric base for believing in Jesus as Christ.

However, as christology is the starting-point, the story or the Gospel ought not to be ignored. Both are implicated with each other, for just as his character is also the source of the story, the story brings out the character and the "who" of Jesus. Neither is it only a matter of interpretation that allows both aspects to fulfil the character of Christianity. The Holy Spirit, understood by the Christian as part of the creative disclosure of revelation, brings the community of faith into new understanding about the person of Jesus as well as the relevance of his story for the present and future. Consequently, Christianity presents not only a historical situated, embodied and contingent story to the world but has something of a claim on the nature and work of the Godhead itself as Trinitarian; Creator, Son and Holy Spirit.

This post-modern theology raises the awareness and importance of the incarnation, christological, and eschatological dimensions of Christian faith to a historically situated, embodied and contingent humanity. It presents our human story as historically situated, embodied and contingent and describes this aspect through time, horizontally. It states that everything to which we refer has a reflexivity or reciprocity, that all our experiences are language and context dependent. The realities we experience and believe for ourselves, as individuals or corporately, are described and held by a language that is formed by the experiences and beliefs themselves. Everything is relational to something else. The facts are confirmed by the experiences! There is no getting beyond this mutual interdependence of human perceiving, learning and knowing, and the language that describes and forms our reality. Yet into this comes the process of perceiving, learning and knowing about the

significance of the christocentric community. A Christian community now gives impetus to the idea that there is another aspect, as well as horizontal, describing the relations between its notion of God and what is created as humanity. It gives credence to the idea that there is another aspect to the autonomous-self exalted by modernity. There is an aspect to humanity that concerns the self-emptying (kenosis) or servant model of living. In our mutual exchange, and mutual interdependence, where everything is now relational we can exhibit that which the Christian community interprets about the incarnation. A kenotic interpretation identifies the incarnation as the transformation of God into man through self-emptying and re-enforces the image of the servant Christ.

In this theology the horizontal time component is intersected; so that humanity may recognise its own significance now and for the future in relation to a creator God. The eternal hope is that humanity may come into a fuller knowledge of and participation in God's creation. This post-modern theology allows this intersection or kenosis to represent the moment, and moments yet to come, for all humanity, when the incarnation and christological significance gives ultimate significance to humanity's own self-understanding. It is, then, eschatological, that the significance of the incarnation is always in the process of being realised. The point of intersection or kenosis is a moment at which our own reality and story encounters the story of Jesus Christ. Our story is then construed in terms of the Christ story presented to us. Each informs and indwells the other, one is seen through the other, just as the parable or metaphors of Jesus see and express further meanings without dispelling the reality referred to; so our understanding comes under a new theological description and we learn something new in this moment. It could be a moment of grace, conversion or metanoia in the language of Christianity.

What were for us the primary facts about reality now receive a new figurative meaning as Christ's reality trains us in a new use of old words in which all primary references are to God.[5]

The possibilities of this theology are its effect upon the tension between the epistemology of participation and the psychology of separateness. The tension is diminished because cognitively humanity is encouraged to look in a new direction. Such a theology allows the human qualities of innovation and imagination to relate creatively and participate in the creation of a new world and a new truth. Our humanity is embraced by the incarnation and it participates in Christ. Participation in the reading of the story, and the process of engaging

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[5] Patterson, S. *Realist Christian Theology in a Post-modern Age.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999. p. 9.

with the main character, is an encounter that is believed to remake our own story in the light of its truth, which is not static but changes into a new understanding, as though caught up into the truth of God. This sense is an epistemological participation of the faithful community and is, an activity, through and with the Holy Spirit, in which the trinitarian God also finds participation.

As a consequence of a transcendent divinity everything creaturely is dependent on its creator for its origin and continuing existence. The claim of Christian doctrine is that the Incarnation brings the meeting point of this transcendence and contingence and produces the dialectic between these two natures into the one person of Christ.

As outlined above, humanity is allowed to participate in this dialectic. It follows then that, redemption; the moment of grace, conversion and metanoia is the moment that the contingent person finds continuing existence with the Creator. In formulated trinitarian doctrine christology links and grounds creation and this redemption. We are contingent yet christologically created and redeemed.

God comes into relation with that which is not himself through his Son, the mediator between himself and creation, and the Son is rightly conceived as Logos, not only the Word spoken to time from eternity, but the imminent dynamic of meaning which holds time and space together[6]

Although this is classically formulated Christian doctrine, and not necessarily post-modern, nevertheless a post-modern theology requires that human creativity is part of God's continuing agency, and that our part in it is not completely determined. It is an actively constructing theology, developing context and within a context, participating in the continuing creation of the world which human beings are encouraged to freely participate in. This is the releasing of an eschatological component in this theology a 'now and not yet ness' that permits the continuing unfolding and perfection of creation and redemption until Christ is all in all.

(Christianity) is post-modern because its story – God's story – imagines a world "out of nothing", a world of becoming, in which people are not fixed essences but life-narratives with a future[7]

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[6] Gunton, C. *The One, the Three, and the Many, Creation and the Culture of Modernity.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993. p. 178-9

[7] Loughlin, G, *Telling God's Story.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press. 1996. p.21.

Unfortunately, in suggesting that creation unfolds in this way, allowing space to develop contexts, a realisation occurs that the freedom to participate is also the freedom to negate the potential of such creativity. The Christian doctrine of sin confidently predicts that our freedom can be used to harm and destroy all that is willed by a creator God. Post-modern life in its strongest and worst form is one that proclaims a creation that is self-conscious, self-evaluating and in essence self-idolizing. The only solution Christianity can offer though this post-modern theology, is the same point of meeting through the incarnation, christologically through the Cross of Christ. The redemption, already mentioned, is often a process that takes place within the framework of distress, loss and chaos. Here in the darker recesses of humanity is the place for new significance and possibility. The dialectic between the two natures, is complemented by the dialectic of the cross and resurrection – the lament of the self in its isolation and distance from God, and the song of praise in its anticipation of the new life of the resurrection. Interestingly in the Focus Groups some of the participants spoke movingly about this dialectic, its struggles and its release.

Such a theology also requires a continuum between the relational experience of perceiving, learning and knowing as a human being and the concept of a relational God. The communal and social aspect of humanity, which is not only physical but also linguistic and conceptual, can be represented in the Christian understanding of God. This is provided for in the formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity, which have wrestled over the centuries with the nature of the Godhead in the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is and has been a doctrine, not without controversy, but indicative of how one expresses the co-inherence, the mutuality or reciprocity of indwelling, whereby the love that is God *acts* and *is* through real and objective relations. The problem of the doctrine is how to explain this reciprocity and mutuality, historically and dialectically at the same time with regard to our own grasping of language and experience to explain concepts such as 'the humanity of God' in Jesus or the self-emptying (*kenosis*) questioning an immutable divinity. These issues are either left as the paradox of faith or as the contradictions, which for some make faith a mystery to pursue or for others impossible to contemplate.

However this doctrine does not mean we are left speechless in the face of this mystery, for the Trinitarian doctrine of God considers that communication is inherent to God's being. It is the act of communication that allows God to be revealed. God's being, formulated from the event of revelation, as a *Word* incarnated, is in itself verbal, and allows God's being to be known. God reveals in the Christian understanding the Word that invites all utterance to come under its judgement through the incarnate Christ. Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1.14 σκενόω – to encamp) In this way human language can become what it is truly

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meant to refer to by a process that this emerging post modern theology suggests is not one way. Such a post-modern theology suggests a critical observation about where we are and what we are doing as individuals and as a community. It is a prophetic theology. Unfortunately, modernity has tended towards the idea that reality is an objective reality, without a knowing subject; so God is above and beyond, transcendent, and therefore beyond our language which is simply our own. The criticisms of post-modernity allow the mutuality of language to be discovered, that humanity can speak the language of God, through our being and our action, as the language of love and of Christ, the incarnate Word.

It is this understanding of co-inherence mentioned within the Christian doctrine that provides the continuum between the relational knowing of humanity and the concept of a relational God within a post-modern theology. For the suggestion has already been made that we are permitted, even invited to participate in the continuing eschatological unfolding of creation. It is a dynamic 'becoming', an outcome still to be determined, through the relationships of humanity in and through the relationships that describe God. A theology is being described that allows humanity's mutual reflexivity and reciprocity initiated by the post modern condition to be realised and known through God's own reciprocity and co-inherence. This does not necessarily mean that God is also related and affected by all that goes on in creation. Therefore my suggested post-modern theology is distinct from a process theology.

We become truly human through absorption into God's story, as God is known to us through a self-emptying (*kenosis*). The essential narrative of sacrificial love presented, and spoken of, through the christocentric community allows the possibility to re-appropriate and participate in the language that helps to create new contexts for social relationships. As the potential of these new relationships is realised within the narrative of the Gospel, the notion of relationship with God, through discipleship and vocation, is made apparent through the community that not only upholds the tradition of this way of living, but also is a continuation of the life in Christ, questioning and renewing not only tradition but Christian identity. There is then a place, in this post-modern theology, for the *ekklesia*, the community of those faithful to the understanding that all human personhood receives its completion and salvation in Jesus Christ, a community that lives and believes in the language of its own expression, faithful to the language of divine expression.

At last I can return to the pragmatic condition of the congregation, as the place for the reflection of practice amidst the field of experience. As I have outlined above, the nature of the Church is inseparable from its practice, yet it is concerned to proclaim and uphold the mystery of a transcendent God. This is an important point, because if the mutuality and

reciprocity I have mentioned did not respect or proclaim this transcendence, then the expression of its faithful practice, and the God it professed would be of its own making. We are left with the question of verification. How does the post-modern church, contributing to theology in the way I have suggested, know that it is *not just creating a God in its own image?* All of the above rests, as explained, on the issue of incarnation and the christological link between creation and the notion of redemption. The key-point is the praxis, the relation of its theological theory to its practice:

The Church both participates and represents (or bears) this incarnational reality (and thus participates in divine being) as the locus of Christ's being and agency in the world. [8]

Hearing the voices of the congregation, as outlined in the focus groups, is a way of recognising this participation and representation. The incarnational reality, is a relational one, represented by traditional models of the church as the People of God, or the Communion of saints, but it must also be verified, not just by the fact that the Church exists as a historical reality, but that the people representing it are involved in the mystery of its verification. The post-modern thesis allows the proclamation of God -as transcendent - to be provisional, and revisable, but it does not mean that God's transcendence is in anyway under question. The proclamation is provisional and revisable because human experience is such that each experience has to be spoken about and referenced not only against tradition but the immediacy of the present situation. I am back to Tanner's earlier comment quoted in this chapter that it is situational needs that re-work theological positioning.

This thesis has shown that the situation of change, chaos or loss, perceived by many to be a symptom of something that has to be corrected, or redeemed, or even gone through, to preserve the understanding of a tradition, need not be correlated to any correcting or universal idea supported by rationality. Arbuckle's theological position, as an example, was one in which correlational methodology was used to re-enforce a traditional universal Roman Catholic theology, albeit not a pre-modern one. Such experiences of loss and change can in themselves demonstrate the adequacy of Christian faith, and the Church's proclamation, or even the inadequacy of the moment. Hearing the story, partaking in the narrative, of such examples of change, chaos and loss (it might be also be within stories of homelessness, poverty, violence for example) may challenge, or reform ecclesial practices and negotiate belief. For, what is happening through the listening and engagement in the story, as the focus Groups showed, is a critique of the cognitive processes that give

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[8] Paterson, S. *ibid:* p. 138.

significance and purpose. A congregation, or the wider Church, may be able to discern a voice, a word, the Spirit, that creates new understanding and offers gain to ecclesial being. A post-modern theology, as suggested, reaffirms the ontological whereas influences under modernity deny it.

The key to this new understanding for the ecclesial community is the theological underpinning of the incarnation, and seeing personhood as christological. The image of God in humankind is the image of Christ and the church is the place and community that represents this idea. It is a community that holds this two-way relationship between God and humanity, not as a passive channel of grace, but an active community that is *becoming* in grace and love. It is free to create and be created by the metaphors and parables of divine expression continually spoken and heard in faith, not fixed in meaning but renewed in significance by language not bounded but participating in something new. The Church in this way is not confined by the need to uphold tradition or its formularies, but participates in the becoming of God's own being, in an eschatological community that gathers up into the being of God those who seek their humanity in and through Christ.

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