



WT

BRINGING BAKHTIN INTO THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Paul Woods

TEMPLE TRACTS



Bringing Bakhtin into Theological Reflection

Paul Woods

Temple Tracts

Book 20

Sign up for our free newsletter at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter [@WTempleFdn](https://twitter.com/WTempleFdn)

©William Temple Foundation 2020

Cover image from [Pixabay](https://www.pixabay.com/)

Author

Dr Paul Woods is a research tutor at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and an Affiliated Researcher at The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing. His academic journey has taken him from engineering, through linguistics and theology, and on into continental philosophy and literary theory. His first PhD was in the Cognitive Linguistics of Chinese and the second was a Biblical Theological Response to Migration in East Asia. His principal research interest involves using lenses from continental philosophy and sociology to examine East Asian fiction as a representation of social change and trends.

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Author | ii |
| Contents | 1 |
| Introduction | 2 |
| 1 Theological reflection | 3 |
| 2 The thought of Bakhtin as it pertains to theological reflection | 7 |
| 3 Bringing Bakhtin into theological reflection | 11 |
| Conclusion | 18 |
| Bibliography | 19 |

Introduction

This tract is a modest attempt to refine and inform theological reflection by referring to the theories of the Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). It is modest in that the reader will discover many parallels between the basic steps and principles of theological reflection and relevant ideas from Bakhtin. This echoes Roland Boer's belief that Bakhtin and biblical form criticism are long lost siblings (2007, p. 3). While Bakhtin's ideas may not be well known among theologians and Christian practitioners, the parallels are there and discovering the Russian thinker can strengthen, inform, and justify our practice of theological reflection. The words 'refine' and 'inform' are used because Bakhtin's ideas can help us see more clearly the need to embody our practice in context, engage in various kinds of dialogue between context and text, and accept a certain tentativeness about our interim conclusions.

The tract first presents an overview of theological reflection without embracing any particular model, and then introduces relevant concepts from Bakhtinian thought. It then seeks to bring these two related streams of thought together, before laying out some conclusions.

Chapter 1

Theological reflection

In essence, theological reflection is a dialogue between (socio-cultural) context and the tradition of the church. In their excellent introduction to the practice, Patricia Killen and John de Beer (2006) talk about a conversation between our experience and religious tradition. ‘Experience’ refers to that which we have gleaned from our own life journey, as well as that held within a community. Meanwhile, they see ‘religious tradition’ as broader than the written deposit of scripture; it also includes tradition and the lessons of history. Siting theological reflection within practical theology, Swinton and Mowat hope that the activity will ‘draw us into the divine mystery’ (2006, p. 12) while leaving us anchored in our own contexts. There is also a strong sense that theological reflection is about change, or at the least the potential for it; we are to move from the ‘what is now’ to the ‘what might be’.

For Graham, Walton, and Ward (2005), theological reflection concerns the growth and discipling of individual believers within the community of the body of Christ. They believe that the body of Christ is greater than the sum of its parts, and, as the New Testament epistles tell us, when individual Christians come together there is potential for good as well as the reality of tension and division. The authors also advocate the taking of Christian faith into the broader culture in which the church finds itself. Yet this is not about the simple communication of doctrinal truth; like other writers on theological reflection, Graham et al. desire to produce practical wisdom, or *phronesis*.

According to John Trokan (1997), there are various models of theological reflection, which differ in how much they use the social sciences, or personal experience, or the emotions as well as how to influence the church and the broader community.

However, the common elements are attention to and analysis of particular experiences in context and the subsequent conversation between the results of that analysis and Christian theology and tradition.

Concerning that ‘conversation’, Roger Walton (2002) categorises models of theological reflection into linear, cyclical, and dialectical. He dismisses linear models as they allow only one-directional movement from tradition to real life (Walton, 2002, pp. 35, 212). Cyclical models can also be thought of as spirals, which should move us forward to new starting points for further reflection and action. While such models do provide new understandings of both situation and theology, Walton claims that they may diminish genuine dialogue between context and tradition (2002, p. 213). Finally, dialectical models promote more rigorous interaction between the situation which is to be reflected upon and the sources of theology. However, their complexity can make them unwieldy and somewhat unpopular with practitioners. Regardless of the method, Walton insists that the starting point for the process should be ‘experience or practice’ (2002, p. 213).

The emphasis on dialogue is vital because theological reflection helps us make sense of challenges and experiences which are new for us or even for the whole of humanity. This dialogic process is *generative* (my word), allowing us to embrace and respond to developing situations. We not only respond to new challenges, but also add to the collective wisdom of the church. For Graham et al. theological discourse (of which theological reflection is a part) is ‘a process rather than a product’ (2005, p. 5).

Another important concept is embodiment. Killen and de Beer (2006) mention this almost in passing, but the term is hugely significant for theological reflection in general and for this paper in particular. For them, the idea is that our experiences are rooted in our being and become part of us. After mentioning embodiment, Killen and de Beer discuss the parables, taking our lives as individualised parables which can form the basis of our own theological reflections. Graham et al. make the similar point that practical theology relates to the life of the people of God in particular settings and comes from ‘concrete human situations’ (Graham et al., 2005, p. 9). The notion of embodiment has implications for dialogue, which will be unpacked later in this paper.

In their introduction, Killen and de Beer also mention the ‘movement toward insight’ (Killen & de Beer, 2006, p. xi), which is part of our essential human need for meaning. This brings a sense of dynamism and exploration; theological reflection cannot remain static and any conclusions are tentative. The need for clear and unambiguous answers

is especially marked in some Christian traditions and can work against meaningful theological reflection by closing off the possibility of new experiences (Killen & de Beer, 2006, p. 5). Where the scripture is given a very high status, overly conservative perspectives can make it very difficult to bring contemporary issues into genuine dialogue with the authoritative text, as the latter may be understood narrowly and rigidly. In addition, in such circles ‘church tradition’ may be viewed with suspicion when an incorrect concept of *sola scriptura* rules out the wisdom of both the doctors of the church and its ordinary members over hundreds of years. On the other side, in what the authors call ‘liberal Christianity’ (Killen & de Beer, 2006, p. 3), current experience has a higher status than any form of wisdom with connections to the past.

This brief look at theological reflection has revealed its essential characteristics. First and foremost is the dialogue between context and the tradition of the church. Where theological reflection uses the social sciences along the lines of Catholic Social Teaching, the principal conversation partner is the analysis of a particular socio-political context. However, Graham et al. describe a form of theological reflection based on the interaction between the wisdom of the church and the emotions and inner life (2005, p. 18). These two different implementations suggest a dialogue between the cognitive and the affective as well between the individual and the community. The social sciences bring an objectivity that differs from more subjective personal experience. Thinking about church tradition evokes a dialogue between revealed, scriptural truth and the wisdom of church fathers, age-old practices, and contemporary theologians. Ecclesiology could also be relevant as some church traditions emphasise a flat, democratic approach to the development and delivery of practical theology, while others are more hierarchical and expect wisdom to be delivered to the church by bishops and academic theologians. Finally, although it has been said that the body of Christ is moving south and east, many around the world feel that the brain remains in the West. The need for dialogue between majority world and western theologies and understandings of the role of the church in the world is clear.

Second, comes the importance of specific context, described as ‘embodiment’ by Killen and de Beer (2006). Theological reflection must relate the particularities of a given situation to the universality of scripture and theology. Embodiment implies not only the placing of the locus of the reflection within a person, but also suggests a broader *contextual* relevance in the sense that Shoki Coe (1973) uses the word: theological reflection is about relating theology not only to cultural forms and traditions, but also to contemporary socio-political realities.

Third, and connected with embodiment, is inherent open-endedness. Humanity is finite in time, space, intellect, and capacity for experience, and so embodiment implies that theological reflection and its results are tentative and indeed unfinished. Our knowledge of both theologies and situations is limited, and, in addition, the contextual issues we face are always changing. We must accept a certain roughness and readiness about the whole enterprise. If we are to bring our finite humanity into dialogue with a theology which reflects the nature and being of an infinite God and apply this to a set of realities in constant flux, then we must accept that this process will never yield a finished product.

Chapter 2

The thought of Bakhtin as it pertains to theological reflection

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian literary theorist and philosopher largely unknown in the West until the last quarter of the 20th century. Many of his works were discovered in a damaged and fragmented form in the Soviet Union and translated into English and published in the West after his death. His earliest work was produced shortly after the communist revolution in 1917 and the young Bakhtin soon fell foul of the Soviet authorities under Stalin, eventually suffering internal exile. It is difficult to discern Bakhtin's faith position and scholars do not agree, yet there seems little doubt that his worldview and philosophical leanings were consistent with aspects of Russian Orthodox theology at the time. Bakhtin's thinking grew from reflection on the interaction between self and other, eventually developing into a complex tapestry of 'embodiedness', 'unfinalisability', and 'dialogism'. These terms will be explored below, but for the moment the reader is encouraged to see the resonances with the three principal elements of theological reflection.

The corpus of literature by and surrounding Bakhtin is vast. As well as his own works, organised around a broad range of themes, there is a substantial body of secondary literature, commenting on and explaining Bakhtin in his original context and looking at his relevance to situations a long way from Stalin's Soviet Union. This paper only introduces elements from Bakhtin's thought germane to the theory and practice of theological reflection introduced above, which are dialogue, context, and open-endedness.

Bakhtin is one of the pre-eminent voices in dialogue and dialogism. Indeed, one of his best-known works is entitled 'The dialogic imagination' (Bakhtin, 1981). Alastair Renfrew claims that much of Bakhtin's thought, in philosophy and literature, derives from the importance he attached to 'self-other relations' (2015, p. 23).

The mutuality inherent in an interaction between oneself and another means that our self is defined and refined vis-à-vis the other. Thus, rather than reducing others to a lowest common denominator or homogenising them as simply different to ourselves, we must go out from ourselves, interact with specific others around us, and then take what we have learnt back to our own self-understanding (Bakhtin, 1993, pp. 48-49). Our knowledge of other people cannot be left at the level of theoretical abstraction and must be grounded in temporal and spatial experience in what Bakhtin calls 'empathising' (1993, p. 15). Inasmuch as Bakhtin requires us to combine 'head and heart', his use of the term 'empathising' can be thought of as broadly similar to our everyday usage of it.

From this basic orientation concerning self and other, and as his engagement with literature deepened, Bakhtin developed his idea of polyphony, the multiplicity of voices within the novel (1984, p. 7). In his work on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin goes further, claiming that the mere presence of different voices is not enough, and they must dialogue with each other (1984, p. 18). In the novel, and by extension in all domains of human endeavour, meaning is created not by the presence of different voices but by their interaction. Returning to Dostoevsky, Bakhtin claims that the novel is developed so that it is impossible for the reader to be a passive observer; he or she is drawn into the text and makes meaning together with the consciousnesses represented in the text. Note that this is not postmodernity or some overstated form of reader response or undermining of authorial intent. It is simply the recognition that we interact with others (as living human beings or texts) and negotiate meaning in a personalised apprehension of broader truths which are incomplete unless we play our role. In this way we can escape from the 'ideological monologism of modern times', where 'monologism' is Bakhtin's critical term for the stultifying conformity of thought and consciousness resulting from European Enlightenment rationalism (1984, p. 80ff). Although Bakhtin's exploration of dialogism began with philosophical reflection on self and other and then moved into the narrower confines of literary theory and the novel, Renfrew's summary comments on the Russian's ideas are helpful. 'Concepts are inherently dialogic – all meaning is dialogic' (2015, p. 90) and 'dialogism [is] a truly universal, social phenomenon' (2015, p. 91).

With dialogism as a theoretical underpinning, derived from self-other interaction and the novel as the integration of different voices within and beyond the written work, we can look a little deeper at other themes from Bakhtin.

His emphasis on the relationship between the universal and the particular is significant. It is striking that what he wrote in the arguably monocultural and certainly politically repressive environment of the early Soviet Union is so apposite for the totally different world of today. Bakhtin is not opposed to theories and intellectual abstractions but wants them applied and fleshed out in the world of human experience. He talks about ‘Being-as-event’ (1993, p. 12), arguing that true being in all its completeness can never be reduced to a mere theory. ‘Eventness’ is essential, as our being is not only embodied, but is something that we do and even perform; being is lived experience in the here and now. There can be stark divisions between cognition and experience; thinking and theorising about something are simply not the same as experiencing it. This is why the ‘act’ (the event of doing) is of supreme importance (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 12). While Bakhtin is clear about the limitations of human theorising and the construction of models and representations of concepts and behaviours, he is not opposed to the intellectual endeavour. His point is that we recognise the limitations of our own understanding and theorising. Rather than throw our hands up in the air and confess that we cannot understand, he asks us to live in the tension between theoretical abstraction and located, embodied human experience. His comments on ideological monologism above are a warning against a one-size-fits-all approach to intellectual endeavour. Yet neither is Bakhtin arguing for individualistic fragmentation; his negotiation between universal and particular and his rigorous study of the novel as the work of an author strongly imply that in our own embodiedness and eventness we accept and make reference to the reality of existence in bodies which move and change in space and time. Dostoevsky writes his novels and invites us to join ourselves together with what he has created. Renfrew claims that Bakhtin’s nuanced negotiation is in strong contrast to the mind-body dualism of Descartes (2015, p. 31), and some might perceive embryonic elements of what we now understand as critical realism (Bhaskar, 2011).

Notions of dialogue and embodiedness flow naturally into Bakhtin’s ideas of finalisation and unfinalisability. Our embodiedness and the fact that our own experience (eventness) must be held in creative tension—in dialogue—with theoretical generalisations and abstractions mean that any understanding we have can only be tentative. Our individual acts are tiny, localised situations, which occur uniquely and

are uniquely brought together with theory. The uniqueness of both the event and the way in which it meshes with the universal means that exhaustive knowledge is impossible (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 13), and theoretical abstractions are dubious, even bringing a kind of death (Renfrew, 2015, p. 36). The uniqueness of the event and our embodiment in time and space contribute to Bakhtin's idea of 'unfinalisibility' or 'unconsummation' (1990, p. 13), depending on the translation. Indeed, he claims, 'if I am consummated and my life is consummated, I am no longer capable of living and acting. For in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated' (1990, p. 13).

Chapter 3

Bringing Bakhtin into theological reflection

Bakhtinian ideas of dialogue form the basis of an early article by Carol Newsom (1996), in which she seeks to bridge the chasm between biblical studies and theology. For her, practitioners of both disciplines are possibly too attached to monologic positions inherent in their own fields, and to make progress in a truly biblical theology she advocates a dialogue through which meaning is forged. The dialogue concept is extended by Juliana Claassens (2003), who wishes to add the voice of the reader to the conversation between biblical text and theological themes.

At around the same time, Barbara Green's biblical studies project applied Bakhtinian ideas to a section of 1 Samuel to understand the story of Saul and liberate it from narrow, conservative readings (2000, p. 191). A few years later, the Society of Biblical Literature published a whole volume dedicated to the interaction between Bakhtin's theories (of literature in particular) and form criticism (Boer, 2007). In the introduction to the volume, whose primary theme is genre, Boer tells us that for Bakhtin, 'meaning itself is generated through dialogism' (Boer, 2007, p. 2). This dialogic orientation is emphasised by the editor's claim that Bakhtin's theories and form criticism are long-lost relatives (2007, p. 3); it is natural to bring the Russian's ideas together with a particular approach to biblical text. The various chapters in the volume are thus applications of aspects of Bakhtinian thought to specific chunks of biblical text from both testaments.

Finally, in her volume *Writing Theology Well*, Lucretia Yaghjian makes explicit reference to Bakhtin while discussing hermeneutics. She draws on his notions of dialogism and embodiedness to argue for a ‘hermeneutics of diversity’ (2006, p. 196), which allows a variety of different cultural voices to come together and produce new meanings, as opposed to a single interpretation reminiscent of ideological monologism. Here, then, is a move from text to context, rather than a focus on biblical text and theology alone.

Yet, while the use of Bakhtin in biblical theology, biblical studies, and critical hermeneutics is encouraging, there is little evidence that his theories have been brought into the more practical realm of theological reflection.

The section above on theological reflection introduced some basic concepts of the practice and fleshed out some of the details concerning the raw material for and steps in the process. Following this, the simple introduction to certain themes in Bakhtin’s thought has provided a basic orientation to his philosophical position. It is now time to bring the two parts of the endeavour together and use Bakhtin to improve and extend theological reflection.

Naturally, and consistent with the basic ethos of both theological reflection and Bakhtinian thought, I begin with dialogue. If we think of theological reflection as a dialogue between (socio-cultural) context and the tradition of the church, then Bakhtin’s starting point of self and other is useful. For many Christians, and especially those in the evangelical tradition, the tradition of the church (often narrowly understood as the Bible alone) is ‘the self’ and the extra-church, non-Christian context is ‘the other’. In addition, many new to the idea of theological reflection assume or even insist that the process must begin with the scripture because it is deemed normative. But Bakhtin’s ideas of mutuality (1993, pp. 48-49) can help us here. We must begin with ourselves and then reach out to the other, understanding that person or issue on its own terms as far as we can, but then bring what we have learnt back to ourselves and continue in an attitude of dialogue and openness. Two points emerge from this. The first is that our understanding of the scripture is itself the product of dialogue between written text, cultural and historical processes, and theological hermeneutics. The fact that different theological positions exist on the origin of the universe, the nature of the Eucharist, the end times, and women in ministry, for example, are proof that any theological position may appear to be true, but in reality is at best the pseudo-asymptotic result of complex interactions between text and context; also, it is very difficult to say whether the long processes

of theologising and understanding of the text of scripture began with text or context. We may think that we come to a piece of scripture or a concept in theology without any preconception brought by our culture, the world around us, or previous interpretations that exist in our faith community. But such a view is naïve, as it is impossible to approach any written material without bringing something to the text. The second is that, in a globalised world full of complex issues, the challenges that both the church and society face are not fully represented in the canon of scripture. The world has grown in complexity and interactivity, while the Bible remains the same. Also, apart from Christianity, or rather Christianities, there are many other schools of thought and philosophies, all of which jockey for position. There is neither a one-to-one correspondence between issues in society and issues in scripture, nor between societies and religions. In both cases, there is a one-to-many relationship. For this reason, and in the spirit of various approaches to theological reflection and pastoral theology, it is necessary to begin with context. It must be conceded that the specific matters in society that we believe merit the attention of the church may be identified according to some pre-existing perspective derived from the scripture, but even this is the result of a dialogue.

For the church in a given cultural and political setting, the challenge is to respond to factors or phenomena which are seen as threatening to the well-being of ordinary people in a way which promotes biblical *shalom* and wholeness. This means engaging in a dialogue between these and the scripture as we understand it, in the knowledge that others who do not share our beliefs may also be engaging with similar issues in a different way. In a society which exhibits social injustice, poverty, or gender inequality, for example, other religions, traditional cultures, and political groupings will also be creating responses according to their own viewpoints.

Following Bakhtin's 'going out and then bringing back' (my summary of his self-other interaction in Bakhtin, 1993, pp. 48-49), we may well find that the dialogue between self and other, which here approximates to our own theological understanding and the extra-church issue in focus, results in a change in our theological position. The very process of bringing our theological ideas into dialogue with the real world can act to refine and inform them. Indeed, this has been the experience of the church and of theologians in developing liberation theology, holistic mission, and contextual theology. According to Andrew Walls (2015), mission and the crossing of cultural frontiers necessitates new theologising. In a sense, what I am saying is nothing

new. However, the use of Bakhtin gives us theoretical underpinnings for the process, exhorts us to go out from self to other and back again, and requires us to think in terms of ongoing dialogue between text and contexts.

Apart from this most basic and essential text-context dialogue, I have also mentioned dialogue on the ‘Christian side’, so to speak, such that we recognise that the theological orientations of different schools or denominations are themselves the products of centuries-long discussions and even conflicts. Less radical, but of equal importance, is the nature of the Christian resources we bring to the process of theological reflection. When teaching theological reflection in certain conservative evangelical groups I have often noticed a certain stiffening of the back in some present when I mention ‘church tradition’. As already mentioned, for some in these camps, the only viable Christian resource is the Bible itself. In addition to the point already made about where interpretations of scripture come from, Bakhtin helps us to accept not only theology next to scripture, but also the broader tradition of church and mission. Dialogue and its cousin unfinalisability take us into the history of the church. What has been done before that may be of assistance, in our own ecclesial corner or elsewhere? Have there been successful, or even disastrous, attempts at dialogue between church and context? What can be learned from and what must be avoided? Church tradition must therefore take account of examples of ministry within and across cultures, as well as the writings of great men and women of the church. Dialogue asks us to read widely, going beyond the scripture or theological studies, and glean from the wisdom of men and women of God across time and space. At the same time, the limitations of finite human beings mean that we will encounter weakness and error; yet this does not mean that the process of dialogue is invalid. The corollary to this is that in looking at issues in ‘society’ we should also interact with secular scholarship. Many well-meaning Christians who desire to influence society for the better are ignorant of or even hostile to the wisdom of the secular academy and broader thinkers. Bakhtin urges us to talk to everyone and push the boundaries in dialogue; for the Christian this does not mean a denial of the uniqueness and authority of the Christian position. However, it does require the application of wisdom and a clear understanding of one’s own theological orthodoxy.

One further element in this dialogue ‘on the Christian side’ appears during this sifting process. In taking what we might broadly call ‘Christian tradition’ to dialogue with ‘the world’, there is a secondary dialogue between major and minor themes, or

perhaps core and peripheral theological beliefs. Each Christian or church group needs to identify both non-negotiable principles and matters on which greater flexibility is acceptable.

Finally, as the church is now a worldwide entity which crosses cultures and political systems, it is essential for dialogue to proceed between normative theological positions normally associated with the West, or even just the United States, and non-western theological orientations. In my own experience, it felt very odd to be among people attempting theological reflection on issues in Southeast Asia (for example) by bringing purely western understandings to the task. It matters little whether such resources are neo-fundamentalist from the southern United States, classic Reformed theology from Western Europe, or modern pan-western Charismatic theology; if these are not brought into dialogue with the way in which non-western people think about the teachings of scripture and theology, as well as how they look at themselves and their faith, then the results will be lacking. The objection may be raised that the use of culture as a means of developing theology is risky; the response is that the western theologies mentioned in this paragraph are results of just such a process in the first place. Here, Bakhtin's embodiment reminds us that taking local contexts seriously is essential.

Many models of theological reflection are constructed as circles or spirals. In most cases the principle is that theological reflection leads to a new understanding of how to respond to a particular issue (and perhaps a refining of our theological position), which is the starting point for subsequent action or reflection. This is why a cycle of breaking down an issue and then responding to it is presented as a spiral. In some other models, a circle is preferred, because a particular social concern may be complex and need breaking down into a number of smaller parts, each of which needs a cycle of reflection itself. Sometimes, we may reflect on the same issue several times, in several different ways. But however the model is structured and implemented, there has to be some kind of cycle; a simple coming together of tradition and context is not sufficient. Bakhtin's principle of unfinalisability is helpful here. Every event is unique and limited, and we cannot draw straight lines between a particular case and universal principles. There is always a tension between the particular and the universal, and general conclusions and higher-level abstractions must be used with great care. Bakhtin is not 'anti-theory' but he does warn us that excessive theorising removes us ever further from a particular event and can be reductionist.

The nature of theological reflection and the tension between theology or tradition and socio-political context require us to be tentative and open to refinement and correction. As we go into the process, Bakhtin helps us see that we cannot and should not expect easy answers or set formulae. We should always be open to change and correction, whether we are relying on theological responses to situations crafted by other people or using our own. This points to a more localised and experiential approach to theological reflection as we place ourselves into the process and live in the tension between theory and practice. It is consistent with the juxtaposition of our limited nature and God's infinite reality, and here we come back to Swinton and Mowat's 'divine mystery' (2006, p. 12). We are also encouraged to draw on emotional and affective responses to situations, rather than purely cerebral approaches to theology, reflecting the increased acceptance of the emotions in Christianity around the world. This is a further echo of Bakhtin's embodiedness principle but relates to the affective realm of a person or community's being rather than their ethnic culture.

It is appropriate that the final substantive section of a paper on Bakhtin's relevance to theological reflection should finish with some comments on the influence of the Christian tradition on the Soviet philosopher. In her important work *Christianity in Bakhtin*, Ruth Coates claims to fill in a gap in Bakhtin scholarship by explicitly documenting 'Christian motifs' in his work, although he did not follow a systematic Christian theology (2004, p. 21). He was a 'religious intellectual' rather than a true follower of the Orthodox faith (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 120).

Certain motifs are evident in his work and relevant to this paper. For Coates, the Christian idea of God the absolute and infinite appearing to us in the human form of Christ lies behind Bakhtin's insistence that the theoretical and abstract must be anchored in the here and now of human experience (2004, p. 35). Although this article has used the technical term 'embodiedness', in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1993) Bakhtin uses the terms *voploshchenie* and *inkarnirovanie* repeatedly. These are Russian and Latinate words for 'incarnation'. Bakhtin's notion of 'embodiedness' is thus inseparable from the theological idea of incarnation.

The nature of the Christian God is fundamental to Bakhtin's idea of dialogue, because God is a triune conversation within Godself. Further, God's relation to human beings is a model for self-other interactions. Another theological aspect of the dialogue notion is found in Kozhinov's record of an interview with Bakhtin in the early 1960s (1992). Concerning the kingdom of God, Bakhtin states that while 'objective idealism' places it outside of us and Tolstoy claims that it is within us, in fact the

kingdom is ‘between us, between me and you, between me and God, between me and nature: that’s where the kingdom of God is’ (Kozhinov, 1992, p. 114). It is only through this polyphony of voices that meaning can be created.

Bakhtin was also familiar with the apophatic (negative) approach to theology of the Orthodox tradition, which emphasises the limitations of the human mind in understanding God. We can never know God exhaustively, and Lossky speaks of ‘a tendency towards an ever-greater plenitude’ (1957, p. 237). Here we see parallels between Orthodox theology and Bakhtin’s unfinalisability.

Writing of the ‘Christ event’, Bakhtin discusses the difficulties we face in apprehending comprehensively what occurred through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 16). If we rely on theoretical abstractions, we can understand it in a removed and disengaged sense; while if we focus too much on the historicity of the events, we may lose its universal and theoretical sense. Meanwhile, if we overemphasise ‘aesthetic intuition’ then we can grasp the universal meaning and historical reality of what happened but may find ourselves cut off and distanced from it. Here, Bakhtin reminds us to keep a creative tension between the particular and the universal and juxtapose this with our own embodiedness. Renfrew (2015, p. 27) echoes and paraphrases this as he asks us to avoid the extremes of theory and individual experience and advocates a ‘productive alternative’ (2015, p. 28).

In summary, ‘Christ may be said literally to embody many of the ideas closest to Bakhtin’s heart’ (Coates, 2004, p. 35), and this permits and requires us to take Bakhtin as a model for the productive interaction of theology, philosophy, and the broader social sciences.

Conclusion

This brief examination of basic concepts in theological reflection and summary of relevant areas of the scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin has shown the considerable overlap between the two. While theological reflection is used as a tool by the church, Bakhtin provides theoretical foundation for the enterprise. This means that we can confidently marry theory and practice. In addition, Bakhtin's philosophical insights allow and encourage us to view theological reflection in his terms: embodied, unfinished, and dialogic. This means that the practice of theological reflection—bringing the resources of the church into conversation with contemporary issues—can and should be marked by its grounding in the lives and situations of specific people, a sense of tentativeness about our conclusions, and a strong sense of dialogue all the way through.

It is hoped that, whilst this short tract has a somewhat theoretical bent, the ideas explored here will facilitate healthy and transformative theological reflection for the church in the modern world.

Bibliography

- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1990). 'Author and hero in aesthetic activity'. In Michael Holquist & Vadim Liapunov (Eds.), *Art and answerability* (pp. 4-257). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1993). *Towards a philosophy of the act*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bhaskar, Roy (2011). *Reclaiming reality: A critical introduction to contemporary philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- Boer, Roland (2007). *Bakhtin and genre theory in biblical studies*. Semeia Studies Volume 63. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Claassens, Juliana (2003). 'Biblical theology as dialogue: Continuing the conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin and biblical theology'. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 122(1), 127-144.
- Clark, Katarina, & Holquist, Michael (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin*. London: Belknap Press.
- Coates, Ruth (2004). *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the exiled author*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coe, Shoki (1973). 'In search of renewal in theological education'. *Theological Education*, 9(4), 233-243.
- Foley, Edward (2014). 'Reflective believing: Reimagining theological reflection in an age of diversity'. *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 34, 60-75.

- Graham, Elaine; Walton, Heather & Ward, Frances (2005). *Theological reflection: Methods*. London: SCM Press.
- Killen, Patricia & de Beer, John (2006). *The art of theological reflection*. New York: Crossroad.
- Kinast, Robert (1990). *Let ministry teach*. Madeira Beach, FL: Center for Theological Reflection.
- Kozhinov, V. V. (1992). 'Kak pishut trudy, ili proizkhozhdenie nesozdannogo avanyurnogo romana (Interview with N. Pankov) [How to write works, or the origin of an uncreated adventurous novel (Vadim Kozhinov talks about the destiny and personality of M. M. Bakhtin)]'. *Dialog, karnaval, khronotop*, 1, 109-22.
- Lossky, Vladimir (1957). *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*. London: James Clarke & Co.
- Newsom, Carol (1996). 'Bakhtin, the Bible, and dialogic truth'. *The Journal of Religion*, 76(2), 290-306.
- Pattison, Stephen (1999). 'Some straw for the bricks: A basic introduction to theological reflection'. In James Woodward & Stephen Pattison (Eds.), *The Blackwell reader in pastoral and practical theology* (pp. 135-145). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Renfrew, Alastair (2015). *Mikhail Bakhtin*. London: Routledge.
- Swinton, John & Mowat, Harriet (2006). *Practical theology and qualitative research*. London: SCM Press.
- Trokan, J. (1997). 'Models of theological reflection: Theory and praxis'. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 1(2), 144-158.
- Walls, Andrew (2015, June 17). *The rise of global Christianity* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/rnlt1EJFju8>
- Walton, Roger (2002). *The teaching and learning of theological reflection*. PhD thesis, University of Durham.
- Yaghjian, Lucretia (2004). 'Teaching theological reflection well: Reflecting on writing as a theological practice'. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 7(2), 83-94.
- Yaghjian, Lucretia (2006). *Writing theology well: A rhetoric for theological and biblical writers*. London: Continuum.



Thank you for reading.

‘Temple Tracts’ are short, free-to-download books from the William Temple Foundation, presenting engaging analysis on key debates in religion and public life. Find out more and download the other books at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/temple-tracts.

Sign up for our free newsletter at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk.
Follow us on Twitter [@WTempleFdn](https://twitter.com/WTempleFdn).

©William Temple Foundation 2020