

# Introduction

## *The Shape of this Book and What It Contains*

Our thinking, as we present it here in this book works across several disciplines to illuminate a powerful concept—liminality—which has been developed through close attention to experience and reflecting upon it to identify patterns and processes in human experience. It seeks to engage theologically with this rich nexus of ideas.

We present the book in three distinct but interconnected parts which broadly follow the cyclical, or, better, spiral, pastoral cycle (e.g., Green, 1990), but not in any slavish fashion. This is important for you, the reader, since you don't therefore need to start at the beginning and read to the end. It may be just as enlightening, possibly even more so, to start at the end! Each chapter also stands somewhat alone and yet is connected in its own way, we believe, to the whole.

We have already begun with experience and we'll continue from that starting point in Part I where we offer several classic critically reflective approaches to the phenomena or lived experience that make up liminal processes in human behavior. We call these the origins of liminal theory and present the "primary texts" of the subject in some critical detail. These approaches are grouped broadly into three disciplines; anthropology, psychology, and organizational theory placed within practical theology. They each

enable us to “reflect on our experience” in an interdisciplinary manner which is a key element in any practical theology enterprise.

Having laid a solid foundation, we then, in Part II, take a look through the “liminal lenses” we now have in order to see afresh three core functions of the Christian Church<sup>1</sup> (or movement as we will call it): reading scripture, worship, and mission. In terms of the pastoral cycle we are connecting here broadly with the Christian tradition.

Finally, we return on the cycle to experience, or, to put it another way, experience via renewed action, in Part III. Here we make use of the power of the dynamics of moving through liminal space in several wider activities of Christians and churches. We engage with “liminal leadership,” use liminality as part of a framework for theological reflection, as well as thinking about discipleship in general through the activities of learning, spiritual formation, work and pastoral care.

In conclusion we suggest what we have learned about a practical theology of liminality in the book as a whole.

For the rest of this introduction we offer a summary of the key “jumping off points” in the book as a taster for the rest of it, like the trailer for a film. Hopefully this might enable you, the reader, to decide where you would like to start. However, some readers more familiar with the subject may wish at this point to dive straight into a particular chapter.

### *Finding and Building Liminal Frameworks*

It was a social anthropologist, Victor Turner, who developed the concept of liminality in his landmark book, *The Ritual Process* (2009 [1969]), building on the earlier work of Arnold van Gennep who had introduced the concept in his work *Rites of Passage* (1961—published originally in French in 1909). Turner studied human transitions between significantly different roles which, seemingly, have to be ritually marked in all societies, such as birth, marriage and death. From his anthropological observation of these rituals he developed a three-stage process to describe them: pre-liminal rites, which are to do with separation from the old

1. In this book we will consistently refer to the institution as “Church” and the local manifestation of the institution as “church.” Where both are implied, we will use “Church.”

way of life; a liminal, awesome, even chaotic period; and, finally, post-liminal rites, which concern reaggregation into society in the new role. Furthermore, he developed a common understanding of a movement from and then back to the world of structure—the everyday life of the society, via the world of anti-structure—by definition undefined, primal, chaotic perhaps, and engaging with the transcendent in a very direct way—a place of profoundly intimate engagement for the people involved which he called *communitas*. We will take an in-depth look at anthropological approaches to liminality in Chapter One.

Turner was not writing from a wholly Christian perspective. However, in observing faithfully and clearly human behavior initially in one culture—the Ndembu tribe in Zambia—and then across different cultures, he was able to identify human behavior in relation to transition and the transcendent which we can recognize only too vividly from within the Christian tradition. Such study raises many questions about what the key principles are which translate the concept of liminality across contexts, cultures and spiritual and religious contexts—a question we will keep asking in this book. It raises too the question of what a distinctively Christian engagement with liminality might look like. Also, what light the concept might shed on the Christian movement and its activities, as a resource for carrying out theological reflection, and, in fact, the whole of the life of discipleship.

A number of theologians have taken up the idea of liminality, from Urban T. Holmes III (1979) and his work on priesthood and liturgy, Eamonn Bredin (1985) and his study of the Gospels on discipleship, and Bruce Reed (1978) in his engagement with an understanding of the nature and purpose of the Church, through Alan Roxburgh's book (1997) on mission from a liminal perspective, to William Countryman (1999) in his understanding of the liminality of the priesthood of all. Yet we do not think there has been one book that has attempted to offer a careful look at the concept of liminality from the available and varied disciplinary approaches combined with a sustained theological reflection on the process. We hope engaging in such theological reflection will affect our definition of liminality, just as the engagement with the liminal will develop our theological understanding and affect our action. Practical theology is always a two-way process. In this sense then we have been eager that this book be written, even if it has been many years in gestation. Further, it is a book that we believe has needed to be written.

### *Other Approaches to the Liminal*

So, before we get to laying those theological foundations, let us trail the two other disciplinary approaches we will use to engage with liminality in Part I: they are drawn from psychological and psychoanalytic schools and organizational thinking. First, there is Donald Winnicott, the British object relations theorist and child psychoanalyst and his work on transitional space (1991 [1971])—beginning with the vital role of teddy bears. We will see how his understanding of the critical significance of the gaze between mother, or primary parent, and child, creates this “space between” from which play, creativity, culture and the cult, including our representations of God, emerge. In that transitional (or liminal) space our negotiations between dependence, interdependence and autonomy may be said to develop. It is an amazingly fertile nexus of ideas which have clear links to that of liminal space and will be the subject of Chapter Two.

Then, there is the part played by organizational and systemic thinking in the form, first, of Bruce Reed’s oscillation theory which we have already alluded to in terms of its engagement with the nature and purpose of church in society. This can be found in fullest form in his book, *The Dynamics of Religion: Process and Movement in Christian Churches* (1978). The subtitle is deeply significant in apprehending that liminality has to be conceived in terms of process (essentially ritual action/s) and movement (the creation of groups of people motivated by a core belief). It is vital to grasp that liminal process happens in and through a dynamic and holistic movement of people through time—while intersecting remarkably with the eternal and transcendent.

The link we will make in Chapter Three between oscillation theory and the so-called “U Movement,” as expounded by Peter Senge et al. (2005) and Otto Scharmer (2013, 2018) in “Theory U,” is one we owe to Colin Quine of the Grubb Institute, which is now no longer in existence. The U Movement attempts to describe the process of profound change that can happen in individuals, organizations and whole societies. Rosy and Nigel found a real-time connection between the U movement and the shape of experience of many participants at the Transforming Clergy Leadership conferences, which we will describe later, especially in Chapter Seven.

David Ford's book, *The Shape of Living* (2012 [1998]), is a reminder that the Christian life takes on the shape of baptism, passion, death and resurrection—and the whole trajectory of salvation history is recapitulated each time we come to the Eucharist. If we're going to allow any "overwhelmings" (to use Ford's apt phrasing) to shape the others that come our way, why wouldn't it be these? The form of the U Movement outlined by Senge, Scharmer and their colleagues works with this fundamental shape—which can be seen in different ways in other worldviews and frameworks.

We will be using these multiple disciplines as sources for theological reflection – which of course draws its wisdom from across all the disciplines and each of them helps refine our theological understanding. All truth is God's truth in the realm of practical theology and we will say a bit more about that now.

### *Theology and Liminality*

As soon as we start engaging theologically with the concept of liminality, we find ourselves asking an extra set of questions about how we are using the terms—and, indeed, questioning afresh how other people from different standpoints have used them. In contemporary culture, the word liminal is often used very loosely in the world of the arts to describe in-between or mysterious states. Turner (2009 [1969]) is very precise in the way he uses the idea of the liminal process, identifying it as a time between clearly defined roles or states of being in a culture. However, he works primarily from an example in which the culture concerned is premodern and sharing one, unified religious framework and worldview. He certainly saw liminal processes as working across different cultures, and cited the examples of monastics as "permanently" liminal people (with a very clear "rule") and theological seminaries as places where people move between different roles in society—both within western cultures. However, we live in a postmodern plural culture—which is not a situation he could have fully engaged with when he was writing (and we will engage with this situation at points throughout the book).

So, we have the task of uncovering our theological assumptions that we bring as Christian writers to the liminal process. For us, it is important that God is not in a box, and transcendent engagement (which is key for Turner in the middle liminal

stage of the process), and therefore transformation, cannot be planned for in some kind of cause-and-effect straight line or even accessed on demand. All we can do is cooperate as far as possible with the conditions in which we are likely to be open to God's transformative work. The way we use language, therefore, is very important in avoiding making the liminal process appear as something we can control or produce on demand, and we are particularly aware of that when we get to describing the leadership conference we have worked on together or any training framework. Using the example of ordination training, from a Christian perspective we certainly cannot guarantee that attendance or participation equates *per se* to openness to a liminal experience, whether residential or not.

Therefore, letting God be God is one important way to avoid seeing liminality as some kind of "theory of everything." It is worth quoting Thomassen here (2014: 7):

Liminality explains nothing. Liminality *is*. It happens. It takes place. And human beings react to liminal experiences in different ways. . . . Briefly put, the concept of liminality can help us understand transition periods and social processes of change in a different light.

The process of engaging theologically with the concept of liminality, understood with some rigour from its roots and journey, will release other explicit principles which our faith gives us in relation to the in-between. Then our theological reflection on our experience will compel us to go and wrestle again, a dialectic and circular dynamic in which, as we have already pointed out, we will be involved throughout this book. If the original concept involves a change of states of being in society, then we will have to wrestle with how we are changing and evolving in the ever-increasing pace of change in society. It is worth the reader noting that some of the chapters of the book were written during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. It was impossible not to bring this clear liminal experience into the material we have presented. A pertinent and very contemporary example of the need for writing the book in the first place.

Given this fast-changing pluralist society, we have to think about how we might understand liminal processes both within and beyond the Christian household of faith, but this should not

be beyond the wit of a Church which has the concept of Kingdom to locate itself within. As Christians, we are constantly faced with how to make links between inside and outside in our faith, and the concept of liminality potentially gives a very helpful place betwixt and between for that to happen, something we shall seek to illustrate.

### *Hermeneutical Key and Pastoral Method?*

The only whole theological book exclusively on the subject is Timothy Carson's earlier work *Liminal Reality and Transformational Power* which was first published in the US in 1997 (second edition, 2016). Carson suggests, importantly, that working with and understanding what he calls "liminal reality" can offer people of faith and especially those in leadership positions "*a hermeneutical key and a pastoral method*" (1997: xiv, our emphasis). We agree wholeheartedly with this statement, supported by Thomassen, quoted above, which implies that seeing places and events, even periods in history including our own times, through the lens of the liminal can give us important and transformative insights. Such an approach still leaves us corporately with choices about whether we are open to this transformative potential or we resist it in different ways. The issue of what happens when potentially liminal periods get disrupted or stuck and go wrong in various ways is one we will want to look at. However, that is not all, as, once we have understood the power of the liminal, we can recognize how it fits with other Christian themes and cooperate more fully with God's transformative work in liminal processes and places.

Once we understand the basic shape and movement of the liminal process as separation, anti-structure and reaggregation (a fuller explanation will be given in Part I), we can make connections with the salvation history of Judeo-Christian faith for it proceeds through intense liminal periods. Carson particularly notes the importance of the transitional 40-day/year period in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Here we come to the heart of our book and the claims that we are going to make in it.

If the concept of liminality is a "hermeneutical key" (which has to be applied critically of course—it is not the solution to everything), then we should be able to develop critical theological reflection on it which will continue to interact with further developments



in the field. This will be a pivotal moment (in Chapter Four) at the heart of our book. An example would be how further critical anthropological work on liminality in postindustrial societies is required with the development of Turner's concept of the liminoid, which we will explore and which will be vital to the way we use liminal theory to engage with contemporary culture in the world and the church.

### *Liminal Bible Reading*

The concept of liminality as we have already noted is a transcultural and foundational element in human life and so crosses over into many fields. Chapter Four will continue to employ the liminal lens to read the Bible in the light of liminal theory. We will see how much of the Bible can be read in this way from macro themes, such as exodus and exile, through to the story of Jonah, the birth narratives of Jesus and the ubiquity of symbol (such as the use of "40") to mark out liminal space and times. The theme of marginality—the poor, oppressed, and unclean—will also emerge. Reflection on such people as these, and the potential for the marginal to become liminal in a transformative way, will be an important part of our work here.

### *Liminality, Liturgy and Worship*

In Chapter Five we seek to understand the worship of the triune God as a core function of the Church, at the heart of its purpose. Liturgy, in its broadest sense, is a key chosen liminal space for Christians and will be reflected upon, developing ideas from Bruce Reed's oscillation theory, integrating insights from Winnicott, as well as drawing on thinking about liturgical ritual. A key question explored earlier in Chapter Three is how the transition is made from gathered worship and the roles taken up there into the "liturgy after the liturgy" through life and work—both for clergy and the rest of the *laos* (these ideas will be extended in Chapter Ten). How clergy can be leaders of worship and worshipers themselves needs urgent attention, as does how the church recognizes the true leadership of lay people in many aspects of mission. We shall extend this reflection in Chapter Five into a deeper study of worship and liturgy through the lens of liminality.



*Liminality and Missiology*

Christianity begins and ends in the glorification of God through our worship, yet the faith would not exist without the reach of the missionary God beyond Godself in creation and redemption. Mission then is the concomitant core function to worship of the one, holy, catholic and *apostolic* Church and we address this part of the Christian movement in Chapter Six.

As noted above, we are in the midst of a time of rapid change and transition—we are “post” modernity (or in late modernity) but we do not know what the new era will be—which leaves us all betwixt and between in very deep and profound ways. In the midst of this we feel the pressure upon the life and future of the Church. Will it survive? Will we be able to recognize it in its new form if it does? What with the climate, economic, technology and pandemic crises, the world can be a different place every few months, let alone years. We know where have come from but we do not yet know where we are going. One of the key tasks of the Church is therefore to arrive where we are (where God always is), neither holding on to old identities or seeking prematurely to find new ones, but rather to be able to live with unknowing and in faith and to let newness and innovation emerge from our (eschatological) future. In doing so we may just have the resources to address Thomassen’s claim that our current era is actually deliberately permanently liminal since the beginning of the modern period—he claims that western society may not be that interested in seeking renewed structure in the post-liminal (2014: 11). Here would be a renewed “gospel” for our age.

*Models for Cooperating with Liminal Processes*

In Part III of the book looking to liminality in action we first offer a more specific application of organizational insights towards Christian formation in Chapter Seven. By way of systems-psychodynamic thinking—often referred to as the Tavistock tradition—and its particular application in the Transforming Experience Framework of the Grubb Institute, we will develop a particularly systemic model of theological reflection. These approaches undergird the Transforming Clergy Leadership conferences that Rosy and Nigel worked on together and which

we have experienced as liminal on many occasions. We will describe the model, give examples and particularly describe the process of role analysis, its praxis.

*Liminality and Discipleship through Learning, Spiritual Formation,  
Work and Pastoral Care*

In the rest of Part III, we turn our attention to some of the key issues facing the Church and Christian disciples in contemporary society, as they have been thrown up by this engagement with liminality. How do we learn and grow in our faith? What to do about the Sunday/Monday split between worship and work. How does liminality help us in the pastoral crises we face in ourselves and others?

As we suggested above, we will need to revisit at the end of our book the question of where we have got to in both our definition of liminality and the theology of liminality in the light of the exploration. We will also need to focus on what the key challenges are for us in our action. Will we know our end from our beginning? Will we come to a place and know it again for the first time?

At the end of each chapter we offer some reflective questions or exercises for the reader (or groups of readers) to interact with and possibly even journal with as you read the book. We wonder if the reading experience might also be liminal for you. We certainly hope it will be transformative.

*Questions for Reflection*

1. Are you ready for the ride? If reading and interacting with this book is to become a truly liminal experience for you, there may well be something of a rollercoaster about it—and a genuine process of “letting go” of existing patterns of thinking and understanding and “letting come” of new ways of seeing and acting.
2. With the outline of the book now before us, think about where your interest and attention is drawn. What brings you to read this book? What do you want to find out about?
3. What hopes and expectations do you bring to the book? Which chapters will you especially want to concentrate on? If you use a journal or other way of reflecting by writing, make some notes as you begin which you can refer back to as you proceed.