



# The human web: Reflections on the state of pastoral theology

by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

**A**FTER COMPLETING graduate work in religion and psychology, I found myself teaching pastoral care at a seminary. In making that transition I experienced two surprises. The first was the jolt of moving from the academic study of religion and social science to the peculiar discipline of pastoral theology. Although I had had clinical training and professional experience in chaplaincy and pastoral psychotherapy, I had never had an actual course in pastoral care or pastoral theology, nor had many of my courses emphasized pastoral or congregational practices. This was not just a personal quirk. The field of pastoral theology is expected to be more oriented toward ministerial practice than other disciplines; at the same time, it has struggled with the ambiguities of its identity. The routine use of the psychological sciences in the past few decades, while helpful, has also complicated the struggle.

The second blow was encountering a student body that was approximately 50 percent women and 50 percent black. Although I had a personal interest in listening to other voices, none of my graduate school courses had required a text by a woman or by a person of color. In a society increasingly aware of the ways in which gender, race, class and worldview shape our ways of knowing, my good intentions quickly proved to be insufficient in working with such diversity.

Both shocks represent significant issues in pastoral theology. It is a field that is still trying to clarify its identity in relation to the academy and the church and its methods in relation to the social sciences. And now it must do so while taking heed of the many new voices that are contributing new perceptions of pastoral care. Both issues deserve comment.

Whereas biblical studies experienced the challenge of modernity in terms of historical-critical approaches to scripture, pastoral theology experienced it in terms of the emergence of psychology and sociology as disciplines. For the past four decades pastoral theology's toehold in seminaries has depended to a considerable degree on its use of clinical psychology. Pastoral theologians may have felt uneasy about the ethos of pop psychology and self-analysis, but they flourished within it. Whereas in 1939 few theo-

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logical schools offered counseling courses, by the 1950s almost all of them did. And 80 percent listed additional courses in psychology and had at least one psychologist on staff. For a brief period in the 1960s and '70s, Carl Roger's *Counseling and Psychotherapy* was a standard text, and the fundamentals of empathic, reflective listening were a staple of introductory pastoral care courses. In the 1970s and '80s, Howard Clinebell's variations on this theme, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, replaced Rogers as the conventional introductory text. Although the first edition situates modern pastoral care within the long history of pastoral ministry, most of the text is devoted to particular counseling techniques for an array of problems.



The widespread use of psychology has fostered questions about how pastoral theology can be both a genuinely theological and a scientifically psychological discipline. This identity crisis is readily apparent in the assorted job titles. We may teach pastoral care, pastoral counseling, pastoral psychology, pastoral theology, practical theology, religion and psychology, psychology of religion, religion and personality or religion and culture. As these titles indicate, the discipline has been roughly divided between those who emphasize practical care and counseling approaches, those engaged in the critical correlation of theology and the social sciences, and those involved in the social scientific study of religious experience. Meanwhile, among our colleagues the turn to psychology has generated stereotypes of the field as skill- and feeling-oriented and as therapeutically shrewd. Among clergy, this approach has generated a reliance on psychological jargon and counseling techniques rather than on theological language, pastoral mediation and congregational care. On these accounts, there is some reason for critique.

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**P**ART OF THE APPEAL of psychology has been its ability to bridge the distance between human suffering on the one hand and theology, philosophy and ethics on the other. During my graduate years, clinical training in both chaplaincy and pastoral psychotherapy was one way to bridge the gap between academy and church, although it received no official academic

credit. When I began teaching I tried—against the pressures of institutional structures—to maintain positions both in the seminary and in a pastoral counseling center. Without some kind of pastoral practice, I realized, my efforts in theological education were going to become a noisy gong.

I was intrigued, however, by the fact that few of my colleagues in other fields felt the same tug. Why shouldn't those interviewing for positions in biblical studies, ethics or theology be asked about their pastoral practice? How do other seminary faculty resolve the gap between academic theory and ministerial practice?

Pastoral theology discovered in the social sciences a fresh model of how to relate theory and practice. In many respects, figures like Freud, Heinz Kohut, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and M. Scott Peck write like sophisticated practical theologians. It was no accident that when a friend in the midst of a marital crisis reached for a book, he bought one of Anne Wilson Schaef's popular titles. Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* has been recommended more frequently by pastors and chaplains than any religious or theological text. Therapeutic-oriented books have reigned in part because they offer clarification: they translate theories of human nature, fulfillment and anguish into understandable terms. Pastoral theology took up this helpmate both to its benefit and its detriment. Though it avoided theological abstraction and academic trivialization, it was lured toward technique, theological vacuousness and an individualistic, subjectivist orientation.

**M**OST THEOLOGICAL educators would still assert that empathic listening skills and sensitive individual counsel are prerequisites for ministry. But significant changes are afoot, symbolized both by the apparent decline in the popularity of Clinebell's text and the publication of a revised edition of it. Most teachers have added to their repertoire the theories of more recent schools of psychology such as family systems and Heinz Kohut's self psychology. More critically, the focus on individual counseling and educative listening has come under criticism from a variety of angles; the prevalence of counseling courses has waned; "pastoral theology" has replaced "pastoral psychology" as the overarching theme; and the notion of care has returned to center stage, with counseling regarded as an important but not comprehensive specialty. Finally, almost everyone acknowledges the limits of the therapeutic paradigm and talks about sharpening our understanding not just of theological paradigms but of the social context as well, through the study of sociology, ethics, culture and public policy. Specialized professions that rely on therapeutic paradigms, such as chaplaincy and pastoral psychotherapy, will be understood increasingly as only two of the manifestations of pastoral theology.

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The focus on care narrowly defined as counseling has shifted to a focus on care understood as part of a wide cultural, social and religious context. This shift is evident in a variety of recent publications, among them James Poling's *The Abuse of Power*, Pamela Couture's *Blessed Are the Poor* and Larry Graham's *Care of Persons, Care of World*. Anton Boisen's powerful metaphor for the existential subject of pastoral theology was the "living human document." Today, the "living human web" suggests itself as a better term for the appropriate object for investigation, interpretation and transformation. Public policy issues that determine the health of the human web are as important as issues of individual emotional well-being. Psychology will serve a less exclusive (though still important) role, while social sciences such as economics or political science will become powerful tools of interpretation.

**T**HE WORLD of parish ministry has offered a little-recognized wealth of insight for teaching, and recent congregational studies have also begun to confirm the congregational nature of pastoral care. Aware of the limits of relying on one-to-one counseling and the expertise of the pastor, the pastoral care curriculum has focused increasingly on how congregations



provide care and on clergy as developers of networks of care rather than as the chief sources of care. For instance, Roy Steinhoff Smith, professor of pastoral care at Phillips Graduate Seminary in Oklahoma, requires students to work together in small groups in his introductory courses to evaluate their different congregations as "caring communities."

In the midst of this shift, related changes are occurring in pastoral counseling. On the one hand, pastoral therapy has acquired the status of a clinical profession. On the other hand, in part because of its relationship to religion, it does not have the kind of recognition accorded secular therapeutic professions. And despite the notable contributions of clinical pastoral education and pastoral psychotherapy, many chaplains and pastoral therapists have tenuous relationships with seminaries and congregations. As the pastoral theology curriculum in seminaries broadens and as the clinical identity of pastoral counseling solidifies, pastoral counseling training centers will have to address questions about their ministerial, educational and institutional place in relation to the congregation, academy and society. To be taken seriously by other mental health disciplines as well as by insurance companies and governmental structures, pastoral psychotherapy must develop its own evaluative criteria. To be taken seriously by churches and seminaries, it will have to affirm its connections

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and contributions to ministry and theological discourse.

Maxine Glaz has provocatively observed that the move away from psychology in pastoral theology may be part of an "impetus to avoid issues of gender." Just when women in pastoral theology begin to find feminist psychology an incisive tool for reconstructing pastoral care and theology, she suggests, the "people of a dominant perspective emphasize a new theme or status symbol."

The criticism points to the difficulty of bringing diverse voices into play. Criticism of the individualistic focus of pastoral care has come in part from feminist theology and black theology. Few books in pastoral theology have addressed issues of gender, race and class. Even the recent history of pastoral care by E. Brooks Holifield sees women, slaves and "others" primarily as the objects of care, rarely as caregivers and never as the source of new ideas. Some, like Clinebell, have revised their basic texts to add new sections on "transcultural" perspectives. David Augsberger's *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* has received wide acclaim. But such books represent—as the authors acknowledge—dominant perspectives. Augsberger's definition of an otherwise helpful idea, "interpathy," is a good illustration of the problem. He uses the term to encourage entering into a "second culture" with respect for that culture "as equally as valid as one's own." Many feminists and people of color have pointed out that the subordinates in a society already intimately

know the realities of two worlds, that of their own and that of the dominant group. Augsberger's interpathy is absolutely necessary, but it is a trait relevant for the dominant culture. Those in the "second culture" have been practicing this maneuver for a long time. Their first step, by contrast, is to affirm their own reality as worthy of equal respect.

**D**ESPITE THE PASTORAL nature of much feminist theology and careful treatments of specific issues in pastoral care such as abuse or spirituality, there is no book by a single author on pastoral theology from a woman's or a feminist perspective. Such texts are on the way. These problems are less severe for black theology, as a consequence of contributions from scholars with long tenure in the academy such as Archie Smith and Edward Wimberly. Still, wider recognition and reliance upon their work has been slow in coming. On the other hand, because of the limited size of the discipline, women and people of color are closer to the center of the field than is the case in other fields.

What will it mean to bring new voices into play? *Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care* offers an indication. Edited by Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, the book includes the work of five authors in ministerial settings and four in the academy. The book aims to nurture intellectual acuity in the midst of pastoral practice. Almost every man who has read this text in my courses testifies that it powerfully illumines women's lives. Women students want to send multiple copies to their ministerial colleagues, men and women alike.

Emma Justes states that if clergy "are unable to travel the route of hearing women's anger, of exploring with women the painful depths of experiences of incest and rape, or enabling women to break free from cultural stereotypes that define their existence," they should not be doing pastoral counseling with women. When those involved in pastoral care do not know how to recognize the realities of violence toward women, they foster further damage and violence. Pastoral care givers must sharpen their sensitivity to the stress that women experience as wage-earners and homemakers, the economic devaluation of women in the workplace, the health issues of concern to women, and the implications of female images of God for self-esteem.

These kinds of understandings are merely a beginning. The authors of *Women in Travail*, all white professional women in mainline faiths,

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invite “companion volumes written by nonwhite, ethnic, non-middle-class women within Western culture and by other women elsewhere throughout the world.” No Hispanic, Asian, African or American Indian pastoral care and theology has been published. And no one text deals with the pastoral agenda for men that might include issues such as fear, anger and grief over role changes, vocational confusion or tensions between work and family. Protestant pastoral theology and related clinical associations have all but ignored rich traditions and histories of pastoral theology in Roman Catholic, Jewish, evangelical and other circles.

We cannot predict what difference other stories and traditions will make to general formulations of the field. When we admit that knowledge is seldom universal or uniform, and that truth is contextual and tentative, we discover a host of methodological, pedagogical and practical questions. In some ways, teaching and ministry become harder, professors and clergy more vulnerable. We find that we do not yet have the right texts to assign in our classes or the right answers in the pastoral office.

We do know that we can no longer ignore an author's or a parishioner's identity and location. A “living human web” cannot simply be read and interpreted like a document. Those within the web who haven't yet spoken must speak for themselves. Gender, feminist and black studies all verify the knowledge of the underprivileged, the outcast, the underclass and the silenced. If knowledge depends upon power, then power must be turned over to the silenced. This lesson—that we must hear voices of the marginalized from within their own contexts—is one that pastoral theologians have known all along, but perhaps never articulated in quite this way.

The methods of pastoral theology demonstrate the value of a “thick description” as a fundamental beginning point for all the fields of theological study. Standing explicitly between academy, church and society, those in pastoral theology know intimately the limits of academic exercises, and they know the limits of knowledge apart from context. On both scores, pastoral theology is challenging theology and theological education to reconsider their foundations. ■

## The shape of a noble death: Suicide among Jews and Christians

by James T. Clemons

### A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity.

By Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor. Harper-Collins, 203 pp., \$25.00.

ANYONE WHO agonizes over the issue of suicide will be grateful for Droge and Tabor's solid work of historical research and analysis. Their survey of ancient and classical literature focuses primarily on the reasons so many ancient Israelites, Jews, Greeks, Romans and Christians chose to take their own lives or to have life taken from them. The reasons recovered from the past often go unnoticed in the present, even though they remain relevant to current discussions of suicide. With this book's aid, the motives and intentions of suicide in our own world can be more clearly and usefully understood.

Using the phrase “voluntary death” as a nonpejorative designation for suicide, the authors detail many examples of such death and examine the less frequent but significant philosophical discussions of it in antiquity. Their analysis strongly supports two claims: 1) contrary to long-held and still widely quoted opinion, actual outright condemnation of self-chosen death was a late development; 2) death by choice was often highly regarded, at times even encour-

aged, when it was motivated by religious or patriotic purposes. In documenting these conclusions, Droge and Tabor present a much-needed corrective to current confusion regarding the origins of Jewish and Christian opposition to suicide.

Jewish sources that treat the topic have long been misunderstood and misinterpreted. When highly regarded scholars in this century aver that Judaism has always and unequivocally condemned suicide, they are ignoring 500 years of discussion. Social and scientific studies of the ancient material have now led scholars to conclude that Jewish opposition to suicide came only in post-Talmudic literature, according to Droge and Tabor.

Christian opposition was minimal until Augustine's work in the fourth century. The authors carefully recount Augustine's stringent reasons for the condemnations, some of which were, it seems, politically motivated. Historically, Augustine denounced Donatists who took their lives to avoid persecution, contending that they were no more martyrs than Judas. Later, in *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, he condemned those women in

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