The Religious and Moral Foundations of Pastoral Counseling

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the significant issues related to the articulation of distinctions between pastoral counseling and the secular psychotherapies. The argument is made that pastoral counseling can be distinguished from the secular psychotherapies because the former is grounded in the moral vision of the religious traditions as well as the growing body of clinical knowledge the secular psychotherapies have made available to the culture. A dialectical model of moral inquiry is then presented as the most adequate for the pastoral counseling enterprise to carry out its inescapable moral task.

The rise of the pastoral counseling movement and the development of clinical training programs within the curriculum of theological education have raised significant questions at the boundary of psychology and religion. These questions focus upon the issues involved in the religious appropriation of the insights and treatment processes of the psychological disciplines to advance the purposes of pastoral care. These questions are directed especially to the pastoral counselor or pastoral psychotherapist, who has become a specialist within the religious community in working with persons whose emotional conflicts tend to require more professional attention than can be provided by clergy or lay congregants.

One of the central questions the pastoral counselor faces in the development of a professional identity concerns what is done in working with emotionally troubled persons that makes the work uniquely pastoral and different from the work that is done by a secular psychiatrist or psychotherapist. This question seems all the more urgent as pastoral counselors align themselves with one or more of the secular psychotherapies (for example, psychoanalytic psychotherapy in its Freudian or Jungian forms or one of the neo-Freudian schools, Rogerian, Gestalt, Transactional psychotherapy, neurolinguistic programming, or systems psychotherapy, to name but a few). On
the surface, at least, pastoral psychotherapists seem to do nothing different in their work with clients from that which is done by their secular counterparts.

It is not surprising that the question of pastoral counseling has often been raised in terms of the putative conflicts between the moral visions of Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and the value commitments, including the claim to be value-free or neutral in regard to moral questions, of the secular psychotherapies, on the other. Since the pastoral counselor is committed to the moral visions of Judaism and/or Christianity by virtue of one's religious identity and, at the same time, is also committed to one or more of the secular models of psychotherapy as a therapeutic specialist within the larger professional ministry of the church or synagogue, the question is how the alleged conflict between these two distinct sets of commitments can be resolved.

This question becomes especially poignant when the claim is made that the moral commitments of depth psychology and its many contemporary derivatives are, in fact, subversive of the moral traditions of Judaism and Christianity. It is claimed further that depth psychology is thus responsible in part for the dissolution of the cultural "plausibility structure" of the two traditions. The result, it is asserted, is the undermining of their commanding appeal to large numbers of contemporary men and women in Western culture.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this issue in detail. What I am seeking to do here is to examine the task of the pastoral counselor in the light of the so-called "new ethic" that has sprung from the discovery of the unconscious. In carrying out this task, I will draw upon the work of Ann and Barry Ulanov as it is expressed in Religion and the Unconscious and Don S. Browning's valuable contributions to this discussion.

It is a common assumption shared by philosophers, theologians, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists alike that Western culture since the Reformation has moved progressively toward the collapse of a constitutive moral universe. This collapse, it is argued, has meant the loss of those structures of meaning that order the life experience of human beings, orient them in the world and the cosmos, and motivate them to strive toward the achievement of transcendent cultural goals; goals requiring a measure of individual self-sacrifice on behalf of the "common good" and guaranteeing the transmission of a vital human cultural world to succeeding generations. In the face of the rapid social change brought on by increasingly accelerating technological advances and the emergence of pluralistic value alternatives, no one of which can claim privileged status in guiding human beings in the conduct of their lives, there is a growing consensus today that we are basically on our own in trying to cope with the moral ambiguity and vicissitudes of contemporary life.

Under the impact of this situation there has been a veritable explosion in self-help programs. These programs aim to assist people in achieving a sense of identity and meaning and in living creatively through the developmental