Pastoral Counseling for Self-Transcendence: The Integration of Psychology and Theology

Walter E. Conn
Villanova University

I. Introduction: The Problem of Relating Psychology and Theology

In his Foreword to the new Paulist Press Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling, M. Scott Peck highlights the significance of the Handbook's attempt to integrate the "insights of psychology and religion." As part of a historical movement "out of an age of excessive specialization into an age of integration," he writes, the Handbook also "represents the coming of age of the pastoral counseling movement" itself.¹

Several of the Handbook's thirty-one essays address the issue of integration explicitly, formulating the problem in different ways—some locating the need for integration not between psychology and religion, as Peck specifies it, but, for example, between psychology and Christian faith,² or between theology and psychology,³ or between psychology and spirituality,⁴ or between spirituality and personal maturity.⁵ These are representative of the many attempts in pastoral counseling's relatively short history to make it truly interdisciplinary. All too often, of course, one discipline—usually psychology—has dominated the pastoral counseling partnership.

Pastoral counseling had hardly been established, therefore, when—counterpointing integration attempts—efforts were begun to distinguish what was distinctively pastoral about it. Perhaps the most successful of these efforts has been the specification of context as the feature that distinguishes pastoral counseling precisely as pastoral. In the Handbook, this context is specified both as pastoral care (e.g., the parish)⁶ and, more generally, as the "moral and religious assumptive world associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition,"⁷ i.e., the faith
that constitutes the caring community. Today, as many of the Handbook's essays point out, the trend is clearly in the "direction of reaffirming the distinctively religious and theological dimensions of pastoral counseling." Just how this is to be done is not so clear, however. And neither are the basic terms of the discussion.

A few distinctions are necessary if we are to appreciate fully the complexity of the integration issue that Peck rightly emphasizes. First, we must distinguish between practical and theoretical questions. To designate the full ministry of pastoral care within a Christian community as the proper context of pastoral counseling is to respond to the practical issue of assuring the Christian character of counseling: counseling will be pastoral insofar as it is explicitly understood and practiced in the context of the Christian community's ministry of pastoral care. In the practical equation, then, pastoral counseling is related to the context of pastoral care; pastoral counseling is identified as a particular ministry within the full ministry of pastoral care.

As adequate as this response may be to the practical question of distinguishing pastoral counseling from secular counseling, it implicitly assumes that counseling is compatible with Christian faith. An altogether different kind of response is necessary if one questions that very assumption, if one asks whether counseling really is compatible with Christian faith, whether it truly is a form of pastoral care. Now the theoretical cat is out of the bag, for now one is asking whether the psychological foundation of counseling is consistent with the theological understanding of Christian faith—or, rather, whether a particular psychological foundation of counseling is consistent with one's particular theological understanding of Christian faith (for only particular understandings of abstractions like "psychology" and "theological" exist in the concrete). Now the issue is one of relating (linking or splitting, integrating or differentiating) interpretations or theories of the human: critically correlating psychologies and theologies. Some may relate positively even though others may not. One theology may deny the possibility of integration with any psychology; others may not. One psychology may reject the validity of all theology; others may not. Obviously, then, how one understands "psychology" and "theology" is crucial.

If, for example, psychology is understood as promoting self-affirmation, self-fulfillment, or self-realization, and theological understanding of Christian faith is understood as demanding self-denial, self-emptying, or self-surrender, the candidates for integration appear to be radically opposed to each other. But these are precisely the visions pre-