SHIFTING CONCEPTS OF THE 'LIVING HUMAN DOCUMENT'

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ABSTRACT

The 'living human document' is a key concept for Clinical Pastoral Education with its primary focus on the intensive study of human experience. Over the past century significant developments in the behavioural sciences, spirituality, and Christian anthropology have given rise to shifts in the understanding of human nature. This paper sets out to examine the theological anthropologies evident in the works of three major figures within the CPE movement to discern the impact of the intellectual context on their theology of human nature and resultant pastoral practice. It is concluded that, in order to avoid complicity with the dominant intellectual climate, pastoral practitioners need a depth and breadth of theological knowledge which will enable them to exercise a critical stance toward prevailing theological and spiritual 'fashions'.

Anton Boisen, the 'father'[1] of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), coined the term 'the living human document'[2], thereby making the intensive study of human experience the core[3] of his first training program for clergy in 1925[4] and of the movement that grew out of his initial vision. The study of 'the living human document' remains the essence of CPE programs almost one hundred years later[5]. With the passage of time have come, however, significant developments in the behavioural sciences, spirituality, and Christian anthropology, resulting in a variety of theological and psychological understandings of what it means to be human.

The intention of this paper is to examine various understandings of human nature by means of a dialogue with three influential figures in the CPE movement, Anton Boisen, Seward Hiltner and Charles Gerkin, each of whom is an exemplar of change within Clinical Pastoral Education and in the social and intellectual climate of twentieth century America. It will be argued that, in the case of each of these representative figures, the theological anthropology discernible in his work is largely a product of the cultural context in which he operated, and that it is necessary to understand that context in order to situate correctly the theology to which it gave rise. It will further be contended that it is essential for pastoral practitioners to adopt a critical stance, not only in relation to the context of twenty-first century Australia but also with regard to current theological and spiritual trends. Awareness may thus be raised of the impact of contextual factors on the often implicit conceptions of human nature underlying much CPE practice.

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[1] David A. Steere, 'Anton Boisen: Figure of the Future?' *Journal of Religion and Health,* 8:4 (1969), 359.

[2] Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 185; *Problems in Religion and Life: A Manual for Pastors* (New York and Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), 5.

[3] See *Problems* 5: 'The minister ... must learn to read the living human documents [which] are the primary source for any true understanding of human nature.'

[4] That program took place in 1925 at Worcester State (Psychiatric) Hospital where Boisen was currently the chaplain.

[5] The contemporary focus is now on the human person within the 'web' of his/her 'wide cultural, social and religious context.' Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 60.

Anton Boisen (1876-1965)

Boisen's writings stem from the socio-cultural climate of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, a climate characterised by confidence in technological expertise[6], belief in evolutionary progress[7], trust in science as the most reliable source of knowledge, and a view of the universe as an impersonal order 'framed in general laws'[8]. A dominant theological influence was Liberalism with its emphasis on the pursuit of truth through reason and experience. The liberal project which aimed to reconceptualise theology in terms of scientific categories resulted in the displacement of divine transcendence by the concept of 'the Deity as immanent in his creation'[9], the reformulation of traditional doctrine in conformity with reason[10], and the postulation of an 'evolutionary teleology [which] required an acceptance of struggle and conflict as a means to higher ends.'[11] Human subjectivity, considered to be governed by natural laws, was held to be trustworthy[12] as a 'key to unlocking the mysteries of religion and reality.'[13] Also influential for Boisen were Sigmund Freud, with his exploration of the unconscious, John Dewey, who argued that that education must be an inductive process of learning through active engagement with the environment[14], and William James[15], who promoted the psychology of religion, claiming that '*the conscious person is continuous with a wider self*'[16],'*conterminous...with a MORE ... operative in the universe outside of* [us]'[17].

The prevailing belief in evolutionary progress, experiential learning, scientific methodology, and liberal theology is reflected in Anton Boisen's understanding of human nature.

Underpinning Boisen's whole vision is his conception of theology as a science[18]. He contends that, in place of the theological methodology of the past[19], based on the authority of Scripture[20], the theologian is to adopt 'the principles of scientific procedure'[21]. Through a rigorous, systematic study of actual human dilemmas, students of religion may discern 'the forces and laws involved in the religious life' and thus develop 'an increasing body of tested experience upon which the religious faith of thinking men may be based.'[22] Only on the basis of such empirically validated conclusions may the church speak with conviction of 'the great Reality to whom we give the name of God'[23].

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[6] See E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 166-8. Also Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971) which deals with this period of American history.

[7] Michael Ruse, 'Charles Darwin,' in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought,* eds. Chad Meister and James Beilby (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 67.

[8] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age (*Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press, 2007), 362.

[9] Holifield, *History,* 197.

[10] J.B. Stump, 'Liberal Theology', in *The Routledge Companion,* 324.

[11] Holifield, 166.

[12] William James was influential in giving credibility to subjective experience. See *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature,* Edited with an Introduction by Martin E. Marty (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 498.

[13] Holifield, 198.

[14] Inductive learning from direct experience is basic to the methodology employed by Boisen and by the subsequent CPE movement. See Stephen D. W. King, *Trust the Process: A History of Clinical Pastoral Education as Theological Education* Lanham, MD and Plymouth, UK: University Press of America, Inc., 2007), 2

[15] Whereas Boisen refers only in passing to Dewey (*Religion in Crisis and Custom,* loc 330, note 4), he is explicit about the influence of William James on his thinking. See, for example, Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 89-90; Anton Boisen, *Out of the Depths: An Autobiographical Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1960), 60.

[16] William James, *Varieties*, 515 (James's italics).

[17] Ibid., 508.

[18] Ibid., 183.

[19] Ibid., 191.

[20] Anton T. Boisen, *Religion in Crisis and Custom: A Sociological and Psychological Study* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945, 1955), 255.

[21] *Exploration*, 253, 182.

[22]*Religion,* 256. See also *Exploration,* 191 and p. 237: 'the shift from faith in a revealed religion to an empirical basis ... must be eagerly furthered.'

[23] Ibid., 237.

According to Boisen, humans are '[t]he temporal embodiment of an eternal process', and, as such, are 'fundamentally social', both shaped by their social context[24] and 'one with Something above and beyond' themselves.[25] Possessing 'potentialities which look forward into an unending future'[26], they are also deeply flawed[27], resulting in inner conflict. Salvation consists in the resolution of the conflict through unification with that which is 'Greater-than-self', bringing inward peace and sacrificial cooperation in the process of evolution.[28] That was the case with Jesus whose inner conflict was resolved through the temptation experience and who was consequently willingly to die for his people, thereby becoming '... the Divine Spirit of the world.'[29] He remains the sacrificial ideal[30] toward which humans should strive if they are to achieve personal fulfilment, but has, apparently, no other salvific significance.[31]

In summing up Boisen's understanding of human nature, we note that he locates it wholly within the natural order, in that spirit, both human and divine, is immanent within nature. Flawed by sin, humans are to strive to cooperate with the divine Spirit to effect personal and social transformation and achieve ultimate unification with the divine. Human uniqueness is thus ultimately subsumed by the universal divine oneness. This scientifically-framed conception of human nature results in a model of pastoral practice which employs the empirical observation of experience in order to establish the 'laws' governing the spiritual order.

Seward Hiltner (1909-1984)

Hiltner described the period in which he was writing as a 'peculiarly psychological intellectual climate' characterised by a 'mode of thinking ... unique to our time.'[32] Thoroughly conversant with the work of the neo-Freudian personality theorists[33], he was also influenced by Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal theory, Erich Fromm's emphasis on freedom and the 'real' self, and Carl Rogers' client-centred approach[34]. His adoption of these psychological theories was never, however, without critical reservation concerning their underlying humanistic, assumptions, and he consistently insisted on Christian revelation as the starting point for any adequate understanding of human nature[35]. While his writings certainly reflected the American post-war emphasis on self-realisation and the development of one's full human potential[36], they did so from the Christian perspective of neo-orthodox Protestant theology with its affirmation of the centrality of Christ and the ultimate authority of divine

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[24]Ibid.

[25] Ibid. See also p. 255: '...as a cell is to the body, so the individual human being may be to something greater.'

[26] Ibid., 193. While Boisen acknowledges that there is as yet no proof of existence after death, he points to the prevalence of this belief across religions and among psychotic patients. Ibid., 196.

[27] Ibid., 194.

[28] *Exploration*, 140. See also p.175: Salvation is 'the attempt to elevate the personal and group loyalties to the level of the cosmic'; p. 294: 'a common struggle for the better personal and social life'; and p. 207: 'The real evil is the failure to grow, the failure to achieve one's true objectives in life.'

[29] Ibid., 138. My italics.

[30] Ibid. See also *Exploration,* 126.

[31] See Anton Boisen, 'Theology in the Light of Psychiatric Experience', in Asquith, *Vision,* 62, where he declares that Jesus' teaching about his death has been 'miscontrued'.

[32] Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Nashville, TX: Abingdon Press, 1958), 26. This opinion is reaffirmed by William B. Parsons in his overview of the relationship between psychology and religion between 1880 and 2009. See W.B. Parsons, 'On Mapping the Psychology and Religion Movement: Psychology *as* Religion and Modern Spirituality', *Pastoral Psychology* 59 (2010): 16.

[33] Hiltner refers to the work of Adolf Adler, Karen Horney, Carl Jung and Erik Erikson . See also Holifield, 288ff.

[34] Seward Hiltner,, *Pastoral Counseling* ((New York and Nashville, TX: Abingdon Press, 1959), 19; *The Counselor in Counseling,* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950), 3.

[35] See, for example, Hiltner, *Pastoral Counseling*, 31-2; 'The Future of Christian Anthropology', *Theology Today,* 20:2 (1963), 251.

[36] Hiltner acknowledges this in 'A Descriptive Appraisal, 1935-1980', *Theology Today*, 37 (1980), 220.

revelation. The influence of process thought is discernible in his conception of grace as the dynamic process within creation drawing humanity toward wholeness.[37]

Hiltner holds that human existence, as revealed in both Scripture and lived experience, is inescapably paradoxical[38], subject to the conflicting tensions of divine purpose and human finitude and fallibility.[39] The first paradox is that of **divine grace and human sin**: created in the image of God[40] with the potential for freedom and creativity[41], humans also possess the potential for evil. Divine grace, which is never coercive, offers the possibility of repentance.[42] Salvation, in the sense of restoration to wholeness of being, occurs only through Jesus Christ[43], although the mode of the healing may be 'through a profane channel' such as medical or psychotherapeutic intervention.[44] **Embodiment and transcendence** constitute a second paradox. Humans are created as 'unified body and mind presided over by spirit'[45]. It is the spiritual dimension of human embodiment that enables humankind to transcend the limitations of physical existence through the divine qualities of freedom, creativity and love.[46] This unity of body/mind/spirit is, however, frequently sundered by human sinfulness, resulting in distorted sexuality, dualistic splitting of body and spirit[47], and an impact on bodily health[48]. The third paradox is that of '**being and becoming**'[49]. Human life is a process of realising one's God-given potential[50], a process which is repeatedly distorted by sin[51]. Progress involves the healing of resultant personality distortions through pastoral and/or psychotherapeutic intervention, such healing being ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit.[52] Finally, **humans are inseparably individual and social**. While each person is unique, this uniqueness can be realised only within community[53], which is inevitably distorted through sin.[54] Nevertheless, it is within the imperfect context of community that humans achieve wholeness through God's grace.[55]

Hiltner's paradoxical understanding of human nature, with its emphasis on the Spirit-directed psychotherapeutic resolution of inner conflict, leads to a model of pastoral ministry primarily concerned with insight into the psychodynamic dimension of human functioning. The intentional 'this-world' focus of his pastoral theology fails to take adequate account of the transcendent dimension of human existence. By comparison with the detailed knowledge of the behavioural sciences evident in his writings, his anthropology is flawed by a corresponding depth and breadth of theological scholarship.

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[37] Seward Hiltner, *Theological Dynamics* (Nashville, TN : Abingdon, 1972),41/2. Various commentators have noted the explicit and implicit influence of process theology on Hiltner. See, for example, Paul A. Mickey, 'Is there a "theology" in Seward Hiltner's pastoral theology?' *Pastoral Psychology,* 21:8 (1970): 28.

[38] Ibid., 139-140. The four paradoxes discussed here are those identified by Hiltner in an unpublished conference address summarised by Herbert Anderson, 'A Paradoxical Understanding of Persons,' in *Turning Points in Pastoral Care: The Legacy of Anton Boisen and Seward Hiltner,* eds LeRoy Aden and J. Harold Ellens (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 129-141.

[39] See ibid., 129-141.

[40] *Dynamics,* 25, 198. It is clear that Hiltner considers this image to be 'distorted' but not completely effaced. See, for example, ibid., 199/200.

[41] *Pastoral Counseling,* 258.

[42] Ibid., 82.

[43] Ibid. 199.

[44] *Preface,* 100/101.

[45] *Dynamics,* 156.

[46] Anderson, 'Paradoxical Understanding', 140. See also Hiltner, *Dynamics,* 185.

[47] *Dynamics*, 157. See also ibid.,152.

[48] Ibid., 99.

[49] Anderson, 'Paradoxical Understanding', 140.

[50] Ibid., 31. See also *Dynamics,* 34-5 and Seward Hiltner, 'Clinical and Theological Notes on Responsibility,' *Journal of Religion and Health* 2:1 (1962), 14, 15, 16.

[51] *Pastoral Counseling,* 31*.*

[52] *Ibid.,* 18. See also Anderson, 'Paradoxical Understanding', 138.

[53] Hiltner, 'Theological Perspectives', 19, cited by Anderson, 140.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Hiltner, 'Responsibility', 19.

Charles Gerkin (1922-2004)

The major works of Charles Gerkin (1979-1997) bring us into the world of 'postmodernity'[56], characterised by 'fragmentation', 'pluralism', 'relativism'[57], the 'loss of a consensual structure of meaning and value'[58], and the difficulty of 'talking with any meaning about God's participation in human life'[59]. In this climate, Gerkin aimed to offer pastoral practitioners a theological foundation and sound methodology that would enable them to interpret, and dialogue with, the prevailing secular consciousness. While insisting on knowledge of the human sciences[60], he instigated a conversation with hermeneutical theory[61] and contemporary theology[62] in order to develop a hermeneutical narrative approach to pastoral theology.

Undergirding his theological anthropology [63] is the fundamental belief that human existence finds meaning only within the overarching context of God's ultimate purpose for the whole creation. Gerkin thus identifies the two contextual levels necessary for understanding human nature, the finite temporal and the open-ended eschatological. Within each context, different language systems operate- psychology for human development in time, and theology in reference to humanity's eschatological goal, with hermeneutics serving as the bridge between the two languages. Human identity is accordingly conceptualised in both psychological and theological terms which express the different perspectives from which the core reality of individual human nature may be viewed. Gerkin can thus speak of 'eschatological identity' as contrasted with 'temporal identity', the latter finding its true meaning only within the former. Humans may experience healing, transformation and fulfilment only as their temporal identity is brought into conformity with their eschatological identity.[64] Psychological interpretations of a person's story may add detail and depth to the theological perspective, given the premise that it is the latter, with its larger interpretative frame, which is the controlling interpretation.

The role of pastoral ministry is to assist in the process of bringing the temporal and eschatological identities into closer relationship. In hermeneutical terms, it involves the fusion of the two horizons of the individual story and the Christian narrative by the provision of a space for playful interpretative speculation[65] which allows for alternative versions of the story and thus the possibility of a transformed perspective on life[66]. Not a matter of psychological technique alone, the resultant transformation is always the work of the Holy Spirit operating within the transitional space between the 'humanly constructed reality and the new reality God is bringing about.'[67] Through the Spirit, a person's temporal identity begins to find its true meaning within her or his future-oriented eschatological identity.

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[56] The term 'postmodern' is not used by Gerkin.

[57] See, for example, Charles V. Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 30; *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 197; *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 15-18; *Prophetic Pastoral Practice: A Christian Vision of Life Together* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 14-15.

[58] Charles V. Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 101.

[59] Charles V. Gerkin, 'Clinical Pastoral Education and Social Change,' *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 25.3 (1971): 179.

[60] 'Art of Caring', 401-2. Gerkin continued to make extensive use of the developmental schema of Erik Erikson. See, for example, *Living Human Document,* 99.

[61] Reference is made to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

[62] Important influences were Pannenberg, Moltmann, Lindbeck, Frei and McFague.

[63] See, for example, ibid., 324; *Document,* 95; *Widening,* 71-2; *Prophetic,* 64, 106-110.

[64] Ibid., 146.

[65] The 'space of playful speculation' combines the Winnicott notion of 'transitional space' with Gadamer's concept of 'play'. See Ibid., 153.

[66] Ibid., 153.

[67] Ibid., 154.

The principal weakness of Gerkin's theological anthropology is his lack of theological precision, and a consequent failure to explore more fully the implications of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in his explication of human nature. The relationship between and among the Persons of the Trinity, evidenced in the Incarnation, is understood only in terms of its impact on the historical process, with no reference to its relevance for an understanding of human personhood. It must be conceded, however, that his writings[68] predate the wider interest in patristic trinitarianism with its emphasis on Personhood and the 'ecstatic' character of divine inter-relationality.

Conclusion

The conclusions to be drawn from the study of these key figures within the CPE movement serve as cautionary notes for ongoing pastoral reflection and practice and as a pointer to future directions for pastoral theology.

The main caution relates to the inescapable impact of the prevailing socio-cultural intellectual climate on the theory and practice of pastoral care. While there is no objective standpoint from which one's culture may be analysed, it is nevertheless imperative to exercise a hermeneutic of suspicion, not only toward popular cultural trends, but also toward current theological emphases, so as to avoid, as far as possible, the cultural and theological complicities evidenced in the work of Boisen, Hiltner and Gerkin.

A second caution derives from the lack of theological depth evident in their work. Hiltner and Gerkin each aspired to gain intellectual credibility for the discipline of pastoral/practical theology through a correlational method of dialogue between theology and the human sciences. While Gerkin's theology was certainly more fully developed than that of Hiltner, both may be accused of a failure to attain a depth of systematic theological knowledge comparable to their knowledge of psychology. Their insight into human existence suffers from this absence of theological breadth, depth and terminological precision. They serve as a reminder to the discipline of practical theology, and to the Clinical Pastoral Education movement in particular, that it is necessary to ensure a sound theological basis for theory derived from pastoral practice. Only by critical scrutiny of both our cultural and theological assumptions will pastoral practitioners avoid the trap of complicity with current intellectual fashions. This is especially important in developing our understanding of 'the living human document', the focus of the CPE process.

More positive are indications for future directions in pastoral ministry. Gerkin's attention to the theological dimension of human existence highlights the practical pastoral value of dialogue with developments in theological anthropology. In particular, there is considerable scope for study of the practical implications of the concept of Personhood in recent trinitarian thought.

The prophetic role exercised by all three figures in pointing to gaps in pastoral practice and advocating change is a pointer to the prophetic, apologetic strain of practical theology that has become increasingly significant over the past two decades.[69] Linked to the prophetic role is the exercise of imaginative vision, a capacity to see beyond the limitations of the current situation to glimpse new alternatives and unforeseen possibilities. While, of the three thinkers considered in this paper, Gerkin alone makes explicit reference to the human capacity for imagination, all evidence creativity in their pastoral theory and practice, and it was Boisen's trust in the significance of the vision arising out of his experience of psychosis that was the genesis of the whole CPE movement and of ensuing developments in pastoral and practical theology.

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[68] Gerkin also makes no reference to the theology associated with Vatican II and its subsequent developments and his theology is derived almost exclusively from Protestant sources.
[69] See, for example, Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (London: SCM Press, 2013) and David Tracy, 'Religion in the Public Realm: Three Forms of Publicness,' in *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public life,* ed. William A. Barbieri Jr (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 29-50.

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