

Tolerance and Encouragement: At the Core of the Modern Clinical Pastoral Tradition

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*"The idea of an organized church ... marks
the close of a living spiritual movement.
The great ecclesiastical establishments are
the dikes and the dams to retain the current
that cannot be held by any such contrivances."*

***"Things which matter most must never be
at the mercy of things which matter least."***

Among the *first* things a scientist might expect out of others at a large gathering of colleagues would be an attempt to change his or her mind. Nonetheless, each clinical research scientist speaks openly, collegially about the tenets of his or her research team – and expects that others will articulate more or less clearly the tenets of their own research teams. While openness to others' views is expected, only *tenuous* clarity and only *tenuous* certainty about one's own views also are expected. Truths are assumed to have been *almost* found and *almost* understood. Scientists gather hoping for some productive *challenging* of their beliefs, and they certainly anticipate challenging others'.

Among the *last* things a chaplain might expect out of others at a large gathering of colleagues would be an attempt to change his or her mind. That being said, certainly each clinical pastoral chaplain may speak openly, collegially about the tenets of his or her faith community – and certainly each would expect that others could articulate more or less clearly the tenets of their own faith communities. Notice that I said, "*more or less* clearly". Such **equivocation about tenets was fine for the scientists but it might be a problem for the chaplains**. While openness to others' views is expected, clarity and some degree of certainty about one's own views also are expected. Notice that I said, "*some* degree of certainty". Again, such **hedging about views was fine for the scientists, but it might be a problem – or just the same problem stated another way – for the chaplains**. Truths are assumed to have been found and understood. Chaplains gather hoping for – it is not clear for what they are hoping.

Are gathered chaplains hoping for a challenging of their beliefs? for a confirmation of their beliefs? for an ignoring of their beliefs? or for what? **Is it really "OK" for chaplains of diverse faith traditions to be meeting together, especially in intense, intimate soul-searching small-group settings, including "Chapter" meetings?** Is there a religious endorsing body that would take a "Presby-gationalist" under its wing? Can we openly appreciate that many clergy change nuances of faith across the years?

Clinical research scientists in general and clinical pastoral chaplains in general are very different. The scientists may or may not care if they are endorsed, while the chaplains certainly do. Not being endorsed, scientists are free to wonder openly about gravity or germs or whatever; being endorsed, chaplains are somewhat less free to wonder openly about G-d or the soul or the hereafter. Perhaps this difference in public freedom needs to be acknowledged – and consciously appreciated. That being said, **perhaps there is some space in between the two broad conceptions of "the truth" – between "the truth that is being found" and "the truth that is found" –** where both types of professionals can spend part if not all of their time. Stated differently, a recurring question has

been whether scientists are allowed to dabble with *certainty* and **whether chaplains are allowed to dabble with uncertainty** – whether scientists are allowed to dabble with *clarity* and **whether chaplains are allowed to dabble with doubt**.

In a way, “The Covenant” of the College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy addresses, at least for clinical pastoral chaplains, these questions head-on.

**We believe we should
make a space for one another and
stand ready to midwife one another in
our respective spiritual journeys.**

“The Covenant” appears to imply – and to accept – that there will be certain productive tensions between *clarity* and *doubt*, between *certainty* and *uncertainty* – that there will be **“journeys” within one’s faith** – what Anton Theophilus Boisen appeared to view as “becomings”.

Both supporting and questioning feedback came to this author about the short essay, “Tolerance and Encouragement: Among the Roots of the Clinical Pastoral Tradition”. That essay noted how at the time of ordination Boisen and three of his fellow seminarians were considered “agnostic and undecided in their faith” – neither “affirming” nor “denying” certain theological touchstones. All four seminarians, nevertheless, went on to become energetic and creative leaders on behalf of religion. Which faith group would ordain or endorse them today is a question well-taken. An even thornier question is how to welcome into clinical pastoral chaplaincy those clergy whose faith groups do not have seminaries, let alone ordination.

Most faith groups have become comfortable with at least some degree of ecumenicalism, granting that other faiths might have discovered at least *some* aspects of “the truth”. The “deep ecumenism,” as it has been called, has envisioned the possibility of “a common truth” underlying the varying emphases of differing religious traditions. The question is the extent to which some degree of variation can be accepted *within* a faith group – **the extent to which one can both be a believer and be becoming a believer all at the same time** – the extent to which one’s faith can be both *mature* and *maturing* all at the same time. This decision, of course, can be made only by an individual faith group itself.

It might be worthwhile considering the seriousness with which Boisen, for example, approached some of the most important theological issues of his time – questions that his generation especially understood as **“the things which matter most”**. He did not just say, “I believe in the Virgin Birth”; Boisen thought about why Jesus came when He did and how this symbolized uniquely the coming of something totally new into the world. He did not just say, “I believe in the crucifixion”; Boisen thought about how sin demanded atonement and how Jesus courageously, knowingly accepted sacrifice for others. He did not just say, “I believe in the resurrection”; Boisen thought about Jesus’ understanding of it and how it held out hope for those fallen souls trying to enter a new path in life. He did not just say, “I believe the Bible is inerrant”; Boisen thought about how the scriptures old and new plus various interpreters were trying to capture the essence of spiritual wisdom; he thought about how various people – for example, those bewildered or suffering – might be understanding the scriptures that they read. If Boisen were up for ordination today, no doubt once again there would be “an earnest discussion” for “more than two hours” and much would be “said on both sides of the case”. Possibly some could be **persistent enough** and **patient enough** to work

with him. Possibly some could have sufficient **tolerance** and **encouragement** about his continuing spiritual growth.

Boisen's paternal great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were bishops, while his maternal grandfather and great-uncle were learned ministers. He knew the Judeo-Christian scriptures inside and out from an early age – which may have been why he viewed their message as complex. It might be worthwhile to consider how, possibly, his having been “agnostic and undecided” – yet theologically serious – allowed him to embrace and develop the notion of **a clinical pastoral ministry to believers, non-believers, and those unable to believe** alike. As both a clinical research scientist – we forget that, don't we? – and as a clinical pastoral chaplain, Boisen lived emotionally and intellectually in and between both worlds, always focusing upon both G-d and everyday people. One can envision several religious endorsing bodies debating about which one would claim him. Imagine the questions he would ask if he served on a certifying committee himself. Very likely, of those who joined him in plenary and chapter life, **as many would be challenged as would be confirmed in their faith**. Perhaps that is why some appreciate Boisen as a valuable gadfly.

Endnotes:

The first opening comment is by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura (1874-1937), in the *The Harmonist*, January 1929; quoted by B. V. Tripurari, 11-18-2004, Vaishnava News Network; <http://www.indiadinivine.org/audarya/spiritual-discussions/39302-there-institutionalization-gaudiya-vaisnavism-before-srila-prabhupada-became.html> Compare this to Boisen's distinguishing “between the ‘church,’ which he views as orderly, perhaps even by necessity boring, and the ‘sect,’ which he views as disorderly yet life-giving to religious practice”; “one could say that the church is ‘custom,’ that the sect is ‘crisis,’ and that they together account for the development of religion” [Powell Robert C. “Chapter Life’: ‘Thinking and Feeling Together about the Things that Matter Most’ – ‘A New and Vitalizing Experience’. A Response to the Rev. Dr. Gebhart's Call for an ‘Order of Pastoral Care’.” *J Pastoral Care & Counseling*. 2005;59(suppl), ft.1; referring to Boisen's *Religion in Crisis and Custom: A Sociological and Psychological Study* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1955), pp.19, 66, 232, 239].

The second opening comment is said to be by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749?-1832), but, thus far, a diligent search has not found the exact citation. Part of the phrase also formed the title of a widely-read book of the late nineteenth century, *Things That Matter Most: Devotional Papers* (NY: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1913), by John Henry Jowett (1864-1923), a British Congregationalist minister who served the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, from 1911 until 1917. (Like Boisen, Jowett must have been a “Presby-gationalist”.) The phrase was one of Boisen's favorites. In his *Religion in Crisis and Custom...* he used both variants, “the things *that* matter most” (p.xiii) and “the things *which* matter most” (p.5). During an exploration of this phrase, it was noted that in earlier citations the phrase clearly refers to spiritual matters, while in later citations it could refer to almost anything. The older uses almost always end the sentence with the phrase – or occasionally add “to G-d”, while the newer uses almost always either add a few more words – generally mundane words – onto the end of the phrase – eg, “to me,” “to us,” etc – or insert a comment about what these “things” should be – instead of assuming that the phrase, “the things that/ which matter most,” has a definite and universal meaning. Boisen frequently used the phrase specifically to refer to “the ultimate realities of life and death” [*Religion in Crisis and Custom...*, p.3].

Speaking to both the first and second opening comments, consider one of Boisen's comments: “And even the Church ... becomes overparticular about creedal conformity or ritualistic niceties and in other ways tends to

substitute minor for major virtues and loyalties” [“The Problem of Values in the Light of Psychopathology.” *Am J Sociol.* 1932;38(1):251-268, p.158][obviously this is a reference to The Bible, Matthew 23:23].

At the end of the second paragraph, “Presby-gationalist” refers to a common “inside joke” about the fact that Boisen served both denominations within Protestant Christianity. Actually, Boisen’s theology does not fit cleanly into any camp. He has been called an “evangelical liberal” and a “progressive empiricist” – both tags trying to capture his standing in the midst of many theological arguments during the first half of the twentieth century. Quite significantly, in 1925 **Boisen helped to awaken the liberal wing of the Protestant churches to the possibility that their theology might be losing them adherents.** The *somewhat liberal* journal commented as follows on one of Boisen’s first theological essays, published (unsigned) in *somewhat conservative* review: “The author states that, as a result of rather extensive investigations, ‘I have been forced to the disturbing conclusion that wherever the liberal influence is strongest, there the influence of the church tends to be weakest’.” [“Current Events and Discussions.” *J of Religion.* 1925;5(4):419-423. p.419; “In Defense of Mr. [William Jennings] Bryan: A Personal Confession of a Liberal Clergyman.” *The American Review.* 1925;3:323-324.]

The reference in the fifth paragraph is to this article: Powell, Robert Charles. “Tolerance and Encouragement: Among the Roots of the Clinical Pastoral Tradition” *CPSP Pastoral Report.* June 6, 2011. http://www.pastoralreport.com/the_archives/2011/06/tolerance_and_e.html#

The reference in the sixth paragraph, about “deep ecumenism,” is to this book: Fox, Matthew. The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance (NY: HarperCollins, 1988).

The references in the seventh paragraph regarding Boisen’s views are mostly to his autobiography: Out of the Depths: An Autobiographical Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 106, 59, 79, 101, 105, 135, 141. **Clearly Boisen believed strongly in the reality of both sin and salvation.** See especially the following of his articles: “Evangelism in the Light of Psychiatry.” *J Religion.* 1927;7(1):76-80; “The Sense of Isolation in Mental Disorder: Its Religious Significance.” *Am J Sociol.* 1928;33(4):555-567; “Theology in the Light of Psychiatric Experience.” *Crozer Q.* 1941;18(1):47-61; “The Problem of Sin and Salvation in the Light of Psychopathology.” *J Religion.* 1942;22(3):288-301; “What Did Jesus Think of Himself?” *J Bible Religion.* 1952;20(1): 7-12; and “Inspiration in the Light of Psychopathology,” *Pastoral Psychol.* 1960;11(7): 10-18.

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