

Formation and Transformation – Discovery and Recovery – of Spirit and Soul: Religion in Crisis and Custom

Robert Charles Powell, MD, PhD

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ABSTRACT: Anton Theophilus Boisen's first major study, The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience (1936, 1952, 1962, 1966, 1971), and his last, his own "case history," Out of the Depths: An Autobiographical Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience (1960) are classics. Three other of his works, however, are not to be neglected: Religion in Crisis and Custom: A Sociological and Psychological Study (1955, 1973), Problems in Religion and Life: A Manual for Pastors, with Outlines for the Co-operative Study of Personal Experience in Social Situations (1946), and the hymnal he edited, Lift Up Your Hearts: A Service Book for Use in Hospitals (1926), later re-titled, Hymns of Hope and Courage (1932, 1937, 1950). Boisen's research and teachings concerned how persons and societies reorganize – for the good or for the bad – in response to crisis. He used and encouraged theological reflection to generate hypotheses, then followed a patient stance of "co-operative inquiry" with those troubled in spirit or soul, toward finding a point of effective intervention that would promote constructive resolution. The current essay aims to demonstrate the special relevance of Religion in Crisis and Custom, a study of the formation and transformation of spirit and soul, to our turbulent times.

“There exists today a great need for carrying forward
the empirical study of human nature in its various aspects to
the higher reaches and broader perspectives with which religion is concerned.”
[p.190, Religion in Crisis and Custom ...; *italics mine*]

“What is needed is the attitude of humility which is willing to
put religious insight to the test.” [p.202, RCC; *italics mine*]

“... I seek the basis of spiritual healing
... in the *living human documents*
in all their complexity and
in all their elusiveness and
in the *tested insights of the wise and noble*
of the past as well as of the present.”
[pp.248-9, The Exploration of the Inner World ...; *italics mine*;
while Boisen maintained some skepticism about the work of
theologian Emmanuel Swedenborg, which he definitely studied,
one has to wonder whether Swedenborg's notion of
“inner exploration” influenced the title of this book; see p.71-2, EIW]

“we turn to the *laboratory of life* and examine the experiences of
those who are ... under the strain of moral crisis.” [p.41, RCC; *italics mine*]

“*Without true understanding*
it is impossible to render effective service, and
only as one comes in the attitude of service
will the doors open into the sanctuaries of life.”
[p.5, Problems in Religion and Life ...; *italics mine*]

“The great opportunity comes not to
those who live in cloistered academic seclusion but to
those whose knowledge is being constantly tested and increased
through actual service to human beings in need.” [p.6, PRL; *italics mine*]

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A remarkable book from fifty years ago, Religion in Crisis and Custom ..., still speaks to us, across place and time. Having some two decades earlier examined *personal crisis* in depth, the study's author, the Rev. Dr. Anton Theophilus Boisen (1876-1965), now went on to tackle *social crisis*, observing “*that religious experience arises spontaneously*” when men and women are “*forced to think and feel intensely regarding the things that matter most.*” [p.xiii, RCC; *italics mine*] Let me repeat that, “*that religious experience arises spontaneously*” when men and women are “*forced to think and feel intensely regarding the things that matter most.*”

As your Congress President, the Rev. Dr. Ernest Y. Wu, noted in his letter of invitation, the recent global scenarios of “drastic financial ebb and flow,” of “political bitterness and terrorism,” and of “wars and aftermath of wars” – not to mention, of tsunamis and earthquakes – have “troubled people” throughout Asia – and indeed throughout the world. That these crises have “troubled people” must surely stand as understatement. Who among us can forget the chilling images of skyscraper towers crumbling to dust or of tsunami-hit villages swept to sea? Who among us was not “forced to think and feel intensely regarding the things that matter most”? We may not want to be reminded, but the fact remains that incidents of sudden, catastrophic terrorist and natural destruction – far too many of them in Asia – have become more frequent over the last five years. [US State Dept, Patterns of Global Terrorism, reports re 1985-2004; the 2004 tsunami rapidly killed about 300,000; the last times devastation of this magnitude and velocity had been encountered were the 1976 earthquakes in China, the 1970 floods in Bangladesh, and the astounding 1959 floods in China – as noted by The Disaster Center, a private think-tank] Within such context this Congress addresses President Wu's question, of how we and our people can “maintain our buoyancy” – and “lift up our spirit” – so that we can “continue to focus on a more abundant life of faith, hope, and love.”

Boisen's research, spanning fifty years, argued that as one “stands face to face with the ultimate realities of life and death, religion and theology tend to come alive.” [p.3, RCC] By “religion” he meant “not a system of beliefs and values, but, in its creative stages,” those experiences that

- (1) are characterized by “the sense of identification with a fellowship”
that has the capacity to be “universal and abiding” – and that
- (2) are preferentially promoting “unification with

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the finest potentialities of the human race.” [p.100, PRL; p.305, EIW]

By “theology” he meant the attempt – either individually or collectively – “to organize and scrutinize” these experiences and the associated beliefs regarding

- (1) “the end and meaning of life,”
- (2) “the spiritual forces which operate within us,” and
- (3) “the relationships which exist between their various manifestations” [p.306, EIW]

Notice how, instead of speaking in terms of his own religion, an evangelical liberal version of Christianity, Boisen, viewing himself as an explorer and investigator, attempted to find objective terms that could apply to any religion and to any theology. Following St. Thomas Aquinas, he considered theology itself to be “the queen of the sciences”. [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1 question 44 article 2] Boisen further held that

- (1) by examining the beliefs of “troubled” individuals, “each in its own context amid the complex entanglements of actual life,” and
- (2) by taking into account “the consequences which have followed from particular choices and reaction patterns,”

it would be possible “to arrive at some valid generalizations”

- (1) regarding “the nature and function of religion,” and
- (2) regarding “the conditions under which maximum self-realization is likely to be achieved.” [p.191, EIW]

In Religion in Crisis and Custom . . ., a masterpiece of extended theological reflection, Boisen tried, as empirically as possible, to delineate “to what extent and under what conditions *crisis* experiences” – “standing face to face with the ultimate realities of life and death” – “are associated with *religious awakening*” – “maximum self-realization” – “and under what circumstances [*crisis* experiences are associated] with *disaster*.” He recognized that crises “may break as well as make” – both individuals and groups. [p.4, RCC; *italics* mine] That the impact of crisis could go either way he considered to be “the price we have to pay for being human” – with “the power of choice” and “the capacity for growth.” [p.5, RCC]

Religion in Crisis and Custom . . . What did Boisen intend to imply by the juxtaposition of those words “crisis” and “custom”? “*Spirit and Soul*.” What do I intend to imply by the

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juxtaposition of the words “spirit” and “soul”? These issues are, I believe, connected. It might go without saying that neither term in the two pairs can easily stand alone: the recognition of *crisis* lies within the context of appreciating what has become *custom*, and the value of *spiritual* awakening may depend somewhat on having experienced *soulful* repose. While for most of us, let me hope, *custom* is normative and *crisis* unusual, we must strive hard to grasp that for *some* persons and *some* societies at *some* times unfortunately *crisis* has become normative and *custom* unusual. For the small child both of whose parents died from terrorism or a tsunami, which has become more real, the critical trauma or the customary life? In contrast, most of us, let me hope, have lived long enough in what Boisen would call the “static” phase, a time of habit and *custom*, that we are ready to be jolted into the “creative” phase, a time of reorganization albeit through *crisis*. [pp.33,38, RCC] He viewed, for example, “established” churches as products of *custom* and “upstart” sects as products of *crisis*, with the interaction between churches and sects as accounting for the development of religion. [p.239, RCC] While meeting and resolving *crisis*, assimilating lessons learned into *custom*, is ever a task of organized religion, Boisen pointed out that the door should always be “left open for the prophet when he comes.” Social crisis may provoke the prophetic, and the prophetic may provoke personal crisis. Perhaps we are fortunate that the troubles of the world have, as Dr. Wu noted, “troubled people” around us. Have you and I been troubled enough?

Before examining the notions of “spirit” and “soul,” as well as their correlates, “spiritual formation” and “pastoral care,” let us take a closer look at the word “crisis”. In the medical sense – and indeed the concept originated in the era of the great physician Hippocrates – “crisis” is seen as the “*turning point*” in disease, a bad time that is coming, but whose coming is accepted, even encouraged, for, if the patient does get through this inevitable difficult period, health does lie ahead. [Epidemics, Prognosis, Regimen in Acute Diseases] It is in this sense that Boisen viewed *crisis*, whether personal or social: as *an experience to be embraced*. He considered “that it is ever religion’s task to disturb the consciences” of men and women – to induce crisis, if you will – “regarding the quality of the life they are living,” and regarding their failure thus far “to achieve their true potentialities.” [p.41, RCC] He observed that in “periods of normality,” men and women “do their thinking in an accepted currency of ideas, and their attention is free to apply itself to the commonplace duties of life.” Boisen went on to explain that, and I quote,

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In time of crisis, however,
 when their fate is hanging in the balance,
 [men and women] ... are likely to think and feel intensely.
 Under such conditions new ideas come flashing into the mind,
 often so vividly that they seem to come from an outside source.
 Crisis periods have therefore creative possibilities.
 They are also periods of danger. [pp.68-9, RCC]

Whether it be terrorism or tsunami, the “deep emotional stirring” provoked may serve as a stimulus for either beneficial or malignant reorganization. According to Boisen’s studies, and I quote,

when the process is induced within a social matrix
 and follows accepted patterns,
 the danger of personality disorder is at a minimum. ...
 When, however,
 the intense emotions generated in such experiences
 comes under *wise leadership*,
 then an important and vital religious movement is likely to result.
 In either case a leveling process [eventually] takes place.
 The eccentric and regressive movements are
 leveled up and become respectable,
 while the forward-looking prophetic movements are
 leveled down and become conventionalized. [pp.93-4, RCC; *italics mine*]

That is, as Boisen noted, whether “regressive” or “progressive,” a sect, a new group, under a slightly new belief system, ultimately, under wise leadership, becomes or rejoins an established church, an established religion. The religiously quickened ultimately find words to instruct the next generation, and the new entity born of *crisis* becomes part of *custom*.

Boisen’s earlier research regarding *personal* crisis is far better known than his later research regarding *social* crisis, and our current task is to focus on the social response to sudden, catastrophic terrorist and natural destruction, but it may be worthwhile to review quickly his writings on *disorganization* – the discovery of special insight – and *reorganization* – the

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recovery of equilibrium. “Crisis periods are characteristic of normal growth.” [p.42, RCC] That must be accepted. Worldwide, the “normal crises” of personal development are integrated socially through religious ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, etc. Personal character and social culture “develop through the overcoming of difficulties”. [p.43, RCC] Boisen distinguished four main reactions to crisis. Ponder these, as they are reviewed, in terms of how this or that *society* might respond to the “abnormal crises” of sudden and catastrophic events:

Surrender – an embracing of the unacceptable, leading to a loss of self respect;

Withdrawal – seeking satisfaction in avoidant fantasy, leading to a loss of hope;

Concealment – depreciation of others, substituting minor for major virtues,
escape into beliefs unshared by others, and bids for undue attention;

Frankness – accepting responsibility for one’s shortcomings
and for one’s failures.

Without naming specific societies – as all have erred at some point in time – it can be recognized that each of these responses – *surrender, withdrawal, concealment, and frankness* – has been employed at different stages of social crisis in recent years. To adopt Boisen’s phrases, we are called upon to seek “the *tested insights of the wise and noble* of the past as well as of the present.” [pp.248-9, EIW, *italics mine*] The challenge is to bring these social crises “under *wise leadership*,” such that “an important and vital religious movement ... [might be more] likely to result.” [pp.93-4, RCC; *italics mine*]

Within chaplaincy, such leadership manifests itself, at times of custom rather than crisis, through everyday ministrations to parish congregants, but also through patient supervision of younger theologians. In both cases there is a complex task at hand. Let us now examine the phrases “*spiritual formation*” and “*pastoral care*”. Across this last decade there has been an accelerating trend toward dropping the phrase “pastoral care and counseling” in favor of the phrase “spiritual formation and care” – as if the two notions could be either equal – “just a change of words” – or entirely opposed – the one being clearly not the other. [See the following caveat re “spirituality”; while spirituality is all too often viewed as unambiguously positive, one must recall that, as Boisen would have admonished, there can also be negative manifestations in some people, in some societies, at some points in time. Raymond J. Lawrence, “The Trouble with Spirituality.”] Perhaps a not unreasonable solution was that of one chaplaincy group which renamed itself the “Association of Pastoral and Spiritual Care and Counseling” – supposedly toward satisfying both the primarily “western” contingency that identified with the pastoral, “nurturing”

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aspect, and the primarily “eastern” contingency that identified with the spiritual, “awakening” aspect of chaplaincy work. [Emmanuel Y. Lartey, “Global views for Pastoral Care and Counseling ...] While the stereotypes are more likely provocative than accurate, it may well be that the more chronically over-stimulated and scattered West is longing for a “recovery of soul” just as the more habitually calm and reserved East is seeking an “invigoration of spirit.” It would be easy enough to argue that all of us could benefit from both. Just as Boisen taught “down to earth” pastoral care to young clergy through their “supervised encounter with ‘living human documents’,” so that they might develop into mature “living souls,” one could also say that he encouraged transcendent spiritual formation through orchestrating their “supervised encounter with the divine,” so that they might experience the “quickeningspirit”. [1st Corinthians 15:45 “And so it is written, the first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam [was made] a quickening spirit.” 1st Corinthians 15:47 “The first man [is] of the earth, earthy: the second man [is] the Lord from heaven.”]

As I have discussed at length elsewhere, there is a vast literature regarding the “spiritual” in contrast to the “soulful” aspects of religious ministrations to those who are vulnerable or broken. [see Matthew Cohn, “A Brief Review of Biblical Psychology,” 2003, on the web at <http://www.matccohn.net/history.html>] Boisen’s student, colleague, and mentor, Dr. Helen Flanders Dunbar (1902-59), at the outset of the movement for a clinically trained chaplaincy, conducted a classic program of inpatient research on healing, comparing the invigorating role of “spiritual stimulation,” attempting to connect with the transcendent, to the quieting role of induced “soulful repose,” attempting to connect with one’s own essence. She ultimately concluded that the spiritual and soulful approaches used together offered the most promise for “mobilizing” and “restoring” the “healing processes as we know them.” She recognized that there was a time for new insight and awareness just as there was a time for tranquility and equanimity. [compare the complementary Buddhist meditation techniques of “Vipassana” and “Samatha”] Dunbar was herself most intrigued by “the therapeutic values of the various forms of worship – liturgy and hymnody, the exercise of private devotions, and the contemplation of religious symbols and architecture,” [her only manuscript regarding this, however, was lost in the flooding of the basement at Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY; see her classic volume, Symbolism in Medieval Thought . . . ; yes, this is the Flanders Dunbar, BD, PhD, MD, MedSciD who is generally considered the founder of the American Psychosomatic Movement – parallel to Boisen’s movement for clinical pastoral training, which she shepherded to its success; see Powell, Healing and Wholeness . . .] She also encouraged Boisen in the continued refinement of his chaplaincy hymnal, that first carried an inspiring title, Lift Up Your Hearts . . . , but later reflected the merged – soulful plus spiritual – approach under the title, Hymns of Hope and Courage In one of his later books he spoke

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of the “attitudes of ... calm reassurance that ... make it possible for the healing forces to operate,” and of the message of “joy that triumphs over pain,” of “life that springs eternal,” which “has untold power to help.” [p.86, PRL]

Again, while these distinctions between “soulful” and “spiritual” today may seem more provocative than entirely accurate, they were quite meaningful years ago, and they may help us grasp some otherwise unexplained trends in the worldwide responses to terrorism and the tsunami. After 9/11, the “Western” emphasis, it would seem, was on containing potentially retaliatory fervor. After the tsunami, the “Eastern” emphasis, it would seem, was on stimulating regional awareness of one’s neighbors. One part of the world sought a reconnection with the depths of the ordinary; the other a contact with the heights of the extraordinary. “May their souls rest in peace” was a prayer for those who died on 9/11. “May our spirits seize the occasion” was a hope of those who survived the tsunami. [pp.135-6, 157-8,196-8, RCC on East versus West; Thomas More, “Soul Talk,” 2003] The “resting in peace” being sought was not one of slumber but of the “peace that passeth understanding,” the sense of wholeness within. [Philippians 4:7] This “seizing the occasion” being sought was not one so much of action as of “seeing face to face” interfaith relationship. [1st Corinthians 13:12] Those in the West, it would seem, were called upon to look inward, to consider the mote within one’s own eye. [Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 7:1-5; compare this with the Buddha’s similar admonition, as recorded in the Dhammapada 4 (50)] Those in the East, in would seem, were called upon to look outward, to consider the broader ramifications. This is a very complex area of thought, but it is clear that “soul” and “spirit” have very different implications, both in the scriptures of the various religions and in common usage. [According to the Jewish Kabbala, the *ruach* (literally, “wind”), the distinct personality, so to speak, is viewed as an intermediate entity, flitting back and forth between alliance with the *nefesh* (literally, “rested”), the earthy, soulful essence that keeps one physically alive, and alliance with the *neschama* (literally, “breath”), the transcendental, spiritual essence that pulls one toward God. During moments of specifically religious observance, while there is an aspect of rest (*nefesh*), there is predominantly spiritual expansion (*neschama*). Jews consider themselves spiritually connected to all peoples of the world, because they believe that all humans, whether they know it or not, share *neschama*, this potential for an awareness of God. Simcha H. Benyosef, “The Additional Shabbat Soul”] In either case, however, “soulful” and “spiritual” suggest purposeful, mindful engagement.

Stepping outside what has become customary, uninvolved existence, allowing the challenge of potential crisis, and the time to engage, is a prerequisite for personal and societal growth. What do I intend to imply in the title of this essay by the juxtaposition of the words “discovery” and “recovery,” as well as of the words “formation” and “transformation” – all of

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which relate to this notion of growth? These issues are, I believe, connected. It might once again go without saying that neither term in the two pairs can easily stand alone: the longing for *recovery* lies within the context of appreciating the past joy of *discovery*, and the nature of *transformation* depends somewhat, quite obviously, upon the nature of one's original *formation*. Notice how both *discovery* and *formation* seem to hark back to an earlier time in life, while both *recovery* and *transformation* seem to speak to a later period. Most important for us is that we consider that societies as well as persons both form and transform -- discover new truths and recover old ones – sometimes through their own conscious intention and sometimes through being provoked.

Getting involved, while appreciating the risk of rejection, is exactly what Boisen would advise and did. Viewing himself as a sociologist, he read widely about other cultures, and throughout his life he could strike up a conversation with anyone. More than read or talk, though, Boisen listened. Despite his many social anxieties, he had a way of helping individuals and communities to convey their real concerns. Let us take a quick look at some of the prompts that made up the clinical interview used by Boisen and his theological students with patients on the hospital wards. The right question – sincerely asked – might start someone thinking and feeling and talking for quite a while. Imagine yourself having several days to engage with an individual or a community about even one of the following questions:

Have you been worrying about something?

Have you ever felt that you were different from others?

Have you been having any unusual experiences?

Have you felt that something strange was going on,

something you could not understand?

Did it seem to you that something was about to happen?

Have you ever felt that God was displeased with you?

What is your idea of why we are in the world?

Have you ever thought of dying?

What is your idea of this universe in which we live?

What reasons do you have for believing in God?

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There were other questions – and Boisen had no qualms about eliciting a complete sexual history – or asking about almost anything, for that matter – but you might admit that his questions were probably more interesting and more productive of meaningful conversation than those asked by the average physician, the average ward attendant, or maybe even the average minister. [Powell, 1977, ATB's "Psychiatric Exam"] Within this interactive process, Boisen tried to bring patients to “that sense of social support which gives peace in the midst of conflict” – that is, he tried to calm them down, but he also tried to reinforce “those tendencies which make for progressive unification on a basis conceived as universal and abiding” – that is, he tried to spur them onward. [p.268, EIW] He viewed this engaged rather than sterile interview as “co-operative inquiry” – beneficial to both parties, but also as part of an overall “empirical theology,” “an effort to build up a body of organized and tested experience relating to the religious life and the laws that govern it.” [p.157, “The Present Status of William James ...”; Boisen always used the spelling “co-operative” rather than the spelling “cooperative,” and that convention will be followed in this manuscript] He viewed this engaged, sincerely questioning approach as a means of helping patients carry through their attempts at reorganizing their lives in response to disintegrating crises, but also as ultimately advancing the cause of society and religion.

What Boisen in his era would have called “conversion” or “spiritual awakening,” frequently sudden, via “religious quickening,” is perhaps what in this era would be called “spiritual formation” or “spiritual transformation,” frequently viewed as the endpoint of a process. In the best of all worlds, Boisen envisioned all of us – both personally and socially – as making an “honest and thoroughgoing commitment” to what he called “the heroic way of life.” [p.206-7, RCC] Notice that this is not a static but rather a dynamic notion – commitment to an *ongoing* “way of life,” to a *becoming*. This was a key concept in the theology he felt most useful to persons and societies in trouble – that they be viewed not as they are now but as what they are “in process of becoming” – that they be honored for “doing the best they can with the resources at their command.” [p.51, RCC, referenced to John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. New York: Henry Holt, 1920, pp.176ff] “The yesterdays demand attention only insofar as they are influencing the todays and determining the tomorrows.” [p.99, PRL] Boisen, focusing on the *becoming*, viewed “transformation of the personality” as the end of “all vital religious experience,” and he viewed support for the “re-creation of religious faith” as a special task of the clergy. Thus he might set out to help the troubled in their formation of spirit and soul, but his real focus would be on their ongoing transformation across time. [p.178-9, RCC]

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Let us take a closer look at Boisen's comment about the "re-creation of religious faith." While usually we view this in terms of personal spiritual formation and transformation, is this not what has happened across millennia, centuries, decades, and even just a few years as different societies, different faith groups have struggled with their own internal crises? Despite the fact that we do not generally stop to think about it, there has been a continual, global "re-creation" of religion. In virtually all cases, the splinter "sect" has caused the original "church" to *discover* new insights and to *recover* old ones, with a net benefit to society. That is, this "re-creation of religious faith" is both

- (1) the effect of men and women feeling "forced to think and feel intensely regarding the things that matter most," as well as
- (2) the cause of further personal and social spiritual transformation.

It could well be that *a person's initial spiritual formation and later transformation are quite different* – perhaps better, perhaps worse – according to whether that person's *religious tradition itself* is in crisis or custom. Historically, as we have noted, the trend has tended to be positive, but that does not guarantee a positive outcome for the recent "re-creation of religious faith" occurring as "Islamic Jihad". Surely this could bear a great deal of further study – *now*, and not in the distant future. In any case, Boisen viewed *the guiding of this transformation of religion* as a responsibility of the clergy. While it would be easy to argue that each faith group should "tend it's own garden," perhaps it is worth asking if the current religions have any responsibility for assisting *all* of the world's people toward what Boisen spoke of as "*identification with a fellowship*" that has the capacity to be "*universal and abiding*" and toward what he spoke of as *promoting "unification with the finest potentialities of the human race."* [p.305, EIW; *italics mine*]

Let me give but two examples, while fully knowing that each is imperfect. When the United States government, after the liberation of Afghanistan, found itself with detained combatants who turned out to be underage, illiterate, and ignorant of the religious tradition that nominally provoked their carrying of arms, it accepted the responsibility to protect them as children, to teach them to read and write, plus to bring in Moslem clergy with whom they could study the Koran. Surely such outreach must be rare in the annals of history. Perhaps it may help build a bridge later between the religions of custom and this religion of crisis – this sect of a

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church in crisis. A second example would be the work of the Mennonites, a branch of Protestant Christianity. Before, during, and after the main thrust of the recent struggle in Iraq, this faith group, itself opposed to participation in all wars, has continued its valuable work helping Iraqi farmers. While the chance of Mennonite relief workers converting Muslims theologically is remote, their chance of having positive effect on the development of a Muslim sect is great. *Chaplaincy work in general, of course, stands as one of the rare and notable situations in which practitioners of one religion might be called upon to assist the adherents of another religion in the practice and perhaps deeper understanding of their faith.*

While the initial tendency is to view growth and transformation, whether personal or societal, as uniformly positive, the fact is that growth does not always proceed steadily in one direction. Growth frequently involves taking two steps forward, then one step backward. Keeping this in mind, *we need to allow ourselves and our religions some room for misunderstanding the true nature of things and for losing the intended path. To not allow this is to set up ourselves and our religions for a potentially devastating sense of failure if the choices made later turn out to need some correction.* Boisen wrote extensively about this problem of *disintegration in response to self-perceived failure and threatened isolation.* [“Personality Changes ...”]

One of Boisen’s core observations was that “the sense of personal failure” was the driving force behind many crises. While he focused primarily on the personal, he recognized that this factor might also apply to the social. Boisen emphasized that “the sense of personal failure...is not necessarily an evil. When frankly recognized and intelligently handled, it becomes a precondition of growth.” [p.46, RCC] Of course, “frankly recognizing” and “intelligently handling” it is most of the problem. We could say that the “Western” world failed to protect itself from terrorism or that the “Eastern” world failed to protect itself from the tsunami, but we could also ask, are these not worldwide responsibilities? Is it not now becoming clear that the West needs the help of the East and that the East needs the help of the West? – that the East can help the West dissipate the powers of terrorist destruction just as the West can help the East dissipate the powers of natural catastrophe? What if the East recognized the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as their problem to solve? What if the West recognized the washed away towns of 2004 as their problem to solve? What if the East and the West forgot which is East and which is West?

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There is a need for all of us to begin thinking more globally. Boisen called for “*an effort at mutual understanding and helpfulness in the pursuit of a common goal.*” [p.260, RCC; *italics mine*]

What if, however, no one or no group frankly and intelligently tried

(a) to understand things as they really are and

(b) to promote transformation of all toward their “finest potentialities”?

Whatever the actual personal or societal response to crisis, one of Boisen’s main concerns was that there might be *no* constructive response. Let me repeat that: one of his main concerns was that there might be *no* constructive response – that *no* one and *no* group might get involved. He considered that “the real evil” for a person or a society would be “the failure to grow, the failure to obtain one’s true objectives in life.” [p.207, RCC] He had no illusions about what he called “the herculean task,” but his approach was just to get started with the person or society at hand – which he did. Boisen assumed that everyone was capable of theological reflection, and that everyone had some kind of beliefs, perhaps not well formulated, regarding “the end and meaning of life, the spiritual forces which operate within us ... [as well as] the relationships which exist between their various manifestations,” [p.306, EIW] He had no qualms about arousing “the sleeping conscience” as long as one recognized that an individualized “task of reconstruction” must then begin. [p.281, EIW] While Boisen’s research used a standardized set of provocative questions that he and Dunbar devised, as noted above, he was quite adept in any case at just sitting down with someone and drawing out his or her views about “the things that matter most” – “the ultimate realities of life and death.” He did this within a respectful atmosphere of what he called, “co-operative inquiry” – a kind of blending of the two parties into a research team regarding the problem at hand. Boisen taught his students to try to get involved with others’ active or latent curiosity about their “beliefs ... amid the complex entanglements of actual life” [pp.191,182, EIW; see, John Dewey, *A Common Faith*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934, p.32, “There is but one sure road of access to truth — the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection”; perhaps also of interest: John Dewey, “The Field of Value,” in Raymond Lepley, *Values: A Cooperative Inquiry*. New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1949]

The question is, can this drawing out of others’ views about “the things that matter most” – “the ultimate realities of life and death” – be carried out on a *societal* as well as on a personal level? *Can one society or one religion successfully engage another society or religion within this atmosphere of “co-operative inquiry”?* Boisen thoroughly believed that through “suffering

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together,” getting down to work on real problems, the “strain is shared and social support is afforded,” with the net result being “steadying and constructive.” Can this tried and true approach to persons be applied to societies and religions? Preliminary research on the recent incidents of sudden, catastrophic terrorist and natural destruction, shows that those persons immediately wrestling with the task have fared the best – which is exactly what Boisen would have predicted. Could this hold for societies or religions – that those immediately tackling the real problems, open to assistance among equals toward resolving the problems, would fare best in the near future? “Crisis experiences,” in Boisen’s view, “reveal hidden elements of strength and of weakness.” [p.45, RCC]

Boisen maintained that cultures developed best “through the overcoming of difficulties” [p.43, RCC] Some of the difficulties currently facing the world, however, are of an unprecedented magnitude. Boisen observed that war, for example, as a personal and social calamity, seemed to be an exception to the rule that crisis could stimulate useful religious concern. [1945, “What War Does to Religion”] As he asked, “What important religious movements have grown out of a war ... ?” [p.5, RCC] He concluded, however, that religious growth of a personal and social nature might occur when “the reaction to national disaster was self-blame rather than hating and blaming the enemy” – that “examining the beam in one’s own eye” had to precede “considering the mote in the other’s”. [p.6, RCC; see note above] In his view, war, “like an acute psychosis in an individual ... is an attempt at reorganization which may either make or break, depending on the honesty and fair-mindedness which we face and eradicate the long-standing evils” – “the complex forces common to us all” – “which have been responsible” for the problem in the first place.” [pp.7,97, RCC] That is, we must strive to *maintain perspective and a self-critical stance* during the current global war on terrorism. Even a natural phenomenon, such as the 2004 tsunami, brings its own challenges – especially to the extent that there are contributing “non-natural” factors and complications. When the reaction to catastrophic terrorist and natural destruction brings excessive self-blame or excessive acceptance, that can derail useful religious concern, discouraging an engaged response.

At the last Asia Pacific Congress on Pastoral Care and Counseling, in Perth, Australia, in July 2001, the Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Y. Lartey outlined prophetically some of these problems we now face. He spoke of “rapid change and flux in the social, economic, cultural, religious,

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political and personal spheres,” producing confusion, uncertainty, fragility, and vulnerability. He emphasized that “these conditions exist to different degrees all over the globe ... simultaneously” – that it was “not the case that any one of these conditions exists in isolation in one geographical area or cultural context.” While Lartey called for all of our assumptions to be “critically appraised,” he also cautioned that it was not true “that the condition critiqued ceases to exist.” What are we to do? Sounding very much like Boisen’s call for an “empirical theology” fifty years earlier, Lartey called for a “post-modern,” global view of pastoral care and counseling, encompassing both individuals and societies, focusing on the specific. He called for a return

- (1) “from the general to the particular,”
- (2) “from the universal to the local and contextual,” as well as
- (3) “from the timeless to the timely.”

Lartey also spoke bluntly of the problem *that not all approaches are positive – that developing religious beliefs can be “sometimes creative and other times lethal”*. He raised the issue of universal responsibility – of chaplains “as agents of respect for the whole-created order” of the world. He noted that in response to the need for multi-faith initiatives some religions, just as Boisen would have predicted, are responding to the crisis “courageously and innovatively,” while others are “frozen with fear, dread and anxiety”. Lartey called upon chaplains to *engage critically and empathically, encouraging and empowering others “to work towards creative change of community-destroying structures.”* While not quite showing the appreciation of empirical method – “the attitude of humility which is willing to put religious insight to the test” – that characterized Boisen’s work, Lartey did call for “collaborative work” with disciplines outside of theology, toward achieving holistic health for the entire planet. [Lartey, “Global Views for Pastoral Care and Counseling ...; *italics mine*] The question becomes, *can we step outside our own religion to engage all other religions? Can we listen to the others, speak to the others, and nourish a reasonably objective appreciation from both sides as to what is working and what is not?*

We may need to begin closer to home, to gather strength for taking on the world. Boisen called for *the recovery of zeal, inner experience, and faith* [p.232, RCC] – for a “*living fellowship with a certain body of beliefs in which there is room for growth and for discovery.*” [p.237, RCC; *italics mine*] One organization, “a theologically based ... covenant community,” has been trying to

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foster this nurturing environment by actively bringing together groups of chaplains who desire to grow richer in spirit and in soul. [The College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy, PO Box 162, New York, NY, 101098, USA; on the web at www.cpsp.org] Let me quote from their Covenant, but as I do so *try to imagine these admonitions not as applying to individuals but as applying to societies and religions* – indeed to all the societies and religions of the world.

We ... see ourselves as spiritual pilgrims
seeking a truly collegial ... community. ...

We commit to being mutually responsible to one another for
our ... work and direction. ...

We commit ourselves to a galaxy of shared values
that are as deeply held as they are difficult to communicate. ...

Again, try to imagine these admonitions as applying to all the societies and religions of the world. Let me continue to quote:

We place a premium on
the significance of the relationships among ourselves.

We value personal authority and creativity.

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

That is the phrase that most caught my attention: “*We ... stand ready to midwife one another in our respective spiritual journeys.*” That is, we, or our societies and religions, will help each other through our “spiritual transformations,” or, in Boisen’s terms, our “re-creations of religious faith.” Let me again continue to quote:

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Because we believe that life is best lived by grace,
 we believe it essential to guard against becoming
 invasive, aggressive, or predatory toward each other.
 We believe that persons are always more important than institutions

We are invested in offering *a living experience*
 that reflects human life and faith within
a milieu of a supportive and challenging community of fellow pilgrims. [*italics mine*]

Does not this covenant sound like Boisen’s “living fellowship with a certain body of beliefs in which there is room for growth and for discovery”? [p.237, RCC] Imagine the impact a loose worldwide network of such interfaith groups could have. Just two years ago this covenant community of chaplains underscored its “conviction that *a clinically trained person is one who is committed to continuing personal transformation.*” [see the General Secretary’s report, 21 March 2003, The College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy; on the web at www.pastoralreport.com/the_archives/2003/06/general_secreta.html; *italics mine*]
 Since these chaplains have already been very active in encouraging the formation of indigenous pastoral care and counseling associations throughout the world, it would not be much of a stretch to envision them as committed to working toward a continuing transformation of the world.

As you will recall, Boisen observed that, worldwide, the “normal crises” of *personal* development are integrated socially through religious ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, etc. Another of the questions facing us now is, what means do we have for integrating the “normal crises” of *social* development? Is each society and each religion left to struggle on it’s own? Remembering Boisen’s research on four main reactions to crisis, is there a way that part of the world community – perhaps a network of clinically trained chaplains – might help groups avoid

surrendering to hatred,
withdrawing into lust and greed, and
concealing one’s inadequacies through delusion,

but rather succeed in

viewing frankly the true nature of the situation,

such that exceptional crisis might provoke insights that can be integrated into customary life?

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Eighty years ago, nowhere in the world did there exist a “clinically trained” chaplain. Now there are thousands. The movement for clinical pastoral and spiritual training, education, and transformation was ecumenical from the start, and began to spread worldwide within several decades. These programs, however, need to embrace clergy of even more faith groups and to be established in even more nations. Perhaps one of the most important projects to be tackled would be the translation in paraphrase of Boisen’s call for clinical work, “A Challenge to the Seminaries,” into as many languages as possible. [Boisen, 1926, in *Christian Work* 120: 110-112; reprinted in the *Journal of Pastoral Care* 5: 8-12, 1951] Think of the potential impact on our current crises if there were clinically experienced chaplains attached to every – and I do mean “every” – theological school in the world, committed to nourishing *the wisdom of perspective and a self-critical stance*. [compare Lartey’s speech from the last Congress, 2001, cited above, in which he spoke of the “post- modern” approach, in which one attempts to maintain the stance of “... ‘being in critical vein’ or ‘in questioning mode’.”]

“Religion in Crisis and Custom.” Let us return to the title of Boisen’s last monograph, published fifty years ago this year. The first major thrust of this presentation outlined “religion *during* crisis and custom” – the personal discovery and recovery of spirit and soul during extraordinary as well as ordinary times. The second major thrust, however, began a careful consideration of “*religion itself in crisis and custom*” – the “re-creation of religious faith” in societies as new revelations and insights initially rest uncomfortably with older ones, during extraordinary as well as ordinary times. Boisen’s view of transformation – for both individuals and societies – focused on “struggling together,” on striving to maintain “an honest and thoroughgoing commitment” to a process of *becoming* – on becoming *the best one can conceive*. Boisen emphasized that *failures were part of the price paid for attempting to grow – to become* – but that daring efforts must be attempted nonetheless. The burden – the challenge – is large, but appears unavoidable. We must indeed, as this Congress is charged, “maintain our buoyancy” – and “lift up our spirit” – as we shoulder the immediate worldwide task with which we are confronted. What is being asked now is whether we can *come to view our religions*, individually and collectively, *as having universal responsibilities* to promote what Boisen called “the *finest potentialities of the human race*.” [p.305, EIW; *italics mine*]

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My questions, once again, are beginning to outnumber my answers. The conclusions from my several historical presentations to the clergy are, however, beginning to add up. A few years ago I noted a first “challenge from the past,” exemplified by the work of Boisen, that we

(1) maintain the courage to espouse beliefs not initially shared by others.

[Powell, 1999, “Whatever ...”] Somewhat later I noted a second “challenge from the past,” exemplified by the work of Boisen’s colleague, Dunbar, that we

(2) maintain the willingness to tackle the apparently impossible task.

[Powell, 1999, “Emotionally ...”] Still later I noted a third “challenge from the past,” again exemplified by the work of Boisen’s colleague, Dunbar, that we

(3) maintain the continued ability to create and invent.

[Powell, 2002] Before formulating – actually, resurrecting – a fourth challenge, let me note several things about the Rev. Dr. Anton Theophilus Boisen in the light of these first three challenges.

He sized up a moral problem,
putting insights into print for evaluation by colleagues, and
stood strong by his convictions.

He took charge of situations,
overcoming the shyness induced by severe mental illness, and
started what had to be done.

He remained intrigued by situations,
reflecting on complex confusion until finding clarity, and
proposed a solution.

I am sure that Boisen would have thoroughly enjoyed reflecting theologically upon recent world events and the ways in which the religious community has or has not engaged and responded. There is no question in my mind that we would be hearing his prophetic voice. In Boisen’s absence,

(a) can the suffering world – not just your region or your community –
but the *world* – depend upon *you*

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- to provide the wise leadership needed?*
- (b) can the broader world depend upon *you*
 to *size up problems,*
take on the tasks, and
remain intrigued?
- (c) can those parts of the world that seem foreign depend upon *you*
 to *stand strongly by your convictions,*
get to work without excuses, and
encourage novel approaches?

Each time I speak to the clinical pastoral community as an historian, so it seems, I discover and recover one more piece of wisdom from your past. During his latter years Boisen spoke of “the broader perspectives ... with which true religion is concerned.” [p.393, “What War Does to Religion.” this longer version of Chapter VI, RCC is strongly recommended.] He thought deeply about the hardships of the 1930s, the moral issues of World War II, and the worldwide aftermath of war, recognizing the temptation for each party involved to focus primarily on it’s own situation. Following the precedent of the prophets, Boisen saw *the need for clergy to take the lead in expanding and questioning people’s views.* This time, the “challenge from the past,” a fourth, is that the worldwide clinical pastoral and spiritual community

(4) *maintain the wisdom of perspective and a self-critical stance,*
 as it takes seriously the call to transform the world, in times both of crisis and custom.

Thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts on the formation and transformation discovery and recovery – of spirit and soul. Shalom # 7,500 words

“Out of the depths have I cried unto to thee, O Lord.” Psalm 130:1 in the Protestant Bible; 129:1, “De Profundis,” in the Catholic Bible. “A Book which We have revealed to you, in order that you might lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light ...” al-Qur’an 14:1.

Endnote for the General Reader:

The Rev. Dr. Anton Theophilus Boisen (1876-1965) is generally credited as the founder, in 1925, of the *trained* chaplaincy, for hospitals, prisons, the military, and other institutions. These specially trained ministers also now offer pastoral care, counseling, and psychotherapy within parish settings. What eventually became the

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worldwide movement for “clinical pastoral education” actually grew out of a delusion Boisen had in 1920 – about having “broken an opening in the wall which separated medicine and religion.” Yes, this was initially a delusion, as Boisen was, at age forty-four, in the midst of his first of six periods of profound psychosis. What makes Boisen different from so many others who have suffered with schizophrenia is that he devoted the last half of his life to working out the practical implications of his delusional insight. The training program he developed for theological students in 1925 has since been copied by most American seminaries, has spread throughout Europe, and is now spreading throughout Asia. His best known book – his first – that has been republished five times – is The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience (1936), which is still widely cited in the literature of religion and psychology. A close runner-up would be his last book, Out of the Depths: An Autobiographical Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience (1960). Each of his books – and he wrote three more – has become a classic in its own right. #296 more words

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#517 more words