

Managing the Space in Pastoral Encounters

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One of the things that I have emphasized in my work is the need for theological reflection on pastoral practice. That is, I believe that what we do in pastoral work needs to be grounded not only in psychology and counseling theory, but also in the theological tradition. One theological doctrine that I have found helpful here is the doctrine of the Trinity. You may find this strange at first glance. It is a doctrine that many find arcane and of little or no practical relevance. However, over the last 20 years we have seen a revival of the doctrine of the Trinity, and a common theme here is that it is practical through and through. With this in mind, theologians have used it to better understand practical concerns such as ministry, the nature of the church, the search for a more just society, and psychotherapy. The common theme in all of these areas of human concern is relationality. Theologians are now saying over and over

that the Trinity is all about relationship. If we understand the way in which the Three relate we have a model that shapes and informs our thinking about the way we relate in ministry, in the life of the church, in psychotherapy, and in the wider society.

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It wasn't always like this, though. Theologians didn't always think about the triune God in terms of relationship and communion. The church fathers thought of God as a substance. God was the supreme substance at the centre of an ordered cosmos. From very early in the history of Christian thought the category of substance featured in trinitarian formulations. Tertullian (c.160-c.220) sought to capture the essence of the Trinity with the formula one substance, three persons (*una substantia, tres personae*). The one indivisible, homogenous divine substance exists as three individual persons.

This kind of approach is worse than useless for us if we want to use the Trinity to shape our thinking about pastoral encounters. I can't be in communion with a substance. A couple of centuries later the Cappadocian Fathers came along, though, and helped us to think about God as being in communion. Now we're getting somewhere. This idea of God as essentially a communion of love looks much more attractive from a pastoral point of view.

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You'll notice that I referred to the Three earlier rather than to the three persons. This was deliberate because it is very difficult to think rightly about the Trinity if you use the language of persons. God is pure relationality. God exists through a system of relations. For example, the Father begets the Son. In the creed, we refer to the Word of God as God's only begotten Son. Then, the Father and the Son spirate or breathe forth the Spirit. So we have the relations of begetting, being begotten, breathing out, and being breathed. There are no beings at each end of these relations. If there were, we would have tritheism (three gods). God is relationality, full stop. God is pure relationality grounded in and animated by perfect love.

The first step in developing a Trinitarian approach to pastoral work is to recognize this fundamental theological truth: God is a system of relations. The key fact about the Trinity is that God is a loving communion. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are names that point to the relations that make up the life of the Trinity.

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The next step is to look for practical insights that might emerge when we begin to approach the Trinity as a system of relations. A term that the theologian, David Cunningham, identifies as useful in talking about the Trinity is *polyphony*. It is a technical musical term and it refers to the playing of a number of notes simultaneously in such a way that none of the notes are so dominant

that they mute the others. In the Trinity, the notes of oneness and threeness are sounded simultaneously. There is unity in the Godhead, but there is also particularity.

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I have found it helpful to follow Cunningham's lead in order to make the suggestion that polyphony is a central feature of pastoral ministry. For example, in seeking to establish a real relation with another person, we need to sound the notes of both *nearness* and *distance*. If I cannot draw near to the other person, our relationship will develop on a superficial basis. On the other hand, if I cannot judge when I need to give him some space, I will be seen as intrusive, demanding, and insensitive. That's why I think that a fundamental skill for the pastoral caregiver is *managing the interpersonal space*.

Theologians have observed that there is both nearness and distance in the life of the Trinity. The Three exist in a perfect communion of love. They draw near to each other and share life fully. However, at the same time they give each other space to be. If there was no space, there would not be any particularity. That is, the Three would collapse into oneness. The relations of begetting, being begotten, breathing out and being breathed require space to operate. If the space is completely shut down, these relations collapse.

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So how is nearness expressed in pastoral care? It is expressed fundamentally through empathic attunement. Empathy involves an attempt to put oneself in contact. More specifically, it involves attuning oneself to the story, to the experience, of the other. It is not so much a skill, although it is that, as a way-of-being-with. Of course, it is metaphysically impossible to think and feel oneself into the inner world of the other in such a way that one has the same experience. I can imaginatively grasp the general species of feelings and thoughts another person seems to be having; I cannot feel the affect and think the thoughts exactly as he does. I can sense, for example, that he is intensely frustrated and imaginatively get in touch with my own experiences of deep frustration. The fact that I cannot feel precisely his feeling of frustration is not an obstacle to a real meeting between us. As soon as I say to him, "I can see that you are so frustrated you could scream," he is no longer alone in his frustration; now he has a friend to share it. Empathy is "an attempt to penetrate the metaphysical aloneness of the other".¹

If I am to move beyond merely looking at the other as if she were a specimen, something to be studied and analysed from the outside, to being with her in her world, I need to "go" into her world and sense from the inside what life is like for her. In an early attempt (1957) to define empathy, Carl Rogers wrote:

¹G. Egan, *The Skilled Helper*, 4th ed., (Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole, 1990), p.123.

To sense the client's private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the "as if" quality--this is empathy, and this seems essential to therapy. To sense the client's anger, fear, or confusion as if it were your own, yet without your own anger, fear, or confusion getting bound up with it, is the condition we are endeavoring to describe.²

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The "as if" quality in empathic attunement is very important, I think. There is a need to maintain the boundary between oneself and the other. There needs to be some space between us. A real meeting between two people requires that both maintain their own individual identities. Just as the Three in the Godhead need to give each other space to be, so it is with us. To forget that the other's anger, frustration and confusion are hers and not one's own introduces confusion into the relationship. It's interesting to note that in a later (1980) definition of empathy Rogers, to the contrary, shows himself to be much less concerned about the possibility of identification. To enter the private world of the client

²C. Rogers, "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change", in H. Kirschenbaum and V. Land Henderson eds., *The Carl Rogers Reader* (London: Constable, 1990), pp. 219-235, p. 226.

means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values.....In some sense it means that you lay aside yourself; this can only be done by persons who are secure enough in themselves that they know they will not get lost in what may turn out to be the strange and bizarre world of the other, and that they can comfortably return to their own world when they wish.³

I consider that Rogers' earlier approach is to be preferred. I don't believe it is necessary or helpful to leave one's own inner world; even if it is only for a short time. We need to keep some space between us.

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I have talked about nearness in pastoral relations, but what about distance? I believe that one important expression of distance is a willingness to go beyond empathy in order to challenge or confront the other person. Here I find Martin Buber's notion of confirmation helpful. To confirm the other is to help her grow into her God-given potential. Sometimes this involves struggling with a person *against* herself. That is, the pastoral caregiver sensitively confronts the care recipient with destructive personal patterns. In order to assert oneself in this way requires taking a step back. Just as the Three in the Godhead need space

³ C. Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), p. 143.

in order to express their particularity, so the caregiver needs to create space in order to bring his or her particular view of what is going on for the care recipient.

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The details of a debate between Carl Rogers and Buber over confirmation are very enlightening. Rogers saw in Buber's concept of confirmation something quite close to his own view of acceptance. During their dialogue at a conference, he wanted to establish just how Buber saw the relationship between the two concepts. He began by explaining how acceptance works in the therapeutic relationship:

I feel a real willingness for this other person to be *what he is*. I call this "acceptance"....I am willing for him to possess the feelings he possesses, to hold the attitudes he holds, to be the person he is.⁴

Buber responded by commenting that all genuine relationships must begin with acceptance, with communicating to the other that "I take you just as you are".⁵ But he also felt compelled to point out that confirmation is actually a step beyond acceptance. Buber shared his conviction that it is possible to see in the other his God-given *potential*: "I can recognize in him, know in him, more or less,

4 C. Rogers, 'Dialogue Between Martin Buber and Carl R. Rogers', in M. Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, trans. by M. Friedman & R. Gregor Smith (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965), pp. 166-184, pp. 169-170.

5 Buber, *ibid.*, p. 181.

the person he has been (I can say it only in this word) *created* to become."⁶ Seeing the potential is a movement beyond acceptance, and it implies the need to *act* with the other: "And now I not only accept the other as he is, but I confirm him, in myself, and then in him, in relation to this potentiality that is meant by him and it can now be developed....He can do more or less to this scope but *I can, too, do something*" [emphasis added].⁷ Imagining the potential of the other and helping in the realisation of that potential constitute for Buber the critical points of distinction between acceptance and confirmation.

Rogers reacted by asserting that in therapy he accepts not only the individual in his current emotional state but also his potentiality.⁸ This unconditional positive regard is the "strongest factor" in promoting change. Buber was unable to find the same level of confidence as Rogers in the power of acceptance alone to produce growth. His experience is that often one must struggle with the other *against* himself. The other knows the direction he should take, but for some reason he finds himself moving in another direction, or not moving at all. For Buber, the human can best be understood as a polar reality.

[T]he poles are not good and evil, but rather yes and no, rather acceptance and refusal. And we can strengthen, or we can help

⁶ Buber, *ibid.*, p. 182.

⁷ Buber, *ibid.*, p. 182.

⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 182.

him strengthen, the one positive pole. And perhaps we can strengthen the force of the direction in him because this polarity is very often directionless.⁹

It is only possible, according to Buber, to help the other move through his ambivalence on the basis of a distinction between accepting and confirming.¹⁰ This seems right. Given that there is often this struggle between “yes” and “no” in a person, a more active approach than acceptance is required. Here Buber’s image of ‘unfolding’ comes into play. I struggle with the other against herself not to impose a direction, but to facilitate a release of that which is latent in her. Friedman captures well the nature of this wrestling with the other while respecting her autonomy and independence:

You’ll never be confirmed by me simply by my putting myself aside and being nothing but a mirror reflecting you. Confirming you may mean that I do *not* confirm you in some things, precisely because you are not taking a direction. It is not just that you are wrestling with yourself; I am wrestling with you. There is an added factor here that is not what one calls being *empathic*, which strictly speaking means temporarily leaving my ground to enter into yours. It is not just that I am watching you wrestle with yourself; I am also entering

⁹ Ibid., p. 180.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 183.

into the wrestling....I may not, of course, impose myself on you and say, "I know better than you." It is only insofar as you share with me and as we struggle together that I can glimpse the person you are called to become.¹¹

It is interesting to note that the person-centred therapist, Ralph Quinn, also attests to the reality of the polar nature of the self, although he does not refer to the Buber-Rogers debate. In an article entitled "Confronting Carl Rogers", he points up the limitations in an "acceptance-only" policy and cites his own clinical experience:

In the last year I have worked with a man who claimed he *desperately needed* to be more assertive in his life, with a lonely woman who *wanted* to quit spending all her evenings alone at home, with a student who *would do practically anything* to stop using marijuana, and with a husband and wife whose constant fighting was "ruining their marriage."

With all of these clients at some point in the course of therapy I spent a good deal of time confronting their (largely unconscious) desires to *not be* assertive, to *not be* with other people, to *keep smoking* marijuana, and to *maintain the same dysfunctional*

¹¹ M. Friedman, 'Reflections on the Buber-Rogers Dialogue', pp. 63-64.

*patterns of fighting [emphasis added].*¹²

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The theorist who has done the most to relate Buber's ideas to counselling is Maurice Friedman. In an article co-authored with Tamar Kron on the role of confirmation in counselling, the need affirmed by Quinn to go beyond acceptance to confrontation is related to the polar self: "[I]t is not enough to reflect back to you what you are and affirm it. I have to confront you with your unacknowledged polarity so that you will be ready to take responsibility for it."¹³ The authors illustrate their convictions through a case study involving a young doctoral student who came to Kron for counselling in order to work through the difficulties created by his low self-esteem and lack of confidence in his intellectual capabilities.

The client is one of seven children of a North-African, low socioeconomic multiproblem family who grew up in a nonencouraging environment. Overcoming all his hardships, the talented youngster succeeded in his studies and became a doctoral student in a highly valued natural sciences program.

Listening carefully to the client's way of describing himself, the

¹² R. Quinn, 'Confronting Carl Rogers: A Developmental-Interactional Approach to Person-Centered Therapy', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 33, no. 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 6-23, p. 12.
¹³ T. Kron & M. Friedman, 'Problems of Confirmation in Psychotherapy', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 66-83, p. 81.

therapist sensed, concealed within his self-deprecation, a tone of arrogance. She verified her impression during the next few sessions. When the client once again expressed his feelings of inferiority and despair at his inability to go on with his somewhat pretentious project, she stopped him and said, "But you know, actually you are arrogant and presumptuous."

The client was taken aback and responded with surprise, "Arrogant? I never thought of myself as arrogant, for I usually feel so inferior."

The therapist told the client that side by side with his feelings of inadequacy, he does feel proud of his high achievements in the face of his low background and his hardships. "You can be justly proud of yourself for all your achievements," she added, "but you are also arrogant for being the only child in your family who made it and climbed high up into the academic world."

The client became quiet and reflective. In the next session, he came in and said, "Last time I felt hit as though you had sent a missile at me. I was confused and bewildered the whole week. I feel as if my whole self-image is being turned upside down." He then continued by telling a dream he had. In the dream, he sees himself standing precariously on a hill of stones. He looks down the hill and feels afraid that the stones will start rolling down and he will fall and

get himself hit hard. He then starts to descend the hill very slowly and cautiously, holding on to the more solid-looking stones with his hands and feet until he succeeds in going down all the way and standing on firm ground.

Both the client and the therapist understood the dream to be about the patient's ego inflation, his fear of failure, and the acknowledged need to go slower and adapt his work to his present abilities.¹⁴

Within this student there are both acknowledged and unacknowledged polarities. He claims his sense of inferiority and low self-esteem, but disclaims arrogance and pride. "Yes" and "no", acceptance and refusal – these are the dynamics the counsellor must reckon with; she must wrestle with her client against himself.

In wrestling with the other, I need to assert myself and my point of view. That is, I need to move out, to create some distance. In empathy, I project myself into the inner world of experience of the other. In confrontation, I step back in order to bring my perspective and my challenge.

Let me try to pull the threads of this approach together. I have attempted to make the claim that managing the interpersonal space is central in pastoral work. Drawing inspiration from the relational dynamics in the life of the Trinity, I

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 81-82.

have identified both nearness and distance as important. Effective pastoral care requires the wisdom to move appropriately between these two poles. The caregivers who are most helpful to others are those who not only draw near through empathy, but also occasionally step back and offer an appropriate challenge.