

**Theological Accountability: The Hallmark of Pastoral Counseling****Carrie Doering, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract** A growing interest in spirituality among psychologists, social workers, and health professionals has created new opportunities for collaboration between religion and psychology. This collaboration challenges pastoral counselors to identify what is distinctive about their identities and practices. The purpose of this paper is to explore the dangers of theological naïveté and elaborate ways in which pastoral counselors are theologically accountable for using first, second, and third orders of religious language, and for identifying the covert comparisons---theological, universal, and phenomenological---they make between their religious worlds and those of their clients.

**Keywords** Pastoral theology, pastoral counseling, pastoral psychology

**Introduction**

The dawning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has coincided with a new era in the relationship between health and spirituality in North America. Two momentous developments have launched this collaborative relationship between the health sciences and religion and spirituality. First, research has demonstrated what we've all known for a long time, that certain aspects and forms of religion and spirituality can be good for one's health and well-being. Psychologist of religion Kenneth Pargament (Pargament, 1997; Hill & Pargament, 2003) has led the way in developing new ways to measure many aspects of religion and spirituality. Instead of using simple measures

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of religiosity, like church attendance and frequency of prayer, Pargament and his colleagues have done extensive research on complex aspects of religion and spirituality, determining which aspects are associated physical, psychological, and spiritual health.

Psychotherapists who draw upon this research can help clients formulate goals for both psychological and spiritual growth. For example, Kenneth Pargament, in his new book, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred* (2007) uses his encyclopedic knowledge of this research to help clients develop a well integrated spirituality. At the outset of his book, he makes this very important point:

Spiritual resources are not simply another problem-solving tool. They are instead embedded in a larger worldview. ...[S]piritual resources are, first and foremost, designed to facilitate an individual's spiritual journey. Therapists who overlook the larger sacred purpose and meaning of these resources risk trivializing spirituality and reducing it to nothing more than a set of psychological techniques. (Pargament, 2007, p. 12)

He has a comprehensive and complex understanding of well-integrated spirituality, which he defines as

...broad and deep, responsive to life's situations, nurtured by the larger social context, capable of flexibility and continuity, and oriented toward a [spirituality] that is large enough to encompass the full range of human potential and luminous enough to provide the individual with a powerful guiding vision. (Pargament, 2007, p. 136).

Pargament's psychological understanding of religion and spirituality exemplifies this collaboration between religion, spirituality and the health sciences which has emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A second development inaugurating this collaboration is the growing use of postmodern approaches to knowledge, which has opened up new possibilities for understanding religion and spirituality, as well as for understanding science. In terms of science, psychologists are realizing the limitations of scientific approaches to knowledge, especially of complex phenomena like religious and spiritual experiences. There is a new appreciation for the ways in which knowledge is socially constructed and highly contextual. As psychologist, Kenneth Gergen, notes

... to do science is not to hold a mirror to nature but to participate actively in the interpretive conventions and practices of a particular culture. The major question that must be asked of scientific accounts, then, is not whether they are true to nature but what these accounts (and the practices in which they are embedded) offer to culture more generally. The local truths of scientific cultures are essential to maintaining their traditions, but to presume the local to be the universal not only is arrogant but also sets the stage for conflict and deathly silencing. (Gergen, 2001, p. 806)

When postmodern approaches are used by those in the health sciences, there is a whole new array of possibilities for collaboration with those studying religion and spirituality. However, there are also many challenges to using postmodern approaches to religion, which I'll explore in this paper, as I talk about the dangers of theological naïveté.

One of the greatest challenges for those of us with faith commitments, who work with clients who are religiously committed is identified by theologian Paul Lakeland:

To any but the most unreconstructed of biblical literalists, the challenge of contemporary religious thought is to keep alive in the post-modern world a religious vision created in a distinctly premodern cultural context, honed to a level of sophistication and lived out courageously through many centuries of premodernity. (Lakeland, 1997, p. 39)

The purpose of this paper is to explore how we as spiritual caregivers and pastoral counselors can make unique contributions to this collaboration in ways that avoid the dangers of theological naïveté by being theologically sophisticated.

### **Re-examining what makes our work as pastoral counselors distinct**

This growing interest in spirituality among health practitioners, including physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and family therapists, is exciting for all of us who have worked for many years at the intersection of counseling and spirituality. What I find most exciting is that we have an opportunity to re-examine who we are, and what makes our work as pastoral counselors and spiritual caregivers distinct from counseling offered by those who are spiritually or religiously committed, but not theologically educated and formed. The question I pose is this: What does it mean to be identified as counselors and caregivers in the historical tradition of the American Association for Pastoral Counselors? What does it mean to be part of a national multifaith organization which is committed to the professional education, certification and support of people involved in pastoral care and pastoral counseling?

In this paper I argue that what makes us unique in the field of mental health is that we draw upon our theological education to understand our own spirituality, and the spirituality of those we counsel. In contrast, spiritually-oriented practitioners who do not draw upon a formal theological education face the limitations of being theologically naïve when they counsel spiritually or religiously committed clients. We risk being as naïve as them, if we do not intentionally draw upon our theological education. Our theological education, including its ongoing process of spiritual formation, makes our counseling different from other mental health professionals. We have been trained to think theologically and to practice our religious faith and

spirituality within circles of theological accountability. We are theologically accountable not only to our communities of faith and/or the religious organizations that endorse our practices; we are theologically accountable to our religious and spiritual traditions which, for centuries, have been in conversations that inform the work we do and ‘whose we are’. It is this theological accountability that makes us *pastoral* counselors and *spiritual* caregivers, and distinguishes us from spiritually oriented therapists who are not theologically educated and credentialed as pastoral counselors.

### **Examining the relevance of this notion of theological accountability**

The notion of theological accountability has rich meanings for me because of the work I do teaching pastoral care and theology. If you work in a context where there are few opportunities to draw directly upon your theological education, then theological accountability may not describe your identity or work as a pastoral counselor. Or, if you are one of AAPC’s professional associates and haven’t had the opportunity for a formal theological education, then you probably don’t think of yourself as theologically accountable. I want to acknowledge that the more your context is similar to mine, the more relevant and meaningful my framework will be; the more different your context is, the less meaningful. The most important outcome of these reflections on theological accountability is that we have ongoing conversations about what distinguishes the work pastoral counselors from spiritually-oriented counselors, as we stand at the intersection of practices that support health and religious faith and spirituality.

I’m arguing that for pastoral counselors, this intersection is truly a crossroads, in several ways. First, as pastoral counselors, we are trained to work with clients who seek spiritual as well as mental health. Second, in terms of the theoretical perspectives we use, we stand at an

intersection between (1) the health sciences and (2) religious and theological studies, along with other theoretical perspectives that may be relevant, like family systems theory, and gender and race studies. As we stand at this intersection, what does it mean to be theologically accountable as pastoral counselors?

First, we need to be able to use the full range of ways in which to talk and think about theology, namely what I will describe as first, second, and third order theological and religious language. Second, we need to be theologically accountable for the comparative approach we use when we work with those outside of our religious and spiritual traditions. As I explore each of these ways of being theologically accountable, I will identify the dangers of theological naïveté.

### **Being accountable for using first, second and third order reflections on religion**

One helpful framework for distinguishing between theological naïveté and sophistication draws upon the differences between first order, second order, and third order religious and theological language. Theodore Jennings describes these levels of reflection in an essay in the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* where he defines pastoral theological methodology (1991, p. 862). Jennings describes first order religious language as expressions of religious faith and spiritual experiences. This is the language people use when they gather in communities of faith to worship. First order religious language occurs in counseling when a woman cries out that she feels as though she is being punished by God, when a man describes a moment with his infant son that felt sacred, or when a therapist finds herself thinking that the God she believes in wouldn't punish her client, and would celebrate a father's love for his son. First order statements are these spontaneous expressions and thoughts in which we express an embedded theology that may be pre-critical.

In their book, *How to think theologically*, Stone and Duke define embedded theology as “the implicit theology that [people of faith] live out in their everyday lives,” and they note that “some of us find it easy to articulate the embedded theology that we carry with us. But many do not” (Stone & Duke, 2006, pp. 13 & 14). This notion of embedded theology can be elaborated using sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas (1992) about culture, as practices with embedded values that we internalize and put into practice. For example, I have internalized my family’s and culture’s values about what it means to be a woman, and I practice these values in how I experience my body, how I dress, and how I express myself, in my tone of voice and body language. Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to describe these internalized values that we enact in our practices. As pastoral theologian Elaine Graham has elaborated, religious and spiritual beliefs are internalized in the same way, and become embedded in the ways we view our lives and relate to each other.

Bourdieu is presenting a model of tradition and continuity by which the values of the past are encoded in social life yet continually evolve because of human agency... [Similarly] Christians [can be described] as participating in and reshaping a living faith through their contemporary practices of worship, care, and social concern. (Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005, p. 194)

When we visualize religious faith or spirituality as a *habitus*, we can imagine embedded theologies as those beliefs and practices that have become a habitual part of our world, like the ground on which we stand, or the shape of the window through which we look out on life. When our world is disrupted by an existential crisis, we suddenly become aware of our embedded theologies. We may be forced to deliberate and evaluate whether religious and spiritual practices

and beliefs still connect us with a sense of the sacred and help us make sense of what is happening.

In contrast to embedded theology, Stone and Duke describe deliberative theology as “the understanding of faith that emerges from a process of carefully reflecting upon embedded theological convictions.” “Deliberative theology *carries us forward* when our embedded theology proves inadequate” (Stone & Duke, 2006, pp. 16 & 18). Deliberative theology becomes second order religious language when we draw upon ongoing conversations about religious faith and spirituality in communities of faith, and among religious professionals and scholars. Entering into such conversations is a form of theological education in which we look at our beliefs and practices from the theological perspectives of our religious community, denomination, tradition, or from a strand within theological studies, like liberation theologies.

Opportunities for informal theological education come in adult bible study and book discussion groups, and through workshops and visiting lecturers. Participation in worship is itself a form of theological education. These informal venues for theological education help people elaborate their religious faith by making it more deliberate. If one’s religious tradition is not Christian, then religious studies, such Jewish or Buddhist Studies, can be used to engage in second order reflections on one’s religious tradition. I’ll say more about broadening our perspective to look beyond Christian traditions when I explore the dangers of making covert comparisons between our religious tradition and those of our clients.

Another opportunity for deliberative theology and informal theological education occurs when people leave their childhood faith traditions and either drift away from participation in faith communities or find new religious and spiritual homes, a trend that has emerged in the past few years and has been documented in a survey on religious affiliation published recently by the



Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. As Neela Banerjee reported in the New York Times on February 26, 2008, “The report, titled “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” depicts a highly fluid and diverse national religious life. If shifts among Protestant denominations are included, then it appears that 44 percent of Americans have switched religious affiliations.” In this process of redefining one’s spirituality and religious faith people are likely to identify their embedded theologies, deliberate over them, and conserve, reconstruct, replace, or reject these theologies. Another significant finding is that, as Banerjee reports, “The group that had the greatest net gain was the unaffiliated. Sixteen percent of American adults say they are not part of any organized faith, which makes the unaffiliated the country’s fourth-largest “religious group.” She notes that “The rise of the unaffiliated does not, however, mean that Americans are becoming less religious. Contrary to assumptions that most of the unaffiliated are atheists or agnostics, most described their religion ‘as nothing in particular.’” Theologians Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland describe how many people “in the postindustrial West increasingly see their own spiritual lives in highly individualized, syncretistic, or postdenominational terms” (Jones & Lakeland, 2005, p. 21).

When we encounter careseekers who have found new religious and spiritual homes or who are unaffiliated we are theologically accountable for responding to and often initiating conversations about how their religious faith or spirituality relates to their lives. Such conversations offer them opportunities to deliberate further over how their religious faith and spirituality may enhance or exacerbate their coping and meaning-making. We need to be theologically accountable for engaging in these second order reflections. In working with this population of people who have found new religious and spiritual homes or who are spiritual but not affiliated, our theological education equips us to recognize the multi-layered nature of beliefs

and practices which are especially prevalent for people in crisis. Careseekers who think they have left their childhood religious faith behind may re-experience it in the midst of a crisis.

I vividly recall a personal experience in which my childhood Catholicism emerged in a crisis. When I was 25 years old and a newly ordained Presbyterian minister in a rural area of Ontario, Canada, I received a call from my father, telling me that my grandfather had committed suicide. My father and uncle decided that they would go to Florida, and make all of the arrangements for his body to be cremated, and that the family would gather later to bury the ashes. This news was shocking to me and I was far away from family and didn't know how to express my grief. I telephoned Iris Ford, the only other woman minister in my part of the country. I asked her if she thought I should ask the Roman Catholic priest in my town to say a Mass for my grandfather. Iris asked me if my grandfather had been Catholic and I said, no, he had never gone to any church, as far as I knew. "So why you want to have a priest to say a Catholic mass for him?" she asked. The question made me realize that in the midst of this crisis, I was drawing on my childhood Roman Catholic practices and beliefs, which formed a sort of embedded layer of my religious world. I was re-experiencing a childhood belief that I needed to intervene in order to help my grandfather's soul get into heaven. This belief was pre-critical in a way similar to the premodern beliefs of the medieval church I had learned it in my catechism. In the moment of crisis, I was acting like a good catholic girl taught by the nuns in fourth grade. At that age, I didn't interpret or even question the absolute truth of beliefs about heaven and hell. Talking with my friend prompted me to deliberate over this embedded theology. I immediately realized that a Catholic mass was an inadequate ritual, and would offer only a limited way of trying to connect spiritually with my grandfather. Instead, my friend and I talked about him, what he had meant to me, and how I understood his death.

Life cycle transitions, as well as crises within our families, in our communities and country, and throughout the world often force us to excavate and identify our embedded theologies and deliberate over them. As Judith Herman wrote in 1992, in *Trauma and Recovery*, “The traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian. . . . The survivor . . . stands mute before the emptiness of evil, feeling the insufficiency of any known system of explanation” (Herman, 1992, p. 179). If survivors, their families, or communities do not draw upon second order reflections on violence, suffering, and evil available to them in their religious traditions, their theological naïveté may result in theologies that are part of a web of violence, rather than a web of life. We’ve become painfully aware of such dangers when we hear American ministers make sense of violence by telling victims that God does not give them more than they can bear, this suffering is their cross to bear, or that suffering is an opportunity to find Jesus and be saved. In confronting violence, we all need to be theologically accountable for, first, knowing the religious ways for making sense of violence, such as theodicies that have been constructed over the course of centuries; second, knowing the benefits and liabilities of these theodicies; third, being able to empathize theologically with the ways in which people struggle to make sense of violence, and finally, being part of a process of constructing meanings that are contextually relevant, and which are life-giving, not life limiting or destructive.

I’ve described first order religious language as expressions of our embedded theologies and second order language as the process of deliberating over these theologies by using religious and theological perspectives, which may be part of informal and formal theological education. Third order religious language examines the theological method we are using to relate theoretical perspectives in psychology and theology to the practices of faith, as well as pastoral counseling. Fifty years ago Seward Hiltner (1958) challenged pastoral caregivers and counselors to think

about method in his classic text, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*. Don Browning (1983), James Poling and Donald Miller (1985), and others in the 1980s challenged pastoral counselors to relate theory and practice using practical theological methods. Evangelical Christian counselors, who parted ways with progressively liberal theological pastoral counselors in the 1970s, have been thinking about methodology for many years, often using a method involving levels of analysis, which frames their psychological theories and practice within an evangelical Christian worldview. We all need to be theologically accountable for identifying our methodology and knowing its benefits and liabilities.

Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward (2005) describe seven methods of theological reflection, providing historical examples and then listing the pros and cons of each method. They arrive at these methods by surveying historical and contemporary practices of theological reflection. In a qualitative study in which Townsend (2006) interviewed seventy pastoral counselors, he identified four methods that are similar to ones identified by Graham, Walton, and Ward: a formational approach (similar to what Graham et al. call “theology by the heart: the living human document”), a correlational approach (similar to what Graham et al. call “speaking of God in public: correlation”), a diagnostic model, which Townsend describes as a refinement of the formational and correlational methods, and feminist and liberation approaches (similar to what Graham et al. call ‘theology-in-action: praxis’).

Pastoral counselors and spiritual caregivers can use Graham et al.’s descriptions to think about their own style of theological reflection, and the styles that their clients use. The first method they describe---“theology by heart”---is most common in pastoral counseling and spiritual direction:

God is experienced as immanent, personal and intimate, speaking through the interiority of human experience. Records of such experience---journaling, autobiography, psychotherapeutic accounts of self---are vehicles of theological reflection and construction. (Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005, p. 13)

In a companion volume entitled *Theological Reflection: Sources* Graham et al. (2007) offer excerpts that illustrate each method. In illustrating ‘theology by heart’ they draw upon the writings of Augustine, Thomas Merton, C.S. Lewis, and Anne Dillard.

They identify another method, one that is often used by those in more conserving theological tradition. Described as “telling God’s story” this method emphasizes the bible as “canonical.” Theologian Karl Barth is used to describe a Christian identity rooted in the foundational stories of the bible, often in opposition to popular culture, in contexts that are seen as fragmenting identity and imperiling truth with cultural relativism. Theologians Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Alistair McIntyre, and Stanley Hauerwas are identified with this method of theological reflection. In describing the drawbacks to this method, Graham et al. (2005, p. 106) note that the Christian tradition, which is believed to have a unchanging deep grammar, is, in fact radically plural; further, “while some canonical narrative theologians seek to engage fully with the postmodern challenge others are nostalgic for a premodern world in which the Christian narrative provided the predominant epistemological framework for society” (Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005, p. 106). They ask the provocative question, “But for whom is contemporary pluralism and breakdown of traditional values a problem but for those who have benefited from ‘social order’ in the past?” (Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005, p. 106).

I find the last three methods they describe as particularly congruent with more liberal theological perspectives. The method they identify as “speaking of God in public” brings

theological and religious perspectives into dialogue with scientific, artistic, socio-economic perspectives in order to construct new religious and theological propositions, which in a postmodern approach are understood as contextual and provisional. This method, called the revised correlational method, has been used extensively in liberal pastoral theology, for example, in correlating Tillich with psychodynamic models of personality. A problem with this use of the correlational method is that it focuses on the individual and not on larger social systems.

Another method identified by Graham et al. as “theology in action” that is used within liberation theologies addresses this problem. “The starting point of this method of theological reflection has...never been abstract speculation on timeless truths” (Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005, p. 170); rather, theology begins with concrete experiential knowledge and asks questions about transformative praxis that liberates people from oppression. This theological method is relevant in clinical work with those who are marginalized because of gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, or disabilities.

The final method they examine, which they call “theology in the vernacular” also has great potential for doing theological reflection in clinical work. This method pays attention to the local theologies that can be constructed from everyday language, the symbols of ordinary people, and popular culture. It works particularly well in settings where people cobble together a syncretistic faith which blends aspects of material, ethnic, and religious culture in idiosyncratic ways.

This discussion of methods of theological reflection illustrates the value of identifying a method that is relevant to oneself and one’s clients, and knowing the limitations of each method, so that these methods can be used responsibly. As you can see, to use only first order ways of talking about religion or spirituality is theological naïve. In order to be theologically

accountable, we need to use theological perspectives to reflect upon first order religious and spiritual language, and we need to use third order reflections to identify our method and know its relevance and limitations.

How can these three orders of religious language function in spiritual care and pastoral counseling? I liken the use of first order language to the way Christian faith traditions were experienced in premodern times, when, after the third century, Christian women and men lived within a world where their faith was continuous with all other aspects of their culture. They did not need to interpret their faith, or think critically about it, because second order language was the domain of those in religious authority. It may be simplistic to equate premodern and precritical expressions of religious belief, since there was a great deal of critical reflection and religious plurality occurring during this historical period. Nonetheless, looking back, we often nostalgically envision premodernity as a time of doctrinal uniformity.

Much of the heritage of Christian faith traditions and practices comes from this premodern time. For many Christians, participating in their communities of faith often means appropriating these historical traditions by using first order language in pre-critical ways, as though there is no need for interpretation. Indeed, in my experience on ordination committees, candidates for ordination often have to demonstrate that they can whole-heartedly use first order language in attesting to their adherence to the core doctrines of their tradition, as if their use of second order language to explain their interpretation of these doctrines will make them less able to relate to the pre-critical first order language of their congregants.

As theologically accountable pastoral counselors, we need to know how to relate to the first order language used by our clients. We need to be able to empathize theologically, by stepping into their shoes and viewing the work through their religious perspectives. We need to

imagine vicariously what it would be like to give voice to their embedded theologies and begin to deliberate over them. This is all part of the process of theologically joining with our clients and forming working alliances that are religious, spiritual, and theological.

In this process of vicariously stepping onto the religious or spiritual worlds of our clients, we *first* need to assess how they may be yearning for an immediate sense of God's presence or a sense of the sacred, in a pre-critical way similar to how God was experienced in the premodern traditions of Christianity. We can use a pre-critical or premodern lens to assess how people experience God 'directly'. *Next*, we can use a modern or critical lens to interpret their religious experience, using a variety of theoretical perspectives, like biblical critical perspectives, medical, or psychological perspectives. Modern approaches to religious knowledge were formulated in reaction to premodern approaches that gave primary authority for interpretation to the Roman Catholic Church. The Christian Reformation shifted interpretive responsibility from the communal or corporate frame of the church to the individual, who, drawing upon the Enlightenment approaches to knowledge, used reason to approach the bible and make sense of it. When clients turn to the Hebrew Bible or New Testament for help, they can be encouraged to think critically about how this source of authority can help them make sense of their crisis. For clients experiencing health crises, modern medical knowledge, available on the internet, helps them understand what is happening to them. *Finally*, we can use a postmodern lens to appreciate the contextual and provisional nature of knowledge, including knowledge of God. This postmodern lens brings into view the importance of intrinsically meaningful religious experiences that emerge from the particular cultural, communal and family narratives.

Theological accountability involves being able to use these trifocal lenses (Doehring, 2006). The challenge is to know which lens is the most relevant or meaningful in any given



situation. In my experience, a postmodern lens is predominantly used in the academic study of religion, in theological and religious studies. A modern lens is often used in seminaries, particularly in biblical critical studies, and also in denominational debates over controversial issues, like the ordination of gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships. A pre-critical or premodern lens predominates in communities of faith, especially during the experiences of worship. When we finish graduate degrees in theological and religious studies, and begin our practices of care and counseling, we often face the challenge of how to draw upon the modern and postmodern approaches to religion, which we learned in the academy, in our work with people of faith, who are likely to experience religion in pre-critical or premodern ways.

Before leaving this discussion of first, second, and third order levels of religious language, I want to comment briefly on how this framework can help us evaluate methodologies used in spiritually oriented approaches to psychotherapy written by psychologists, social workers, and family therapists. Often therapists are using first order or premodern religious language to talk about religion and spirituality; they use modern approaches to knowledge to talk about scientific aspects of psychology. They sometimes use postmodern philosophical approaches to reintroduce religious and theological worldviews as a foundational level of analysis; however, they only draw upon premodern approaches to religion, making universal claims that all theistic religions have the same core belief. The clearest example of this approach is the extensive work of Richards and Bergin (2004, 2005) elaborating a theistic approach to psychotherapy. Their theological naïveté, in limiting themselves to first order reflections on religion and spirituality without accessing second order reflections available in theological and religious studies, makes it more likely that they will see all religions through the lens of their own religion, and less likely that they will see differences.

How can we be theologically accountable within a religiously pluralistic context? That's a central ethical question for those of us who identify Christian traditions that have been part of the history of colonialism. I turn now to exploring the dangers of covert religious comparisons that often attend theological naïveté.

### **Covert comparisons: theological, universal, and phenomenological approaches**

The biggest challenge facing pastoral caregivers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is how to draw upon our religious tradition when we are helping someone outside of our tradition. In a pluralistic, global context, we need to take responsibility for the comparative method underlying the care we offer to those outside of our religious tradition. I'm going to draw upon the comparative study of religion to describe some common comparative methods that have been used when Christian compare their religious tradition with other world religions.

#### *Christian Theological Approaches*

One comparative method, which is common among many Christians, is to use Christian theology to interpret the non-Christian's religious experience. This is like a default comparative method, which creates a theological horizon of meaning that includes everyone. Listen to how Shirley Guthrie, an American Presbyterian theologian, uses this approach:

We can ... recognize [people of other religious faiths] as fellow human beings who just like us are created in the image of God; people who just like us are loved and cared for by God; people for whom just as for us Christ lived, died, and rose again; people who just like us are promised the life-renewing Spirit of God...When we go to meet such people we do not go into foreign territory but into territory where the living Triune God has

already been at work before we get there, we will expect and gladly welcome evidence that the grace and truth we have come to know in Jesus Christ have reached into their lives too. We will *expect* and *be glad* to hear them say things about their God and their faith which sound remarkably similar to what we have to say about our God and our faith... We sometimes see in them more of the way, the truth, and the life taught and demonstrated by Jesus than we see in our own lives. (Guthrie, 1996, p. 71)

By theologically weaving a net that will include everyone in his religious meaning-system, Guthrie is claiming that all people, regardless of their particular religious faith, experience the general way that God is revealed through nature and through human intellect. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.3.1), Calvin (1816) described general revelation as a natural instinct that makes humans aware of God. Many Christians believe that general revelation prepares people to receive special revelation, which is the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, and through the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.

The problem with this comparative approach is that we end up submerging the other person's spirituality within our own religion. Comparative religious studies scholar William Paden notes, "We all tend naturally to reduce areas of [another person's] life to certain themes that fit our own worldview" (Paden, 1994, p. 2). Given the dark history of Christianity's participation in colonialism, we need to be aware of the implicit comparative method underlying our practices of care, lest we colonize the religious or spiritual world of those who are not Christians.

*Universalist Approaches*

Another commonly used comparative approach is the universalist approach, which interprets all world religions as having a common spirituality, as many paths leading to the same goal. This approach, like the Christian theological approach, has a long history dating back to antiquity. While a universalist perspective might bring into focus some underlying similarities between my religious journey and another person's existential journey, it blurs the contextual differences that make my experience of the sacred very different from another person's. The universalist approach is dangerous in ways similar to the theological approach. We inevitably see the core of our religious tradition as the common core of other world religions.

*A Phenomenological Approach*

A phenomenological method allows pastoral counselors to focus on differences between their religious traditions and their clients. It allows the client's religious expressions to present themselves in their own terms. Using this phenomenological approach I will first try to be aware of my own biases---the lens of my worldview, through which I am liable to interpret another person's worldview and experience. Second, I will try to see the other person's existential searching in terms of his or her life. William Paden, a scholar who studies comparative methods, puts this phenomenological approach into practice by describing each person's religious faith as a "religious world," which he likens to a habitat, "a system of language and practice that organizes the world in terms of what is deemed sacred" (Paden, 1994, p. 10). In the preface to the second edition of his book *Religious Worlds* he describes how "useful, synthesizing, and far-reaching the concept of 'world' is as an organizing category for the study of religion. "'World' is not just a philosophical abstraction... In more human experiential terms, it is an actual habitat, a

lived environment, a place...” (Paden, 1994, p. viii); each person’s religious world is “the structure of meaningful relationships in which a person exists and participates (Paden, 2000, p. 335). Paden suggests that each person’s religious world is in some ways unique: “Within a single tradition like Christianity, there are thousands of religious worlds” (Paden, 1994, p. viii). “The notion of world calls attention to the radical cultural and geographical diversity among and within religious systems” (Paden, 1994, p. 55)

A phenomenological comparative method enhances empathy. Paden’s description of the process of understanding others is similar to the way pastoral counselors talk about empathy: “The notion of different worlds is an essential part of the concept and practice of ‘understanding others’...Don’t worry about whether other people’s beliefs and acts refer to something real in *your* world, but first understand what the beliefs and acts invoke as real in *their* world” (Paden, 1994, p. 54).

The table below outlines the features of each comparative approach to counseling Christian, spiritual, and nonreligious persons.

Table 1

*Matching Comparative Approaches to Types of Care*

Describing how comparative approaches affect counseling with clients whose religion or spirituality is similar	Christian theological approach: The Christian pastoral counselor looks for theological meanings and	Universalizing approach: The counselor looks for universal themes that are common to both her/his religious/spiritual	Phenomenological approach: The counselor tries to understand the client’s religious/spiritual world without imposing
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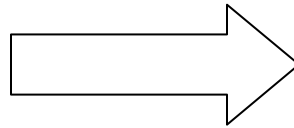
or different from the counselor's	practices in the religious/spiritual world of the client.	world and the client's religious/spiritual world.	her or his religious/spiritual world on the client.
Pastoral counseling with Christian pastoral counselors and Christian clients	The more overlap there is between the Christian world of the counselor and the client's, the more relevant a Christian theological approach will be.	The more overlap there is between the counselor's world and the client's, the more likely there will be common themes	The less overlap there is between our Christian world and the client's, the greater the need for an approach that looks for differences.
Counseling with those who are religious/spiritual but not Christian	Theologically submerges the existential worlds of non-Christians within the Christian world of the counselor	Theologically erases differences and risks imposing themes from the counselor's spiritual/religious world onto the client's religious/spiritual worlds	Makes no assumptions about similarities, but looks for differences between the counselor's religious/spiritual world and the client's

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***My religious world:***  
 Christian, Protestant,  
 Presbyterian,  
 Progressively liberal,  
 Postmodern theological  
 approaches; shaped by aspects of  
 my social identity, like age, race,  
 nationality, citizenship,  
 socioeconomic class, ethnicity,  
 gender, sexual identity, able-  
 bodiedness.  
 As a Christian, I use theological  
 perspectives to construct my own  
 meanings, for example, in order  
 to understand where God is in my  
 own life experiences,

Pastoral  
 counseling  
 builds a bridge  
 through the  
 process of  
 empathy;  
 imaging how  
 the other is  
 constructing  
 meaning and  
 connecting  
 with a sense of  
 the sacred.

***The client's religious or  
 spiritual world:*** shaped by  
 his/her religious and  
 spiritual experiences, and  
 other interacting aspects  
 of social identity: age,  
 gender, nationality,  
 citizenship,  
 ethnicity/racial identity,  
 socioeconomic class,  
 sexual orientation, and  
 experiences of disability.



In imaging the gulf  
 between the counselor's and  
 client's religious, spiritual, or

existential worlds, we can visualize pastoral counseling as a process where we build a bridge between our religious/spiritual world and the world of the client.

Diagram 1

*Implementing a Phenomenological Approach*

In building this bridge, I need to pay attention to how I am comparing my religious world with the religious world of the client. As I noted earlier, as Christians our default comparative approach is to use our Christian theology to understand the other person's religious/spiritual world. When the client is Christian, this may seem like an appropriate approach. However, when we stop and think about how much someone's Christian world is shaped by cultural identity---the religious faiths of their families, their ethnic and racial identities, their national identity, their gender, age, socioeconomic class and sexual orientation, their experience of disability---we can see that each Christian world is probably going to be quite different from someone else's Christian world. For example, my experience of teaching at a progressively liberal American seminary is going to be quite different from the religious world of a Presbyterian Korean minister. Even when we are engaged in pastoral counseling with people of our own religious faith, we need to stop and think about what approach we are using to compare our religious world to their religious world. The risk of not explicitly examining our comparative approach is that in our theological naïveté we will impose our theology on the client when it is not relevant or meaningful to him or her.

If we are pastoral caregivers functioning in what has been called the classical paradigm of pastoral care, then our job may well be that of imposing our theology on the other. Throughout centuries of Christianity, this paradigm for pastoral care was one of proclamation. The goal of those ordained by the church and representing God was to save the soul, by guiding it, using the true message of the gospel. You can find the classical paradigm being practiced in what is called biblical counseling. Jay Adams's (1970) *Competent to Counsel* is a popular textbook on pastoral care and counseling in more conservative theological seminaries.



In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more theologically liberal pastoral caregivers in the United States and Canada, adapted the counseling techniques of Carl Rogers, moving away from what they saw as the moralistic aspects of the classical paradigm. They reshaped pastoral care and counseling as therapy, focusing on the counseling relationship, which was supposed to emulate the unconditional acceptance of God. The goal was to heal, by promoting self growth and self actualization. Here it was not the Christian message that saved the client. It was the relationship between pastoral counselor and client. In this therapeutic paradigm, theology was often used to describe the quality of the relationship, especially in terms of how it was like God's relationship with us. In the clinical or therapeutic paradigm of care and counseling, the default comparative approach to understanding similarities and differences between us and the client was a universalizing approach. We might have been aware of differences between us and the client, but we looked for underlying commonalities, often using psychological rather than theological perspectives.

In an edited volume entitled, *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, Nancy Ramsay describes how, in the 1990s, the clinical paradigm was widened to include two emerging paradigms which often focused on justice: the communal contextual paradigm and the intercultural paradigm.

Relational justice, normative for the communal contextual and intercultural paradigms, shifts the understanding of the self to a far more contextual, socially located identity in which the political and ethical dynamics of asymmetries of power related to difference such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and class are prominent. From within the clinical pastoral paradigm pastoral counseling had long focused largely on liberating persons from spiritual and psychological bondage, but relational justice requires that care also

includes attention to liberation from the actual bondage of oppression—the corollary of freedom from bondage is relational justice. (Ramsay, 2003, pp. 9 – 10)

In the communal contextual paradigm, described by John Patton (1993), the community represents God in the way it cares for those in need. Within this paradigm, there is the freedom for pastoral care to be constructed in unique ways, shaped by the context. The intercultural paradigm includes all of the varieties of pastoral care practiced throughout the world. It pays attention to how pastoral care often involves building bridging between cultures. Emmanuel Larney, a professor who first studied in Africa and later in Great Britain, and who now teaches at Emory School of Theology in Atlanta, has elaborated the intercultural paradigm. Larney uses Kluckhohn and Murray’s (1948) assertion that “Every person is in certain respects (1) like all others, (2) like some others, and (3) like no other” (Larney, 2003, p. 43) to argue that each careseeker will both reflect aspects of his or her culture and also be unique. He recommends an “intercultural” approach in which “the complex interrelatedness and interconnectedness of the three spheres interacting in living, growing and changing human persons is what is expected, treated as the norm and attended to” (Larney, 2003, p. 35).

Both of these paradigms acknowledge the extent to which context shapes pastoral, spiritual, and religious care and counseling. The comparative approach used in both the communal contextual paradigm and the intercultural paradigm is a phenomenological approach that emphasizes the differences between us and the client. The chart below sketches the implicit comparative method used in these paradigms of pastoral care and counseling.

Table 2

*Comparing Paradigms of Pastoral Care and Counseling*

Paradigms	Classical/Cleric	Clinical/	Communal/Contextual	Intercultural
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	al	Therapeutic		
Why	Salvation	Self actualization/ healing	Depends on the context: often involves care and counseling of persons, families, communities; relational justice	Depends on the context
How	Guiding people to God: helping them believe and accept the tenets of the Church	Rogerian therapeutic techniques: Empathy, Non-directive unconditional acceptance	Depends on context: Relational justice, sustaining people in the midst of social oppression; holding people accountable for their participation in social injustice	Indigenous, culturally and religiously authentic strategies for healing, sustaining, guiding, justice-seeking
Comparative method	Implicit Christian theological approach: We look for Christian theological	Implicit Universalizing approach: We look for common, universal themes between	Depends on the context: Christian theologizing approach when there is more of a shared religious/spiritual world;	Phenomenological approach: We try to understand the client's religious/spiritual worlds without imposing

	meanings and practices in the religious world of the client.	our religious/spiritual worlds and the client's religious/spiritual world.	Phenomenological approach when we have less in common with the client's spiritual/religious world.	our religious/spiritual world on them.
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Being theologically accountable for our comparative approach to a client's spiritual or religious world is part of being theologically sophisticated within a pluralistic context where information technology may make it seem as though people across the globe are close at hand. However, as Paden says,

The profound differences between human world views have not been erased by information technology or international business networks, with their appearance of having so easily unified the surface of the world. Beneath the surface, the earth is still a patchwork of bounded loyalties and hallowed mythologies, a checkerboard of collective, sacred identities. The theater of ethnic and religious diversity has not gone away. The variety of human worlds, with all their conflicts, is still there, despite the façade of unity. (Paden, 1994, p. vii)

This is the context in which we function as pastoral, religious, and spiritual caregivers and counselors. As I have noted, the danger of theological naïveté is that we unwittingly see our client's religious or spiritual world through the lens of our embedded theology. This covert form of theological comparison is a subtle re-enactment of Christianity's long history of colonization. We need to draw upon the work of contemporary comparative religious studies, to engage in second order reflections on religious worlds that differ from our own. We can draw upon third

order reflections to identify comparative methodologies that help use appreciate what is distinct and different about our client's religious or spiritual worlds. In these ways, we can be theologically accountable for our practices of care and counseling.

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In pastoral theology this process of reflecting on the interdependent relationship between theology, psychology, pastoral care and pastoral counseling practice promotes the development of practice skills rooted in a coherent and dynamic theoretical framework for pastoral care and counseling (Graham & Whitehead, 2006;Purnell, 2004). Thus, the formation of pastoral counselors is enhanced as students interact with pastoral theology (Graham & Whitehead, 2006), specific psychotherapeutic models (CooperWhite, 2006;Hightower, 2002), and engage in theological reflection (Townsend, 2006).  
Theological Accountability: The Hallmark of Pastoral Counseling. Article. Carrie Doehring. @inproceedings{Burger2015ThePO, title={The perspectives of the pastoral counsellor and pastoral counselling in South Korea : a postfoundational practical theological journey}, author={Dennis Frederick Burger}, year={2015} }. Dennis Frederick Burger. This research was done from a Postfoundational practical Theological position and I made use of the narrative approach as my methodology. The focus of this research was to come to a better understanding of what the perspectives are of the pastoral counsellor and pastoral counselling in the South Korean context. This was done by listening to the nar The best counseling uses Scripture as God intended: as a living perspective of a dynamic world that holds authority over our own. It is not one-dimensional, but three-dimensional, able to address the many factors of lifeâ€”from relational dynamics to self-perception to circumstantial difficulties. The Bible delights us even as it instructs us; it challenges the core commitments of our hearts even as it lifts our perspective above our sorrows.Â Jeremy Pierre (PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) serves as the dean of students and associate professor of biblical counseling at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He is also the pastor at Clifton Baptist Church and serves on the board of directors for the Biblical Counseling Coalition.