

CONCLUSION

One of the traditional objectives of clinical pastoral education has been for students to explore their own attitudes, values, and assumptions relative to ministry work. As chaplains or pastoral supervisors progress through certification processes, the quality of their functioning depends on their attending to their own attitudes toward and values of the standards that define adequate practice in their professional organizations. There are places in the professional associations for appraisal of one another's virtues as well.

NOTES

1. Herbert Anderson, "Authenticity and Character in Pastoral Ministry," in Heather Cameron and others, *Together in Ministry: Essays to Honour John Pavor* (Melbourne, Australia: Uniting Academic Press, 2009), 157.
2. Thomas L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5th ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 26–51.
3. Muslim, Hindu, Hebrew, and Buddhist teachings similarly honor humility as a key personal characteristic. The Qur'an, for example, warns "And walk not on the earth with conceit and arrogance (17:37).
4. Robert C. Roberts, "Humility as a Moral Project," in *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 2007), 78–95.
5. Edmond Pellegrino and David Thomasma, "Prudential Judgment and Religious Commitment," in *The Christian Virtues in Medical Practice* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 99–115.
6. Thomas Keating, "The Gift of Counsel," *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000), 59–69.
7. Peter Kreeft, "Justice, Wisdom, Courage, and Moderation: The Four Cardinal Virtues," *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press: 1992), 59–69.
8. Pellegrino and Thomasma, "Charity in Action: Compassion and Caring," in *The Christian Virtues in Medical Practice* 84–97.
9. Gordon J. Hilsman, *Intimate Spirituality: The Catholic Way of Love and Sex* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 15–46.

Review Essay of Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self*^a

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As we reflect on responsibility and accountability in supervision and formation, H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self* merits fresh consideration. Originally published posthumously in 1963, this book is taken from the Robertson Lectures delivered by Niebuhr at the University of Glasgow in 1960 and the Earl Lectures delivered by him at the Pacific School of Religion and at Riverside Church in 1962. Nearly half a century later, this book seems to anticipate directions that education for ministry has subsequently taken, and it continues to provide a framework for understanding these educational developments. In particular, Niebuhr's model of the responsible self and his understanding of an ethics of the "fitting" can enrich an understanding of: (a) the action-reflection model of education, (b) the importance of description in practical theology, and (c) the emphasis on context in contextual studies.

Niebuhr identifies four aspects of responsibility in his model. Responsibility involves: responsiveness, interpretation, accountability, and "social solidarity." With these four aspects in mind, he summarily defines responsibility:

The idea or pattern of responsibility, then, may summarily and abstractly be defined as the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents (p. 65).

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Each of these four aspects of responsibility entails implications for formation and supervision in ministry and will be discussed in turn.

RESPONSIVENESS

That responsibility entails responsiveness may sound like something of an oxymoron, but it remains a most significant observation and a correction on more formal conceptions of moral responsibility. To be responsible, one must respond to something and to someone. One cannot speak of responsibility in the abstract by appealing to notions of the good or the right. The moral life happens within relationships and in response to each other's actions.

This reality of responsiveness is one of the key assumptions behind the action-reflection model of education, utilized in some form by most of the readers of *Reflective Practice*. We find ourselves responding to others, and we reflect on our actions and responses within specific situations. We attend to the data of our interactions in mutual responsiveness with others.

With regard to pastoral ministry in particular as reflective practice, Jackson Carroll has written that pastoral leadership occurs "in the midst of messes,"² by which he means attending to matters that are already complexly in process. In a similar vein, I have elsewhere written about pastoral ethics beginning "in the middle."³ In other words, we are called to respond to others and to events already occurring.

INTERPRETATION

Niebuhr's second element of responsibility—interpretation—is also one of the key assumptions behind the action-reflection model. We **reflect** on our actions and responses. We interpret and reframe our actions, responses, and the situations themselves, so that we can deepen in our self-understanding and our understanding of others.

Niebuhr would have us ask, "What is going on?" or "What is happening?" as an initial line of inquiry. Then, secondly, one seeks to determine an action in response that is "fitting" to the situation. Hence, Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility is also an "ethics of the fitting" or "*cath kontic* ethics" (pp. 60, 87).

Moreover, there are levels of interpretation that are possible for attending to whatever is going on. There is the immediate perception of events, conditioned as we are to see and interpret them as we do. Actions occur, though, within systems which bring meaning to actions and which themselves are subject to interpretation. These are social and political systems as well as nat-

ural systems. Niebuhr refers to the total "context" of an action for interpreting its meaning. He writes: "The act is understood only because its relations are understood, and the question is about the extent of its relations, about its context" (p. 123).

For Niebuhr, at an even deeper level, actions are ultimately to be interpreted with reference to God—to a monotheistic faith and to an understanding of sin and salvation in Christ that affirms life over and against the forces of death. As the book proceeds, the chapters become increasingly theological and confessional.

The Responsible Self thus models for us the pattern of theological reflection that we typically now use in theological field education. Various iterations of the "pastoral circle" move from an initial description of a situation, to a deepening analysis of its social context, to explicit theological reflection, and finally to an informed pastoral response.⁴

The handbook *Studying Congregations* that is commonly in use by students in theological field education as well as in courses on congregation studies provides such a model. Beginning with description, it moves through analysis of a context and theological reflection, resulting in action. The authors of this handbook emphasize the importance of description:

Don Browning, for instance, in his book *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, suggests that the first task of practical theology is to ask, How do we understand this concrete situation in which we must act? He argues that this task of description is, in fact, a theology task⁵

In that same handbook, Robert Schreiter notes that Thomas Groome as well as Don Browning begin with description, and he emphasizes: "Description of the environment is not something extrinsic to the theological process, but is deeply part of it."⁶ Niebuhr's understanding of responsibility involving interpretation and responsiveness resonates and reverberates strongly with these materials.

ACCOUNTABILITY

For Niebuhr, though, the social context is also entwined with the third and fourth elements of his definition of responsibility—accountability and social solidarity. Accountability for Niebuhr is the recognition that our actions have consequences. Not only do we respond to events preceding our actions, but our actions provoke responses from others following our actions. These responses to our actions include natural cause and effect, but also, more complexly, the social community of interpretive agents surrounding

us and our actions. We act within society, and our social partners respond to us in accordance with their interpretation of our actions.

This response to our response is itself a form of accountability, but we also anticipate and internalize our expectations of others' responses. When we do so, that anticipation of others' responses to us enters into our own decision-making and responsibility. Following the social behaviorist, George Herbert Mead, Niebuhr refers to the "generalized other" as an ingredient of conscience (p. 76).⁷ Niebuhr writes: "The generalized other or the impartial spectator of the empirical conscience is a knower and an evaluator, representing the community but also the community's cause" (p. 84). The generalized other is that socially formed internalized conscience.

Throughout *The Responsible Self*, Niebuhr follows his understanding of G. H. Mead and Mead's interpretivist and interactionist model of the self. Mead's theory continues to be of interest to scholars in the social sciences. Niebuhr quotes Mead: "'The self,' he writes, 'as that which can be an object to itself is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience'" (p. 72).⁸ It is this model that allows Niebuhr to balance materialism and freedom, individualism and society, in his own conception of moral agency.

This is an intersubjective understanding of conscience and accountability. It is at once subjectively internalized for the individual, yet it is essentially a social phenomenon in its genesis and function. It is much akin to that which we, as educators, are seeking to help shape and form among our students, as we have them reflect on their experiences of ministry in the contexts of their peers and contemporaries. We are hoping that our students internalize from these conversations with others a sense of responsibility and accountability that they will be able to access when serving in leadership or ministry positions beyond that group of peers and fellow students.

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

Finally, by social solidarity, Niebuhr is acknowledging that all individual agency is occurring within this wider social context. This has implications not only for individual moral responsibility and personal relationships but also for broader political and social life and witness. It is instructive that Niebuhr introduces his model of responsibility by attending to its relevance for two types of circumstances: personal suffering and social emergencies. Both represent situations that may be imposed unwanted upon people but to which people must necessarily be responsive; their responsiveness would

be in accordance with their understanding of personal suffering or of the social crisis respectively.

It is a strength of Niebuhr's model that it fits with each level of challenge presented to the formation of conscience within community. It fits with the individual's internal processing of events as the minister deepens in formation for ministry. It fits with the nature of interpersonal relationships as we contemplate our interactions with others in mutual responsiveness. It fits with our sense of responsible participation in larger social structures, policies and movements as we seek to understand their significance. And it fits with our hope, apprehended by faith, that the ultimate significance of our actions is held within the universe of God's creation and salvation.

It fits, in sum, with much of our hope as teachers for our students' increasing awareness, deepening empathy, and social conscience and engagement. It fits with our praxeological methods of instruction that have students reflect on their own actions within a community of peers and with an eye toward further formation for ministry and engagement in church and society.

NOTES

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1963; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 183 pp.
2. Jackson W. Carroll, *As One With Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 121.
3. Joseph E. Bush Jr., *Gentle Shepherding: Pastoral Ethics and Leadership* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 2.
4. See for instance Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books Maryknoll, 1983), 7-8.
5. Nancy T. Ammerman and others, eds. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon, 1998), 16, citing Donald S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991).
6. Robert J. Schreiter, "Theology in the Congregation: Discovering and Doing," chap. 1 in Ammerman and others, *Studying Congregations*, 26, citing Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), also citing Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.
7. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 154.
8. Citing A. Strauss, *The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 217.