

# Pastoral Counselling in Multi-Cultural Contexts

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**SUMMARY.** This article explores ways in which pastoral counselling reflects cultural preferences. By reference to Western, Asian and African contexts it shows how culture affects what is accepted and practised as counselling. Four views of multi-cultural society are presented and critiqued. An trinitarian, inter-cultural approach to pastoral counselling is proposed that promotes respect for the universal, cultural and unique aspects of all persons. Each of these three elements needs attention and must be held together in creative, dynamic tension. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Pastoral counselling means different things in different communities. As such in order to undertake an adequate exploration of pastoral counselling in multi-cultural contexts it is necessary firstly to seek some under-

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standing of the nature and meaning of pastoral counselling in different cultural contexts. It is important to realise that the roots of pastoral counselling in very many cultural contexts lie in the healing and restorative rituals and arts practised by priest-healers within their traditions in the past and to some extent, the present. The traditional healer often combined the roles of priest and physician. He or she was the one to whom folk went in times of difficulty. The expectation was of words and rites grounded in culture, world-view and belief that were deemed efficacious in bringing relief and restoration to functioning order. The traditional healer had to be knowledgeable concerning a wide range of physical, emotional, social and cultural phenomena.

Modern day western pastoral counsellors may appear very different from their historical predecessors. The understanding of what it is they are engaged in may also be radically different. Nevertheless, it is true that the needs, expectations and desires for relief of anxiety that propel people into counselling relationships today, share several similar features with those in the past. It is also the case that in virtually all areas of the world currently, people seek out others they believe have some knowledge, expertise or power that they understand might help them in their quest for relief, well-being or meaning in life. In this article we first examine some understandings and meanings of pastoral counselling in different cultural settings. We then examine different forms of pastoral counselling in multi-cultural contexts. The essay ends with a proposal of an intercultural approach that I believe might offer helpful insights for pastoral counsellors. Since most of us work in situations where we are called upon to interact across cultural boundaries such an approach offers an orienting principle that might facilitate our work.

### ***PASTORAL COUNSELLING IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE***

Pastoral counselling can and has been understood in a variety of ways. I have elsewhere presented five distinct understandings that appear in western contexts (Lartey, 1997, pp. 73-78).

(1) There is a secular usage in educational settings in Britain in which 'pastoral' counselling focuses on the welfare or well-being of students and the personal, social and moral developmental issues faced by pupils in school. Pastoral tutors in schools and colleges seek, through counselling and other means of communication, to facilitate the personal growth and welfare of their students. (2) There is the exclusive focus of the term upon the counselling work of ordained clergypersons. Here, pastoral counsel-

ling refers only to what the clergy do when they offer guidance or counsel to parishioners or others who seek their help. (3) Pastoral counselling may also refer to counselling with a broadly religious frame of reference or counselling which unlike other forms does not equate religion with pathology but rather seeks to take into account clients and counsellors religious sentiments. (4) Pastoral counselling is also seen as counselling offered within or by a community of faith. On this view, groups or individuals within or else representing a particular faith community, work with individuals or groups in accordance with the beliefs of their community's faith. An example of this would be Christian counselling or counselling which seeks to base its theory and practice exclusively on the Bible and the tenets of evangelical Christianity may also be described as a form of pastoral counselling. (5) When counselling focuses on the whole rather than specific aspects of a person's experience (e.g., emotions or cognitive functioning) then the qualifier 'pastoral' in pastoral counselling refers to the whole person. Here the pastoral counsellor is concerned for the total well being of a person mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially. Such a person would not, of course, offer everything on his or her own. They often work alongside others and have recourse to referral as a means of enabling attention to specific needs. Their overall aim is for holistic health that ignores or minimises no aspect of this.

Wicks and Estadt (1993) edited a book entitled *Pastoral Counselling in a Global church: Voices from the field* in which the work of pastoral counsellors from ten different countries, namely Venezuela, Panama, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, Ghana, Thailand, Korea, Australia and the Netherlands, is presented. What is clear in this text is that all the writers have found it necessary to modify the western-based training they have received with its assumptions and presuppositions in order to relate in culturally different contexts. Ghanaian pastoral theologian Ghunney, for example declares,

After completing the Masters Program in Pastoral Counselling at Loyola College in Maryland, where I learned many theories in counselling, I returned home to Ghana in West Africa with the hope of practicing the theories I had learned in the West. I realised, however, that though the theories I learned were good ones, most of them were not practicable in Ghana. The only way I could succeed in the counselling situations there was to contextualize and graft what I had learned with the Ghanaian culture. (in Wicks & Estadt, 1993, p. 82)

Counselling which has developed in the west, by and large, is individualistic, rationalistic and promotes the self (ego) above all else (Lambourne, 1974; Wilson, 1988; Halmos, 1965). This is in line with a system of thought that is essentially materialistic which places the highest value on the acquiring of measurable objects. Colin Lago and Joyce Thompson (1996) in a useful book entitled *Race, Culture and Counselling* attempt to assist counsellors understand the different underlying philosophies that inform non-western approaches to helping and counselling. They (p. 86) argue that western forms of knowledge have tended to be external, the result of counting and measuring with the knower distancing themselves from the object to be known. On the other hand, Asian conceptual systems tend to emphasise cosmic unity and place much value on the cohesiveness of the group. Both inner and external ways of knowing are important and the aim is the integration of body, mind and spirit that are considered to be different aspects of the same oneness (1996: 86).

African systems are often based on a spiritual (or supernatural) and pragmatic ontology that places value on relationality. Knowledge is acquired through intuition and revelation that comes through ritual, symbol and rhythm. The focus of African healing and counselling then is the relationship between and among persons whose intrinsic worth is to be found through the network of spiritual and familial relationships within which they are embedded. With regard particularly to African and Caribbean contexts reference has been made, within the context of pastoral counselling, to the pervasive nature of religion and transcendence in all of life. There is little or no separation between a 'sacred' and a 'secular' realm. All of life is both sacred and secular. These beliefs are expressed most clearly in rituals that are meant to foster and enhance harmonious relations between humans and with the unseen world of ancestors, gods and spirits. Rites and rituals emphasise the importance of symbolic representation and celebration. This is evident also among African Americans and other diasporan African communities (Smith, 1997). For most traditional African and Caribbean peoples, dreams have great significance because they may be avenues through which the really important issues of life may be communicated to persons. Attention within this context is paid to a plurality of practitioners of the healing arts that include traditional priest-healers, herbalists, ritualists as well as diviners, dancers and creative artists. All creative performers are seen as having a part to play in the processes of healing. The pastoral counsellor is seen as part of a community of healers. Life as such is experienced and conceptualised in holistic and synthetic ways (Lartey, 1993; Mulrain, 1995).

Masamba ma Mpolo (in Masamba & Nwachuku, 1991) argues that illness in Africa may be thought of as having spiritual or else relational causes. This is in line with cosmologies that emphasise the inter-relationships between the seen and the unseen world. As such illness may be ascribed either to bewitchment, the anger of mistreated and offended spiritual forces, possession by an alien spirit or to broken human relations. Masamba therefore suggests that spiritual means including 'through ecstasy, rituals and symbolic representations' (p. 28) need to be adopted in helping people deal with their emotional and psychological needs.

Berinyuu (1989) attempts to be deeply rooted in the therapeutic practices and interpretations of the peoples of Africa while dialoguing critically with and attempting to integrate western forms of healing. He defines a pastoral counsellor in Africa as a 'shepherding divine who carefully guides a sheep through a soft muddy spot' (p. 12). Berinyuu's model of the pastoral counsellor is essentially that of one who is adept at harnessing the African 'spirit-filled' universe as well as culturally recognizable symbolic forms of interaction such as storytelling, myths and proverbs, dance, drama and music, in the quest for appropriate responses to the exigencies of life. Such a view could be said to be representative of, in broad terms, an essentially African picture of a pastoral counsellor.

Clearly then, the inclusion of spiritual and cultural resources as pivotal to the work of the counsellor is a distinguishing feature of pastoral counselling. Moreover, in different geographical areas and contexts what is needed is the freedom to recognise what is of value in their historic traditions, to reject what after careful contextual and contemporary examination proves ineffective, and the skill to initiate new syntheses out of the blending and clashing of the different cultures which make up most of contemporary societies.

It is as such true that all forms of counselling are inseparable from cultural assumptions and biases. Different cultural systems appropriately find expression in different therapeutic styles and approaches. In view of this it is reasonable to argue that effective pastoral counselling practice involves reflection on the significance of both the counsellor's and the client's cultural world for the therapeutic process. In what follows we will critically examine a number of different models of multi-cultural society and the form of counselling that emerge on those assumptions.

### ***MODELS OF PASTORAL COUNSELLING IN PLURALISTIC PLACES***

**Monoculturalism**

*Basic maxim: 'We are all really the same.'*

The monoculturalist basically claims to work in a 'colour-blind, culture-free' way. For such a counsellor little or no attention is paid to differences that arise from cultural or social background. The overriding assumption is that all human persons in a given situation are basically the same. Most often what such workers accept are the presuppositions of the particular theoretical position that under girds their approach to counselling. They proceed on the basis of these presuppositions often with little critique or question. Seldom do they raise the question of cultural 'fit.' As such they unwittingly insist upon the core values and cultural norms of the particular class or social group represented by the theory they espouse.

Monoculturalism therefore in spite of suggestions to the contrary is not neutral. Two aspects of this unwitting non-neutrality are apparent. Firstly, it universalises particular sets of norms, values, cultural beliefs and practices. Everyone regardless of preference or background is assumed or expected to function in accord with these universals. In this regard the 'white western' and sub-cultures akin to it is regarded as the norm to which all must conform. In terms of pastoral counselling the 'tried and tested' person-centred values of humanistic counselling baptised with healthy doses of liberal western theology become the underlying premises upon which the practice of universal pastoral counselling is based. Secondly, it at best, denies and at worst suppresses cultural expressions that do not appear to conform to this mould. Difference is equated to deviance and is denied, suppressed or forced into conformity. An example of this would be any form of counselling that appears directive. Such would be seen as inappropriate, oppressive or outdated. Practitioners of such abominable arts as 'advising' or 'informing' are shunned or else offered courses in counselling skills.

Pastoral counselling in a monoculturalist framework has tended to take the form of an insistence upon privacy, intimacy, confidentiality and surrogacy. Such counselling usually takes place in one-to-one sessions held in the privacy of the 'pastor's office.' It is premised upon the ability of clients and counsellors to self-disclose and to be articulate, autonomous, independent and self-directing—the predominant values of secular western society. The point is that these values are assumed to be normative in all 'civilized societies.'

While pastoral counselling as described is of value for many in western society it must not be assumed to be so for all in multicultural societies in the west. The next approach to be described takes cultural difference more seriously.

### ***Cross-Culturalism***

*Basic maxim: 'They are totally different from us'*

Pluralism is the credo of the cross-culturalist. Cross-cultural work in counselling based on cross-cultural psychology. The latter sought, from its inception in the 1960s and early 1970s, to study and respond to cultural variations in behaviour in a bid to validate or replicate generalisations about human behaviour based on white European or American studies. Studies undertaken in Europe or America were suitably modified and then undertaken in other parts of the world in order to ascertain the extent to which these generalisations were valid.

Cross-culturalists recognise cultural difference. Such difference is located in social groups that are constituted on the bases of identifiable physical, geographical or cultural characteristics. There are three sets of ideas that seem to be uppermost in the thinking of those who take this approach to the multi-cultural reality. Firstly, the very fact of *difference*— namely the recognition that real difference exists between groups of people in a society. That we are not all the same. Secondly, the view that the *boundaries* around groups are *fixed*, unalterable and to a degree impenetrable must be taken into consideration. Third, that each group has an *identity* that is shared by all who belong to the group. Identity is viewed as a bond that associates all who share it. It ties members together in a collective unity of homogeneity. Every member so identified is like everyone else within the social bond.

One of the pioneers of cross-cultural pastoral counselling is American Mennonite David Augsburger. In a very useful book entitled *Pastoral Counseling across cultures* (Augsburger, 1986) he argues for the need for 'culturally capable pastoral counsellors' who have the 'ability to join another in his or her culture while fully owning one's own' (p. 19). Augsburger's aim is to assist in training culturally able counsellors who are at home on the boundary, able to cross over effectively into another culture with deep 'interpathic' understanding and then return to their own. Howard Clinebell, in the Foreword to the book captures this vision clearly:



Crossing over to another culture with openness and reverence and then coming back is the spiritual adventure of our time, according to David Augsburger. In his view, crossing over with this mind-set and heart-set enables one to return to one's own culture enriched, more aware, more humble, and more alive. In a real sense, the power of this book is that it can enable us as readers to cross over, experience a stunning array of diverse cultural realities, and then return home with the treasure and growth-in-personhood that comes from interpathic caring in different worlds. (p.10)

Augsburger offers much that is of value and use in the encounter across cultures. However there is a fundamental problem that emerges when one adopts this mentality. The difficulty is that it encourages a 'them' and 'us' mentality that creates problems in any pluralistic society. It is *we* (invariably the dominant, white European/American) who cross over to *them* (the 'rest') and then return. We do things to them. *We* learn about them. *They* are different from *us*. The unconscious assumption is that the counsellor belongs to the dominant majority and the client/patient to the other. The problem is highlighted for me as a Black African pastoral counsellor in Britain—am I part of the 'we' or the 'them' on such reckoning?

Moodley and Dhingra (1998) have recently commented usefully on the complexity of the relationship between counsellor and client when the counsellor is of ethnic minority extraction. Bearing in mind McLeod's (1993) reminder that counselling remains a predominantly white occupation with relatively few ethnic-minority counsellors they explore the client's choice of counsellor. 'For white clients the appearance of a black counsellor may unconsciously evoke certain prejudices and stereotypes which could lead to the rejection of the counsellor but be interpreted by the client as not having a right to choose' (Moodley and Dhingra, 1998, p. 296). They examine white clients' strategies in accepting black counsellors and black counsellors' strategies in managing the relationship. By exploring the questions of 'race' in therapy and facing up creatively to issues of difference, perception and expectation, they argue that white client and black counsellor 'can develop a rich environment for effective and creative therapeutic outcomes' (p. 299).

A very real danger in the cross-cultural approach is the encouragement of division through the *essentialising* of cultural difference. Essentialising occurs when we make particular characteristics the only true or real expressions of a people. The assumption is that there exists an *authentic* African, Asian, African-Caribbean or Black other who is totally different from the dominant one's own cultural experience. The 'exotic' other only



exists in the imagination and fantasy of the person within the dominant culture. This way of thinking leads to stereotyping and is related to the over-emphasis of cultural difference. It fails to recognise the mutual influence of cultures within multi-cultural societies.

In terms of pastoral care, the identity and difference of the 'other' is recognised as sacred and advocated for by carers and counsellors from the dominant culture. These brave souls become the 'experts' on 'the Asian community' or the Black community. They then become spokespersons for these cultural groups and inform the rest of the dominant group, relieving them of any responsibility to get involved themselves in the difficult business of cross-cultural encounter. In one sense these cultural informants vicariously bear the vulnerabilities of members of the dominant culture who leave them to get on with it. From time to time members of the subaltern groups who successfully manage to cross over in the other direction become incorporated as token representatives of their cultures and evidence of the liberalism, kindness and tolerance of the dominant group.

Cross-culturalism represents a serious and valuable critique of monoculturalism's presumption of universal values. Nevertheless it operates on the basis of a flawed overemphasis on the identity, difference and homogeneity of other cultural or ethnic groups. While cross-culturalism over-emphasises difference, educational multi-culturalism, which we will now discuss, over-simplifies cultural difference for the purpose of quick and easy encounter.

### ***Educational Multi-Culturalism***

*Basic maxim: 'Aren't they interesting: We need to learn as much as we can about them.'*

The fundamental premise upon which this approach is based is the need for accurate and detailed information to provide the basis for relevant policy and social action. If appropriate services are to be provided for a multi-cultural society, it would make sense for the nature and needs of the various cultural groups to be properly understood. Healthy 'race-relations' within any community must be based on knowledge and information about the groups constituting the community. The approach to the multi-cultural society favoured here is that of 'facts and figures' as providing the necessary tools for effective action. As such an attempt is made to build profiles of the various ethnic communities in the society which seek to give information about, for example, social customs, reli-

gious rites, food habits, leisure activities, family patterns, gender roles, education and housing within each group.

In Britain of the 1990s ethnic monitoring questionnaires represent, in a crude form, this approach to the multicultural society. It certainly goes some way in providing information. However, the information generated in such ways is too often understood in a reductionistic and individualised way. It thus becomes fuel for cultural, ethnic, religious or other forms of stereotyping. Stereotyping involves perceiving and treating any particular individual member of a cultural group as bearing the presumed characteristics of that group. Stereotyping homogenises groups creating expectations of sameness among all who are classified as belonging to a group. Some attempts at multi-cultural education for counsellors and pastoral carers in an attempt at informing them about 'ethnic minority clients' perpetuate stereotypical myths concerning, for example, the angry under-achieving Caribbean male; the Asian young woman's oppressive cultural role; the aggressive Muslim or the problems of the Asian extended family system.

Along with categorising often goes placing in hierarchical order. Cultural groups are tacitly or at times explicitly placed in order of preference or value on particular characteristics. In such rankings the social or cultural group to which the one classifying belongs usually comes out on top. Moreover there is an accompanying presumption that particular cultures are fixed or in some sense static.

Educational multi-culturalism then adopts a commendable information-based, scientific-data oriented approach to the multi-cultural. However, like cross-culturalism, it fails to avoid stereotyping, reductionism, individualising, placing groups in hierarchical order and perpetuating myths that where imbibed can induce self-hatred within the sub-dominant groups. Educational multi-culturalism is often led by media, consumer, tourist, quick fix or market considerations. Busy pastoral counsellors wish to be able rapidly to obtain the information they need to enable them visit or counsel their ethnic minority clients. So they turn to these manuals of information as they would to tourist guides. The problem is the gross oversimplification of the cultural that can mislead and distort any real human relationships to be found therein.

Pastoral counsellors who operate on such premises are often sensitive and caring persons who seek as much information as they can obtain in order not to offend or act inappropriately with the cultural other. However what is lost in a dependence on this information is the spontaneity and sensitivity that is a *sine qua non* of genuine human interaction. 'For pastoral care to be real it has to arise in the midst of genuine human encounter

where carer and cared for are both vulnerable and open.' (Larney, 1998, p. 49).

### ***Intercultural Pastoral Counselling***

*Basic Maxim: 'Every human person is in some respects (a) like all others (b) like some others (c) like no other.'*

In order to gain a fuller understanding of human persons within the global community, it is necessary to explore the ways in which culture, individual uniqueness and human characteristics work together to influence persons. Kluckhohn and Murray's (1948) phrase quoted above captures these three spheres of influence that act simultaneously in the experience of every human person. By 'human characteristics' (we are all *like all others*) refer to that which all humans as humans share such as physiological, cognitive and psychological capabilities, with all the common human variations. The 'cultural' (we are *like some others*) refers to characteristic ways of knowing, interpreting and valuing the world which we receive through the socialisation processes we go through in our social groupings. These include worldviews, values, preferences and interpretive frames as well as language, customs and forms of social relationship. The 'individual' (like no other) or personal indicates that there are characteristics—both physical (e.g. finger-print and dental configuration) and psychosocial—which are unique to individuals.

These spheres of human experience interact constantly in living human persons who continually learn, grow and change. Intercultural pastoral counsellors seek to work with persons in the light of these pre-suppositions and realisations. In any pastoral counselling encounter three kinds of issues are attended to by the intercultural pastoral counsellor. Firstly, there is an attempt to inquire what of the common experience we all share as human persons is to be found in the particular situation in question. The attempt here is in recognition and affirmation of the fact that all human beings are created in and reflect the image of God. The assumption therefore is that in spite of variations, ambiguities and differences there will be evidence of humanity in all pastoral counselling encounters. Second, there will be an attempt to figure out what in the experience being dealt with is the result of social and cultural forces. Attention will need to be paid to specific socio-cultural views and practices relevant to the social group the counselling partner recognises as their own. Carter's 'Racially Inclusive model of psychotherapy' offers many useful insights in this respect (Carter, 1995). What would need to be encouraged would be an af-

firmative as well as self-critical and open exploration of these cultural views and practices in an attempt to discover their influence upon the issue being examined. Within multi-cultural environments, the influence of other cultures than one's own will need to be investigated. Questions of power, domination, benefit and suffering are of particular poignancy here. Third, in intercultural pastoral counselling attempts will be made to investigate what in the experience could be said to be uniquely attributable to the personal characteristics of the counselling partner.

At various moments in any pastoral encounter one or other of these aspects of our humanity will be the focus of attention. Nevertheless, intercultural pastoral counselling will always have the other aspects in view and seek to hold all three in creative and dynamic tension. On such a Trinitarian and communitarian view and vision the relational character of the three Persons of the Godhead is never lost sight of. As such the 'universal,' the cultural and the personal in all human persons are attended to on their own while also being seen as in creative and dynamic interaction with each other.

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