

The Librarian as an Image of Pastoral Care

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Abstract Drawing upon Anton Boisen’s image of the living human document and Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s idea of the living human web, this paper explores the librarian as an image of pastoral care. By paying attention to the testimonies of a number of librarians and to my own experience as a pastoral theologian and a library worker, I suggest three areas of intersection between pastoral theology and librarianship: attention to individuality, a sense of impartiality, and kindness. The paper concludes by pointing out that the librarian and the pastoral theologian share the task of defending the uniqueness of individual experience in a culture that tends toward conformism.

Keywords Books · Libraries · Pastoral care · Pastoral theology · Human documents · Living human web · Anton Boisen · Adolf von Harnack · Individuality · Impartiality · Kindness

Introduction

Take thou a book into thine hands as Simeon the Just took the Child Jesus into his arms to carry him and kiss him. And when thou hast finished reading, close the book and give thanks for every word out of the mouth of God; because in the Lord’s field thou hast found a hidden treasure.

—Thomas à Kempis (as cited in Clark 1901, p. 77)

Browsing through the shelves of the Firestone Library at Princeton University, I came across a book entitled *The Care of Books* (Clark 1901). As one who has been reading texts on pastoral theology for a number of years, the word *care* has become an important word for me, and I therefore tend to be on the lookout for that word in whatever context it may appear. Not surprisingly, the title of Clark’s book immediately captured my attention. In a

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natural kind of way, this led me to think about the care of souls, perhaps because this was the name of one of my doctoral seminars at Princeton Theological Seminary. Care of books, care of souls—could it be that these two phrases have something more in common than their grammatical structure? Perhaps the care of books can be an appropriate image for the care of souls? After all, in the words of the English poet John Milton (1927), “Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are” (p. 5). In this sense, caring for a book is caring for the vitality and creativity of the writer’s soul.

Bringing the care of souls and the care of books together in a pastoral theology paper seemed natural to me because over the last few years I have spent a great deal of time thinking about souls and books, churches and libraries, and pastors and librarians. My interest in churches and libraries, however, is not new. On the one hand, churches have been central to my life since I was a little boy. At age 19, after an intense discernment process, I went to seminary, and years later the Presbyterian Church of Mexico ordained me. On the other hand, although I have never been formally trained as a librarian, I have been a student worker in libraries at several points in my life. The first library at which I worked was the Alice G. K. Kleberg Library of the Presbyterian Pan American High School in Kingsville, Texas. A few years later, I worked at the Plutarco Arellano Library of the Presbyterian Seminary in Mexico City. Since 2010, I have worked at the Princeton Theological Seminary Library. Evidently, churches and libraries have played a major role in my life. Yet never before had I paused to ponder what this might mean in terms of my sense of vocation and my understanding of pastoral theology, or what the care of souls and the care of books might have in common at a deeper level.

My purpose in this paper is to reflect on the vocation of the librarian as an image of pastoral care. In *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings*, pastoral theologian Robert C. Dykstra (2005) notes that for many years pastoral theologians have been using metaphors to explain who they are and what they do: “It is as though they are forever condemned to, while simultaneously embracing, a purposeful introspection and self-doubt” (p. 3). This sense of self-doubt and the need for ongoing introspection, Dykstra suggests, is rooted in the fact that ministers are called “to know and speak on behalf of an unknowable, unspeakable God” (p. 3). If human beings cannot comprehend God, if God eludes our best efforts at definition, then the theologian, whose vocation implies reflecting “on the nature and action of God” (Niebuhr 1963, p. 40), is impelled to recognize and embrace a sense of self-doubt that is inherent to the theological enterprise. Pastoral theologians, of course, are not alone in recognizing the fragmentary and provisional nature of their work. Paul Tillich (1966), a theologian who during his lifetime was known as a supporter of the fields of pastoral care, pastoral psychotherapy, and pastoral theology, points out that the Eternal has set “a limit on everything finite” and therefore “our highest level of accomplishment is fragmentary” (p. 98). Karl Barth (1995), lecturing on the theology of John Calvin, underscores the dilemma of the Protestant theologian:

Those who look for a program, or even simply a system of directions, in instruction in the Christian religion must turn to Thomas and not to Calvin. . . . Longing for the smooth and well-lighted paths of medieval and Roman Catholicism is a very understandable emotion, and it is too much alive in us Protestant theologians for us to take offense at others when they accuse us of leaving them in the lurch at the most relevant point in our

expositions. But it is not we who do it. It is the Reformation that leaves us in the lurch the moment we think: This is it! Or, rather, it leaves us to God. It shows us clearly that all else that has been said can only be an experience that helps us discard all other possibilities of salvation and leads us to the point where we must hand over ourselves—our conscience, insight, and will—to God. (p. 205)

It seems to me that what distinguishes pastoral theologians from other theologians is that pastoral theologians tend to be more open to recognizing and embracing the consequences of being left in the lurch. We embrace personally and unapologetically a sense of self-doubt and tentativeness. Instead of disguising conscience, insight, and will through complex doctrinal systems, a pastoral theologian recognizes that his or her reflection constitutes only a tentative possibility for approaching God's being and redemptive action in a particular time and place. In this sense, as Dykstra (2005) suggests, the kind of wisdom pastoral theologians evoke is "hard won and continually refashioned" (p. 6).

But the provisional and fragmentary nature of pastoral theology is not only rooted in God's eternal being. A second reason for why pastoral theology tends to elude definitions and instead use metaphorical language is the complexity of the human condition. Commenting on the reasons for which pastoral theologians use indirection, analogy, and poetry in their efforts to explain who they are and what they do, Dykstra (2005) suggests: "Anything short of this would mock the complexity of the human heart and mind and disregard the limitations of any individual perspective on the perplexities of the human condition" (p. 5). No single definition, and certainly no single image, can do justice to the complexities of the human condition. Consequently, my presentation here of vocation of the librarian as an image of pastoral care is *an* exercise in pastoral self-understanding or, as Dykstra puts it, "an exercise in art appreciation" (p. 13). I do hope, however, that the testimonies and insights of the theologians and librarians offered in this paper will contribute to the reader's understanding of pastoral theology and to his or her sense of self-understanding and identity.

Dusty books as living human documents

There is no dust to be compared to that of the library; its consistency is so fine; it has grown gradually mellow; when the sun shone across the hall you could see millions of particles holding high holiday in the sunshine; it even lays on the sacred busts of the images of the departed, and added additional reverence to their appearance.

—Cuthbertson (1910, p. 182)

Before moving into the discussion of the librarian as image of pastoral care, I will consider briefly the apparent contradiction between the use of books and the role of direct observation of human experience in the field of pastoral theology. Anton Theophilus Boisen (1875–1965), regarded as the father of the clinical education movement, used the image of "the living human document" to underscore the idea that seminary students should study not only books but first-hand human experience. Reflecting on the origins of the clinical education movement, Boisen (1951a) explained:

Let me also emphasize the fact that this movement, as I have conceived of it, has no new gospel to proclaim. We are not even seeking to introduce anything new into the

theological curriculum beyond a new approach to some ancient problems. We are trying, rather, to call attention back to the central task of the church, that of “saving souls,” and to the central problem of theology, that of sin and salvation. *What is new is the attempt to begin with the study of living human documents rather than with books and to focus attention upon those who are grappling desperately with the issues of spiritual life and death.* (p. 15)

In another article, Boisen (1951b) made a more forceful remark: “Religious experience can and should be studied before it has gathered dust on library shelves and the living documents are the primary sources for the understanding of human nature” (p. 17). Since this paper is about libraries and librarians, it is appropriate to explore more carefully Boisen’s anti-book remarks. In his article “Cooperative Inquiry in Religion,” Boisen (1951b) offered an explanation for his criticism of books, particularly theology books. The article reviews several books, including *Theology as an Empirical Science* (Macintosh 1927), *The Psychological Approach to Theology* (Horton 1931), *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Niebuhr 1941), and *God and the Common Life* (Calhoun 1935). Boisen did not dismiss the value of these books, but he criticized their approach: “From the standpoint of this inquiry . . . it is a striking fact that these attempts to deal with the central problems of Christian faith make so little effort to attack these problems empirically or to utilize empirical studies by other workers” (p. 21). His tendency to discourage the use of books and libraries is therefore not rooted in some sort of bibliophobia but in the nature of those books, specifically in the authors’ tendency to exclude observation and actual human experience in their discussions of the Christian faith. Whether Boisen was fair in his assessment of these books is not under consideration here; what is more important here is to underscore that Boisen’s insistence on the priority of the study of living human documents did not imply a renunciation of the written word. Boisen had, for example, a high regard for scholarly journals because of their sense of freshness and their invitation to criticism and interpretation (1951b, p. 17). As in the case of books, however, he regretted that the majority of the articles published in religious journals did not include empirical studies. In his analysis of the articles published in the *Journal of Religion* from 1931 to 1944, he concluded that of the 283 articles only eight were empirical studies of religious experience and only five included empirical studies by other researchers (Boisen 1951b, p. 18).

Boisen’s appreciation of the written word is most evident when we consider his own extensive writing. He wrote numerous articles and letters, and several books, including *The Exploration of the Inner World* (1936), one of the founding documents of the field of pastoral theology; his autobiography; and the hymnal *Hymns of Hope and Courage* (1950). In addition to these publications, one of Boisen’s most significant contributions was the development of the case study method. Boisen (1962) believed that inquiry had to begin “not with the ready-made formulations contained in books but with the living human documents and with the actual social conditions in all their complexity” (p. 185). His case study method, through a series of thorough and exhaustive instruments, sought to do justice to this sense of inner and outer complexity (Asquith 1980). Boisen’s method also sought to help students understand religious experience and develop the students’ ability to think theologically about human experience (Asquith 1980, p. 94). However, he also recognized that this

process of reflection could be greatly enriched by incorporating the study of books and journals. In *Problems in Religion and Life: A Manual for Pastors*, Boisen (1946) extended his understanding of living human documents to include the written testimonies of the past:

From the point of view which underlies this manual the primary sources for the understanding of human nature are to be found in living human documents. *This applies even to the past*. It is true that our knowledge of the past is dependent on written documents, but it is also true that historical method presupposes a constancy of human nature which must be determined through the study of present-day experience... But the process is an interrelated one. Even though we insist on the primacy of the living documents even when we are dealing with present-day experience, *we are in constant need of the stories of previous experience which are contained in books* [emphasis added]. (p. 148)

One can perceive in these words the decisive influence of William James. As a graduate student at Indiana University, Boisen had become deeply interested in James's *Principles of Psychology* (Boisen 1960, p. 45). Later on, during his time at Union Theological Seminary, Boisen decided to pursue his interest in psychology of religion, particularly through James's 1902/2002) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It is hard not to see the connection between Boisen's idea of the living human document and James's use of *documents humains* in *The Varieties*. The *documents humains* that James used in his psychological inquiry of religious experience were simply the "works of piety and autobiography" of those who "lie along the beaten highway" (2002, pp. 8–9). Boisen knew, of course, that James had made extensive use of written autobiographies in *The Varieties* (Boisen 1962, p. 89). In his manual for pastors, Boisen seems to expand his understanding of living human documents to include both present-day experience and past experience as reported in books. In doing so, it seems to me that Boisen was recognizing the viability of his teacher's method while affirming his own approach. Consequently, there was really no need to suggest that religious experience has to be studied "before it has gathered dust on the library shelves." While a first-hand, face-to-face encounter with an individual is an undoubtedly rich source of insight for the pastoral theologian, a dusty book can also be the means to establish deep and significant contact with the writer's living soul *if* it contains relevant stories or evidence of human experience.

Interestingly, in the last pages of his manual for pastors, Boisen (1946) offers a few suggestions regarding a minister's library. While he encourages the minister to make "a careful selection of the really important books of all ages," at the end of the day what Boisen believes to be most important is to develop a library that will be personally significant, one that will be in accordance with the minister's tastes and needs (pp. 149–150). And although I believe Boisen was right in inviting pastors to pay attention to their needs and desires, sometimes what seems most distasteful and boring can be the source of rich and invigorating insight. In a theological library most students tend to concentrate their research on the sections dealing with the Bible, doctrinal history, practical theology, and Christian denominations (BS–BX in the Library of Congress classification system). Considering that the Christian gospel is particularly concerned with the marginalized, I thought it would be a good idea to begin my research by paying attention to a section that hardly anyone uses in a theological library, the bibliography and library science

section (the Z class). In the Princeton Theological Seminary Library, the Z section is located on the lower level, in a remote corner. Its location is symbolic of the marginalization of librarianship; librarians, especially in the digital era, are often considered secondary, even dispensable. But, as Jesus repeatedly taught, one can only aspire to enter the Kingdom of God by paying attention to the little ones. This point brings me back to the main subject of this paper: the librarian as an image of pastoral care.

Librarianship and pastoral theology

In what follows I will reflect on the intersection between librarianship and pastoral theology. By paying attention to the testimonies of a number of librarians and to my own experience as a pastoral theologian and a library worker, I will discuss the following aspects of the librarian as an image of pastoral care: attention to individuality, a sense of impartiality, and kindness.

Attention to individuality

Well, I was looking at all those books. I love books! I've got one at home.

—Estela in the play *The Library* (Maggi 1971, p. 124)

A few months ago, while working at the Princeton Seminary Library, Santiago, my two-year-old son, came to visit me. When he saw me and noticed that I was putting books on a cart, he decided to help me. I started handing him books, and although I anticipated he would soon become bored, he actually continued putting books on the cart until the cart was full. What was most interesting to me was his attention to the uniqueness of each book I handed to him. As he received each book, Santiago took time to describe the book by referring to its color, its size, or some other noticeable characteristic such as an illustration or a photograph on the front or back cover. As I reflected on his interest in the uniqueness of each book, I started to realize why books and libraries are so important to me. Each book tells the story or at least offers a taste of the story of a person's life. It is hard to find a book that does not reveal something about the author's personal life; even rigorously scientific texts contain a degree of subjectivity. Libraries are sanctuaries that protect the individuality and subjectivity of each author.

In their daily work, librarians pay attention to the specificity of bibliographic materials. In tasks such as purchasing, cataloguing, labeling, and shelving, the librarian focuses on one book at a time. Of course, a new book is ultimately meant to become part of the library's collection. But a library's collection is always made of individual records. In this sense, individuality is the way for collectivity.

The raw material of pastoral theology, as I understand it, is individual experience. The study of living human documents, including both written testimonies and face-to-face encounters in everyday pastoral ministry, very much defines the work of a pastoral theologian. The primary focus on individuals does not imply, however, that pastoral theologians are not concerned with contextuality and collectivity. Pastoral theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore (1996), in her well-known essay "The Living Human Web: Pastoral Theology at the Turn of the Century," sought to modify Boisen's living human *document* with the image of the living human *web* to approach the complexity of human experience (p. 16). Miller-McLemore explains that she first

developed the image of the web through the influence of a process-theology-oriented college professor who by drawing a three-dimensional net on the blackboard insisted on “the dense, multitudinous, contiguous nature of reality” (p. 17). To understand the living human web, psychology needs the insights and interpretive tools other social sciences such as economics and political science offer (p. 18). Building on gender, feminist, and Black studies, Miller-McLemore points out that pastoral theology can no longer ignore context, especially when it comes to realities of oppression and marginalization of the underprivileged (p. 21). Interestingly, she argues that “this lesson—that we must hear the voices of the marginalized from within their own contexts—is one that practical theologians have known all along,” which she explains using the example of Anton Boisen’s reclaiming of the validity of his own mental breakdown (p. 22).

Miller-McLemore’s image of the living human web continues to be an influential paradigm. Scholars continue to use the image of the living human web to emphasize the communal-contextual dimension of pastoral care.¹ In her later revision of the living human web image, however, Miller-McLemore (2008) has acknowledged that “the metaphor of the living web has undeveloped potential and overlooked problems” (p. 4). The shift from the document to the web in the context of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), for example, generated “confusion over the place of the person and personal identity” (p. 4). Thus, in her 2008 article Miller-McLemore revisits Anton Boisen’s metaphor of the living human document and suggests that a better way to express the field of pastoral theology is the “living document within the web” (p. 11). This approach suggests that “there is a real place for a continued emphasis on the person as document” provided that we consider individuals within their social contexts. Anton Boisen, it seems to me, would have agreed that the analysis of the living human document implies careful attention to the complexity of the human web. The instruments he developed for his case study method, with their attention, for example, to the individual’s social environment, suggest that he was very much aware that the intrapsychic is closely related to the many external components of an individual’s life. More recently, some pastoral theologians have recognized the significance of global contexts while still affirming their primary interest in individual and local experience. Pastoral theologian Donald Capps (2014), for example, explains:

Pastoral theology has tended to privilege the individual (as reflected in its emphasis on case studies and autobiographical writings); not, however, the individual in isolation from his or her social, institutional, and cultural contexts and frameworks. Although I personally support its emphasis on local contexts . . . I believe that pastoral theology also needs to be attentive to cosmopolitan and global contexts, especially to the ways in which these contexts impinge upon and are reflected in local contexts. (p. 552)

I believe libraries, like few other spaces, portray the beauty and mystery of this encounter between the local and the global; between an individual’s creativity and a greater creative being; between the human condition in its finitude and God’s eternal being; between the fragmentary and the universal. From the point of view of the Reformed tradition, one can think of libraries as the banks of God’s grace, depositories of the richness of God’s grace bestowed upon humanity. John Calvin (1960) pointed out that the Spirit of God bestows a measure of general grace to individuals in the degree and manner that God chooses with the ultimate purpose of procuring the common good of humanity (pp. 273–276). In this respect, a library is

¹ See, for example, Barbara McClure’s and Jeanne Hoefft’s essays in Miller-McLemore (2012).

a sanctuary that invites readers to discover the graceful presence of God through the testimonies of a wide and plural congregation of writers. Libraries enable students to cross boundaries, to travel around the world, to become polyglots—in short, to taste the universal. In a library one can often experience what psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1959) described as a “sense of comradeship with men and women of distant times and of different pursuits, who have created orders and objects and sayings conveying human dignity and love” (p. 98).

In his book *Ficciones*, Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) includes a piece entitled “The Library of Babel.”² In this piece, Borges (1962) uses the image of a library to convey a sense of universality: “The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps an infinite, number of hexagonal galleries, with enormous ventilation shafts in the middle, encircled by very low railings” (p. 79). The shelves of the Library “contain all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographic symbols . . . that is, everything which can be expressed, in all languages” (p. 83). But “the librarian of genius” is able to discover that “There are not, in the whole vast Library, two identical books” (p. 83). Borges, after describing the vastness of the Library, ends his piece with a footnote that he attributes to Letizia Alvarez de Toledo (1936–2008), a Spanish grandee: “Letizia Alvarez de Toledo has observed that the vast Library is useless. Strictly speaking, *one single volume* should suffice: a single volume of ordinary format, printed in nine or ten type body, and consisting of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages” (p. 88). René de Costa (2000), professor emeritus of Spanish literature at the University of Chicago, describes this footnote as a “joking note” whose purpose is to ensure the involvement of the reader; “The joking asides,” he argues, “are like a steady check on our continued complicity” (p. 80). But jokes are often pathways into deeper insight. The vastness of the Library is really useless if one does not approach it through one single volume. Or, as Robert C. Dykstra (2014a) has put it, “Individuality is the way to contextual sensitivity.” The librarian knows that in the vastness of a library there are no two identical books; a pastor knows that in God’s universe there are no two identical living human documents. Both know it, and much of what they do every day begins with this principle.

Sense of impartiality

The second aspect of librarianship that I have found to be a rich source of insight is a sense of impartiality. We human beings, of course, tend to be partial and subjective even when we claim to be objective. Here, a sense of impartiality refers to the librarian’s capacity to remain open to the plurality of human experience. Whether a librarian is in charge of collection development or dedicated to reference work, he or she will be in contact with patrons who have a variety of research interests, often interests that will be far from the librarian’s heart. At other times, a librarian might be inspired and intrigued by a patron’s work. Whatever the case, librarians are called to offer their services without showing partiality or at least to make a genuine effort to suspend the human tendency to be partial.

In order to reflect more deeply on the place of impartiality in librarianship, I will consider here the case of the German theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Although he is better known for his work as a theologian and historian, Harnack was also the Director General of the Royal Library in Berlin from 1905 to 1921 (Hirsch 1939). Referring to his work as a librarian,

² Scholar Ángel Esteban (2014) has studied the lives of 30 famous authors who were also librarians. Among these writers he includes Jorge Luis Borges, Director of the National Library of Argentina; José Vasconcelos, Director of the Library of Mexico; and Rubén Darío, Director of the National Library of Nicaragua.

Paul Schrodt (1996) says: “Adolf von Harnack . . . demonstrated that a church historian could be *impartial enough* [emphasis added] to promote and inspire the spirit of research in all the sciences” (p. 133). Other authors have agreed with Schrodt’s assessment of Harnack’s impartiality as a librarian. In an autobiography written shortly after Harnack’s death, Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, Adolf’s daughter, explained that her father summarized his mission as a librarian with three words: “Select, serve, administer” (p. 343). Harnack’s rationale for the selection of materials was based on a sense of impartiality and appreciation of the fullness of human knowledge. According to his daughter, Harnack believed that “the librarian should not be a ‘judge’ over literature and science” (p. 345). By this Harnack did not imply that a librarian should admit into the collection any materials simply because they are printed materials but that “he must collect, *in fullest possible completeness* [emphasis added], the outstanding and the serviceable” (p. 345). Commenting on Harnack’s understanding of the mission of the scholarly library, librarian and professor of history Felix E. Hirsch (1939) wrote:

The librarian should not press the stamp of his own opinions on his library; he should let the sun rise on the evil and the good, give as much space as possible to the works of genius and of great talent, and think continually of the needs of future generations. The spirit of universal enlightenment, as Leibnitz, Newton, and Voltaire understood it, should preside over the library; a truly open-minded eclecticism should predominate in the book selection; and no librarian ought ever to forget that his building must be an asylum of peace. (p. 317)

As Harnack and Hirsch understood it, this sense of impartiality, open-mindedness, and eclecticism was the consequence of a deep commitment to the scholarly aspect of the librarian’s vocation. The paradoxical element of this approach is that the librarian’s *partiality* constitutes the foundation of a sense of *impartiality*. Scholar-librarians can be impartial because they have already experienced partiality by means of their specialization in a particular field of knowledge. According to Stephen D. Crocco (1996), former librarian at Princeton Seminary, the librarian’s own subject specialty is the foundation of his or her approach to bibliography and research and to other disciplines (p. 156). Insofar as the scholar-librarian has become acquainted with the depth and breadth of research in a particular discipline, the librarian is also in a position to empathically address the needs of researchers in other fields.

Like librarians, pastors are called to develop and maintain a sense of impartiality in their work. Again, this does not mean that pastors should claim neutrality on every issue or renounce their theological convictions. What it means is that pastors are called to minister with a spirit of radical hospitality that shows no partiality. As in the case of the scholar-librarian, a pastor’s partiality—his or her core convictions—might be the foundation of his or her capacity to develop a sense of impartiality in pastoral ministry. Dykstra (2014b) has suggested that by understanding and accepting “the fundamentalist within,” ministers may be in a position to develop “greater *empathy* with fundamentalist individuals, communities, and movements” (p. 612). In other words, by acknowledging and embracing their own partiality, pastors may be able to connect with those whom one would tend to exclude. Dykstra points out that while empathy alone cannot eliminate the threats of violence linked to extreme forms of fundamentalism, it is, nevertheless, “one of the most promising points at which to start” (p. 612).

Pastoral theologian Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger has reflected extensively on the significance of empathy for pastoral care and counseling. “Empathy,” Hunsinger and Latini (2013) explain, “is a disciplined undertaking in which one momentarily sets aside

one's own unique feelings and needs to connect with the other's unique feelings and needs" (p. 83). In sympathy the emphasis is on one's own feelings, but in empathy the focus is on fully connecting with the other person (p. 83). Elsewhere, Hunsinger (2011) explains that although empathy is "an essential skill for pastoral care," it cannot flourish apart from self-empathy (p. 125). "In order to focus on another," Hunsinger explains, "one must know, paradoxically, how to pay attention to oneself" (p. 126). Drawing on Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication theory, Hunsinger explains that a significant component of paying attention to oneself is the ability to understand one's own feelings and needs (p. 126). I previously indicated that scholar-librarians can empathically address the research needs of other scholars because they have first addressed their own needs. Likewise, pastors can empathically connect with their parishioners if they first identify and connect with their own needs. Because needs are universal and basic to everyone's humanity (p. 126), empathic understanding can help ministers connect with others across differences.

Although self-empathy and empathy are useful technical skills, "God's love is the well-spring from which we draw when we need compassion for ourselves or others" (Hunsinger 2011, p. 133). In a similar way, the capacity to be radically welcoming and truly impartial can only come from the God who shows no partiality. According to the biblical witness, Peter had to experience a trance, to see a vision before he was able to embrace God's impartiality. Only after confronting his own biases, his "inner fundamentalist," his feelings and needs, was Peter able to confess: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). Biblical scholar Jouette Bassler (1985) has pointed out, however, that impartiality in Acts 10 is "an impartiality that acknowledges the ability of Gentiles to conform to Jewish-Christian standards of merit" (p. 551). After all, Cornelius was a devout man; he gave alms generously and prayed constantly to God (Acts 10:1–2). In this respect, Bassler suggests that for a more radical understanding of impartiality one has to go to Paul (p. 552). Bassler explains the difference between Luke's and Paul's approaches:

Paul argues apocalyptically and dialectically. In the old dispensation Jews and Greeks were all judged by the same rigorous standard of merit; in the new dispensation divine grace is universally available to Jews and Greeks apart from merit. . . . Here in Acts' equivalent of Paul's new dispensation, the eschatological notion of justification is replaced by the tamed and historicized notion of acceptability, and merit is very much in evidence. (p. 551)

This nuance has significant implications for pastoral ministry. Impartiality can clearly be adapted so as to include only those who are alike in appearance and merit. But God's grace in Christ is available to all apart from merit. Pastors and pastoral theologians continually face this dilemma. In all truth, even our best efforts to include others tend to be fragmentary. But we keep on trying, inspired by the wellspring of God's love in Christ.

Kindness

The third and final aspect of librarianship that has enlightened my understanding of pastoral theology is kindness. I do not want to suggest that all librarians in all times and places have been kind people. In his bibliographic study of librarians in fiction, Burns (1998) came to the conclusion that "the image of the librarian in fiction is decidedly mixed" (p. 4). The same is true of librarians in the real world. Burns notes, however, that although in many works

librarians have been portrayed as “good, hard-working, honest, compassionate, and intelligent people . . . the cumulative weight of the fictional librarian’s representation inclines perceptibly to the negative pole” (p. 4). An eloquent example of this negativity is Abbe’s (1938) depiction of Miss Bunce, a town librarian:

She was a huge, imposing woman with a heavy, red, disagreeable face, hairs on chin and upper lip. Her eyes, fierce and always penetrating, lifted from whatever she was doing and knifed the person entering. . . . Her melon-like breasts standing out vengefully; she stood there scowling, the rubber stamp lifted, like a judge ready to strike the death sentence on a criminal’s indictment. (p. 70)

As I read Abbe’s description of Miss Bunce, I remembered the librarian in the movie *Monsters University* (Scanlon 2013). The librarian is a gray cephalopod monster with tentacles; she wears a black dress, and due to the protuberance of her eyes, she holds a lorgnette to read. Although she seems small and inoffensive when sitting at her desk, she turns out to be a gigantic monster when she stands. Like other librarians, what this librarian hates most is noise. Students who dare to be noisy face her monstrous vengeance. As Walker and Lawson (1993) have pointed out, the way Hollywood movies portray librarians influences people’s perception of librarianship (p. 16). They note, for example, that in one episode of the game show *Family Feud*, a group of 100 people were asked to name the typical characteristics of a librarian. The results of this survey disclosed that the respondents perceived librarians to be quiet, mean, unmarried, stuffy, and somewhat blind, therefore needing glasses (p. 16).

In my own experience as a student and a library worker, I have never really met a librarian like Miss Bunce or like the cephalopod monster of the *Monsters University Library*. I do remember a male assistant librarian in high school who became quite nervous when students were noisy or when they entered the library only to make out. Although he could get angry, he was fundamentally a kind man. The other librarian, Ms. Steele, introduced me with patience and gentleness to the world of librarianship. On graduation day, in a profound act of care and kindness, she gave me a hardcover copy of Sheldon’s classic book *In His Steps*.

My next profound encounter with a librarian occurred some years later, on the afternoon of September 1, 2009, when my family and I arrived at Princeton Theological Seminary. The offices had already closed for the day and we were taken directly to our apartment in the residence hall. We didn’t have a car, and we had to find a way to shop for groceries. The next morning, as we walked on Library Place, we saw the old Speer Library. Although we were looking for the admissions office, I felt compelled to visit the library first. We approached the reference desk, and Kate Skrebutenas, the reference librarian, asked if she could help us. We introduced ourselves, letting her know that we had just arrived from Mexico and that we needed a phone to make a few calls. She kindly directed us to her private office and handed us a copy of the local yellow pages directory. Although Kate’s response might seem unimportant and ordinary, her response was for me a true act of kindness, one that I will never forget. After all, it takes courage to direct a group of strangers into one’s private office. Since that day, I have often witnessed little acts of kindness in the lives of library patrons, student workers, and supervisors. These people, without knowing it, have inspired me to write this paper.

I find another example of kind librarianship in the life and work of Adolf von Harnack. Agnes von Zahn-Harnack (1941) explains, for example, that when her father assumed his work as librarian “he became acquainted with each official, meeting them day by day, one after another in the first weeks, letting each speak with him about his activity, its comforts or discomforts, his desires, official or personal” (pp. 347–348). Concurring with Zahn-Harnack, Hirsch (1939) points

out that Harnack's relations with his library staff were cordial: "He soon knew all of them, their functions and special interests" (p. 307). The ability to listen to the stories, interests, and desires of individuals is undoubtedly one of the core characteristics of a kind spirit. As I pondered Harnack's example, I began wondering what might have been the source of his kind approach toward his colleagues. Recall that Harnack summarized his mission as a scholar-librarian using the three verbs select, administer, and serve. Harnack, it seems to me, understood administration as a form of ministry. "Administrative encounters," often seen as contradictory to pastoral ministry, "provide a uniquely vital occasion for the fashioning of ministry" (Dittes 1999, p. 113).

In my search to further comprehend Harnack's self-understanding as a scholar and administrator, I came across a beautiful and very meaningful letter that Harnack wrote to his eldest daughter while she was in boarding school. His daughter, who was struggling with the idea of a personal devil, sought her father's advice. Given its beauty and cohesiveness, I include here the entire letter, dated February 22, 1899:

That the more liberal position which I take in theology is now and again brought home to my children's minds is inevitable, and in the end does them no harm. If they are on that account regarded by some people with something of suspicion, with other people the name of your father serves as a recommendation. Thus far I have so instructed you myself as to have given no significance to certain theological incomprehensibilities and this has passed over to you; this more liberal view puts you under obligation to be considerate toward the "weak" and the troubled. I think you will there already find for yourself the proper key and the proper attitude. *Every honorable religious conviction, however narrow it may be, is to be treated with respect* [emphasis added]. Direct polemic against it as a rule in no way helps, but needlessly creates a rift. Freedom can be given to anyone by discussions only with difficulty.

Now as concerns your question about the devil, there can be no doubt that the Holy Scriptures mean a personal devil (although very different ideas of him, which in part are mutually exclusive, prevail in the various Biblical books), and that Christ and the apostles believed in the existence of a personal devil. It is not difficult therefore, 'with the Bible in hand', to stand up for the existence of the devil; on the assumption that the Bible has here the last word and is infallible. You know that the latter is not my opinion, nor was it the opinion of Luther, who in no way believed in the literal infallibility of the Scriptures. In particular now as to the ideas of the devil, it can be shown how historically they have come into being and have grown and are connected with general ideas of the time which we no longer share. Nevertheless there could well be a devil, and thoughtful people, in no way fools, still maintain this today. They believe they have inwardly experienced his existence. I have not had such experience; therefore, and because the historical accounts are not to me absolutely infallible, I cannot convince myself of his existence. In addition it happens that the whole conception develops into philosophical-theological difficulties of which I do not wish to speak, as it would take too long. If the existence of the devil, accordingly, is at least very doubtful, I would consider the categorical assertion, "There is no devil", as incautious. It should rather be said: "I am acquainted with no devil, and up to the present cannot convince myself of his existence."

But finally—and this is something very important—an idea such as that of the existence of the devil, which has so long prevailed and still prevails with many, which such distinguished, earnest, truly great men have shared, which Christ and the apostles entertained, must contain

a kernel of truth. It lies, as always in such matters, not in the form of the idea, but concealed in its roots. That sin is a power, not merely a multitude of single lapses, that it can overmaster us, that sins combine with one another, and at the same time constitute a kingdom, that there is a world of the dark and evil, as there is a world of the pure, clear, and good, that evil charm and entices—all this is embraced in the conception of the devil, and is brought into a very comprehensible thought. Whoever cannot hold fast all those truths without a “devil”, he alone should believe in his existence. Better this error than the loss of insight into the gravity and the seriousness of evil.

With this thought, which once more lays it upon the heart: “*Deal gently with the weak*” [emphasis added] (even if these weak believe that they are strong, because they believe ‘more’ than we do) I will bring this devil-epistle to a close. (Zahn-Harnack 1941, pp. 295–298)

Harnack’s letter to his daughter could very well function as a paradigm of how liberal theologians or theologians who self-identify as progressive ought to respond to their children when they raise questions regarding the Christian faith. The letter, of course, offers a precise and succinct explanation of the issue at hand (the existence of a personal devil), but it does much more than that. It is a pastorally sensitive response. Harnack summarizes his own ideas regarding a personal devil, but he also acknowledges the ideas of others, including those of Christ and the apostles. In the introduction and conclusion, Harnack underscores one point: respect to “every honorable religious conviction.” After all his explanation, Harnack wants his daughter to keep one thought at the forefront of her heart: “Deal gently with the weak.” This sense of deep respect and gentleness toward plurality in religious experience is, it seems to me, at the core not only of this letter but also of Harnack’s work as a scholar-librarian.

Kindness lies at the heart of what pastors and pastoral theologians do. Donald Capps (2001) suggests that in order to provide counsel, a minister needs “a judicious frame of mind” (p. 244). This judicious frame of mind, he explains, is reflected in two qualities: treating others with kindness, and valuing the counselee’s unique individuality (pp. 244, 246). Capps explains the difference between kind, benign, and benevolent: “*Kind* implies the possession of sympathetic or generous qualities. *Benign* suggests a kindly nature and is applied especially to a gracious superior. *Benevolent* implies a charitable or altruistic inclination to do good” (p. 244). But “to be genuinely kind necessitates an appreciation of the complex life within every person” (Cannon 1994, p. 157, as cited in Capps 2001, p. 245). Capps concludes that kind persons, aware of this sense of complexity, “do not impose their way of life on others” (p. 245). In this respect, I see Harnack’s letter to his daughter as an exercise in kindness. He is aware of the complexity of his daughter’s question and the impossibility of offering a final answer. Even though he does not seek to impose his own views, he does provide a guiding principle: Deal gently with the weak. More than transmitting the “right” answer, Harnack is interested in fostering a proper attitude in her daughter, one of respect and kindness to all.

Conclusion

. . . and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

—Ephesians 4:31–32, NRSV

In this paper I have reflected on the librarian as an image of pastoral care. I have underscored three qualities of librarianship that have enlightened my understanding of what pastoral theologians do and who we are: attention to the uniqueness of each individual, a sense of impartiality, and kindness. My approach in this paper is, of course, only one approach, an exercise in interpretation, the reflections of a living human document contained in one volume of God's universal library.

There is perhaps a sense in which I have idealized the idea of the librarian as an image of pastoral care. But insofar as our ideals, desires, dreams, and utopias have the power to keep us going, a degree of idealization is inevitable and even desirable. I am aware, however, that librarianship, like pastoral ministry, faces unique challenges and difficulties. One of these is the contemporary tendency of institutions to outsource library services, eliminating in this way staff and ultimately moving from a human-centered approach to technocracy. Naomi Klein (2004), reflecting on librarianship as a radical profession, has pointed out that “being a librarian today . . . means being a guardian of the embattled values of knowledge, public space and sharing” (p. 49). Insofar as pastoral theology is concerned with the defense of the uniqueness of individuals in a society that tends toward conformism in the form, for example, of consumerism, the vocation of a pastoral theologian shares this radical quality.

Another ongoing challenge is, of course, the maintenance and optimization of library buildings. Libraries, like temples, are often used as tokens of grandiosity. And grandiosity often takes a toll on individuals. During Harnack's period as director, a new building for the Royal Library was built, but since the plans for the new building had been approved before he took over the library, there was little he could do to modify them. Harnack thought that a mistake in that plan was “the unsuitableness of the great reading-room,” but government officials and the architect underscored “the representative character” of the building (Zahn-Harnack 1941, p. 351). The “gigantic structure” was dedicated on March, 22, 1914, and Harnack himself delivered a “brilliant oration” (p. 351). And so Harnack had to go back into the building to continue his mission to “select, serve, administer.” As a pastoral theologian I am sometimes overwhelmed by the grandiosity and oppressiveness of academic bureaucracy and infrastructure. But then I remember a voice that tells me: “Be kind to one another.” And so, inspired by God's true kindness in Christ, I go back into God's universe—“what others call the Library”—to continue caring.

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