

Ministry Is a Rather Ubiquitous Affair: An Interview with Donald Capps

Robert S. Henderson¹

Donald Capps is a Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Men and Their Religion: Honor, Hope, and Humor* (Trinity Press International, 2002) *A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humor* (Continuum Press, 2005) *Fragile Connections: Memoirs of Mental Illness* (Chalice Press, 2005) *Young Clergy: A Biographical-Developmental Study* (Haworth Press, 2005). He is an ordained Minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. He received his B.D. and S.T.M degrees from Yale Divinity School and his M.A. and PhD from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

RH: How did you get into the ministry?

DC: This question reminded me of Mae West's observation that she was once white as snow and then she drifted. I gave much thought to ministry when I was in college but was undecided when I went to Yale Divinity School after graduation.

When I arrived I learned that I should have announced my indecision because at that time there were special grants offered by the Rockefeller Foundation for students who were undecided. I was unaware that one might be rewarded for what I had thought I should keep a closely guarded secret. Between my junior and middler year I did a unit of CPE and explored the possibility of being ordained to chaplaincy but my denomination—Lutheran—required one to accept a call to a parish as a prerequisite for ordination.

I was certain that I would not accept a call to a parish because liturgical reforms underway would have required that I sing the liturgy and this thought filled me with a mixture of fear and amusement. I wrote about this in my book on social phobia.

So I began to assume that I was destined for an academic career of some sort, but was very unclear as to what field I might study. I had taken several courses in history of religions in my senior year with the idea that I might do doctoral work in the field, but I was more interested in ancient Greek religion than in living religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, and it was difficult to find a program that would enable me to pursue this interest.

¹ Robert S. Henderson is a Pastoral Psychotherapist in Glastonbury, Connecticut and along with his wife, Janis, is co-author of the three volume book "Living with Jung: "Interviews" with Jungian Analysts."

So when I graduated from Yale Divinity School, I began a Ph.D. program at the University of California in Berkeley in English literature, switched in a couple of weeks to Philosophy, and then after completing a semester decided to withdraw. I worked a few months in a church, got married, and then returned to Yale Divinity School to do a Th.M.

In order to get admitted to the Th. M. program, I was asked to write a letter explaining my vocational indecision and to provide assurance that I was now committed to the ministry. I was determined to make good on my promise to pursue a ministerial career, but was quite certain I wasn't destined to become a preacher, so I took four courses in the pastoral care field and four in Christian Education with the idea that the scales might be tipped in one or the other direction as the year wore on.

A seminar from James Dittes in which we psychoanalyzed major religious figures convinced me that I wanted to become a psychologist of religion and a course on theories of human development from Randolph Crump Miller introduced me to Erik Erikson's work. So the Th.M. year helped me get clarity about what I wanted to study further at the doctoral level, but, somewhat ironically, they steered me away from a career in ministry.

To make a long story short, I did my Ph.D. at the University of Chicago and wrote my dissertation on John Henry Newman's life and career prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism. I viewed it as sort of a counterpart to Erikson's *Young Man Luther*. I taught at Oregon State University in the Department of Religious Studies, then five years at the University of Chicago Divinity School, then a couple of years in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. During these years, I didn't think of myself as being "in ministry."

I did get ordained in the Lutheran church when I was teaching at the U. of Chicago but was viewed as a special case and did so not out of any personal motivation but because the academic dean felt the faculty should have ecclesiastical endorsement.

I think I became a minister when I decided to accept a position at the Graduate Seminary at Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma. I was intrigued that they were looking for a professor of "pastoral care and psychology of religion" (which was probably a title someone had coined years before) and I began to think that I might be able to do a creditable job with the "pastoral care" side of things while continuing to pursue my primary interest as a "psychologist of religion." Over the next several years, though, I began to write pastoral care books largely because I needed texts to assign in my classes on pastoral care and counseling and the available texts were rather sparse. So, my answer to the question, "How did you get into ministry?" is simply this: I wrote my way into ministry.

There are certainly more impressive ways of getting into ministry and, in a sense, I've made a sort of career of studying how others have done it. Moreover, I often thought of the letter I wrote in order to get admitted to the Th. M. program and wondered if it

was still on file because a lot of years had elapsed before I entered what I considered ministry (as opposed to going through the formalities of ordination).

But I recalled that when I was writing my dissertation feeling quite taken by Newman's comment as he was beginning to engage in the reform movement that would subsequently be named the Oxford Movement that "one's slowness to begin a course of action is a pledge of zeal once one embarks upon it." As I did not change my external behavior much—I didn't, for example, go out and preach in local churches—I would guess that my faculty colleagues would not have used the word "zeal" to characterize my sense of being a minister.

But I felt an inward sense of commitment and have attempted over the years to maintain a sort of balance between the pastoral care and the psychology of religion sides of my professional identity. I wrote about this in an article titled "The Letting Loose of Hope: Where Psychology of Religion and Pastoral Care Converge" published in the *Journal of Pastoral Care* in 1997.

RH: In the western world of psychotherapy and mental health, attention is now given to short-term and solution-focused work. More and more people have an assortment of medications they regularly use, often without any end in sight. More parents are asking that their children be on medications and more and more children are given mental diagnosis. People often want to feel good quick and long term healing and transformation work involved in depth approaches usually take and are not paid for by insurance companies. Some people today feel they are "in therapy" by seeing their Psychiatrist monthly for a medication check up. Given this what do you see as the future for the work of pastoral psychotherapy?

DC: You raise a very good question. I don't feel, though, that I am especially well positioned, being a seminary professor, to make an especially informed guess as to the future of the work of pastoral psychotherapists. I have a sense, though, that this is a rather perennial issue that manifests itself over and over again, though with somewhat different nuances. Recently I showed a video in my course on the life cycle of Erik H. Erikson being interviewed by Richard I. Evans at the University of Houston in 1964. Erikson noted that when he reported to Anna Freud the kinds of cases he was treating in the United States, she replied that such cases would not be considered appropriate for psychoanalysis in Vienna. This led Erikson to comment that it was probably the case that there were persons in psychoanalysis whose difficulties did not warrant their being in psychoanalysis. On the other hand, we also discussed Erikson's case of the theological student in his lecture "The Nature of Clinical Evidence" in *Insight and Responsibility*, published the same year as the interview with Richard Evans, in which it was absolutely essential that the young man received the "transformation work involved in depth approaches."

In my course on mental illness, students from Pentecostal backgrounds and students from third world countries report that their faith traditions have an enormous

mistrust of psychiatry and that the ministers in these contexts actively dissuade their parishioners from taking any medications for mental or emotional problems.

These students' concern is to find ways to bridge the gap between the legitimate uses of psychotropic medicines and their faith traditions. I find this very concern to find ways to do so a hopeful sign. By the same token, as one whose thinking was formed by dynamic psychologies back in my graduate school days, I share your concern that therapy for some is merely that of taking medications and not exploring their interpersonal and intrapsychic conflicts.

In my book *Jesus the Village Psychiatrist* I argue that Jesus' very effectiveness as a curative agent was due to the fact that he recognized the underlying psychodynamic causes of the illnesses from which those who came or were brought to him suffered--whether blindness, paralysis, leprosy, epileptic seizures, etc. I suggested that he could not have cured these persons had he not recognized the personal and psychosocial anxieties that precipitated and maintained these organic disabilities and symptoms. In this and my earlier book *Jesus: A Psychological Biography* I draw heavily on Freud's groundbreaking work on anxiety in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*.

RH: What have been some of the hopeful and discouraging trends you have seen in the field of clinical ministry in the twenty or thirty years?

DC: By clinical ministry, I assume that you mean chaplaincy, specialized pastoral counseling and pastoral psychotherapy, and if so, I have to acknowledge that I am not as much in touch with these forms of ministry as I perhaps should be. One who teaches in a seminary environment is somewhat removed from these forms of ministry despite the fact that one strongly encourages students to consider these ministries and receives various reports from students--former and current--about their experiences.

Of these three forms of clinical ministry, I remain most in touch with hospital chaplains because our students are most likely to enter CPE programs as part of their field education requirements. No doubt, there are some discouraging trends in the field of clinical ministry, but what I see from my admittedly limited perspective are signs of hope. Students who are giving serious thought to these ministries come from varied ethnic, racial, cultural, and denominational backgrounds, and their experiences in CPE lead them to raise fundamental questions about the truisms and doctrinal verities with which they entered seminary. That this is happening to our students, who represent the future, may well be the most hopeful sign of all.

RH: Some people feel that Seminary faculty are not in touch with the real world of ministry. You have spent a lifetime teaching in Seminary. How do you respond to those people?

DC: I think they have a point. When I look over the courses that are being offered in the seminary where I teach, I wonder how many of them are relevant to the real world of ministry. But when I interact with students, and especially when I read the papers they

write for my courses and make written comments on what they have written, I feel that what is going on being us is directly and immediately related to the real world of ministry.

I even, at times, think that what is happening in these exchanges is, in fact, the real world of ministry that we are ministering to one another. This, however, undoubtedly reflects my sense that ministry is a rather ubiquitous affair that is not confined to specified locations (church buildings) and professions (ordained clergy). While others may deplore the fact that seminary resources are being expended on a significant number of students who do not enter recognized or official forms of ministry when they graduate.

I believe, on the contrary, that this means that the seminary has provided what Erik Erikson has identified as a valuable "moratorium" similar, perhaps, to his years as a struggling artist before he rather accidentally found his niche in life as a psychoanalyst. In fact, a few years ago I had the idea of establishing a prize in honor of Henry James Sr., the father of William James (the psychologist-philosopher) and Henry James (the novelist) and himself an author of religio-theological books.

He attended Princeton Theological Seminary from 1835 to 1837 but did not return for his third and final year. My idea was that the prize would go to a student who either dropped out before graduating or completed the degree but had another career path in mind. I probably thought that if such a prize had existed where and when I received my seminary education, I may well have been one of its recipients!

The prize was established but the task of identifying the most deserving recipient was felt by others to pose insurmountable logistical difficulties. So it now goes to a student whose work reflects the inquiring spirit of Henry James and the regard for psychological awareness and complexities for which his sons, William and Henry, are justly famous. I actually like this formulation as it does not exclude those students who are, in fact, planning to become clergy or enter other official forms of ministry.

I might add that my recent book *Laughter Ever After: Ministry of Good Humor* (Chalice Press 2008) suggests that the rabbi in "a minister, a priest, and a rabbi. . ." has three traits or qualities--(1) is practical and down-to-earth; (2) is simple-minded; and (3) is comfortable with the person he or she already is. I then invite persons who have these three traits or qualities to apply for ordination in the Ministry of Good Humor.

I also suggest that jokes that begin "A guy goes into a bar..." reflect a good humor ethos and that jokes about foul-mouthed parrots, heartless lawyers, and dumb blondes provide excellent Good Humor ministry role models. I regret that those responsible for the design of the book did not endorse my idea of placing an old photo of a Good Humor Ice Cream trucks on the cover as I recall the excitement of kids of all ages when they heard the familiar bell announcing that the truck was approaching their neighborhood. To me, this truck symbolizes ministry in the real world.