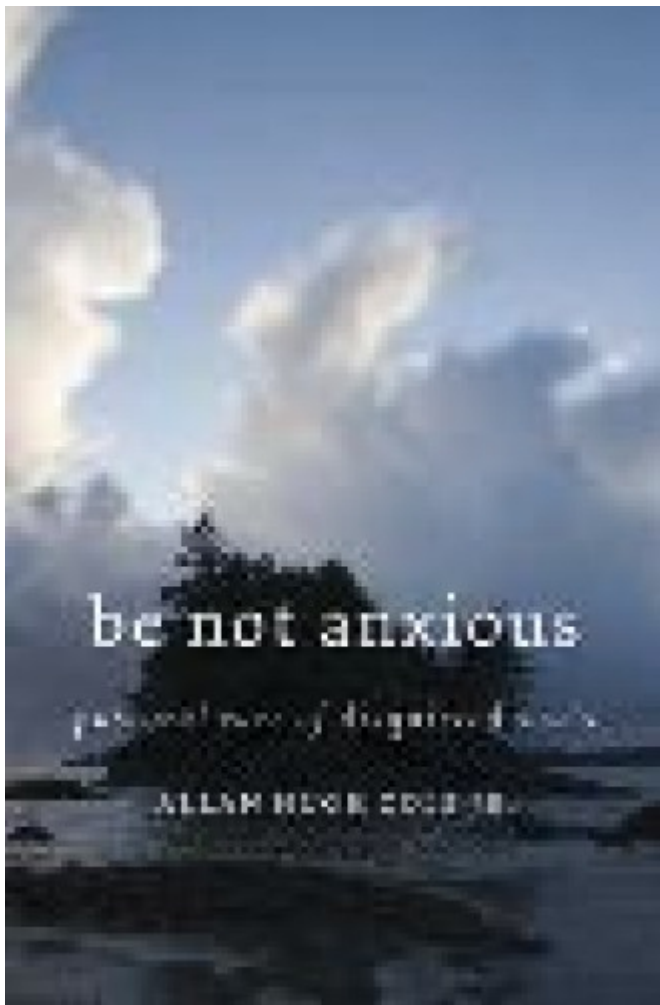


Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls

reviewed by [Arthur Paul Boers](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls

Allan Hugh Cole Jr.
Eerdmans

As any pastor knows, anxiety permeates church life and the work of pastoral care. Sometimes it seems as if the entire job of pastoring can be boiled down to a matter of managing anxiety: that of the pastor, individual congregants, various committees, sometimes the church as a whole. Throughout history, theologians from the Desert Fathers and Mothers through Martin Luther and right up to Paul Tillich in the 20th century wrestled with the meaning of anxiety and asked whether Christians can do away with it. Yet as informed as today's church is by psychology and family-systems thinking, it is difficult to find recent in-depth theological examination of anxiety.

Anxiety, according to Allan Hugh Cole, is neither worry nor fear. It is a soul condition involving the entire person. Closely related conditions include anguish, dread and angst. Anxious people are disquieted souls, deeply ill at ease with who they are and with their relationships with others, including their relationship with God.

Faith communities, appropriately enough, draw and attract disquieted souls, and Cole celebrates the unique offerings of pastoral care as "cure of souls." He hopes that pastors will not defer too quickly to nonclergy professionals because pastors are uniquely positioned to recognize disquieted souls, and the church has many resources for them, such as prayer, scripture, counseling, worship and hospitality. Cole advocates blending cognitive-behavioral therapy with narrative theology, helping people root their individual stories—and their attendant anxieties—in the larger Christian story of "God's creative, transformative, and redemptive acts throughout history."

We can overcome anxiety and worry when we are connected and related to realities that are bigger than we are, Cole explains. We need to be part of social systems, historical traditions and transcendent realms. We are not meant to be isolated and alone; being rooted in deeper realities consoles us, reassuring us that final and ultimate realities will not let us down.

Cole is no advocate of Rogerian nondirective counseling. He believes that disordered thinking—including some theological thinking—needs to be challenged and reordered. Cognitive therapy reframes how people think and teaches them "to identify, understand, and modify their thoughts on their own." The goal of working with those who are anxious is not merely therapeutic consolation but theological conversion, according to Cole.

Pastors should probe, diagnose and challenge in several areas: attention to the holy, belief about providence, depth of faith, perception of grace, gratefulness, ability to repent, capacity for communion and sense of vocation. Such probing is done mostly through gentle questioning, with the hope that anxious people might see the implications of their beliefs and practices: “What keeps you going?” “Where do you find peace and hope?” “How can this get better?” “Where is God in all of this for you?”

Ultimately, we are called to locate our personal narratives within the Christian metanarrative. By telling and listening to individual stories in the wider church context, we come to better understand our place in the world and before God. “Pastoral care of disquieted souls,” Cole writes, “requires assisting anxious persons with exchanging one world, the anxious one, for a world that offers more peace.”

Cole also calls for improving self-awareness, modifying and replacing negative imagery, paying attention to emotions while anxious and “restructuring assumptions about three major life concerns: acceptance, competence, and control.” He notes that many anxious people have an automatic series of thoughts and reactions. A man hears a siren and quickly assumes that his own house must be on fire. A woman drives past a church and within seconds recognizes her fear that God wants to punish her. The caregiver can help people to recognize their deepest, underlying fears. Questions are key: “What’s the evidence for your anxiety?” “What’s a different way of looking at the situation?” “So what if that happens?” People can also be encouraged to name and then interrupt automatic thinking processes. Finally, the caregiver can nudge them to know the Christian story, to examine their experiences in that light, and to claim the reassurance that the Christian story offers.

Just as important as one-on-one work is engaging people in a matrix of Christian practices. Such practices connect people more deeply to God, others and self, reimmerge them in the Christian story, and help them to embody the Christian narrative in the rituals and habits of their lives. Christian practices alter perception and imagination regarding matters that cause anxiety. Cole commends church membership, service to others, and regular worship, prayer, scripture reading and confession.

A mark of nonanxiousness is willingness to enter calmly into neglected or overlooked matters or into contested areas of conversation—think of Barack Obama’s March 2008 discourse on race. Cole’s book models nonanxiety as he explores his topic with a seamless blend of personal experiences, psychological and theological

considerations, and reflections on various situations in which he has ministered; he warmly and invitingly portrays how we can exchange anxious views of life and the world for the grand narrative of Christian faith.