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### **Tribute to Don S. Browning (1934-2010)**

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**Abstract** This tribute adapts words originally written to extol Don S. Browning, one of the foremost pastoral and practical theologians and ethicists of his time, on the occasion of his death on June 3, 2010. The tribute appeared in the funeral worship bulletin on June 10, 2010 at Hyde Park Union Church in Chicago and was revised for a newsletter of a major educational institution with which he had many significant relationships and responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> Although we embellished the tribute slightly, we did not change its main intent: It captures the remarkable depth and breath of Browning's scholarly achievement, the mark he made on public and academic discussion, and the extent to which he is missed by his colleagues, friends, and family.

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*Generativity*: “a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation” that grows out of optimism about humanity (Erikson, 1950).

The vocational and intellectual life and work of Don S. Browning, the Alexander Campbell Professor Emeritus of Ethics and the Social Sciences at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, spanned five decades, several continents, and multiple disciplines. Trained in theology at the University of Chicago in the 1960s, he was equally conversant in modern psychology, philosophy, ethics, sociology, and in the last decade of his life, family law. Over his teaching and research career in practical theology, theological ethics, and the social sciences, he stood at the forefront of three major cultural discussions of import to the wider society—religion and psychiatry, religion and the family, and religion and law. His scholarship falls into three distinct bodies of literature—books on care and moral guidance for congregations and ministers; books on psychology and religion for the wider audience of scholars and professionals in both disciplines; and books on marriage, family, children, religion, and law for students, scholars, and professionals involved in research, public policy, and non-profit institutions.

Browning’s early work sought to bridge theology and psychology in the service of pastoral care and ministry around such diverse themes as the atonement, generativity,

personality theory, and the quest for a normative anthropology. During this period, he produced books that powerfully influenced congregational life and pastoral practice, such as *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (1976). In its call for greater attention to religious guidance as a part of the historical legacy of the Christian and Jewish traditions, this text dramatically changed the direction of the discipline of pastoral care, calling it back to its roots and encouraging it to sustain normative values in its use of psychology and strategies of care. As a capstone of this early period, he edited twelve volumes in a series on Theology and Pastoral Care published by Fortress Press that included his own book, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Browning, 1983a).

Throughout this time and over his career, Browning also sustained keen interest in psychoanalysis, psychiatry, object-relations theory, self-psychology, evolutionary psychology, and cognitive science. His theological and ethical analysis of the modern psychologies has had a major impact on secular and religious scholars alike, through books such as *Generative Man: Psychoanalytic Perspectives* (Browning, 1973), a finalist for the National Book Award in 1974, and *Pluralism and Personality: William James and Some Contemporary Cultures of Psychology* (Browning, 1980). His main work in this genre, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies* (Browning, 1987), altered common perception of psychology as strictly an empirical science and demonstrated how major psychologists create culture-forming narratives and ideals. It was revised and reissued in 2004 and remains one of the most significant books on contemporary psychology and religion (Browning and Cooper, 2004).

In the 1980s, Browning's focus shifted to include the complex connection between practice and theory, the role of moral reason, and the nature of practical theology

as a broader intellectual discipline. He created a program at the University of Chicago that produced teachers and scholars with interests in a wide range of practical theological themes, such as conversion, dreams, aging, poverty, children, and spirituality. He redefined the traditional discipline of practical theology and gave it intellectual credibility and national and international prominence. The publication of one of his most cited works, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Browning, 1991), provided a fresh theoretical base from which other scholars have advanced the discipline and from which ministers and seminary students have shaped their practice. He hosted the first major conference reframing practical theology at the University of Chicago. This conference eventuated in editorship of the first volume on the new discipline, *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Religion, Church and World* (Browning, 1983b). He later served as one of the editors of five books in a Studies in Practical Theology Series.

In 1990, Browning simultaneously broadened and deepened his commitment to bridging disciplines by launching an expansive and unprecedented Religion, Culture and Family project that reshaped discussion about the family and culminated in the publication of a co-authored volume, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Browning, Miller-McLemore, Couture, Lyon, and Franklin, 1997). Recipient of a multimillion-dollar grant from Lilly Endowment, Browning led a study of the family and religion that spanned two decades and engaged scholars from a wide variety of disciplines and many walks of life. The project included scores of public forums and conferences and led to the publication and dissemination of over twenty books and hundreds of scholarly articles on such topics as feminism and the family, biblical perspectives on the family, family law, and most notably the cultural

debate about the family. This endeavor not only illustrates the breadth and the depth of Browning's energetic mind but also his capacity to get people together and "organize the neighborhood." The book that marked that end of the first phase of the Lilly grant, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* (Browning et al., 1997), not only drew on the massive production of literature spawned by the grant in areas as far reaching as biblical studies, church history, ethics, sociology of religion, and congregational studies. It also exemplified the method of practical theology that he outlined in *Fundamental Practical Theology* (Browning, 1991). When *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* was revised for a second edition (Browning et al., 2000), a succinct and significant appendix was added, explaining how the book models a method of critical hermeneutics and theological reconstruction.

In the last decade, Browning brought many of his interests to culmination. He revisited and extensively revised research on ethics and psychology for a new book, *Christian Ethics and the Moral Psychologies* (Browning, 2006). He published several volumes that represent his best thought on families, religion, law, ethics, and practical theology, such as *Marriage and Modernization: How Globalization Threatens Marriage and What to Do about It* (Browning, 2003) and *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies* (Browning, 2007). He also served as the first Robert W. Woodruff Visiting Professor of Interdisciplinary Religious Studies at Emory University and as one of the editors of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Betz et al., 2007). At the time of his death he was at work on a monumental volume, which he privately recognized as his last, on family law and religion with John Witte Jr. of Emory University (Browning and Witte, 2011),

yet another intellectual quest to bridge disciplines, and he had joined University of Chicago colleagues, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Howard Nussbaum, in directing a major project connecting the sciences and the humanities, *The Science of Virtues*, funded by the Templeton Foundation.

Throughout his life, Browning was as much a stellar citizen as a scholar. He was instrumental in founding the International Academy of Practical Theology that has become the locus for development of scholars in practical theology around the globe. He sustained commitments that went beyond scholarship to serve the wider community, such as service on the Board of the Center for Religion and Psychotherapy of Chicago, deanship of University of Chicago's Disciples Divinity House from 1977-83, and later service as co-chair of its Centennial Campaign and a member of its Board of Trustees. At the Divinity School, he was a generous mentor and advisor, the envy of students in other areas for his enterprising spirit in shepherding his students through the doctoral program and the first years of their careers. He taught not only Ph.D. students but delighted in teaching a core course for ministry students. He was highly collaborative, editing scores of books (several with prior students) and lending his support and leadership to a variety of projects. His ability to collaborate is reflected in the scope of interdisciplinary projects that occupied the last two decades of his life. He was also a churchman committed to enriching conversations in the public sphere and an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Browning had a deep interest not only in shaping persons, congregations, and scholarship, but also in influencing society and its institutions. He engaged in conversation and publication that he hoped would change the institutions of marriage,

education, and the professions with books such as *Religious and Ethical Factors in Psychiatric Practice* (Browning, Evison, and Jobe, 1991), *Does Psychiatry Need a Public Philosophy?* (Browning and Evison, 1991), *Reweaving the Social Tapestry: Toward a Public Philosophy and Policy of Families* (Browning and Rodriguez, 2002), and *Marriage, Health, and the Professions: Implications of the Health Values of Marriage for the Practice of Law, Medicine, Ministry, Therapy, and Business* (Browning, Wall, Doherty, Post, and Van Leeuwen, 2002). In the last decade, he co-edited four books that he hoped would influence college education and young adults around children and families, *American Religions and the Family* (Browning and Clairmont, 2006), *Sex, Marriage, and Family in the World Religions* (Browning, Green, and Witte, 2006), *Children and Childhood in American Religions* (Browning and Miller-McLemore, 2009), and *Children and Childhood in World Religions* (Browning and Bunge, 2009). His most recent book, *Revising Christian Humanism: The New Conversation on Spirituality, Theology, and Psychology* (Browning, 2010), represents a wonderful culmination of these interests. He argues for exchange between the wisdom of classic religious traditions and the newest research in the sciences as the best hope for a humane society and global welfare.

Recipient of honorary degrees and named lectureships, Browning was a world-class scholar. In a time when people are quick to take sides, he embodied the capacity to speak to the other side with courage and confidence in order to foster awareness of the assumptions that shape theory and practice. He had definite opinions about controversial issues and people did not always agree with him. This was perhaps truest among his pastoral theological peers where some found his understanding of pastoral care too

dominated by theological ethics, some protested his position on marriage, and some thought his bent toward theory and philosophy off-putting. And we are genuinely sorry that strong programs at Chicago in religion and psychological studies and practical theology were not part of his legacy.

At the same time, Browning strove to find the middle ground and to make room for fair deliberate conversation. He was, in a way, a “radical centrist.” A steadfastly cheerful person with a frequent twinkle in his eye, he had deep respect for others and an open mind. His all-embracing spirit enabled him to be equally at home talking about the Chicago Bears, the latest movie he had seen, the exploits of his amazing children and grandchildren, or Aquinas, Kant, or Gadamer. He had the capacity to hold his own in complicated public policy debates and highly sophisticated circles. And yet he was one of the most approachable persons. In a forward to the *Festschrift* published in Browning’s honor, *The Equal-Regard Family and Its Friendly Critics* (Witte, Green, and Wheeler, 2007), his Chicago peer Martin Marty wrote: “He is a ‘catholic’ thinker in that he is ready to defend his approaches and findings while at the same time showing hospitality to and learning from scholars who differ vastly from him and who may represent other philosophies and diverse religions” (p. xii-xiii).

Ultimately, Browning wasted *no* time with anxiety. We do not know anyone who had less anxiety about everything—his life, his work, and his foibles. He was genuinely positive and confident, even in his dying. As we remembered him at the funeral, a Chicago faculty member and friend commented that Browning was the only one he knew who liked William James but was genuinely once-born. His nephew said he never saw his uncle lose his temper. We believe him. We seldom saw Browning let his temperament



turn to meanness, bitterness, or resentment. Even when you stridently disagreed with him, he liked you and it didn't bother him. Once he told one of us that treating the other with respect was one of the most essential, if not *the key*, component of a good marriage. He exuded this in all of his relationships.

Up to the end, Browning looked forward to life with zest—a mark of mental health, as self-psychologist Heinz Kohut (1971) would say (p. 16), even though sometimes it bordered on a lack of normal, even desirable, vulnerability. Two years prior to his death, he bounced back from a drastic Whipple procedure with vigor and then breezed through chemo treatment with hardly a change in pace, leading many of us to hope he would continue like that for years to come. Barely three weeks before his death, he wrote one of us an email: “I am back in the hospital, but it may be *nothing* more than a *simple* hydration problem. If so, I will be out today. I should be fine when you arrive in June. Look forward to it.” In his last conversation with a co-author of a book that went to press only a few weeks before he died, Browning told him to check a particular footnote in a particular chapter because it had the wrong edition of one of Jürgen Habermas's books. All this seems quintessential Browning.

Don Browning was a friend, colleague, mentor, writing partner, and tennis opponent. Always and everywhere—whether after a movie, at breakfast over pancakes, at a wedding reception, on a walk in the neighborhood, or at a break at some professional conference—you knew you were in the presence of a “great mind at work.” His voice and contributions will be deeply missed. But he made his mark, achieving the kind of generativity imagined by psychologist Erik Erikson, one of Browning's mentors and key

figures, and leaving his friends and colleagues with a model of fortitude, wisdom, and hope for which we remain grateful.

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