In retrospect, pastoral counselors seem to have embraced a view of human nature that was impossibly optimistic given the worldwide war that raged around them. It would be easy to accuse them of being naive and foolish, but it would not be fair. Pastoral counselors adopted their views about the possibility of human autonomy and its centrality to human existence not in spite of what they saw around them but because of it. Displaying a liberal moral sensibility, they believed that human beings could choose freedom and that it was imperative that they did so. As they saw it, to conclude otherwise imperiled both democracy and Christianity and opened the door to fascism. For many pastoral counselors and their allies, the war underscored the dangers of highly authoritarian societies such as fascist Germany. In response to their fear of totalitarian forms of government, they articulated one of the foundational ideas of the postwar liberal moral sensibility—that the psychological autonomy of the individual and the freedom to pursue self-realization and personal gratification were key characteristics of the morally mature, emotionally healthy individual and were also central to a successful democracy. In the decade after the war, and in response to their middle-class constituency, postwar pastoral counselors increasingly
conceptualized autonomy or freedom in such a way that it was both generalized—that is, understood in terms other than the narrowly political—and also personalized—understood in terms of personal relationships and personal gratification.

**Personal Autonomy and the Challenge to Fascism**

Postwar pastoral counselors were undoubtedly influenced in their views by the extent to which they were engaged in ongoing conversation with German émigrés, both figuratively and literally. For instance, during the war years, Hiltner, May, and Rogers participated in a study group called the New York Psychology Group that also included theologian Paul Tillich and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, both émigrés from Germany.¹ Fromm laid the theoretical groundwork for the importance of the autonomous, self-realizing individual, detailing the political implications of psychological autonomy, its historical framework, and its value as a weapon against fascism, in a 1941 book entitled *Escape From Freedom*. Many of his contemporaries, and historians subsequently, considered Fromm a neo-Freudian because of his sharp criticism and revision of many of Freud’s core ideas. Fromm resisted the designation and throughout his career expressed a deep ambivalence about Freud’s ideas.² Fromm, a philosopher, social psychologist, and cultural critic, settled permanently in the United States in the early 1930s. He began a romance with Karen Horney, which lasted a little over a decade and in which the exchange of ideas was such that it is impossible to say who influenced whom. The relationship ended badly. Fromm ultimately allied professionally with Clara Thompson, Harry Stack Sullivan, Janet Rioch, and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann to establish the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry.³

Fromm’s antireligious sentiments complicated his relationship with pastoral counselors, but the ideas he expressed in *Escape From Freedom* nevertheless became central to pastoral counseling theory and practice in the 1950s.⁴ Despite his reluctance to be considered a neo-Freudian, Fromm began his book by laying out the principles upon which he opposed Freud; he noted that his views held much in common with those of Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan, the other two figures most frequently associated with neo-Freudianism.⁵ Fromm’s purpose was to counter Freud’s biological determinism by explaining both how human
beings made choices and why they made the choices they did make. To that end, Fromm presented a complex picture of human nature that took into account both biology and a diverse mix of social, cultural, and historical factors. He opposed the orthodox Freudian notion that human “inclinations” were “fixed and biologically given,” asserting instead that they were the result of “the social process which creates man.” At the same time, Fromm was careful to note, lest he be grouped with the behaviorists, that human beings were not simply a product of their environment; they shaped their environment too: “But man is not only made by history—history is made by man.” Specifically, as Fromm saw it, “man’s energies,” such as the drive for fame and success or the drive to work, became the “productive forces molding the social process” (Fromm’s emphasis). Still, even as he recognized the power of social psychology, Fromm acknowledged that certain fundamental needs like hunger, thirst, sleep, and the need to belong—needs that could be understood collectively as the drive for self-preservation and that were rooted in physiological needs—“formed the primary motive of human behavior.” It was the drive to belong and the fear of being alone that complicated the modern conception of freedom.

Fromm maintained that freedom could leave individuals feeling isolated and alone and that, in their drive to meet the need to belong, they sometimes willingly relinquished their freedom. To illustrate the way in which psychological factors had political implications, Fromm pointed to modern fascism. He argued that “economic liberalism,” increased political democracy, greater religious autonomy, and more personal freedom had created a situation in which fascism could flourish. Having freed themselves from traditional authority and become “individuals,” modern human beings had found that freedom left them feeling alone and powerless. Seeking to overcome the feeling of aloneness, they elected to submit their will to an authoritarian figure they believed would make them feel a part of something powerful. In Fromm’s view, there was no better example of this dynamic than Hitler’s Germany.

Fromm was not implying that greater freedom caused fascism. He was suggesting, however, that there was more than one response to freedom. He argued that human beings could choose love and productive work as one way of meeting their need for meaning and belonging, instead of seeking security in ties that would “destroy [their] freedom and the in-
tegrity of [the] individual self.” In the final section of the book, titled “Freedom and Democracy,” Fromm concluded that if freedom were understood in a positive sense as the freedom to realize the self “fully and uncompromisingly” and “to achieve full realization of the individual’s potentialities,” rather than as something alienating, then democracy would flourish. In fact, Fromm claimed, real freedom was possible only if society took as its “aim and purpose” the “growth and happiness of the individual.” He even went so far as to say that government had a specific obligation in this realm, noting, “Democracy is a system that creates the economic, political, and cultural conditions for the full development of the individual.”

Social psychologist Gordon Allport followed a similar line, further exploring the connections between democracy and the psychologically healthy or “mature” personality (who had much in common with Fromm’s fully realized individual). For Allport, too, the individual’s ability to make wise choices free from social pressures and authoritarian control was crucial. Well respected by his peers, Allport had studied in Germany in the early 1920s and made his name in the fields of social psychology and personality theory prior to World War II, serving as president of the American Psychological Association in 1939. Allport was the third figure who would later be considered a founder of humanistic psychology, and the one most closely allied with pastoral counseling. Like Carl Rogers and Rollo May, Allport was the son of a midwestern Protestant family. Unlike Rogers and May, however, and somewhat ironically, he never pursued a divinity degree yet was the most conventionally religious of the three, remaining steadfast in his religious commitment, which eventually led him to Boston’s Church of the Advent and Anglo-Catholicism. Allport published both scholarly and devotional works relevant to religion. He spent most of his academic career at Harvard and so did not have the same kinds of connections to the New York German émigré community that May and Rogers did, but he had strong ties to Germany from the years he had spent studying there, and he played an important role on a committee the APA created to help German psychologists escape Hitler’s Germany. So, it is no surprise that he devoted some of his writing to explaining the phenomenon of fascism.

In his wartime and postwar writing, Allport explored various aspects of the mature personality, deeming such individuals crucial to the steady
advance of democracy, Christianity, and science. Allport’s initial articulation of these ideas came, while the war still raged, in a 1944 article in Commonweal, a journal of religion, politics, and culture published for and by Catholic laypeople. He later wrote an entire book devoted to the subject, The Nature of Prejudice (1954), which was, and continues to be, widely influential among civil rights advocates. In the 1944 article, titled “The Bigot in Our Midst,” Allport decried the rise of bigotry, which was to him the single greatest evidence of an immature personality. Allport repeatedly made two important associations. The first was that bigotry was a kind of emotional immaturity in which the individual fixated at an adolescent stage of development. At this stage, he argued, individuals needed to have “their backbone on the outside,” by which he meant that they needed a strong authority telling them what to do. At this stage, too, they were easily led by authority, and because they felt a need to be part of an “in-group,” they tended to scapegoat anyone who was different. Second, Allport identified bigotry, with its tendency to scapegoat, as fascism, and he cited Hitler’s Germany as the best example of a society in which this sort of personality thrived.

In contrast, in the mature personality, said Allport, the backbone was “on the inside.” Mature individuals were able to make good choices on their own without a clearly defined authority structure and were not given to exclusivity. They were tolerant of diversity and not threatened by it. These characteristics, he believed, were the essence of democracy. To Allport’s way of thinking, excellent exemplars of both tolerance and democracy were his own cohort of Christians and scientists. In “The Bigot in Our Midst,” Allport was very clear that bigoted Christians should not be considered Christians at all, and in his postwar publications he argued that Christians who went to church and called themselves religious but who were really going to church for the security of fitting in tended to be more prejudiced. In Allport’s view, they were, at best, immature Christians. In line with what Fromm had argued earlier, Allport contended that the purpose of democratic society was to allow the potential of all people in a diverse society regardless of “class or kind” to “reach fruition.”

The arguments of Fromm and Allport were compelling for pastoral counselors in that they tied politics to a concept that pastoral counselors held as foundational—that human beings and their society would only
be transformed one individual at a time and from the inside out. Moreover, Fromm and Allport articulated a connection between autonomy and the success of both Christianity and democracy that pastoral counselors found appealing. Freedom, and more of it, would be the salvation of the postwar world.

**Postwar Professional Growth**

The boom in pastoral counseling, and in psychological counseling generally, continued after the war. In the immediate postwar era, the demand for professionals trained to counsel skyrocketed as Americans returned from war much more willing than in the past to believe that psychological counseling could provide solutions to their problems, relieve their emotional suffering, and even improve the quality of their lives. Pastoral counselors shared in the postwar psychology boom, because when Americans went looking for psychological help after the war, they were as likely to seek the help of their minister as they were to seek that of a psychologist or psychiatrist. Early Gallup polls indicate that among Americans who desired psychological counseling, 42 percent turned to their minister first. In particular, middle-class white Americans sought the help of pastoral counselors. William Whyte, in his classic sociological study of the American suburb, *The Organization Man* (1956), detailed the struggles of suburban ministers exhausted by the demands placed on them by their parishioners who wanted psychological counseling.

The postwar counseling boom resulted in a realignment between pastoral counseling and clinical pastoral education, as the momentum shifted, for the time being, to counselors. Clinical educators’ continued ambivalence about pastoral counseling was particularly ironic given how much CPE teaching methods in the 1920s and 1930s had inclined trainees toward the practice of pastoral counseling and how many of the new leaders of the pastoral counseling movement had gotten their start in CPE. Granted, most CPE programs continued after the war to devote at least some portion of each quarter to counseling methods, but that did not mean that CPE leaders shared the enthusiasm for the subject displayed by some of their students. To their way of thinking, too many young ministers fresh out of seminary and with only a few hours of clinical training under their belts were setting up office hours and offering
counsel to their parishioners. At the first National Conference on Clinical Training in 1944, parish minister Henry Lewis, a CPE supporter, expressed his dismay over the comment from one clinical education graduate and newly minted parish minister who told Lewis that as a result of his CPE training, “he now had four one-hour interviews each week with four different parishioners on their personality problems and hoped to have more.”22 Lewis was not the only one to bemoan the trend, but in the face of wartime experiences, pleas for a return to the original intentions of CPE fell on deaf ears.

Anton Boisen’s continuing call for a scientific study of religious experience received even less attention and clearly deviated from the primary objectives of both clinical pastoral educators and pastoral counselors after the war. He continued to publish throughout the 1940s and remained active in clinical education. Fred Kuether, then executive director of the Council for Clinical Training, maneuvered Boisen into quitting the chaplaincy and directorship of the CPE program at Elgin State Hospital and accepting a position as “educational consultant” for the council. Boisen took his new job seriously and delivered a scathing report at the end of his first year, criticizing CPE programs for moving away from his original vision and becoming overly enamored of counseling and the personal interview. Boisen complained that one supervisor “was quite frank in saying that he was not interested in the case-write-up, but only in the technique of interviewing.” Boisen saw too much emphasis on Freudian theories—trying to “explain George Fox in terms of toilet training”—and not enough “co-operative inquiry,” by which he meant the development of a research agenda and significant reading list and reference library for each of the programs. Perhaps most distressing to Boisen was the number of trainees undergoing psychoanalysis or some form of Reichian analysis.23 But Boisen’s ideas sounded quaint to his peers—a holdover from the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Progressive reform era—illustrating the ways in which the liberal moral sensibility had begun to shift. Boisen’s ongoing interest in the psychology of religion seemed ill fitted and irrelevant to the newly discovered interest in the autonomous individual. The winds would have to change again before Boisen’s ideas would enjoy a renaissance.24

Leaders of the emerging pastoral counseling movement took a view that differed from Boisen’s and from that of the majority of their peers
in CPE. In their view, the heart of the pastor’s job was to be neither a scientist, as Boisen understood it, nor a member of the health care team, as CPE supervisors would have it, but a counselor, whether in the private interview or in the application of counseling principles to all ministerial duties. Clergy who self-identified as pastoral counselors still engaged in a conversation with scientists and in scientific research, but they did so to develop more effective counseling and a better understanding of their counselees and of themselves. It was this view that predominated in post-war debates about the parish minister’s professional duties, particularly among those ministers who were attempting to move counseling to the center of the parish minister’s professional identity.

Pastoral counseling advocates elaborated their conception of pastoral counseling in a 1954 interprofessional conference on psychotherapy and counseling held under the auspices of the New York Academy of Sciences. Representatives from the fields of medicine, psychology, social work, counseling and guidance, and the ministry gathered to explore areas of mutual interest. Reports from each of the five professional groups were published in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, and excerpts of the clergy group’s report were also published in *Pastoral Psychology*. The clergy’s report, written by Wayne Oates in consultation with other members of the Commission in the Ministry, highlighted the unique contribution of the minister as counselor and stressed the value scientific insights could have for pastoral counseling and the importance of “scientific criteria of evaluation” in judging the effectiveness of pastoral counseling. The authors of the report also addressed the distinction between counseling and psychotherapy, called for more research in the area of the psychology of religion, encouraged mutual cooperation among the counseling professions which would involve secular professionals referring clients to ministers as often as ministers referred parishioners to a psychologist or psychiatrist, and pointed out the need for more training opportunities even as they resisted the idea of a specialized field in pastoral counseling, noting, “The creation of a specialty of counseling among ministers, a subprofession, so to speak, is highly undesirable.” Training as a counselor was intended to make a minister not less “but more a man of God to those who come to him for counsel and guidance.” Pastoral counselor Paul Johnson, in the published discussion of the findings, quibbled a bit with Oates’s strong opposition to specialization and compared...
the parish minister to the general practitioner, arguing that clergy needed as much counseling training as possible for use in their parish, although not as much as would be needed by someone who wanted to be “the full-time pastoral counselor, the institutional chaplain, or the teacher of other pastors.”

While the commission’s report made some attempt to define pastoral counseling and delineate its boundaries, in reality, pastoral counseling continued to resist easy definition. In the twenty years after World War II, ministers who self-identified as pastoral counselors continued to practice as they had before the war, without formal licensing procedures, standardized training, a professional organization, or even a clear definition of counseling. They practiced their craft in a variety of settings, serving as parish ministers, hospital chaplains, seminary faculty, and staff members at a growing number of independent counseling centers. They hailed from a variety of Protestant denominations, but the majority held membership in one or another of six denominations: Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Methodist Church, the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Congregationalist Christian Church, the Baptist church (both Southern and American), or the Lutheran church (Evangelical, United, and Missouri Synod). Other denominations, including General Conference Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and Unitarian-Universalists, were represented in smaller numbers.

Ecumenical and only loosely organized until 1965, pastoral counselors were, more than anything else, a community of discourse tied together by two professional journals—The Journal of Pastoral Care, which began publication in the mid-1940s, and Pastoral Psychology, which began publication in 1950—and an eclectic mix of educational opportunities and how-to books published in ever-increasing numbers by the leaders in the field. As a consequence, and not surprisingly, levels of expertise varied widely. Almost any minister who had read a few articles in the professional journals or taken an evening class in psychology could, and sometimes did, call him- or herself a pastoral counselor, while, at the same time, some of the leading figures in the movement had pursued extensive psychoanalytic training.

In an ongoing irony, even as chaplain supervisors persisted in discounting the role of CPE in training pastoral counselors, many ministers continued to get their start in counseling in clinical pastoral education.
programs where they read the counseling literature. A 1962 study, *The Churches and Mental Health*, indicated that of the 235,000 active Protestant parish ministers in the United States, between 8,000 and 10,000 had pursued clinical training and had, as a consequence, been exposed to the basic principles of counseling. In addition to CPE, ministers who wanted to learn about counseling could choose from a widening array of seminary programs and independent seminars. In 1954 alone, there were thirty-five seminars, institutes, and lecture series offered on pastoral counseling. Seventy theological schools, located from Philadelphia to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, provided courses in pastoral psychology and counseling. Forty seminaries listed clinical experience and courses in psychology in their catalogues. Seven seminaries awarded graduate degrees in pastoral theology, pastoral counseling, clinical psychology, or “guidance.” In 1965, the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) was founded. That year, the annual directory, “Opportunities for Study, Training, and Experience in Pastoral Psychology” in the journal *Pastoral Psychology* listed more than double the 1954 offerings. Seminaries offering course work leading to degrees in pastoral theology, pastoral care, or pastoral counseling had more than quadrupled.

Despite the growth of opportunities, little standardization of training occurred in the first two decades after World War II. The seminars, lectures, and workshops available through institutes, hospitals, councils of churches, and seminaries varied in content and length, ranging from one day to two semesters. The majority employed readings, discussions of case studies, and lectures. Some workshops, such as those administered by the Hudson River Counseling Service, covered interviewing and counseling technique. A very small number of programs included supervised experience; the Greater Newark Council of Churches, through its Department of Social Welfare, advertised “special supervised clinical experience for clergy in family and marriage counseling.” Among seminaries and theological schools, only a handful provided supervised fieldwork. As late as 1965 many pastoral counselors still gained much of their knowledge about counseling from reading about it. *Pastoral Psychology*’s editors, clearly assuming that clergy would gain a significant portion of the information they needed from reading, included extensive bibliographies in each annual directory. In addition, much of what they published had a practical bent; two regular features of the journal, “Readers’
Forum” and “The Consultation Clinic,” allowed readers to raise questions and receive answers from specialists. For instance, the March 1956 “Consultation Clinic” raised the question of how to keep records in counseling situations. The three respondents, Rollin Fairbanks, Samuel Southard, and Aaron Rutledge had all served at one time or another as directors of counseling centers. All three gave detailed, practical advice on everything from the length of patient interviews to the appropriate size of index card for recording counselee information.32

Some of the training available was quite extensive, although many ministers lacked the time and resources to take advantage of that training. The Merrill-Palmer School in Detroit provided counseling services to the community, collected data for ongoing research, and offered counselor training to “graduate and postdoctoral students from such fields as psychology, social work, sociology, medicine, theology, and religious education.” The school was affiliated with more than forty colleges and universities and credit earned at the school could be applied to a master’s or doctoral degree at those universities. The training consisted of a minimum of ten months of full-time study over three terms and included both graduate seminars and supervised counseling experience. The counseling sessions were electronically recorded with the permission of the client so that the “counselor-in-training” could use the recordings to improve his or her counseling skills. In the interest of “self-understanding,” counselors-in-training were also expected to participate in weekly counseling sessions as counselees. The program followed a format with which many CPE graduates would have been familiar. The school’s director, Aaron Rutledge, prior to his employment by Merrill-Palmer, had, according to the school’s promotional literature, served as “pastor, army chaplain, chaplain . . . of general and mental hospitals, supervisor of clinical training, Director of Guidance in a University, and . . . at Merrill-Palmer . . . as marriage counselor and leader of the counseling service and the training programs.” Rutledge’s employment history and Merrill-Palmer’s curriculum illustrate the state of the field at the time. The school’s program, designed to attract trainees from across disciplines, implies that counseling training had not standardized in any of the related disciplines.33

In the immediate postwar era pastoral counselors continued to cultivate their alliance with the neo-Freudians, reading widely from their
works and maintaining good working relationships with them. For instance, several key figures in the pastoral counseling movement supplemented their divinity school training and clinical pastoral education with psychoanalytic training at the William Alanson White Institute for Psychiatry. Among these were James Ashbrook, a Baptist minister and seminary professor, and Howard Clinebell, a Methodist minister and seminary professor. Institute member Clara Thompson contributed occasionally to *Pastoral Psychology*, and both she and Erich Fromm were honored as the journal’s “Man of the Month,” or, in Thompson’s case, “Woman of the Month.” Fromm’s commendation came in September of 1955 after publication of *The Sane Society*, which was named the *Pastoral Psychology* Book Club selection of the month. Harry Stack Sullivan had enjoyed the honor a year earlier when he published *The Psychiatric Interview*. Despite her break with fellow neo-Freudians at the White Institute, Karen Horney continued to be much admired by pastoral counselors, served on the editorial board of *Pastoral Psychology*, and was honored posthumously in the May 1953 issue of the journal. Still others integrated neo-Freudian theories into pastoral counseling textbooks they wrote. In one extended discussion of human nature in his book *Pastoral Counseling* (1949), Seward Hiltner returned repeatedly to Horney and Rank to illustrate the interplay between biological drives and cultural imperatives in the making of human personality. Hiltner also noted that his understanding and explanation of human nature had benefited greatly from discussions with Erich Fromm. In defining human nature as it related to counseling, Hiltner ranged widely through the works of cultural anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead and social psychologists George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Gordon Allport, and Gardiner Murphy, as well as the Freudians, both orthodox and revisionist.

In the postwar years, Rogers’s method likewise retained its popularity. Despite frequent criticism from his peers in the field of psychology that he was not scientific enough, Rogers had risen in the ranks of his profession to be elected president of the American Psychological Association in 1946. Pastoral counselors embraced his ideas to an even greater degree in the years immediately after World War II. After 1945 any minister who read the professional journals regularly or who had some minimal level of training in counseling had been exposed to the work of Carl
Rogers. While an outspoken minority resisted Rogerian ideas, one sympa-thizer declared in 1950 that Rogerian therapy had become “the touch-stone of counseling perfection.”38 Four pivotal works written by pastoral counselors in the late 1940s and early 1950s addressed Rogers’s ideas extensively: Seward Hiltner in Pastoral Counseling (1949), Carroll Wise in Pastoral Counseling (1951), Wayne Oates in The Christian Pastor (1951), and Paul Johnson in Psychology of Pastoral Care (1953). Although all four declared reservations about Rogerian therapy, they all included Rogers’s ideas about non-directive therapy in their books, which then became the primary textbooks for most pastoral counseling programs. For his part, Rogers contributed some original pieces to the journal, Pastoral Psychology, and its editors regularly reprinted his most important works. During his years at the University of Chicago and the university’s counseling center, Rogers influenced the research and training of clergy affiliated with the center. H. Walter Yoder went on to establish a highly regarded counseling program at his Congregational church in Michigan. Rogers and Russell Becker cowrote an article on the clergy and client-centered therapy for the inaugural issue (1950) of Pastoral Psychology. And Rogers’s work provided the theoretical and research design framework for the study conducted by Colston and Hiltner about the context of pastoral counseling.

The Liberal Moral Sensibility: Human Potential and the Personalization of Freedom

The embrace of Rogerian theory and methods had specific consequences. Postwar pastoral counselors who looked to Rogers as their guide abandoned the prewar stance of encouraging counselees to make realistic adjustments to their situations and to lead morally conventional lives. Instead, they embraced a broad notion of limitless freedom—an abundance theory of personality—in which they assumed that autonomous individuals, freed from restraints and without obstacles in their path, would move toward more fully realizing all of their “potentialities.” In this context, pastoral counselors reconceptualized the moral ideal and sought to encourage the development of “mature” or “self-realizing” individuals who possessed insight into their own behavior, cultivated emotionally intimate relationships with family and friends, “integrated”
many activities without being too single-minded about any particular task, and made decisions without being unduly influenced either by unconscious factors or the persuasion of other people. In practice, Rogerian pastoral counselors focused on freeing counselees to make their own choices and solve their own problems, theoretically moving them toward self-realization. Rogerian pastoral counseling was characterized by its Protestant framework and by an increasingly personalized idea of freedom.

To say that in the context of personal counseling freedom became more personalized sounds like a redundancy. Counseling had always been personal, its focus on “work with individuals” and their problems, rather than on systems or social structure. But counseling prior to the war clearly had a social end. The Deweyan idea of self-realization, for instance, assumed that the individual recognized his or her social obligations. Holman’s proposals for strengthening the will were for the purpose of creating a better Christian. While freedom and democracy were considered admirable principles, none of the prewar counselors, pastoral or otherwise, imagined that freedom applied to every aspect of the individual’s personal life, any more than they imagined that economic freedom meant that business could proceed unrestrained. In the 1930s they were Social Gospel Progressives living in the midst of an economic depression. Theirs was a culture of limits and they were the heirs of a Progressive ideal that had sought to relieve suffering and inspire social responsibility.

In the context of World War II, pastoral counselors had interpreted psychological freedom or autonomy in political terms, as a necessary response to fascism; but as concerns about fascism waned, pastoral counselors became less explicitly political. At war’s end they were not clearly anticommmunist and tended to frame their politics in terms of a general and diffuse commitment to democracy. What is very clear, however, is that in a postwar culture of abundance in which the problems of a suburban middle class seemed to dominate, they interpreted freedom in the widest possible sense. Perhaps the best metaphor for their theory of psychological autonomy comes from classical nineteenth-century liberalism: postwar counselors applied what amounted to a free market theory to the emotional and personal lives of their counselees, in the belief that the emotional market, given the right circumstances, would self-regulate.
Allowing counselees to come to their own conclusions and make their own mistakes was central to this theory. In his 1949 *Pastoral Counseling*, Hiltner demonstrated how not to proceed, describing the difficulties of a certain “Mrs. Godwin.” While her husband was away at war, Mrs. Godwin had gone to a party, gotten drunk, and slept with another man. When her husband returned home from war, she told him the truth, and he left her. Distraught, Mrs. Godwin sought the counsel of her minister. She explained to him that she had repented and confessed and that she believed there were extenuating circumstances, among them that she had been lonely, did not love the man she had slept with, and would not have been unfaithful had her husband not volunteered to go to war in the first place. She insisted that she had done the best she could under the circumstances and that her husband was wrong to leave her.40

Hiltner’s analysis pointed to the futility of violating the counselee’s autonomy. According to Hiltner, the minister responded to Mrs. Godwin by saying: “I agree with you. You did a wrong thing, but so far as it’s humanly possible, you did your part to make it right. And I can see you’re truly sorry. I think I’d better go around and talk to that young man. Don’t you think I should?” The minister did talk to the husband; Hiltner reported that in response to the pastor’s lecture, Mr. Godwin asserted his “legalistic” stance with even greater determination. In Hiltner’s opinion, the minister had failed in his dealings with the Godwins because he had “no real faith in the young woman, [and] no respect for her capacity to handle the situation if given some help and understanding.” Hiltner concluded that the minister’s actions not only implied disrespect for Mrs. Godwin but that no one gained anything from them: Mrs. Godwin’s marriage was not restored to her, she gained no insight into herself, and Mr. Godwin remained set in his opinion.41

Carroll Wise described how a non-directive approach freed the counselee to make the right choice by telling the story of a young man who came to see him after having been to a series of counselors all of whom had recommended the same course of action. The young man lived with his parents, and each of his previous counselors believed that the only solution was for the young man to move out. After a series of interviews in which Wise applied a non-directive method, the young man concluded for himself that he did, indeed, need to move out. The young man decided, as a result of the counseling, that he would quit his job, move out
of the house, and cease trying to change his father. In Wise’s view, for this young man, the decision to take action came as a natural consequence of his gaining a greater sense of control in his life. Making the choice for himself made it possible for him to act.

In matters of where to live, how to get along with one’s family, whether to marry, what career to choose, or whether to accept or decline health care, the counselee’s choices were sacrosanct in the non-directive approach. Even when the counselee demanded advice, guidance, or moral judgment, the good counselor was supposed to decline. The young man who came to his minister and demanded a book that he and his wife could read together that would explain to her “how a wife ought to look after her husband,” the young woman considering going against doctors’ advice and checking herself out of the hospital, and the unwed mother who prefaced her confession with a statement of her own worthlessness all were to be offered the same respect, the same warm relationship, and the same opportunity to work out their own salvation. And what if the parishioner chose something other than what the minister viewed as best? Theoretically, the Rogerian pastoral counselor defended the “counselee’s right to go to hell if he wants to” and rejected “the right of one person or a few people to order and control the lives of others.”

Part of what made this approach possible for pastoral counselors was the religious context in which they were working at the time. At least some of them believed that they did not need to fear the consequences of such radical freedom because God was at work in the world and in human beings. When pastoral counselors talked about allowing individuals to tap into their inner resources, they did so believing in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Southern Baptist pastoral counselor Wayne Oates expressed it:

This is the genius of the client-centered principle of counseling: it leaves the responsibility for the solution of the problem with the person who brings it, and provides a permissive and warmly personal atmosphere in which he can objectively work through to a satisfactory solution. Religiously stated, it is the careful observance of the principle of autonomy of the individual personality before God, and a confident trust in the lawful working of the Holy Spirit “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” in the life of the person.
Carroll Wise framed it in terms of “resources” available for “healing” of the personality and somehow connected that to the life and work of Christ, although he did not explain precisely what he meant.45

In any case, the relationship between pastoral counselor and counselee was embedded in another relationship, that of pastor and parishioner. Rogers, of course, argued that it was impossible to sustain a counseling relationship if the counselor exercised any kind of authority over the counselee. And Rogerian pastoral counselors were not claiming any kind of moral authority over their counselees. They did, however, see the relationship as powerful. As Wise argued, the Protestant minister did not grant absolution or forgiveness in the same sense as did the Roman Catholic priest, but in a counseling relationship, as a model of God’s love, acted as a “mediator of the grace of God through a living relationship.”46 Russell Dicks claimed that participating in a loving relationship with the minister turned the parishioner or counselee toward God and taught the individual to “believe and trust the universe” again even in the face of suffering.47 Equally important, counseling, as these early pastoral counselors envisioned it, was a part of the life of the church as a whole. Formal counseling, pastoral calls on persons at home, preaching, and even church administration could be conducted using non-directive principles. Under these circumstances, freedom did not look like an abyss.

Rogerian pastoral counselors likewise located self-realization in a matrix of Christian relationships and faith, arguing that Christian love and marriage provided ideal settings for self-realization. As one contributor to the journals described it, marriage gave men and women the “chance to flower [and] to achieve . . . their most noble potentialities.” Foster Williams, a Methodist minister from Buffalo, New York, noted that marriage was one of the best avenues for individuals to “develop” their “unique and best potentialities.” Later in the same article he asserted that, “self-realization is found only by entering into a real relationship with others.”48 Pastoral counselors and their allies were not necessarily naive about the difficulties marriage engendered. Frequently, in the same breath in which they celebrated marriage, they acknowledged its potential pitfalls. For instance, psychiatrist Volta Hall, the same contributor who had described marriage as an opportunity “to flower,” stressed that, for any marriage to succeed, the individuals had to bring a certain level
of maturity to the relationship in the first place. She observed trenchantly, “Marriage . . . is not for the weak, the stupid, or the immature.”

Pastoral counselors offered a similar rationale for viewing sex as a means for self-realization. They argued that the sexual relations of a married couple not only gratified their physical needs but acted as a “bond of understanding between them,” a “visible sign of an invisible commitment,” “an outward and visible symbol of communion,” and a means to expand “personal relatedness between them.” Pastoral counselors then took their argument one step further. They asserted that the sexual relations between married Christians cemented the relationship of those two people not only to each other, but also to God. In fact, theologian Reuel Howe argued that sex between a Christian husband and wife became an instrument of salvation. It became, in Howe’s words, “an instrument for the realization of the fullness of being.”

Pastoral counselors linked the personal to the political, arguing that marriage and family were essential to the success of democracy. Specifically, they argued that the right kind of marriage provided a practice field for democracy. For instance, Roy Burkhart, a minister, argued that it was in the home that Americans developed the character and the “inner voice” they needed to be wise citizens of a republic. Anthropologist Margaret Mead, another occasional contributor to Pastoral Psychology, maintained that Americans learned democratic practices by watching the relationship between their parents. Marriage counselor Leland Foster Wood insisted that Americans could facilitate world peace if they learned “brotherhood” at home. Gordon Allport argued that marriage provided the ideal venue for achieving the maturity one needed to be a good citizen of a democracy.

Pastoral counselors’ views on autonomy, self-realization, and democracy, as well as marriage and family, were undoubtedly shaped by their increasingly middle-class constituency. Postwar pastoral counseling case studies suggest that most of the people they counseled were white, middle class, and, of course, Protestant—businessmen, housewives, and professionals, and members of an upwardly mobile, prosperous, blue-collar population that counted itself among the new middle class. Counseling had been the privilege of this group, as evidenced most clearly in the work of prewar pastoral counselors such as May, Holman, and Bonnell.
In clinical programs, however, where many ministers prior to the war had gotten their first taste of counseling, they had encountered a much more religiously, ethnically, socially, and racially diverse population, because the programs were in state hospitals, general hospitals, prisons, and child guidance institutions.

After the war, as the number of pastoral counselors grew, as counseling moved more fully into the parish, and as Americans became more psychologically sophisticated in general, the middle-class bias became more pronounced. Ministers continued to seek clinical training and to be exposed to a more diverse population. Pastoral counseling professional literature, however, increasingly focused on the parish and parish practice, with its much more homogeneous population. Some evidence suggests that there was simply more demand for counseling from middle-class church members than from other quarters of the population. Sociologist William Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956) documented an “unusually heavy demand among suburbanites for personal counseling” from their ministers.53 Whyte characterized the suburban population as primarily young, and he implied that the stresses associated with rearing a family and establishing a career created the demand for personal counsel. Whyte noted the cases of one minister who was especially popular as a counselor and broke under the strain, and another who had to take on an assistant to help with his counseling load. Logic supports Whyte’s claims. Middle-class parishioners could afford, financially and in other ways, the luxury of counseling and the pursuit of self-fulfillment. While few of the leading pastoral counselors acknowledged it, the pursuit of personal autonomy required that one’s fundamental needs had already been met—enough to eat, shelter, and a bed to sleep in.

Although the evidence is slippery here, it is possible to argue that there is a causative connection between the shift from a social adjustment theory to a theory of personal freedom and the middle class becoming more important to pastoral counselors. A social adjustment theory, with its implications for social control and its stress on the counselee’s social obligations, had made sense in the prewar Progressive mind-set that focused on moral uplift, not only for the middle class, but also, and chiefly, for the poorer and working classes. While no postwar pastoral counselor articulated this view explicitly, the assumptions were implicit: a healthy,
well-educated, white, Protestant, middle class could be trusted to make
the best use of freedom.

The problem was that sometimes those middle-class parishioners made
choices that their ministers did not like. It was one thing to talk about
sex within marriage as a means to self-realization and another thing to
look the other way when marriages in their parish broke apart as a result
of adultery. For the small group of pastoral counselors who had resisted
Rogers’s non-directive therapy from the outset—because they thought it
usurped ministers’ traditional moral authority—accepting divorce with-
out comment was not an option. They understood the regulation of mar-
riage, divorce, love, and sex as part of the church’s historic role and re-
minded one another frequently of that role. By the mid-1950s, Rogerian
pastoral counselors were starting to feel pressure, not only from their
peers but also from their parishioners, to reexamine the implications of
their theory. As a result, Rogerian pastoral counselors were forced to
rethink the ways in which the autonomous self was located in the matrix
of relationship.