Helping the Good Shepherd

Myers-Shirk, Susan E.

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Gendered Moral Discourse

We have our individuality in relationship. Let us swallow this important and prickly fact. Apart from our connexions with other people, we are barely individuals, we amount, all of us, to next to nothing. . . . And so with men and women. It is in relationship to one another that they have their distinct being.

D. H. Lawrence, “We Need One Another”

On May 5, 1946, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who suffered from tuberculosis was hospitalized so that part of her diseased lung could be removed. At the suggestion of a nurse, a young hospital chaplain went to visit the patient that very day. In one extended interview, the patient revealed to him details of her past that were too painful and too intimate to tell anyone else. She told him that from the time she was nine until she was sixteen, her stepfather had attempted to molest her sexually, that her mother refused to believe her reports of this, and that, as a result, the relationship between mother and daughter had been damaged permanently. When she was sixteen years old, her stepfather died a hero’s death in a mining accident. She confided that his death had left her with a heavy and persistent burden of guilt: “I can’t say that I’m not glad he is dead. I think that a person can’t feel the way I felt about his death and still be saved. The Bible says that no murderer can get into the kingdom. And it is as though I killed him myself, because I am glad that he is dead.”¹

In the same interview, she told the chaplain about her life after she had left home: that she had divorced her alcoholic husband and then remarried, that despite her newfound happiness she still felt guilty, because she believed that people who remarried after a divorce committed adultery. Turning to the chaplain, she asked, “Now what is right? Is it a sin to be remarried? If I am to be right with God, does that mean I would have to
tack down all that is good and right in my relation to D [her husband]?”

Over a period of five days, the young chaplain listened to the woman as she retold her story. Although she compared him to a priest listening to her confession, he did not believe her guilty or in need of absolution. Instead, he suggested that restoring her relationship with her mother might ease some of the distress she felt. He reaffirmed the redemptive value of her new marriage, suggested that God accepted people at their point of need, and reinforced her belief that she had done all she could to redeem her first marriage. On the 9th of May, she died, but she had gained some measure of peace. As did many of his peers in that era, the young chaplain had listened to his counselee without offering advice or moral platitudes and instead respected her ability to come to terms with her situation through her own inner resources and through the redemptive power of healthy relationships.

Stories like this one, which Wayne Oates included in his 1955 book *Anxiety in Christian Experience*, formed the core of much of the writing about pastoral counseling. Many of the first pastoral counselors had acquired their counseling skills and knowledge in clinical pastoral education programs that used case studies as their primary teaching tool, so these counselors were accustomed to describing and analyzing the experiences of their counselees. As a result, when pastoral counselors constructed their ethic of relationships, they based their thinking not only on theological concepts and psychological principles but also on what they were learning in the counseling relationship. They did not necessarily recognize or acknowledge the powerful influence their parishioners’ experience had on their counseling theory and practice, but that influence nonetheless helped shape their thinking. The stories also tell those who read them something that pastoral counselors probably never intended to reveal; they illuminate the liberal moral sensibility, including how pastoral counselors’ assumptions about gender differences shaped their understanding of men’s and women’s moral reasoning. When they reported counseling sessions, they tended to emphasize different behavior for women than for men, but, for the most part, without being aware that they were doing so. What emerged, as a result, was a clear (and probably unintentional) impression that women resolved moral dilemmas differently than men did. Revealed was a deeply gendered view of moral discourse in which they portrayed women’s moral decisions and
reasoning as embedded in a web of relationships and men’s moral decisions and reasoning as acted out in the context of principles and standards meant to enhance their own freedom. Many pastoral counselors viewed both the autonomy that they associated with men and the responsibility to relationships that they associated with women as critical to mature moral reasoning.³

Placing pastoral counselors’ assumptions about gendered moral reasoning in the larger context of the history of liberal moral discourse reveals two important characteristics of the liberal moral sensibility. First, it highlights the extent to which virtue and communitarian values had been feminized and consequently minimized in nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal moral discourse. Second, it shows the similarities between feminine and masculine moral reasoning as well as the differences. In this chapter, I explore pastoral counselors’ assumptions about gendered moral discourse, their embrace of a gender-balanced ethic, and how historians have addressed the place of gender in liberal moral discourse. Then I analyze the work of psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, whose research on adolescent moral development in the 1970s demonstrated much of what pastoral counselors had claimed earlier about men’s and women’s moral discourse.

**Constructing a Gendered Moral Discourse**

Several themes and issues occurred repeatedly in the counseling transcripts and case studies in which pastoral counselors depicted women confronting moral dilemmas. First, in almost every case the women were presented as if they worried more about who might be hurt by their decision than about breaking rules or violating principles. Second, they were portrayed as placing the needs of others ahead of their own. Third, women were described as primarily concerned about emotional intimacy and relatedness. Multiple cases were reported of women who chose to protect others even when it meant violating their principles. In most of these cases, women first admitted the validity of their principles and then offered a rationale for violating them. Oates’s patient with tuberculosis acknowledged this tension between principles and relationships when she wondered whether, because remarriage after a divorce was a “sin,” she needed to sacrifice her good relationship with her second husband in
order to be in right relationship with God. In a similar case, Southern Baptist pastoral counselor Samuel Southard described a woman who chose to divorce her husband, even though she believed that divorce was wrong, because he abused their son. She observed, “I took it myself, but couldn’t bear to see him hit the boy.”

In his 1949 classic on pastoral counseling method, Seward Hiltner included the case of “Sheila,” who consulted “Pastor Bendix” after hearing him speak. Visible in Hiltner’s recounting of the case is a clear picture of Sheila’s moral reasoning. Sheila revealed to Pastor Bendix that she was pregnant and unmarried. She acknowledged that, by the standards of the church, she was guilty, and she expected the minister to be shocked. In her explanation, Sheila indicated that she loved the father of her baby very much and that he had wanted to marry her all along. In her judgment, this mitigated her guilt somewhat. A real problem would arise, she thought, if the pregnancy forced her to drop out of secretarial school. She did not care much about school, but her mother did. Because Sheila’s younger brother had tangled with the law, their mother had invested all her hopes in Sheila, who worried that her mother would be upset if she quit school. According to Hiltner’s understanding of Sheila, the correct alternative had to be one in which no one else would be hurt.

A decade later, Southern Baptist pastoral counselor James Lyn Elder told the story of “Helen Jacks,” for many of the same reasons Hiltner had told Sheila’s story. Miss Jacks demonstrated the same sort of moral reasoning as had Sheila. Upon arriving at her pastor’s office, Miss Jacks confessed immediately that she had become involved with a married man. She had come to see her pastor because she felt a growing conviction that the affair was wrong. Like Sheila, Miss Jacks gave a nod in the direction of what she perceived as traditional Christian morality and social convention. She admitted a sense of wrongdoing that she attributed to a fear that her family would discover her improprieties and censure her. Most of all, she worried that her relationship with the man might damage his children, that the time her lover spent with her took away from his relationship with them. Both Hiltner and Elder highlighted their counselees’ willingness to disregard conventional mores as long as no one was being hurt by their behavior.

These women’s stories also illustrate the second recurring theme in pastoral counseling accounts of female moral dilemmas, women placing
the needs of others ahead of their own. In fact, Sheila had so completely subordinated her own needs that we never hear her express her own true desires. She indicated that her fiancé wanted her to marry him and that her mother wanted her to finish school, but we never find out what Sheila wanted. It is not clear whether Sheila never said what she really wanted or Hiltner never bothered to mention her desires in his account, but the resulting impression is that everybody’s desires but her own mattered to Sheila. In Elder’s account of Miss Jacks, on the other hand, Miss Jacks admitted that the thought of ending the relationship frightened her because the affair had given her the first “real happiness” she had experienced in a long time. Ultimately, however, Elder depicted Miss Jacks as subordinating her own needs to what she saw as the more important demands of the relationship between a father and his children.

The stories of Sheila and Miss Jacks represent a familiar scenario in pastoral counseling transcripts—women portrayed in terms of their obligations to other people. They were described as part of an ever-widening circle of responsibility that included husbands, children, mothers, fathers, mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, friends, fellow parishioners, and professional colleagues. Several transcripts report cases of a female parishioner who went to her minister for counsel about an elderly parent who seemed to be making unreasonable demands. Other stories told of distraught daughters who sought the help of ministers because of “demanding” mothers who would not allow them to do as they wished. There is a multitude of stories in which women sought the aid of a counselor when sons or daughters had problems. In many pastoral counseling accounts, women’s sense of obligation extended beyond the immediate family. Included are tales of women who took on the troubles of coworkers as if they were their own. Paul Johnson described a case in which a counselee admitted that she took other people’s problems “too seriously.” “Mrs. N” was so concerned about a woman that she worked with that her husband said, “Why do you carry everybody’s troubles on your shoulders like that? You don’t have to do it!” According to Johnson, Mrs. N perceived herself as having no other choice.

Pastoral counseling accounts suggest that, for many women, the guiding principle in the process of choosing right from wrong was what would sustain the relationships involved. The exception to that rule came in the
arena of marriage, where the quality of the relationship clearly mattered. Pastoral counselors portrayed emotional intimacy as a central concern of women, the third recurring theme in their depiction of women’s moral reasoning. The way pastoral counselors described it, women’s desire for emotional intimacy frequently overrode other concerns. Women who opposed divorce in principle frequently reconsidered that position when they found themselves married to men who failed to meet their emotional needs. “Mrs. Keating” told her counselor, “It would be so much easier to make a decision one way or the other if John ran around with women, or got drunk, or did anything except what he does do—just withdraw himself.” Even though her husband had committed no traditionally egregious acts, it appeared that Mrs. Keating was on the verge of leaving him, because he did not connect emotionally with her. She seemed to be saying that she wished he would behave in a manner that the church deemed “sinful,” then others might agree that she was justified in leaving him. She clearly doubted her own judgment that a man’s inability to love was sufficient cause to end a marriage, and yet she stood ready to do precisely that.9

The inverse was also true. “Mrs. Reede” had suffered considerably because of her husband’s infidelities, and yet she expressed reluctance to end the relationship. In her judgment, the emotional benefits of being in the relationship exceeded the distress caused by his unfaithfulness. Financial security was not her concern; as a professional social worker who earned a good income, she could have afforded to leave him. It appeared, however, that she stayed in the marriage because she believed that her husband was capable of emotional intimacy.10 For both Mrs. Reede and Mrs. Keating conventional moral standards were subordinated to the need for emotional intimacy. Pastoral counseling case studies and transcripts suggest that, for women, emotional intimacy was the most important feature of marriage, and the partner who failed to sustain emotional intimacy forfeited his or her right to that relationship. Returning to the story of Miss Jacks, who was involved in an affair with a married man, we see the point well illustrated. Miss Jacks indicated to her counselor that she would have been unwilling to engage in an illicit affair if the relationship between her lover and his wife had been good. Because she believed that the relationship between her lover and his wife
was poor, she felt justified engaging in what the church viewed as adultery. In essence, Miss Jacks implied that the wife who failed to sustain a relationship forfeited her claim to it.

When pastoral counselors reported on counseling sessions in which the counselee was a man, a whole different emphasis emerged. First, pastoral counselors’ accounts of male counselees show them talking more frequently in terms of standards and principles than did their female counterparts. At the same time, the men openly challenged the authority of the minister more frequently than did women. Secondly, pastoral counseling transcripts and case studies focusing on men show them interpreting moral dilemmas in an abstract sense rather than in terms of the specific needs of others. Finally, pastoral counseling depictions of men show them embracing freedom and autonomy as their moral imperative and viewing family and friends as obstacles to good behavior.

Pastoral counseling accounts of men portrayed them as expressing their moral dilemmas in terms of the pressure on themselves to uphold standards in the face of a temptation to engage in immoral behavior, yet they were resistant to ministerial and church authority and inclined to assert their ability to define moral behavior for themselves. Unlike women, who in pastoral counseling reports seemed to simultaneously acknowledge and ignore the demands of the church, the men seemed to think that they had to either accept and adhere to or reject the church’s standards. For instance, one young man came to see his minister after cheating on an exam. Even as he wondered aloud what purpose would be served by confessing, he used the counseling session to work up enough nerve to take what he perceived as the right action.

Accounts of male behavior suggested that men did not frame their moral dilemmas in terms of who would be hurt, as women did, but rather in terms of whether they themselves had met their obligations and duties to the principles they believed in. In the case of the unmarried and pregnant Sheila, we see the differences clearly illustrated. Hiltner portrayed Sheila as indifferent to standards of behavior or even whether she had done her duty or met her obligations. Rather, she worried whether her boyfriend loved her and whether her mother would be hurt if she did not finish school. When we compare that to Hiltner’s account of the case of “Mr. Bolton,” a married man caught in an extramarital affair with his secretary, we see some important differences. Mr. Bolton excused his
behavior on the grounds that he did not “love” the woman with whom he was involved nor did she love him and that he had sought sex outside of marriage because his relationship with his wife was poor. In other words, Mr. Bolton believed that he had not promised his lover anything he could not deliver and that his contract to his wife was no longer binding because of the poor quality of the relationship. As Hiltner told the story, Mr. Bolton was convinced that he had met all his obligations and, hence, did not need to feel guilty. He never asked himself whether Mrs. Bolton had been hurt by his behavior—at least Hiltner never indicated that he did. Instead, Hiltner’s report showed a man whose obligations, rather than the needs of others, provided the reference point for self-evaluation of his behavior.

While pastoral counselors did not attribute to men the same concern for others needs that they found in women, neither did they suggest that men were oblivious to the opinions of other people. Specifically, they repeatedly returned to the male concern about what other people thought of them and about the extent to which they measured up to some unspoken standard. But the men’s concept of “other people” was always expressed in the abstract, never as specific people, such as their wife, their minister, or coworkers but rather the community in an abstract sense. For instance, “George Thomas” told his minister that he wanted people to admire and respect him, but he worried that they neither liked him nor accepted him. He wanted to be a “leader” but feared he was not. Mr. Thomas cared about what other people thought of him, but he did not describe his difficulties in terms of specific people.

Similarly, pastoral counselors rarely described their male counselees as expressing the same sense of responsibility for other people that they saw women displaying. By contrast with the records about female counselees, there are almost no accounts of men approaching their ministers about refractory sons or daughters or domineering parents. An occasional minister mentioned a male parishioner who came for marital counseling, but almost all of these cases involved men who hoped the minister would correct a difficult wife who was not fulfilling her duty. The case of “Mr. Hay” is a good example. According to Mr. Hay, the trouble would begin at breakfast when his wife would announce that she wanted to eat out that night because she would be too tired to cook after returning home from work. Inevitably, an argument would ensue between
them. Mr. Hay had already approached another minister for advice, and by the time he consulted the second, he and his wife were barely speaking. The then-desperate Mr. Hay asked the minister for a book that he and his wife could read together that would explain to her how “a wife ought to look after her husband.”

Unlike the records for female counselees, in which women are portrayed as considering emotional intimacy to be crucial to marriage, transcripts for male counselees rarely describe a man as desirous of greater emotional closeness with his wife. In fact, in many accounts, the men seem to have viewed relationships as secondary or unavoidable difficulties. Their language implies that they wanted their personal problems solved not as a road to greater intimacy with other people, but as a road to freedom. If we take pastoral counseling case reports at face value, we would have to conclude that a significant number of white, male Protestants in the mid-twentieth century shared the assumption that if they could only fix or solve their relationship problems, they would be free.

The case of young “Tom Jarrett,” who came to see his minister regarding a career problem, illustrates this phenomenon. Tom’s father wanted him to graduate from high school and join the family insurance business. Tom, however, wanted to go to college to become a journalist. He was certain his father would be angry if he told him about this desire. In the end, Tom decided that, while he disliked upsetting his father, he really had to do whatever he thought was best for himself. He drew an analogy between his own life and the life of Christ, “You know, I just thought of it—isn’t this something of the same problem Christ faced when he started preaching? His family wasn’t too sold on the idea, were they?” Tom noted that Christ did what he thought was best, and ultimately his family acknowledged the validity of his choice. Like many other male parishioners portrayed in pastoral counseling accounts, Tom based his choices on what he perceived as “right” and believed it was his duty to take the consequences of living by principle—even if that meant the destruction of a relationship.

While male counselees seemed to present their problems as vocational or religious, that did not mean that they did not talk about relationships. In fact, sometimes going to their minister about a religious problem or career question allowed them to admit that what they really needed to talk about was their relationships. For instance, Mr. Awkright told his
minister that a passage from the Psalms that he had been reading had left him feeling “depressed.” His wife had recently died, but when he sought counsel it was not about feelings of grief, at least not explicitly. By the end of the session, however, based on their discussion of the scripture passage, Mr. Awkright had realized that, although he had been praying for God to help him with his grief over his wife, he had refused to turn to his friends for emotional support. He admitted that he had isolated himself from his friends and needed to restore those relationships if he expected to recover.18 Carroll Wise recounted the story of a young man whose story has interesting parallels to that of Mr. Awkright. This man approached his minister for counseling because the sermon of the previous Sunday had “disturbed” him. He decided shortly after counseling had commenced that the sermon had distressed him so much because it unconsciously reminded him of his father, with whom he had a difficult and unresolved relationship. While this man came to his pastor with an ostensibly religious problem, he then turned his attention to a damaged relationship.19

The ethic of relationships that pastoral counselors articulated in the mid-1950s mirrored the concerns that they regularly attributed to their female counselees. Concern about the needs and feelings of others when making decisions and about fostering emotional intimacy fit perfectly with pastoral counselors’ talk about the “I-Thou” relationship and “true” Christian morality. In contrast, the approach to moral reasoning that they attributed to their male counselees is more compatible with pastoral counselors’ ideas about autonomy and self-realization.

The Consequences for Counseling Practice

By 1965, the words associated with the concept of responsible freedom had become thoroughly embedded in the language used by pastoral counselors to analyze cases. The assumptions that accompanied an ethic of relationships had surprising consequences for the practice of pastoral counseling. Pastoral counselors clearly wanted their parishioners to find a balance between personal autonomy and their obligations to relationships, between taking care of themselves and taking care of others. The gendered subtext persisted. To their male counselees they emphasized learning the skills of relationships and taking responsibility for those
relationships. To their female counselees they stressed the importance of self-fulfillment and caring for themselves.

In 1959 Wayne Oates published a collection of articles intended for the novice pastoral counselor. The collection included an account by Samuel Southard of a divorced business woman who had gone to see her minister about a problem. A man had proposed to her, and she wondered if it would be right to marry him, citing concern about her son from the previous marriage. Probing a bit further, the minister discovered that the woman felt guilty about the way her marriage had ended, because she had been forced to commit her husband to a psychiatric hospital. He had abused both her and her son; fearing that her husband was damaging their son emotionally, she had divorced him. She commented, “I’ve often thought that love would have cured him. But I did love him.” She added, “Also, I was near the breaking point. I wasn’t any help to my boy or to myself.” She believed that, in light of the advice of doctors, she had done the best she could. Nevertheless, she felt guilty because she had been taught that divorce was wrong.

The minister responded by validating her choice to do what was best for her son and herself. He acknowledged that she had an obligation as a wife to her husband but indicated that she also had an obligation as a mother to her son and as a person to herself. He reaffirmed that she had done all she could to make the situation right. The pastor suggested that her moral choices needed to be made with reference both to her own needs and to those of others. Further, he suggested that the son had needs that outweighed those of the husband. She had to make her moral choices based on a hierarchy of personal needs that included her own.

Pastoral counselors who took a less directive stance than did the Southern Baptist minister just described shared the same commitment to helping their counselees balance the claims of relationships with self-interest. The Mrs. Reede mentioned above, concerned about her marriage to an unfaithful husband, was a participant in a 1961 study by Seward Hiltner and Lowell Colston. Early in counseling she expressed fear that the emotional distress caused by her cheating husband made her unproductive in her professional life. As counseling progressed, she reported that the emotions precipitated by her unfaithful husband were no longer undermining her productivity. She commented that she felt “creative and alive” at work. As to her husband, Mrs. Reede concluded that
she could leave him or stay with him, but she no longer felt compelled in her choices by emotions over which she had no control. She decided to stay.

Hiltner and Colston saw Mrs. Reede’s counseling as a thoroughgoing success, but not because she stayed with her husband. They acknowledged that some might take issue with her choice. They posited two imaginary critics, one who thought that she should leave her husband because he was “systematically unfaithful” and the other that she should stay with him because marriage was undertaken “for better or worse.” Hiltner and Colston rejected both perspectives as forms of “coercion.” When they made that comment, they were, in classic non-directive form, reaffirming Mrs. Reede’s right to make her own choices. At the same time, they suggested that Mrs. Reede’s love for her husband and reluctance to leave him were legitimate guiding principles in the decision-making process. They believed that she should not have to sacrifice her relationship with her husband in order to consider herself free. Rather, they believed that as a result of counseling in which Mrs. Reede learned about herself and her husband, she could return to the marriage fully cognizant of the difficulties awaiting her. She could as legitimately leave him, fully aware of the consequences of her choice both for him and for herself. Hiltner observed, “Personal freedom of this responsible kind is, we believe, the essence of personal morality.” By responsible freedom, Hiltner and Colston meant that nothing could coerce or compel Mrs. Reede because she understood both her own and her husband’s actions. More importantly, Hiltner and Colston believed that if she truly understood her own motives, Mrs. Reede could legitimately choose to stay with her husband. Clearly, Hiltner and Colston were still deeply committed to protecting the autonomy of counselees, especially women, but they had restructured the way they talked about decisions to accommodate their counselees’ concern about relationships.

When pastoral counselors encouraged their female counselees to explore freedom, autonomy, and self-fulfillment and, at the same time, affirmed their choice to maintain any ties they viewed as legitimate, they provided both a context for women to rethink their relationships to others and a tool for women to extend the control they exercised over their lives. One example illustrates the way in which counseling provided a context in which women could resolve the tension between independence...
“Sharon Troy,” a counselee in the Hiltner/Colston study, went to see a counselor because she could not decide whether to marry her fiancé. While Miss Troy did not want to sacrifice herself on the altar of others, she was reluctant to end a relationship even if it was a threat to her independence. She perceived herself as rigid, inflexible, and unimaginative. She perceived her boyfriend as possessing the opposite qualities and feared that if she married him, she would become too dependent on him. In her second interview, she explained to the counselor: “For a long time I’ve disliked the idea of getting married because I don’t like the role of a housewife and a mother. I thought of it as very dull, boring, and routine. And I thought that not having enough ambition or stimulation within myself—once I got married and was further handicapped by the responsibilities of a wife and a mother—I would just fall into this shapeless mass that knew no more than to hang up the wash and cook supper.” Her boyfriend agreed that she should not be dependent on him. In the course of counseling, Miss Troy focused on being less passive, not on whether to marry. As she felt more confident and less passive, she felt less frightened of the marriage role. After counseling, her worries no longer gave her a “terrified feeling—you know, that everything is just rolling in on me and if I make the step in the wrong direction about something the bottom’s going to fall out.” Ultimately, Miss Troy married, but she did so having reconciled her doubts. In one of her last interviews, she described herself this way: “I’m still riding along feeling very good, very capable and confident. . . . I can’t feel that I’m cured. I don’t even know what I would be cured of. But it’s just that I have a different feeling than I had when I first started.” She entered the marriage only when she no longer saw it as a risk to her self and her independence.

Coming at gendered moral behavior from both sides, pastoral counselors nodded approvingly when women made choices that promoted their own independence, and they made a concerted effort to convince men to take on responsibility for emotional intimacy in relationships. In the early literature, pastoral counselors who were concerned about protecting the autonomy of the counselee sometimes recommended that the pastor approach erring male parishioners gingerly. For instance, in his 1949 book *Pastoral Counseling*, Seward Hiltner, when he recounted the story of Mr. Bolton (the man involved in an affair with his secretary),
suggested a number of strategies for approaching men such as Bolton without scaring them away. But Hiltner grew increasingly intolerant of men who abdicated their emotional responsibilities to wives and family. And he was not alone.

In May of 1955, the editor of Pastoral Psychology published portions of an encounter between a minister and an erring parishioner. A married man named Mr. Van was caught by his minister, Pastor Mix, in the church gymnasium in a compromising position with the church secretary. Mr. Van apparently felt no remorse for his behavior and became very defensive when confronted by Pastor Mix. All of the pastoral counseling specialists who commented on the case criticized Pastor Mix severely for adopting an attitude toward Mr. Van that they considered condemning and judgmental. They insisted that Mr. Van should not be browbeaten for his sin, even though each of the commentators stressed that Mr. Van had clearly erred. The responding howl from rank-and-file ministers was deafening. In subsequent letters to the editor, subscribers wrote to express their dismay over Mr. Van’s behavior and lack of remorse. They criticized Mr. Van because they feared he had caused his wife and children great damage and emotional pain, and they criticized Pastor Mix because they believed he had failed to meet his responsibilities to Mr. Van’s family. This story illustrates the growing resistance among pastoral counselors to a kind of counseling that allowed the celebration of human freedom and autonomy to be interpreted as license to abrogate responsibilities to spouse and children.

Liberal Moral Discourse, Gender, and History

Placing pastoral counselors’ gendering of moral discourse in historical context helps to explain the history of liberal moral discourse and the liberal moral sensibility. In some ways it would appear that pastoral counselors were doing something new and different by incorporating the feminine perspective into their moral theory, but they were also simply part of a larger trend in liberal moral discourse in which virtue, community, and relationships were considered the purview of women. Historians of liberalism have largely ignored this reality and instead have wondered plaintively whatever happened to virtue ethics and communitarian values in liberal thought.
Historian James Kloppenberg, in a series of essays collected in a single volume entitled The Virtues of Liberalism (1998), argues that the concept of civic virtue associated with early republican values all but disappeared in the nineteenth century as a result of the liberal emphasis on free market and individual rights. He documents various attempts to restore virtue or a sense of obligation to community to liberal discourse. Kloppenberg contends, for instance, that early in the twentieth century both Max Weber and John Dewey had called for something akin to an ethic of responsibility. Weber actually used the phrase “ethic of responsibility,” arguing that individuals should choose values based on “accumulated social experience” and should commit to accepting “responsibility for consequences of [their] actions.” 30 Similarly, Dewey talked in terms of the “moral democracy” that proceeds upon “free and open communication,” “reciprocal relationships and the sort of interaction that contributes to mutual benefit.” 31 Both of these social scientists clearly believed that individual freedom had to be worked out in a social context. For the most part, however, liberal thinkers worried that too much emphasis on obligation to community risked association with socialism or communism rather than democracy. Most historians have been unable to account sufficiently for the failure of liberal thinkers to articulate an adequate theory of community and virtue ethics. (“Virtue ethics” refers to the practice of defining ethical behavior in terms of virtuous acts, as did Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.) 32

Many historians of liberalism have failed to recognize the extent to which, by the time Dewey and Weber were writing, virtue had become feminized as a result of the rise of industrial capitalism. This lack of recognition has resulted, in large part, from a failure to address sufficiently the scholarship of women’s history. In contrast, most women’s historians are thoroughly familiar with the narrative in which virtue was channeled into the domestic sphere, privatized, and sexualized, so that women could be granted the responsibility of rearing children who would then become virtuous citizens. 33 The feminization of virtue, however, meant that virtue was also devalued. When women brought virtue to the public sphere in the middle to late nineteenth century, under the guise of social housekeeping, they had to defend its worth. Men who joined them in settlement house work or in the spreading of the Social Gospel had to defend their masculinity—the call for a “muscular” Christianity in this
period was not an accident. Women’s social activism in the Progressive era was driven to a large extent by the assumptions that women were more virtuous sexually than men and more caring, particularly for other women and for children. At no point did liberal theorists attempt to reintroduce or redefine virtue or commitment to community as masculine characteristics. That was, however, precisely what pastoral counselors were doing. Or rather, it was the practical implication of implementing a theory of responsible freedom that balanced the demands of autonomy and relationships. In this approach, morally mature men were expected to accept their responsibility to relationships, and women were expected to face the abyss of freedom and claim the privileges of autonomy.

**Gilligan, Kohlberg, and the Persistence of Gendered Moral Reasoning**

To fully understand what happened to the liberal moral discourse in the twentieth century, it is necessary to jump over the 1950s, when theologians wrote most extensively about the ethic of relationships, to examine the study of liberal moral reasoning in the 1960s and 1970s. Two preeminent educational psychologists explored moral reasoning among children and adolescents in order to understand the principles that guided moral decision making. Their research ended up highlighting the same kind of gendered moral discourse so evident in the pastoral counseling literature. Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan made groundbreaking contributions to psychological research on moral development. Gilligan’s work in the early 1980s brought attention to the issue of gender in a way that no one had before. Kohlberg, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, argued, based on studies of male populations only, that human beings progress through stages in their moral development, and in the highest stage manifest a kind of moral autonomy in which they make moral decisions guided entirely by “the universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individuals.” In the 1970s and early 1980s, Gilligan, a colleague of Kohlberg’s at Harvard, conducted a series of studies based entirely on female populations and concluded that women tended to make moral choices based not on abstract principles of justice (what Gilligan called a
“justice ethic”) but on an “ethic of care,” in which women asked not what was right but who would get hurt.\textsuperscript{37}

Gilligan criticized Kohlberg’s moral development scale, arguing that it was gender-biased and that, measured on Kohlberg’s scale, women never reached moral maturity. In fact, on Kohlberg’s scale, many women never moved beyond stage three. This was the heart of the argument between Kohlberg and Gilligan. As Gilligan saw it, because women used a different set of moral principles to guide their moral reasoning, they scored lower on Kohlberg’s scale. Kohlberg insisted that the justice principle was the best and most universal way to approach moral dilemmas. In other words, his theory was prescriptive as well as descriptive. Gilligan was not interested in prescribing a universal ethic. In her view, however, Kohlberg had set up an essentially male model of moral reasoning, claimed it to be universal, and then judged women as wanting.

Gilligan and Kohlberg emphasized the differences in their theories, but the two theories actually had much in common. Both assumed that the morally mature individual was guided by principles rather than rules. Kohlberg highlighted the principles of justice, fairness, and human rights, while Gilligan highlighted the principles of compassion and responsibility to relationships. Both saw the best principles as being “self-chosen” (Kohlberg’s word) rather than imposed by some authority, whether social or religious. Hence, both assumed that their subjects engaged in a kind of moral reasoning that was more sophisticated than just following the rules out of a fear of punishment. Finally, both recognized that most individuals felt some sort of obligation to other people. For Kohlberg that obligation was met by pursuing justice and equal rights for all people. For the women in Gilligan’s study, that obligation was met by taking care of others and by maintaining a network of relationships. In both cases, the morally mature individual cared about others, the one in more abstract terms (justice), the other in more personal and specific terms (compassion or care).

In the Kohlberg and Gilligan studies, we hear the same language that had permeated pastoral counselors’ discussions of moral decision making a decade earlier. While both Kohlberg and Gilligan acknowledged that individuals, whether male or female, frequently moved back and forth between the two moral perspectives, neither saw an integration of
the two perspectives as necessary or valuable. Neither Kohlberg nor Gilligan embraced a gender-balanced ethic in quite the way pastoral counselors did. It is difficult, moreover, to draw a straight historical line from pastoral counselors to Kohlberg and Gilligan. There is no evidence that either psychologist considered works of pastoral theology as part of their research, and neither saw religion as critical to moral reasoning, even though for many Americans religion had historically played an integral role in their understanding of right and wrong. Neither psychologist documented the religious affiliation of their subjects. Gilligan simply did not include religion as part of her research, and for Kohlberg, those whose moral reasoning was based on the authority of religious tradition or religious revelation scored lower on his scale of moral development. Both might have discovered a significant connection between religion and moral reasoning had they explored that question. This may be especially true of Gilligan, for her subjects included young women who attended the elite women’s undergraduate institutions of the northeast and had a high likelihood of having been exposed to mainline or liberal Protestant thinking.

Even though no evidentiary line runs from the work of pastoral counselors in the 1950s to the work of Kohlberg in the 1960s and 1970s and Gilligan in the 1980s, there is still a connecting thread: they share a common language in which ethics are based on principles rather than on rules and in which we find the very heart of the postwar liberal moral sensibility. The story of “Mrs. Wright” from the Colston and Hiltner study of the late 1950s is an example of the kind of moral reasoning pastoral counselors celebrated—that of an autonomous individual in relationship with others who made choices based on general principles of justice and caring. Mrs. Wright initially presented her problem as a difficulty between herself and a seventeen-year-old niece who had come to live with her recently. When she started to talk, however, she spent a significant portion of the session describing a legalistic Christian upbringing that had led her to believe in the superiority of a Christian way of life and its principles. As a result of her upbringing, she believed she had a duty to uphold and enforce certain values such as the “family structure in our society.” As counseling progressed, Mrs. Wright abandoned her narrowly construed code of behavior, and she came to recognize the
possibility of more than one correct way to behave. At one point, she commented that the Bible confused her, because “to be a Christian I’m supposed to believe that this is divine, that this comes straight from God. And it bothers me that I seem to see that there is a life that can be just as good without it, provided we would know how to structure it. . . . as a child I was taught—that this [the Bible] is the absolute, this is it. There is no deviation. And then to discover that this is not true, that there are other ways that are equally as good and could be better . . . .”

Mrs. Wright found the possibility of relative truth to be “shattering.” At a crucial moment in the counseling, however, she decided to find out why she felt the need to define things “as black and white.” She began by discarding the need for absolutes in her dealings with her niece and resolved “genuinely to listen.” She entered her niece’s “frame of reference” and concluded that she did not need to stand in judgment. Mrs. Wright commented that she was able to refrain from judging her niece because she had come to understand that “many of us do things at a certain time [because we have been] influenced by our life experience.”

Near the close of her counseling experience, Mrs. Wright indicated that she believed she had reached a new level in her relationship to God—something akin to a conversion experience, despite the fact that she had previously doubted the reality of others’ conversion experiences. Her restored relationship to God did not lead her back to a legalistic religion. In fact, in a follow-up interview, she told her counselor that she wanted “to understand the process of being related to God, without demanding that some authority line this out for her.” Mrs. Wright was able to envision a relationship to God and to other people that allowed both herself and the people she loved to be free.

Pastoral counselors came closer than anyone to a moral language that was gender-balanced. In their writing they brought together the two sides of the liberal moral tradition, the feminine ethic of community and relatedness and the masculine ethic of autonomy and self-realization, but without returning to the kind of moralism they so distrusted. Neither the liberal thinkers who preceded them nor those since have come as close to envisioning such an ethic. But the moment was fleeting. The history of liberal moral discourse demonstrates the power of individual autonomy
as icon and symbol. So it was, perhaps, to be expected that when pastoral counselors took up the banner of women’s equality, they did so almost entirely in the traditional masculine language of rights, challenging the domestic ideal and arguing for the rights of women to autonomy and self-realization.