

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY: FROM MORAL THEOLOGY TO SPIRITUALITY

Once kissing cousins, moral theology and spirituality have been separated within the Church for at least four centuries. Recent decades have seen various attempts to reunite them: focus on their common scriptural foundation, for example, has been particularly promising. One of the most helpful academic contributions to the reunion effort has come from developmental psychology. Moral theologians interested in the dynamics of conscience were first attracted to Erik Erikson's psychosocial approach to the life cycle and then to Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-structural theory of moral development. Writers on the spiritual life have also found important resources in Erikson and Kohlberg, especially as their approaches have been focused on faith in the work of James Fowler.¹ If the major contribution to moral theology has been the very idea of development, spirituality, which has always appreciated development, has benefited most from a specification of development that clarifies the nature of the self that is developing as both autonomous and relational.

We want to suggest here that the introduction of developmental psychology into either moral theology or spirituality expands their horizons and leads to their integration into one theology of the Christian life. Something like this has already happened within developmental psychology itself: Erikson eventually specified his life cycle in terms of moral development; Kohlberg, realizing that moral reasoning could not answer the question, "Why be moral?," added a seventh religious stage to his six moral stages; and Fowler integrated Kohlberg's moral reasoning into his developmental analysis of faith from the very beginning. We will focus on I) recent developments in developmental theory, especially II) Robert Kegan's model of the evolving self, that III) hold special promise for greater integration of moral theology and spirituality, specifically on the relationship of autonomy and surrender.

I. MORAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CURRENT DEBATE

The leading player in the current debate about moral development is Carol Gilligan, as protagonist vis-à-vis Lawrence Kohlberg and Erik Erikson. At the heart of the debate is Gilligan's criticism of Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning development and Erikson's life cycle as being male-oriented.

¹For basic sources, see Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed.; New York: Norton, 1963), Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), and James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

Kohlberg's longitudinal study of moral reasoning development began thirty years ago with seventy-five boys in Chicago suburbs. Inspired by Piaget's research techniques and Dewey's theory of moral development toward autonomy, Kohlberg's interviews with the boys focused on their responses to questions about simple dilemma stories; Heinz and his dying wife is the most famous of these stories: should Heinz steal a drug to save his wife's life? Whether the response was yes or no, Kohlberg followed up with Why?—and a series of questions to uncover the structure of reasoning behind the response. On the basis of his original research, Kohlberg specified six stages of structural development, from avoidance of punishment to self-chosen universal ethical principles. He claimed that everyone went through the stages in sequence, without regression, though everyone might not advance to the highest stages or at the same rate. Indeed, Kohlberg says that most adult Americans reach only stage three or four (i.e., the conventional level, preceded by the pre- and followed by the post-conventional levels).

Kohlberg and his colleagues have continued their research in several different cultures over the last thirty years, including follow-ups with the original group of boys at regular intervals. And he has made several important adjustments in his theory. But, say Gilligan and other critics, the die was cast at the very beginning when Kohlberg constructed his theory from the results of seventy-five boys responding to stories featuring dilemmas of rights and justice. This starting point gave a definite male slant to his theory. Thus, when later results (now controversial) show that women in our society typically score at stage three (interpersonal), while men are usually at stage four (social order), Gilligan is quicker to locate the problem with the theory rather than with the women. Women's moral orientation is different from men's, she says, but not inferior. And any theory that places women at a lower stage than men is flawed in its conception of morality.

In a Different Voice is a report of Gilligan's ten years' experience of listening to men and women in three studies talk about themselves and their moral understanding, and of discerning (especially in the accounts of women) a moral voice different from that recognized by Kohlberg and other standard developmental theories—a voice stressing not justice and rights, but care and responsibility.² By focusing on this distinctive voice of care and responsibility she hears in women, Gilligan hopes to expand our view of human development—a view that is based almost exclusively on the experience of men. In a theoretical world that celebrates development as separation, says Gilligan, “the elusive mystery of women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle” (p. 23). “To admit the truth of the women's perspective to the conception of moral development,” says Gilligan “is to recognize for both sexes the importance throughout life of the connection between self and other, the universality of the need for compassion and care” (p. 98).

In other words, care and justice must complement each other in a mature moral orientation. Essentially, Gilligan is criticizing Kohlberg's moral perspective as having a one-sided emphasis on justice, a perspective which fails to recognize

²Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); page references given in text.

women's moral strength of caring responsibility. (Such a one-sided perspective also fails to do justice to men, of course). It is particularly interesting that Gilligan uses the equivalent of Erikson's ethical orientation of caring responsibility (the specific strength of generativity) in order to criticize Kohlberg. For Gilligan has also criticized Erikson's life cycle as inadequate to accurately represent the specific pattern of women's development.³

Gilligan's basic criticism of Erikson is that he introduces the reality of relationship only with the sixth life-cycle crisis of intimacy versus isolation (young adulthood). According to Gilligan's interpretation of Erikson, everything in the life cycle leading up to and including the fifth crisis of identity stresses *independence*. Thus, Gilligan uses a notion of caring responsibility to criticize Kohlberg that is very similar to the one in Erikson which she finds rooted too much in independence rather than relationship. Of course, Gilligan could say that her understanding of caring responsibility differs from Erikson's on exactly this point.

Gilligan's specific problem with Erikson regarding women's development is that Erikson insists on the normative sequence of development as having identity (independence) come before intimacy (relationship), even though he points out that most women find their identity only in intimacy. Gilligan claims that women's development, at least, includes relationship all along its course, and that an adequate life-cycle model should recognize this by acknowledging the validity of an "intimacy then identity" sequence. A problem with this view is that, while the life cycle should take account of relational facts along the whole course of development, the fact that many women realize identity only in intimacy may be an aberration of social conditioning, a psychosocial distortion which may prevent full autonomy and which should not be legitimated in a normative model. Gilligan's perspective, which is more useful for critical than constructive work, offers no help with this problem. Help is found, however, in the developmental model presented by Robert Kegan in *The Evolving Self*, which we will briefly outline in the following section.⁴

II. KEGAN'S EVOLVING SELF

Robert Kegan directs his theoretical efforts toward establishing the fundamental unity of the self that is developing. Working from a neo-Piagetian constructive-developmental perspective, Kegan finds this fundamental unity in the meaning-constitutive activity that is the very motion of the self's development or evolution. He understands this meaning-constitutive activity as not only the unifying but also the generating context of personality, that is, of subject and object as

³See Carol Gilligan, "Woman's Place in Men's Life Cycle," *Harvard Educational Review* 49/4 (November 1974), 431-46.

⁴Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). For a correlation with other developmental theories, see Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist, forthcoming 1986); for implications for pastoral counseling, see Joann Wolski Conn, "Spirituality and Personal Maturity" in Robert J. Wicks, Richard D. Parsons, and Donald Capps, eds., *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling* (New York: Paulist, 1985).

well as of thought and feeling.

Shifting the focus of the Piagetian processes of differentiation and integration from cognition to the prior reality of personality, Kegan sees the individual's radical developmental activity as both the very creation of the object (differentiation) and the subject's relating to it (integration). In this view "Subject-object relations emerge out of a lifelong process of development," in which a series of qualitative differentiations of self from world create an ever more complex object of relation—"successive triumphs of 'relationship to' rather than 'embeddedness in.'"

Psychoanalytic theory looks to infancy for its basic themes and categories. Kegan, however, in his constructive-developmental view, regards infancy as qualitatively no different from any other moment in the life span. What is fundamental is the activity of meaning-making evolution. The distinctive features of infancy are to be understood in the context of the same activity which is necessary throughout a person's life. Recurrence of these distinctive features in new forms later on in development are not seen as later manifestations of infancy issues, but contemporary manifestations of making-the-meaning-of "self" and "other," just as infancy issues are, in their own time, manifestations of meaning-making.

Kegan explains five developmental phases or stages of personal development. Each stage involves a certain balance in the lifelong tension between the yearnings for independence and belonging. Each balance resolves the tension in a different way. At one phase the balance will tip slightly in favor of autonomy, while at the next stage it will favor relationship.

Infancy is a transition from complete incorporation in the parent into the *Impulsive* balance (stage one) of a two year old. This transformation occurs through a process of decentration that is repeated at each stage: emergence from embeddedness. Gradually the infant ceases being her reflexes and, instead, has them. The new self is now embedded in impulses or wishes, in that which coordinates the reflexes. The new self is "hatched out" through a process of differentiation from that which was the very subject of personal organization and which now becomes the object of a new subjectivity which coordinates it. In this impulsive balance the meaning of the self *is* its impulses or perceptions which now *have* reflexes (the other, object).

A distinguishing feature of the *Imperial* balance (stage two) is a self-containment that was not present before. Now the self is its enduring interests or wishes, its needs. Therefore, a self-concept can emerge. The capacity to have one's impulses, rather than be them, allows a new sense of freedom, independence, agency. The Imperial stage is specified precisely by the absence of a shared reality, of mutuality.

In Kegan's view of the evolving self, adolescence typically witnesses the self's emergence from an embeddedness in its own self-interest needs. The self no longer *is* its needs (the Imperial self), it *has* them. Because it *has* its needs, and is no longer subject to them, the self can now coordinate them with the needs of others, and thus become "mutual, empathic, and oriented to reciprocal obligation." If such shared feelings are the strength of the new conversational self located in the interpersonal matrix, its limit lies in its inability to reflect on the expectations, satisfactions, obligations of that shared reality because it *is* that shared reality, and

thus is subject to it. Conflicts at this *Interpersonal* stage are not so much between the self and the other as between the self as a part of one shared reality and the self as part of another shared reality. Without coordination of its various mutualities the Interpersonal self lacks the self-coherence that is the hallmark of identity.

Kegan emphasizes that the balance struck at this stage is "interpersonal" but not "intimate." Despite appearances, real intimacy is impossible because there is no self to share with another; the very existence of the interpersonal self depends on—is subject to—the other. Kegan thus insists on the fundamental difference between intimacy and fusion. If the stage two self imperializes the other as an instrument of its need-satisfaction, the stage three Interpersonal self now needs the other not only to complete itself but even to know and define itself.

The stage three Interpersonal self *is* its relationships. What Kegan specifies as defining the movement to the fourth, *Institutional* stage is the self's separation from its relationships in the creation of a coherent identity of its own across the interpersonal context. Now, because the self is no longer parceled out among its various relationships, it has a sense of self-ownership. In *having* its relationships rather than *being* them, the self becomes something of a psychic institution at the subject-pole which coordinates the many facets of its interpersonal mutuality now at the object-pole.

As strong and as independent as the new Institutional self is, Kegan points out that in the very strength of its systematic structure lies its limit. Like the classic bureaucrat, the Institutional self is identified with its organization; its very meaning and being is derived from its organization; it *is* its organization. As a result, at stage four there is no self before which the policies of the organization can be brought. Rather, the self is subject to those institutional policies, and thus vulnerable to the excesses of control characteristic of every unlimited organization.

Kegan locates the last of his stages of the evolving self in the self's emergence from the psychic organization dominant at the Institutional stage. Where before the self *was* the organization, now the organization is shifted to the object-pole and the self directs and runs it. This stage five capacity to coordinate the institutional allows the self to join others as fully personal individuals.

If the Institutional self brought the "interpersonal" into itself, Kegan explains, the new *Interindividual* self brings the self back into the "interpersonal." Again, Kegan insists on the fundamental difference between intimacy and fusion. At stage five, unlike stage three, there is a self to be brought to others, not derived from them; stage five allows the intimate sharing of distinct identities, stage three only the clinging fusion of merely adumbrated identities. The Interindividual self is capable of genuine intimacy with others because it is for the first time capable of intimacy with itself, capable, that is, of not only recognizing but also tolerating emotional conflict within itself.

The *Interindividual* self that has a self to share with others is open, dynamic, flowing; it is not the closed end of a development toward isolated independence. Though not the end of development, it does represent a decisive point in the fundamental process of differentiating and integrating movements begun in infancy with the radical creation of self and other. While different points in the course of development emphasize either differentiation (stage two) or integration (stage

three), the balance struck at the Interindividual stage creates a distinct (differentiated) self ultimately realized in the very sharing of itself (integration), and thus includes in creative, evolutionary tension the two great yearnings in human experience: the yearning for separateness or independence (differentiation) and the yearning for inclusion or connection (integration).

III. SPIRITUALITY: AUTONOMY AND SURRENDER

Spirituality characterizes religious development in ways compatible with the pattern of human development explained by Robert Kegan. Spirituality envisions the goal of religious development as deep love: an inclusive love for God, others, and oneself. Kegan clarifies the capacity for genuine intimacy as the central developmental goal. Thus, he grounds the possibility of the goal of religious development within the very dynamics of human development.

One dimension of Kegan's pattern may be problematic for spirituality, however. Kegan sees the criterion for human maturity as an integration of both attachment and independence, of both autonomy and relationship. Does the tradition of spirituality agree that both of these elements are essential for religious maturity? It does affirm relationship as the norm of religious maturity; indeed, the ability to sustain a wide range of loving relationships, especially that of self-surrender to God, typifies the religiously mature person. It is not obvious, however, that the tradition affirms the need for autonomy or self-direction. Yet, we believe affirmation of autonomy is clear, though implicit, when one examines traditional descriptions of religious maturity as the fruit of a strenuous process. Authors such as Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross speak of maturity as the result of developmental phases which require love even in darkness, loneliness, or misunderstanding. This lack of consolation which throws one back upon one's deepest inner resources is, we believe, the atmosphere which can promote what contemporary authors call autonomy, or what traditional authors call perseverance or fidelity to one's inner calling. For it is this struggle to sustain authentic love that enables one to experience both one's ultimate dependence on God, and one's empowerment by God. God's Spirit affirms both self-surrender and self-direction. What is essential for the self-surrender of religious loving is a self that integrates autonomy with intimate relationship.

A contemporary theology of the full Christian life, integrating moral theology and spirituality, will highlight both autonomy and relationship (surrender). Kegan helps us see that just as genuine personal intimacy requires that autonomous selves be brought to a relationship, so authentic religious surrender also requires the donation of an autonomous self. By trying to do justice to the two basic yearnings of human life—both independence and belonging—developmental psychology is pointing to the possibility of reuniting the moral and spiritual life in a single, bipolar theology that envisions the goal of surrendered autonomy.

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