

Abortion, Power, and the Morality Wars

Diana Alstad is co-author of a 1997 position paper "Abortion and the Morality Wars: Taking the Moral Offensive" (found on the web at www.ris.org in "Editorials") and of The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power. Her co-author is her partner, Joel Kramer. off our backs collective member Karla Mantilla interviewed her this past November.

oob: In your position paper "Abortion & the Morality Wars" you and Joel Kramer advocate a moral justification for abortion rights saying that morality is the most powerful justification. Explain what this moral justification is and how it's related to the more common pro-choice justifications, such as rights.

alstad: There are four main types of justifications for abortion—legal and social rights, health, family planning, and morality. The pro-choice movement mainly uses the first three types, especially rights. For most people morality is more basic, so whoever dominates the moral climate of opinion can undermine the other's rights, as well as access and availability. This is exactly what's been happening to us.

The pro-choice movement has been on the moral defensive for twenty years, ever since the religious "right" captured the moral high ground by making their "pro-life" terminology morally condemning abortion predominant. Being conciliatory with hard-liners is a one-down, ultimately losing position. They're unyielding and use every compromise as the new starting point to erode our position. Consequently, we've lost much ground.

We need to present abortion as often being the more moral choice. Morality must take consequences into account instead of being about obeying rules. The old morality doesn't care about repercussions, impact or implications—outside of protecting the underlying authoritarian belief system. I'm basing values on how they affect people now and in the future, not outmoded rules thousands of years old. In an overpopulated world, where it's difficult to take care of children who need enormous nurturing and protection, to prevent a fetus from being born that one is unable or unwilling to care for is a moral and respon-

sible act. It's society that's irresponsible for not promoting conscious conception, good parenting, and free birth control.

Any truly moral position must include the necessity and quality of nurturing. Opposing abortion treats motherhood as a mechanical role and biological duty. Fundamentalists leave the nurture out of nature, omitting that it takes years of loving care to create a truly human being, not just biological conception or a fetus. The need for love and nurturing and what it means to not have them are conveniently absent from their morality. Yet how a child is taken care of directly affects its survival and what it will become. Proper nurturing can't be forced. Since the mother is the foundation of childcare, how can she not have the last word as to whether she wants to do it or can do it adequately? Only she can be the

line in America of a much larger battle—the planetary battle that I call "the morality wars." This is a battle for people's minds over "Who has the right to decide what's right?" and "What gives them the right to do so?" It's between the forces of the old and the new, between authoritarianism and democracy. Essentially, it's fundamentalist, patriarchal belief systems versus modern, evolutionary, feminist, feedback-based creative approaches to living and solving our many global problems. Fundamentalists of various stripes are getting more and more violent worldwide. Now, increasingly, morality warfare has escalated to killing abortion providers. We must turn the tide.

It's time for us to focus on morality and challenge the "religious wrong's" moral monopoly. The conciliatory approach hasn't worked. Instead the morale and conviction

until we won and the religious backlash managed to shift the focus to the fetus. Our side may say that it's up to the woman to make a personal moral choice, but we haven't made a case for why abortion is usually a moral act. We haven't helped women think it through nor supported them in making a moral choice for abortion. Given the stigma on abortion, for true reproductive freedom it's necessary to do this. Stigma is a punishment and a social control mechanism. It impedes free choice, especially among young women. Who is telling them that abortion can be the moral choice, not the regrettable one? Instead they've been told their entire lives that abortion is bad and irresponsible. That's a big reason why they aren't rallying to protect their right—it's not just apathy or that they take abortion for granted. That's true for much of the ambivalent middle, too. We need their support. To get it, we must offer a positive moral position to counteract the right wing's propaganda.

oob: Do you think that using morality as a justification for abortion opens us up to the charge of being morally intolerant of others in the same way that many liberals accuse the anti-choicers of being intolerant? Do you believe in moral absolutism? Do you think that using morality uses the same tactics as the right wing?

alstad: No, to your first and last questions. Trying to force one's values and behavior on everyone is double intolerance, in both thought and deed. In a democracy everyone has the right to believe what they want. That's not even an issue for our side—just for theirs. The problem is that tolerance has implicitly also meant not criticizing religious values. I believe that that taboo needs challenging. Tolerance should be redefined so that people can criticize any beliefs, including religions, and show why certain ideas are wrong or harmful. This isn't forcing values or behavior on anyone. It's using the democratic marketplace of ideas as it is meant to be used—to win people's minds through reasonableness, argument and debate.

Tolerating the intolerant is no longer tolerable. Tolerating those who consider themselves at war with us puts us in an

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ultimate judge of whether she's up to it and what the personal moral choice is for her.

The moral discourse needs to be raised to a higher level that takes the context and total picture of what it takes to create a healthy child, a fulfilled mother, and a viable society into account. Abortion is usually moral if one looks at its repercussions on living people. It's good for women, children, men, families, and for society overall. Forcing a woman to have a child she doesn't want is bad for all concerned, the woman, children and society. It's the height of immorality, especially in a time of violence and overpopulation. One of the biggest sources of violence on the planet is unwanted children and children who weren't properly loved and cared for—whether by their parents or society. A world is being created that's full of people without hope, often driven by hatred and envy, who don't care about their own lives, let alone others.

I view the abortion fight as the front

of our side has been undermined, and support from the middle eroded. We're at a disadvantage in that cultural conditioning creates a pervasive unconscious resonance for traditional values. So it's easy to push those buttons in people and play upon emotions to arouse discomfort, guilt and ambivalence—even in pro-choice supporters, and especially in young women. Right wing propaganda creates confusion. For instance, it's unfortunate to need an abortion, but it's fortunate and not at all regrettable to be able to have a safe, legal one if you decide you need one. We must never forget that abortion is the bottom line of birth control. Without it, women don't have control over their bodies, and therefore over their lives. Without it, the competitive playing field of money, power and independence is so skewed in men's favor that women really cannot have equal opportunity.

We had the moral high ground when women were dying from illegal abortions—

continued from page 7

untenable, dangerous, one-down position. I'm not favoring another form of intolerance; I'm redefining tolerance. I accept people's right to be intolerant, but I have the right to fight against it and verbally challenge it.

The abortion battle is really about power and keeping women down. The pro-life side is pro-force—forcing a prescribed

morality is situated in its historical epoch and should meet the challenges of that epoch. For instance, technology has brought many new problems and issues. In fact, I doubt humanity will survive unless the sexes share power far more equally because women's influence is needed out in the world. So what's good for women and feminism is also good for the

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behavior on others, forced motherhood as punishment for sex, forced submission to biology, using force to uphold the patriarchy. We should call this battle "pro-freedom" or "pro-choice vs. pro-force" to unmask what lies under their lofty verbiage.

Moral debate is as legitimate as any other topic of debate. Our tactics are not theirs. Their extremists, which many of them tacitly, secretly support, have declared war on us. For them, "All's fair in war." What people don't realize is that their lofty moral principles only apply to those who accept their rules—not those who challenge them. Fundamentalists have historically always been willing and eager to use violence on heretics and "infidels" from the Crusades, to witch burnings and the Inquisition. Their current tactics include lies, force, guilt, creating a climate of fear and threat through intimidation, violence, bombs, and increasingly, through murders that go unprotested and thus are condoned. Silence is complicity. Where are the "pro-life" demonstrations against killing doctors and bombings? Instead their rhetoric incites and justifies violence and murder. They use their democratic rights to push their authoritarian agenda to undermine democracy. I'm not suggesting we do anything unethical or force people to agree or to live a certain way, but rather that we prevent others from doing so to us, and in so doing, protect democracy.

As to whether I believe in moral absolutism, if you mean by absolutism, "Do I believe that some things at a given point in space-time are objectively better or more true than others?"—Yes. If you mean that they're unchangingly so and will be that way forever, I don't think so. I feel that morality—which behaviors are appropriate—changes and evolves over time. Every

species. That's why, in this particular epoch, I think morality should be based on what's good for women and children, humanity, the planet, and species survival. I'm proposing that moral positions be held in a way that allows people to be open to being shown where they're wrong, and to taking new ideas and repercussions into account. Such positions are not absolutist, because they're open to feedback, challenge, and change.

But I'm not a relativist who holds that any culture's morality is as good as another's. I don't look at, say, clitoridectomy, wife-beating, or capital punishment as morally right, no matter what culture they're in. I judge cultures by how they treat people in general—especially women, children, and minorities.

In order for morality to be effective—for it to have any force, credibility, or adherence—it has to transcend mere subjectivity and absolute relativism. The old way of doing this was through unchallengeable rules from on high. Our challenge now is to pin morality on something people can agree upon. I do see morality as situated in a historical context and thus as relative to that context, but not necessarily relative within the context. For instance, if it is agreed that morality involves furthering people in living better, freer, longer, more creative lives in a safe environment, then certain actions better realize these values, not subjectively, but objectively.

oob: In the book *The Guru Papers* that you co-authored with your partner, Joel Kramer, you set out to explain how authoritarianism is a force that undergirds much of civilization. Explain the morality of authoritarianism and how it relates to feminism.

alstad: The two ways we define authoritarian are any person or belief system that claims to know what's best for you, or for everyone, and is also unchallengeable. Patriarchal morality is authoritarian and hierarchical. It comes down from on high, thriving on the self-sacrifice of those beneath, particularly women. We're trying to show how the fundamental control mechanisms of patriarchy work, especially the mind control mechanisms that keep people in line and reproduce patriarchy. This is what we call the hidden authoritarian social virus. We feel that authoritarianism is the basic control mechanism of patriarchy and although patriarchy is not identical with authoritarianism, patriarchy is the most institutionalized and prevalent form of it.

Feminists are very much aware of the linkages between patriarchy, hierarchy, and political authoritarianism, but I don't think that the mental and psychological authoritarianism that's embedded in our values and ideals, our mind sets, self-images, self-control mechanisms and even our very consciences, as well as in our addictions and intimate relationships, has been adequately exposed. Authoritarianism is hidden in the ideals of unconditional love and selflessness, for example. The morality of authoritarianism is fairly simple once you turn your head in that direction. Self-sacrifice is the highest value. Those on top of authoritarian hierarchies need to promote it to maintain their power. All world religions, however diverse they might seem in terms of content, imagery, and practices, have a similar ethical structure. They all promote self-sacrifice. They do this by dividing the spiritual from the mundane, then defining what spirituality is, and telling you how to get there—through self-sacrifice. The religions all prescribe the right way to be: they all tell you to get rid of your ego, renounce self-gratification and self-

remain unexamined, because they sound so good that most people just assume they are good. Most of us have been conditioned from an early age to link them with goodness. But these ideals are actually life-negating—the opposite of what they seem. Because they require you to renounce the self-interest and self-gratification necessary for a healthy life, Joel and I call them "renunciate." A whole chapter in *The Guru Papers* is on how the ideal of unconditional love actually sabotages and hinders the experience of love.

Morality deals with the "Who do I put first?—me or you, my group or your group?—and why and when and how, and what's appropriate?" An authoritarian morality says you should put others or the group first—it doesn't leave room for jockeying or figuring out what's appropriate in different situations. It can fuel abusive relationships like wife-beating.

oob: How so?

alstad: The ideal of unconditional love, which contains this "social virus," means "Love no matter how you're treated" and that's not only absurd, it's dysfunctional. You're supposed to forgive abuse and love without conditions or boundaries. Forgiving abuse reinforces it, like a reward. In many ways women have a bigger dose of authoritarian conditioning to be selfless. So we have more guilt around taking care of ourselves and being self-indulgent. This can lead us to be devoted to causes or to people at our expense and to burn out. The way it's set up, the male sphere, the political sphere, is amoral, and ideally the private sphere is a refuge. Women are supposed to pick up the pieces and compensate for amorality in the competitive public sphere by volunteering, doing charity work, putting others first inside and outside the home. It's no wonder that most women now are overextended. If

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interest.

It's the world religions, which are all patriarchal and authoritarian, that originated and promulgate authoritarian morality. In the Western monotheisms, god hands down rules, and in the East, a so-called enlightened person tells you the way to be. Authoritarian ideals always sound very lofty—unconditional love, selflessness, saintliness, ego-loss, oneness. That's why they

they have a career, a husband, and a child to take care of, there's no leisure time left for them to rest or relax. They experience conflict and guilt as they move between these weighty roles, feeling they can't do them all well, that nothing is getting quite the attention it should—and they're not getting what they need either. Since feminism, women have taken on more roles, not fewer.

oob: Do you think women take on these roles because of their tendency to self-sacrifice or because they are stuck materially, and they have to do it?

alstad: They're pushed or drawn into it in various ways, including poverty. Men have had the power roles, so if women want institutional power, they have to take on those roles. So women take on men's roles more, but men don't take on women's roles much—they mostly don't want to and won't. Women either get other women to help them or struggle to do it all. It's not fair, of course.

I'd be the last one to deny the value and joys of motherhood. There is, however, a cultural pronatalism romanticizing it that doesn't prepare women for the realities of how much self-sacrifice the role involves. It's an undervalued, unsupported, legally binding, unpaid job. If society prepared people more realistically for parenting, there'd be more recognition of the unexpected sacrifices and challenges, and that it's one of the biggest life changes of all—much more than marriage.

Many women would be more ambivalent and thoughtful about becoming mothers if they realized that no matter how much they love their children, they may not like the caretaker job. There are no guarantees, so it's a risk women have to take. If girls realized that having children as a teenager may not be the best thing either for them or the child, they might put it off until they're better prepared or have lived out some dreams. Some women would find other types of self-fulfillment, or opt for more leisure and a simpler life over the stress of trying to do it all. They might have nieces and nephews or other children in their lives, as I do. Patriarchy not only doesn't make motherhood easy or reward it; in many ways it punishes it. So trying to "have it all" is really hard—much harder

self-sacrifice or not.

alstad: It surely does. Unfortunately, in a patriarchy the joy of motherhood is all too often tarnished by ambivalence, resentment, guilt, and exhaustion.

Although I've helped raise children, I was too ambivalent to have a child of my own. In some ways I've been on strike against patriarchal motherhood all my life and still am. As a girl I was determined never to have children. I've been with Joel for 24 years and helped raise his two daughters full-time for the first eleven. In my 30's I began the painful process of reevaluating whether to have children. For years I was in deep conflict, seeing both sides and not knowing which way to go. I questioned every mother I saw. I discovered that most of them, too, had ambivalence about the role. They had regrets about their lives,

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even though they largely didn't regret having children. Once you have children, you love them. But a few even said that although they love their children, having them still wasn't worth the cost.

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than we second wave feminists of the 60's imagined. It often means living a totally structured, high-pressure life while being oppressed at work and at home.

oob: It also turns motherhood into self-sacrifice, whether you personally believe in

A part of me wanted a child, but as it turned out, I ultimately didn't want one enough to have one. I was afraid of losing my freedom and not liking the sacrifices. Basically my life circumstances and the patriarchy combined didn't create the conditions that would foster my making the

move. But the decision wasn't at all easy.

In retrospect, I feel that inherently in a patriarchy, both mothers and non-mothers alike are ambivalent about motherhood. There's a sacrifice either way—each path

to others. Parents use guilt, fear and punishment for control, as does religion.

Feminist and liberal family values have no fixed sex roles. Duty is self-defined rather than culture-defined, related to

Authoritarianism is hidden in the ideals of unconditional love and selflessness.

involves giving up something important and has its own joys and potential for fulfillment. It's a very personal, delicate decision. Forcing motherhood on a woman is barbaric and outrageous! I'm very happy with my choice, which I consider a historical luxury and privilege. I'd like non-motherhood to

how one wants to live and operate in the world. Loyalty is chosen and deserved based on how you and others are treated. One is the judge as to whether authority is legitimate and good for the world and free to challenge it if it's not. Obedience in and of itself isn't a virtue. You might choose to follow someone else's leadership for a specific purpose. Ideally parents would avoid resorting to guilt and fear for control. They would foster a child's independence as soon as possible by linking freedom with acting responsibly. The ideal is to raise children to be self-respecting, self-confident, self-trusting, competent people who can not only succeed in the world, but help make the world a better place.

Although feminist family values do try to minimize authoritarianism and deal with it more awarely, parental authority is actually the most ambiguous kind because some authoritarianism is inherent in being a responsible, protective parent—namely, standing behind what you feel is best for your child. No parent would allow their two-year old in the freeway. Children often don't know what's best for themselves, but then neither do parents. So it's complex and challenging and requires aware interplay. A lot of the struggle between parents and children is around power and control, but the inherent conflict doesn't have to be played out in the old ways. Parental authoritarianism can be minimized and refined as it were—you can be open to your children challenging you and showing you where they think you're wrong. You can let them try to convince you they know what's best, but still keep the last word. The reality is that as long as they're dependent on you, you have power over them. The more awarely you use it, usually the less reactive they'll be.

oob: You've mentioned how a hidden authoritarian virus can infect even movements for social change which are opposing authoritarian structures. Can you explain this and give an example?

alstad: Authoritarian morality is at the core of current social and self-control mechanisms. This social virus permeates everything because it's in most of our minds in

be seen as a positive, pioneering option for women that can open up whole new vistas. I just wish there were a positive word for it!

oob: You've talked about the differences between feminist family values and traditional family values. What do you see as the differences between these two different moralities, the traditional authoritarian morality and a new kind of value or morality?

alstad: One of the main differences is that the old family values and roles are authoritarian and patriarchal. The big traditional authoritarian values are duty, obedience, loyalty, and respect for authority, inside and outside the family. Much of this is fear- and guilt-based. Duty means doing the authoritarian rules and roles. Their ideal is to break a child's will to inculcate dependency and obedience, which meant obeying male authorities and being God-fearing, literally. Loyalty is to the family, or to whatever group you're a part of, no matter what. Loyalty being deserved is only a function of whether they're loyal to you, not of whether the group does good or harm

varying degrees, at least unconsciously. So it's not surprising that it would be very powerful even in social change movements, as it is everywhere else. I leave it to others to make the call as to whether a particular group is authoritarian or has that aspect—I'm just pointing out some of the traits to watch out for. Certain situations bring it out more than others. I've seen authoritarian attitudes of both unchallengeability and believing one knows what's best for others in leftist, liberal, multicultural, feminist and teenage positions, and even in my own. To the extent that it's unconscious, as it often is and as mine was, a group may be supporting and participating in authoritarianism while espousing anti-authoritarian values—not an uncommon situation. Even teenagers or anyone rebelling against authority can be this way. Rebels are often reactive and dogmatic, too.

As in many movements, feminist factionalism comes from people feeling certain they're right and that their line is more radical. I, too, participated in this in the early years of feminism. Authoritarianism within groups hampers long-term effectiveness by causing divisiveness and it can be used to justify trashing and making others wrong.

Interestingly, "purity"—whether ideological or moral—is an authoritarian concept because it's an unlivable, unrealistic, unchallengeable absolute ideal that doesn't allow for situational choices. It leads to rigid judgmentalism, self-righteousness, making others wrong instead of allowing them the space to have opinions you disagree with. What gives anyone the right to decide what's pure and impure? Purity as a standard of judgment doesn't allow situational flexibility in a given context. When people buy into ideals of purity they are as hard on themselves as on others. They have high standards for themselves and expect others to live up to them, too. They can burn out from too much self-sacrifice, or be very judgmental, including self-judgmental. Both are common symptoms of the inner authoritarian.

oob: What is an antidote to hidden authoritarianism?

alstad: For it to no longer be hidden! Because most people have internalized an inner authoritarian, the virus lives in the mind, and the mind is what perpetuates it, so the main antidote is awareness. An unconscious social virus gets its power from remaining unconscious. It depends on it. It's unconscious until a critical number of people become conscious of it.

Just like with patriarchy and sex roles, the first antidote was realizing they exist, then seeing how they work, what they are, and how pervasive they are. Once

people began to see patriarchy, they could see it everywhere. It was only hidden because it was so pervasive that it was unconsciously taken as the given—like the water fish swim in. When feminists called attention to it and turned people's heads in that direction, all of a sudden a huge piece of unconscious conditioning was made conscious in the culture, and other people started to see it. Biased, diluted, and distorted as media coverage of feminism was and is, mainstreaming this awareness has been a partial antidote. In some ways feminism has changed the world, and in others it hasn't.

Joel and I are trying to put hidden authoritarianism on the cultural map the way Kate Millett put patriarchy on the map in *Sexual Politics*. She took an anthropological concept and expanded it into a political one that described women's situation. That concept greatly empowered feminism by giving it legitimacy and a theoretical underpinning. Political authoritarianism is a common concept that we're likewise expanding by extending it into the cultural, psychological, moral, and spiritual arenas. When this more hidden and mental authoritarianism is unmasked and decoded, people realize it's an insidious presence and a danger within the world and themselves. When they see how it works, it automatically loses some of its hold. People tell me that once they start to see it, they see it everywhere, which empowers them and makes them less able to be manipulated. Two aspects are involved—seeing it externally and internally.

A more personal antidote that's also related to awareness is disempowering one's inner authoritarian. I had a strong inner authoritarian implanted in me. It's at the core of Puritanism, which creates a drivenness that requires justifying one's existence through endless achievements or good deeds. The chapter "Who is in Control?" in *The Guru Papers*, which is on the inner battle for control within addictions, is actually about freeing oneself from the inner authoritarian and transforming one's very self-control mechanisms. Addiction is used as an example to illustrate the psychodynamics of inner authoritarianism. Through integrating one's inner divisions, one can end the inner battle for self-control and gain self-trust.

There are a lot of awareness "games" you can play with yourself. You can watch how much time you spend doing things you don't want to do that you don't really have to do and why; or notice which things deflate your energy and which give you energy and do as much of the latter as you can, and as little of the former. You can pay attention to the inner voices of self-judgment and reaction against it, and to the

voices of inner conflict. Those voices are the inner authoritarian and the parts of you it's trying to repress. Just watching and listening can have a liberating effect.

I do believe that as we approach the millennium, more people are more aware of the non-viability of the old order, including patriarchy. We can't expect something so old and entrenched to vanish quickly or easily. But people are more aware of the

necessity of doing something else. Large numbers still aren't, but many of them could be. I feel very hopeful that the time is ripe for people to move beyond the self-mistrust that fosters giving one's power away, beyond unconscious dominance and submission games, and beyond the dysfunctional self- and social control mechanisms of the authoritarian virus that are all at the core of patriarchy.

TEEN ABORTION: REQUIRING PARENTAL CONSENT MAKES NO SENSE

If a girl isn't mature enough to decide not to have a child, how could she possibly be mature enough to raise one? Certainly raising a child requires infinitely more maturity than having an abortion. You can't have it both ways: *If a girl is considered old enough to be a parent, she must be at least old enough to decide whether to be one.*

Parental consent is not legally necessary to have a child. All requiring it for abortion does is force girls to have children they don't want. Those who say parents have a right to decide are either not looking at consequences, or more concerned about maintaining parental control and authority than about good parenting. Just requiring notification alone can prevent or delay a girl from seeking an abortion—especially if her parents are anti-abortion or abusive.

What about the child's right to a responsible and willing mother—especially in this complex and dangerous world? Does a 15-year-old mother also need parental consent on how to raise her child? Or does becoming a mother make her magically responsible and free from parental authority? If it does not, who is the ultimate authority for the baby—its grandparents? To not look at repercussions beyond the womb is truly irresponsible. Saying teenage girls are too young to make the decision without parental consent, but old enough to be parents is absurd.

Diana Alstad

ABORTION & THE MORALITY WARS: TAKING THE MORAL OFFENSIVE

This 10-page position paper co-authored by Diana Alstad and Joel Kramer exposes why being on the moral defensive is harming pro-choice and how we can and must reverse this by regaining the moral high ground. It shows why forcing a woman to have a child is immoral, whereas abortion is usually a moral act that is good for individuals and society. This paper has had significant impact on many heads of pro-choice and family planning organizations, enthusiasm from feminists, and also aroused controversy.

**"ABORTION & THE MORALITY WARS,"
"ABORTION AS A MORAL ACT,"
& "TEEN ABORTION"**

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