A pastor should “diligently apply the cure of souls to those over whom you happen to be in charge. Know the state of their souls and each one’s deeds; if you discover any vice in them, be mindful to correct it quickly.”

William of Pagula’s *Oculus Sacerdotis* (The Priest’s Eye) c. 1320–23

Western Christianity is one of many religions which developed a particular role for widows who did not remarry. A widow undertaking a “career” in religious life in the Middle Ages took advantage of an option which had been a part of the Christian tradition since the days of the Acts of the Apostles, and incorporated some cultural elements from the Roman and Judaic traditions. By the late Middle Ages, the variety of options for widows seeking to live by their beliefs and the theological structure of the idea of chaste widows was quite complex. The choices open to the individual woman varied widely according to her situation.

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2 In fact, many other cultures and religions venerate widows who remain sexually faithful to their deceased husbands. Ida Bloom, “The History of Widowhood: A Bibliographic Overview,” *Journal of Family History* 16:2 (1991), 191–210 cites several articles on such examples as sati (Hindi widows leaping on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands) and Japanese and Chinese traditions of veneration for widows who did not remarry (204). Other cross-cultural studies of widowhood include the first chapter of Andre Rosambert, *La Veuve en Droit Canonique jusqu’au XIVe Siècle*, (Paris, 1923) and Jan Bremmer and Lourens van den Bosch, eds., *Between Poverty and the Pyre: Moments in the History of Widowhood* (New York, 1995). Katherine A. Clark of SUNY Brockport is currently working on a history of the idea of the religious widow from early Christian thinkers through the High Middle Ages. She finds great continuity in attitudes toward widows throughout the period.
This initial survey of the practical aspects of the relationship between the individual widows who took religious vows and their spiritual caregivers uses a variety of sources to highlight the expectations women must meet to take vows, the ecclesiastical process by which they were accepted and vowed, the expectations for widows after taking vows and the consequences the church imposed upon those who did not meet those expectations. Using evidence from the See of York, which includes the areas overseen by the clergy of York, Durham and Carlisle as well as the Archdeaconry of Richmond, this chapter will illustrate that, in practical terms, there was no clear pattern of ecclesiastical supervision for these women.

The position of widows in the Western church was influenced by Hebrew and Roman tradition, but the clerical understanding of the role of widows as a group grew most directly out of Paul’s first letter to Timothy:

> Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about

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3 The work of Beth Allison Barr has also highlighted the gendered nature of pastoral care on the parish level in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, but the religious status of the women in this study mandated that the oversight of religious widows be performed at a different level of church hierarchy. See her “Gendering Pastoral Care: John Mirk and His Instructions for Parish Priests,” in Fourteenth Century England IV, J.S. Hamilton ed., (Rochester, 2006), pp. 93–108.