

# QUESTIONS OF FAITH

*Notes from Jeff Astley*

*from his talk at the Passing on the Faith Symposium*

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These notes offer general reflections on some of the issues that face us in ‘passing on the Faith’, which is a central part of the ministry of the whole people of God.

✚ **Questions of Faith slides.mht**, available on this website, is a web version of the PowerPoint slides of this talk.

## **1. The meanings of ‘faith’**

The 2004 report, *Not Easy but Full of Meaning*, talks of the ‘variety in meaning of the term “faith”’. The background paper to this conference speaks of both ‘passing on the Faith’ and ‘passing on faith in God’, as well as ‘the faith of families’.

**‘The Faith’** is a feature of the Church’s tradition, normally thought of as a body of objective truths. It is ‘the faith which is believed’. Educationally this is the *product* or *content* of Christian learning.

**‘Our faith’**, however, is the lived experience of holding this Faith; and is therefore essentially a human and subjective activity or faculty. Educationally, ‘our faith’ is a process: the learner’s understanding and acceptance of the Faith. It is ‘the faith by which’ we believe.

## 2. 'Our Faith'

As educators we naturally focus on this understanding of faith, through our focus on the *learner*.

- Our faith is necessarily *multi-dimensional*: a thing of the head, heart and hands. It includes cognitive believing but is wider than this, extending into the affective (feeling) domain and expressed in our lifestyle and practice.
- As educators we are much concerned with the *context* of our learners, which is the context of their 'faithing'. This is a matter of the (widely diverse) culture in which they find themselves, for which the 'little way' of ordinary living is usually most significant.
- Our faith is the result of a *dialogue* with the Faith. The Church speaks, but so do I – and my faith is the result of this conversation between the two. The learner is never simply a blank slate waiting to be written on by the Christian tradition.
- According to James Fowler and others, our faith *develops*.

**Fowler's account** is of a generic 'human' faith or 'meaning-making', which he claims to be a universal human condition. *Religious* faith is a type of human faith, for which the content or object consists of religious realities and religious truths (God, Jesus, the Spirit, the Church and her teachings, etc.). These are the centres of value and power, and the master stories that religious people see as forming their own 'big picture' or 'ultimate environment'. But everybody 'believes in' something or

someone. Changes in the content of our faith are understood by Fowler as conversions.

But Fowler's main interest is in the form of faith, which he interprets under different aspects (the forms of thinking, perspective-taking, moral judgement, understanding of symbols, etc.). According to Fowler, these aspects change as we develop and move through a series of relatively stable 'stages of faith', and the unstable transitional periods between them. On this account it is possible to believe in the same things (content) but to believe in them differently (as we occupy different stages of faith), with the form of our faith shaping its content in particular ways. As this account is essentially developmental, these changes are internally driven rather than being learned from the impulse of external experience. Educators need to be aware of such stages as they devise their 'learning experiences' for children, young people and adults.

One who becomes Christian in childhood may indeed remain Christian all of his or her life. But one's *way* of being Christian will need to deepen, expand, and be reconstituted several times in the pilgrimage of faith. (Fowler in Dykstra and Parks (eds), *Faith Development and* Fowler, 1986, p. 37)

Further details of Fowler's accounts of faith development are given in the following documents available on this website (listed here by increasing complexity!):

- ✚ **FAITH DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW** (from *Children, Churches and Christian Learning*)
- ✚ **Insights from Faith Development Theory and Research** (from *Learning in the Way*)
- ✚ **The Psychology of Faith Development** (from the *Handbook of Education for Spirituality*)

One of the major criticisms made of Fowler's scheme of faith development is this idea of sequential, invariant and hierarchical *stages*, which are progressively restructured and transformed over time. On this view, once one is operating at a 'higher' stage the other stages are essentially left behind (although they have 'coloured' the later stages – as in the diagram). Apart from major cognitive impairments, therefore, Fowler does not envisage regression back 'down' the stages. John Westerhoff's account of faith 'styles' or (later) 'pathways' or 'trails' of faith, by contrast, allows that these may be adopted at any time and in any order.

**Heinz Streib's** empirical studies take the content of a person's faith more seriously, in particular the individual's life-history narrative. Streib recommends that we think of five **styles of faith**, with the individual being able to access several styles at certain times in their development. As his diagram shows, these styles slowly develop before 'peaking' at a certain time; they then decrease in significance but remain available to the person. Thus 'regression' to earlier styles is therefore possible.

### 3. 'The Faith'

- This too is *multi-dimensional*. Although often understood solely in terms of Christian truths (essentially doctrines), these should be seen as the products of the Church's reflections on Christian events, experiences, symbols and stories. Christian doctrines should also not be separated from, but rather set within the context of and related to, a wider list of elements within the Christian tradition: in particular, Christian spirituality, values and practices. These things, too, are 'passed on'.
- The Faith further depends on our learning the '*grammar*' of Christianity (of what Kevin Nichols called 'the languages of Faith'), what it means and what it implies, and how it should be used.
- This necessitates our learning not only how to speak and think as Christians, but also how to 'see Christianly'. This element allows us to think of Christian education as essentially ophthalmic – a correction of our vision that helps us to see with the eyes of Christ. Another *skill* required of the Christian learner is the ability to exercise his or her imagination, so as to make connections between the Christian tradition and the person's own experience of life.

### 4. 'Passing On'

We think of this essentially in terms of *faith transmission*, but this would be wholly ineffective without a correlative *faith translation* on the part of the learner, which enables her or him to engage in a dialogue between their own experience and the language of their faith tradition.

**Faith transmission** itself should not be seen in terms of a narrow understanding of communication that involves the communication solely of information. We also communicate affect in communicating attitudes, dispositions and hopes, as well as a sense of the presence of and taste of Christ. The study *On the Way to Life* (Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, 2005) speaks of Christian education as requiring ‘an ecclesial life and faith that is affective and relational as well as cognitive and conceptual. Simply knowing the truth of faith will not sustain witness. The truth must be loved if it is to be fully known’ (p. 59). The authors add: ‘It is not only the coherence and cogency of faith that attracts but its beauty. . . . Faith is not only a matter of hearing the Word but also of seeing it’ (and of seeing life within God’s greater horizon) (pp. 65f).

We want to pass on the Faith in its best form, and show its best side. We wish to release its *attractiveness*. In doing so we are not just passing on the pigments and painting skills of Christianity, as some extreme liberals have argued. But nor are we just passing on the ‘old masters’ – the paintings that illustrate how previous generations portrayed the Christian life. Children, young people and adults need to paint their own pictures, drawing on their own present-day experience and expressing their own ‘ordinary theology’; *and* they need to bring these things into an implicit conversation with the truth they learn in and from the teaching, worship and service of the Church. They need to have access to the great Art Galleries of the Faith. Their faith can then be an authentic expression of what it means to be a *Christian* individual and community today. This portrayal is bound to be a reworking of the Faith that they have received, at least in part.

There is a danger that the metaphor of ‘passing on’ might make us treat the Faith too gingerly – as a fragile object, that we don’t want the other person to drop, perhaps hardly to touch. But in order for faith translation really to work, the learner must truly grasp and embrace the faith – even ‘ingest it’ or at least ‘run with it’. She must make it *her own*. Otherwise there will be no real ‘passing on’; rather, the Faith will pass her faith by.

Faith transmission is often modelled on the approach to Christian education called the ‘faith community’ or ‘enculturation’ approach. On this view, the worshipping community or ‘domestic Church’ serves as a high impact environment in which we learn the Christian ways almost by osmosis. As Horace Bushnell put it (*Christian Nurture*, 1861, pp. 106–7) the child ‘breathes the atmosphere of the house. He sees the world through his parents’ eyes. Their objects become his. Their life and spirit mold him. . . . He lives and moves and has his being in them’. Parents are here ‘teachers’ only in the very widest sense (the sense in which ‘education’ is much wider than ‘schooling’). They teach *through* their parenting: ‘I beseech you turn yourselves to the true life of religion. Have it first in yourselves, then teach it as you live it; teach it by living it; for you can do it in no other manner’ (p. 87).

In faith transmission we ‘internalize and adopt the community’s faith’ as our own (Westerhoff). This is ‘not so much *comprehension* as identification’ (Charles Foster), or as we may prefer to say, it is comprehension-through-identification: understanding the Faith by praying and living it, rather than in scholarly separation from it.

**Faith translation** fits well with the ‘interpretation’ or pilgrimage model of Christian education, in which a dialogue is promoted between the Christian tradition and human experience, often with individuals or small groups rather than in a larger community. On this model we learn in both formal and informal ways, and the *hidden curriculum* of Christian learning (that is, the set of learning experiences that don’t come labelled as such) is as important as any overt teaching in sermons, talks, discussion or study. Indeed, our best attempts at passing on the true Faith can be ship-wrecked by our learners learning all too well the *wrong* gospel, which we have more powerfully expressed through actions that express our true priorities.

The phrase ‘faith translation’ reminds us that all translation is a form of *interpretation*. The translator is an in-between person who must know both languages: in this case, the language of the Christian tradition *and* the language of the learner. In the end, it is the Christian learner who must engage in this dialogue for himself or herself: the conversation between the Faith and his/her faith. Christian educators help the learner to engage in that translating process herself. In this sense, also, we are language teachers.

Those who write about interpretation, often under the title of ‘hermeneutics’, insist that we can only know and understand ‘the other’ (tradition, text, person) *through our own* eyes and thoughts and concepts. ‘To interpret means precisely to use one’s own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us’ (Hans-Georg Gadamer). As Tom Groome has argued, the heart of Christian education is always a conversation (dialogue or dialectic) in which ‘the community Story’ (better ‘Stories’?) impacts on our stories, and ‘our stories respond to (affirm,

recognize limits of, push beyond) the community Story' (*Christian Religious Education*, 1980, p. 217). Without this responsive interaction, the Faith will never become our faith; nor will the Faith be sufficiently critiqued and shaped by our contemporary responses so that it can be passed on as a potent and relevant tradition for future generations.

## 5. More Questions of Faith

- We can no longer get away with preventing our learners *questioning* the faith. Nor do we wish to do so: for if the Church is truly to be a Pilgrim Church then *questing* is an integral part of being Church, and this is what flows out of proper and continual questioning (and proper and continuing answering!).
- The guilt often engendered by our *failure* as Christian educators (and as parents) must be mitigated by the *hope* that arises from our recognition that all learners remain on a questing pilgrimage throughout their lives, and 'it does not yet appear what they shall be'. Fowler's stage theory suggests that the images imbibed in Stage 1, the stories learned at Stage 2, and the hard decisions engaged in at Stage 4, can all remain part of an individual's faith life, ready to be reworked as they resurface in future years. We may be comforted by the thought that nothing good in our children's Christian learning will be wholly lost; and that there may be much that is good in their present *human* faithing whether or not they explicitly embrace an explicitly Christian Faith.

- We don't encourage or condone *ignorance* about the Faith. We really do need a better educated people of God. Parents and others need to know how to answer the questions asked by their children and their neighbours (and by themselves). On the whole we have been very bad at this across the generations and across the denominations. Often all that is required is something at a quite simple level, at least to begin with. But tackling ignorance is not the same as eroding *mystery*. We don't believe, and so we shouldn't pretend, that everything in the Faith can be clearly explained. Of course the truth about God transcends our understanding. But we must ensure that our Christian responses and answers are never superficial, even where they are simple. We should not ignore the *depths* of the Faith.

- *Education* is much wider than *schooling*. As Groome reminds us, parents aren't schoolteachers but socializers. Most of the real work of Christian education occurs outside the school – and certainly outside the university! Life itself teaches us, as even Wittgenstein said.

- Christian *formation* is essentially a type of moulding, structuring, shaping or nurturing, in which our beliefs, attitudes, values and dispositions to act and experience become more Christian. This is clearly an essential part of learning the Faith – being shaped by it. But (despite St Paul!) the learner-clay on this potter's wheel will and must answer back. We are living, responsive, *thinking* clay; and nowadays we shall insist on having our say. No one can slough off their responsibility to think for themselves about the Faith: their responsibility to hold their *own* faith. As Christian learners, we are always engaged in evaluating, assessing – and often, of course, affirming – what it is that we receive from the wider Church and her traditions.

Christian *criticism* essentially comprises these evaluative judgements – judgements that we *must* make if the Faith is to become our faith. This element of criticism is always there. There is therefore an inevitability about human beings ‘picking and choosing’ what it is they believe. (After all, our beliefs can only be *our* beliefs.) So formation and criticism go together, as the learner appraises as well as embraces the Faith. There is no other way for the Church to teach the Christian Way.