

The Psychology of Faith Development

James W. Fowler is a practical theologian whose main influence has been in developing a theory of the development of faith in the context of a programme of empirical research. Although this theoretical framework and the research support for it have both been vigorously critiqued, many educators, pastors and counsellors have found their own thinking illuminated by Fowler's claims.

This essay provides an overview of Fowler's theory. It begins by relating Fowler's broad account of human faith to a generic concept of 'horizontal' spirituality. In describing Fowler's work in more detail, reference will then be made to its psychological and religious roots, its empirical support, and the critical literature that it has attracted. In its final part the essay traces the relevance of Fowler's account of faith and its development for those concerned with pastoral care and spiritual counselling, as well as readers engaged in more educational contexts.

Fowler's doctoral work was on H. Richard Niebuhr (Fowler, 1974), a theologian who remained an influence on his mature concept of faith (see Niebuhr, 1960; 1963) as did Paul Tillich and the religious scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith. But it was his experiences of listening to people's spiritual stories that led Fowler to attempt an empirically-founded developmental theory (Fowler, 1992a; 2004). Working with others at Harvard and later at Emory University, he built up a database of several hundred transcripts of semi-structured 'faith development interviews', each lasting up to three hours. Heinz Streib (2003a, pp. 23–24) estimates that approximately a thousand of such interviews have now been undertaken by a variety of researchers. In them respondents answer questions about their relationships, experiences, significant commitments and beliefs; discuss what makes life meaningful and how they make important decisions; and give their views on the purpose of life and the

meaning of death, as well as their religious views. The resulting transcripts have been analyzed in the light of Fowler's preconceptions about the structure of faith, and a developmental hypothesis framed in dialogue with these data about the manner in which faith might change over a person's life.

What is Faith?

It is important to be clear at the outset that Fowler is using the term 'faith' in a wide, generic sense. We may think of this as 'human faith' (Nelson, 1992, pp. 63–4), as Fowler claims that faith is an almost universal element of the human condition in that everyone 'believes in' something or someone. Religious faith is only one species of human faith; it is faith directed to religious things, in particular to a transcendent God or gods. But everyone has their 'gods', in the wider sense of realities and ideas that they value highly and to which they are committed: including their health, wealth, security, family, ideologies, and their own pleasure.

For Fowler, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but 'nihilism . . . and despair about the possibility of even negative meaning' (Fowler, 1981, p. 31); he therefore writes that 'anyone not about to kill himself lives by faith' (Fowler & Keen, 1978, p. 1). The human heart always rests *somewhere*.

Many critics have rejected this understanding of faith as theologically inadequate, contending that faith is fundamentally a religious (and for some, a specifically Christian) category. It has been argued that Fowler's view implies that even idolatry is a form of faith (Dykstra, 1986, p. 56), and that his concept is so broad as to be indistinguishable from knowing or 'meaning-making' in general. For many religious believers, faith is fundamentally a gift of God's grace rather than a human achievement, and cannot be separated from the objects or content of faith (Avery, 1992, p. 127; Osmer, 1992, p. 141). But

Fowler does allow that God may play a role, additional to the role of creating the natural laws of human development, in changing the content (and perhaps also the form?) of human faith by means of ‘extraordinary grace’ (Fowler, 1981, pp. 302–303; 1984, pp. 73–75).

Despite the above criticisms, many accept that faith is an appropriate word for labelling a fundamental human category that is not restricted to religious people. Generic human faith may be regarded as a useful way of conceptualizing much of human spirituality, particularly when this is understood quite generally at what we may call a ‘human-horizontal’ level, as comprising those attitudes, values, beliefs and practices that ‘animate people’s lives’ (Wakefield, 1983, p. 549; see also Astley, 2003, p. 141–144). Like spirituality, an individual’s faith is understood here as having at its core a disposition or stance that informs his or her behaviour. It is ‘a way of moving into and giving form and coherence to life’ (Fowler & Keen, 1978, p. 24), affecting how people lean into, meet and shape their experience of life. Faith is thus an activity, something that people do, rather than something that simply happens to them. Although grammatically a noun, faith has the logic of a verb; so that we may properly speak of human ‘faithing’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 16).

Gordon Wakefield’s definition also refers to a transcendent (‘vertical’) dimension or function of spirituality, which involves a person in ‘reaching out’ to ‘super-sensible realities’. Although some of the questions in the schedule for the faith development interview are specifically religious, including references to the interviewee’s beliefs about the effect of ‘a power or powers beyond our control’, this dimension of faith is more consistently represented in the more neutral and widely applicable vocabulary of Fowler’s category of a ‘big picture’ or an ‘ultimate environment’ (Fowler, 1981, pp. 29–30). This is Fowler’s terminology for whatever set of highly valued, indeed ultimately significant, objects – within this world or beyond it – functions as the target for a particular individual’s faith, alongside the people who

share that faith and to whom she is also committed in faith. These are the things, people, causes, ideals and values that give our lives meaning.

For Fowler, therefore, faith is essentially about ‘the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning’ (Fowler, 1986, p. 15). It is the ‘generic consequence of the universal human burden of finding and making meaning’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 33). Because of his focus on psychology, Fowler often expresses this in constructivist terminology, in terms of human meaning *making*; but this should not be taken to imply that this meaning has no objective reference. On Fowler’s account, we may say that everybody creates and finds meaning in their lives as they know, value and relate to that which they take to be ultimately meaningful, in commitment and trust. In summary, faith is to be understood as:

the composing or interpreting of an ultimate environment and as a way-of-being-in-relation to it. [It] must be seen as a central aspect of a person’s life orientation. . . . It plays a central role in shaping the responses a person will make in and against the force-field of his or her life. Faith, then, is a core element in one’s character or personality. (Fowler & Keen, 1978, p. 25)

Although most of Fowler’s writings are concerned with changes in the *form* or structure of this faith, he also recognizes that over a lifetime important changes in its *contents* frequently take place. He labels these changes in faith content a ‘recentering of our passion’ (Fowler, 1984, p. 140) and a ‘conversion’ (1981, pp. 281–286). It is significant that, on Fowler’s view, it is possible to change the content of our faith while retaining its structural form. We may therefore be converted to Islam, Mahayana Buddhism or atheism, by coming to believe in different things, and yet we might still understand and relate to these new values and ultimate realities *in the same way* as we did within our previous commitment (say to

fundamentalist Christianity). This situation is the mirror image of Fowler's more familiar claim that, while we may continue to believe in the same things as we grow older, we often come to believe in them in a very different manner. In this case our faith is said to 'develop'. '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, 1986, p. 37).

Any attempt to separate the form from the content of faith in this way is bound to be contentious. At the empirical level, Fowler's research is based on research interviews in which people mostly reveal the mode of their believing through talking about what they believe. At the theoretical level, form and content are two parts of a single phenomenon (faith) that can only be separated by conceptual abstraction. Fowler accepts that the task is difficult. He also allows that changes in the form of faith that are brought about through human development will subtly modify a person's faith contents (ideas, stories, values, etc.), as these are 'reworked' at the new stage of development (Fowler, 1981, pp. 275, 285–286, 288, 290–291), essentially by being thought about differently. Thus, while the child's faith may still be said to be 'there' in the adult, in the sense that its contents are identifiably the same as before (provided that the adult believes in the same things that he believed in as a child), the faith of the child will have been 'amended and adapted through the glass of later ways of faith' as it contributes to the adult's faith (Astley, 1991, p. 3). Similarly, a conversion that leads us to devote ourselves to different gods or causes – that is, different objects and contents of faith – may help trigger a developmental change in our way of being in faith. This usually leads to some sort of 'recapitulation' of previous stages and a reorientation of the strengths and virtues of faith acquired at these earlier stages (Fowler, 1981, pp. 285, 287–291).

Fowler analyses the content (objects) of faith into three categories (1981, pp. 276–277). He writes that our images of our ultimate environment derive their unity and coherence from ‘a center (or centers) of value and power to which persons of faith are attracted with conviction’ (Fowler, 1992c, p. 329). (Although Fowler often uses the rather different phrase, ‘centers of value and images of power’, no real distinction is intended: cf. Fowler, 1981, p. 276). The contents of a person’s faith are what a person takes seriously, either because he or she honours and values them, or because they are perceived as having power over that person.

The third category of faith content, ‘master stories’ or ‘core stories’, may be thought of in terms of one’s personal mythology. This is an overarching narrative that functions as a metaphor for how one perceives and relates to Life, particularly one’s own life. Stories about God as the all seeing Judge may fulfil this specification, as may this more secular interpretation of life that was once told to Fowler:

The way I see it, if we have any purpose on this earth, it is just to keep things going. We can stir the pot while we are here and try to keep things interesting. Beyond that everything runs down: your marriage runs down, your body runs down, your faith runs down. We can only try to make it interesting.

(Fowler & Keen, 1978, p. 23)

Aspects of Faith

How is the form of human faithing understood? Fowler’s theory recognizes seven dimensions or *aspects of faith*, which he calls ‘windows or apertures into the structures underlying faith’ (Fowler, 1976, p. 186). This is a useful analogy that allows us to claim that, like the windows

of a house, each aspect gives only a restricted view of what lies within, and all of them together may not disclose everything about the house's furniture and occupants.

Although these seven aspects may lead us to focus on certain parts of faith at the expense of the whole, Fowler contends that faith is 'an orientation of the total person' (1981, p. 14) and that both cognition and affection are 'interwoven' in faith. He is frequently criticized for underplaying its social and affective components, but Fowler insists that he recognises faith's role as a way of valuing and living in a committed way, and that many of the aspects he identifies 'represent psychosocial as well as cognitive content' (Moseley, Jarvis & Fowler, 1986, p. 55; cf. Fowler, 2004, pp. 30–31). Faith gives shape to how people both construe *and relate to* the world, other people and whatever they take to be of ultimate value. Thus 'to "have faith" is to be related to someone or something in such a way that the heart is invested, our caring is committed, our hope is focused on the other' (Fowler & Keen, 1978, p. 18). Nevertheless, Fowler's aspects do seem to reflect the bias of his theory towards construing faith primarily as a way of knowing, thinking and judging.

Aspect A: Form of Logic. This aspect describes the characteristic pattern of thought that a person employs in making sense of the world. Fowler's Faith Stages 1 to 4 follow Piaget's account of a developmental movement from chaotic thinking to abstract ordered logic, by way of concrete inferential reasoning (see Piaget, 1967; Astley & Kay, 1998). Stage 5 thinking is more dialectical.

Aspect B: Social Perspective Taking. This aspect is concerned with how each of us constructs the inner life of another person, seen in relation to knowledge of one's own self. As people develop they slowly become better at taking the perspective of a wider range of increasingly different people.

Aspect C: Form of Moral Judgment. This aspect is concerned with how a person thinks about morality and how he or she makes moral decisions. Fowler's account broadly follows the stages postulated in the work of Lawrence Kohlberg (cf. Kohlberg, 1969, 1986).

Aspect D: Bounds of Social Awareness. Faith is usually a shared activity, and this aspect captures the way in which, and the extent to which, an individual recognizes others as belonging to his or her own 'faith community'. As faith develops, the boundaries of this 'faith church' widen.

Aspect E: Locus of Authority. This aspect describes how authorities are selected and how the person in faith relates to them: in particular, the authorities for this person's meaning-making.

Aspect F: Form of World Coherence. This aspect describes how a person constructs his or her world, especially their 'ultimate environment'. How do people hold together the different elements of their experience and the different things in which they believe, so as to form one coherent *worldview*?

Aspect G: Symbolic Function. This aspect relates to how we understand and use symbols. According to Fowler, this develops from regarding – and delighting in – symbols as sources of magical power at Stage 1, through a literal interpretation at Stage 2, to a 'demythologizing' of symbols into concepts that are subjected to criticism at Stage 4. A further development is possible to a post-critical 'second naïveté' at Stage 5, in which symbols regain something of their earlier power.

When is Faith?

Although the word ‘development’ is used quite widely in educational circles to denote changes in learning brought about by experience, and Christian educators sometimes describe the learning process they are concerned with as ‘faith development’, Fowler says relatively little about the development of faith in this sense. He is concerned, rather, with the psychologist’s – and, more generally, the biologist’s – notion of development as a change that is internally driven, rather than one dependent on external forces such as those that facilitate learning. Hence, faith development for Fowler is a progressive unfolding or maturation of faith.

Working within the theoretical paradigm of cognitive developmental psychology, Fowler postulated a sequence of discrete stages that progressively built on earlier stages. On this account of things a stage is an integrated system of mental operations (‘structures’) of thinking and valuing; in Fowler’s case this is made up of the seven component aspects. These stages of relative stability or ‘equilibration’ are said to alternate with periods of transition during which one or more of the faith aspects shifts in its form, until the whole structure (that is, all the aspects) changes and faith is restructured into a new, stable stage. This process may be thought of as losing (one way of being in) faith in order to gain (another way of) faith. Fowler writes that ‘to be “in” a given stage of faith means to have a characteristic way of finding and giving meaning to everyday life’. It is to have a worldview, ‘with a particular “take” on things’ (Fowler, 1996, p. 68).

While Fowler regards the sequence of stages as hierarchical (with each stage building on its predecessor) and invariant (one cannot ‘miss out’ a stage), not everyone moves through all the stages. In fact very few interviewees have ever been designated at Stage 6; and in Fowler’s original sample of 359 subjects of different ages, 65% were at Stages 3 or 4 or in

transition between them. Seventy-two percent of the seven to twelve age group were at Stage 2; 50% of the 13- to 20-year-olds at Stage 3; and 56% of the 41- to 51-year-olds at Stage 4. Many may continue in Stage 3 for most of their adult lives, and a few will remain at Stage 2.

Pre-stage 0: Primal or Undifferentiated Faith (circa 0–4 years). The foundations of faith are laid down at this pre-stage, in which the child’s ultimate environment is represented by her primary carer and immediate environment. In this context, faith begins with a disposition to trust, and our first ‘*pre-images* of God’ are mediated through ‘recognizing eyes and confirming smiles’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 121). (Clearly, this is not a stage that can be identified by formal interviews.)

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (circa 3–7 years). This stage is characterized by the great influence of images and symbols, which are viewed magically and form a chaotic collage that makes up the child’s ultimate environment. Thinking is intuitive, rather than discursive, and it is episodic – yielding an impressionistic scrap-book of thoughts, not an ordered pattern. The lack of control on the imagination makes faith at this stage very fertile, but sometimes dangerous.

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (circa 6–12). At this stage the child develops real skills of reasoning that enables him to order his experience so as to distinguish between true stories and fictions. Children at this stage thrive on stories and for them ‘the narrative structuring of experience . . . provides a central way of establishing identity’, through learning the stories of one’s own community (Fowler, 1987, p. 61). However, the child – who is here reasoning at a concrete level – can become trapped in a story and in his literal, one-dimensional view of symbols.

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (circa 11–18, and many adults). The person at this stage (usually an adolescent) can now think abstractly and reflectively, and has a new capacity for perspective-taking that leads her to conform to a group of significant others. It is out of the convictions and values of these other people that the person at Stage 3 ‘welds together’ (synthesizes) a form of second-hand faith: that is, a heteronomous, conformist and conventional worldview. At this stage, however, the person is not yet aware that she *has* a worldview, or where it comes from. ‘In this stage one is *embedded* in his or her faith outlook’ (Fowler & Osmer, 1985, p. 184).

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (from circa 17 or 18 onwards, or from one’s thirties or forties onwards). When the adult can no longer tolerate the diversity of views and roles that make up Stage 3 faithing, individuals may truly become individuals by detaching from the defining group and (metaphorically or literally) ‘leaving home’, enabling them to decide for themselves what it is they believe. At this stage one’s faith can really be said to be an *owned* faith, as heteronomy gives way to autonomy. The transition to Stage 4 is frequently marked by some form of struggle, and a vertiginous recognition of the variety of possible worldviews. (Sharon Parks distinguishes two distinct stages within Fowler’s Stage 4, the first being a post-adolescent, young adult stage of wary and tentative ‘probing commitment’ before adulthood is reached: Parks, 1986, p. 76.) The new capacity and impulse to judge for one’s self, and to justify one’s own truth, may make some who are at this stage unwilling to recognize the value of other voices, and rather over-reliant on their own reasoning powers.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith. (This is rare before age 30 – only 7% of Fowler’s total sample are at this stage, although another 8% are in transition towards it.) What Stage 4 ‘struggled to

bring under consciousness and control', Stage 5 'must allow to become porous and permeable' (Fowler, 1986, p. 30). There is now a new openness to the interpretations of others and a new willingness to live with truths in tension, including the paradoxes and ambiguities of the mature life of faith (Fowler, 1984, p. 65). This is not, however, the easy relativism that claims that 'all voices are true' (which is more characteristic of Stage 3, cf. Astley, 2000b), but a confidence in their own viewpoint that allows some people humbly to recognize both the multidimensionality of truth and that reason cannot decide everything on its own.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith. (This is a very rare stage, represented by only 0.3% of Fowler's sample; its characteristics are usually only shown by those who are advanced in years.) Essentially an extrapolation from Stage 5, this form of faith involves a relinquishing and transcending of the self, and discovers a new simplicity at the other side of complexity. In Stage 6, 'a person more and more becomes herself as she increasingly widens her circle of concern and truth-finding' (Astley, 1991, p. 35).

(For more detail about the stages, see Fowler, 1981, Part IV.)

Criticisms

Despite some unease in a number of areas – including the generality and abstraction of Fowler's constructs, the wide-ranging nature of his hypothesis, and the large number of unproven assumptions it involves – Nelson and Aleshire's review of Fowler's research concluded on a fairly positive note (Nelson & Aleshire, 1986, pp. 199–200), arguing that: (a) Fowler treats his data very tentatively; (b) the research is adequate 'for the proposal of a theory', if not for its confirmation (although 'to some extent this theory can be

disconfirmed'), and (c) 'his research methods are, by and large, quite consistent with his structuralist approach'. John Snarey's statistical study, which used faith development analysis to study kibbutzim, very few of whom 'considered themselves religious in any theistic sense' (Snarey, 1991, p. 289), supported several elements in Fowler's theory: (a) that there is indeed a general, unified dimension of faith development; (b) that variations in other relevant criteria (including moral and ego development) covary with faith development in a coherent manner; and (c) that the faith of non Christians and nontheists is not undervalued by Fowler's model. Stephen Parker has recently concluded that the faith development interview 'is clearly adequate for research purposes' (Parker, 2006).

Nevertheless, Fowler's claims have been widely criticised. Much of this criticism has focused on the difficulty of providing adequate empirical support for this 'grand hypothesis' of faith development through his chosen methodology of analyzing transcriptions of semi-structured interviews. This process involves treating each interview response as expressing one of the seven aspects of faith, and identifying the stage level of these aspects. The resulting scores are then 'averaged out' for a given aspect and then again across all seven aspects to identify the interviewee's overall faith stage, which tends to flatten out scores. Interviews that span two, or even more, stages are taken to represent transition between stages.

It is also a weakness that very little longitudinal work has been done (although see Smith, 2003), leaving the pattern of faith development largely to be inferred from cross-sectional data. It has been further argued that scores on measures of religious judgment and faith reasoning lie too close to those of moral judgment for them to be treated as distinctive from them; and that there is such diversity in the 'religious voice' that the idea of any underlying development of deep structures of meaning-making seems implausible (Day, 2001; 2002).

Concern has also been expressed that Fowler's scheme fits male development better than that of females (see Slee, 1996, pp. 88–92), a view that parallels Carol Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Gilligan, 1980, 1982). A number of studies of women's faith development argue that Fowler's account of Stage 4 is particularly inadequate. Karen DeNicola writes that 'persons who fail to blend reason and feeling – specifically persons who rely solely on rational certainty – can too easily be scored at Stage 4' (Moseley, Jarvis & Fowler, 1993, Appendix H). The work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986, ch. 6) distinguishes two ways in which females may move into what they call 'procedural knowing' (which is akin to Stage 4): a 'separate' style involving distancing and objective reasoning, and a 'connected' style that majors on reflection through participation and dialogue. Fowler admits (in Astley & Francis, 1992, pp. xii–xiii) that females – and some males – who tread this second path may be underscored in his analysis. Fowler also accepts that any claims to cultural *universality* for his faith development sequence, as opposed to his claim about the universality of human faith as such, would require the support of much more evidence from cross-cultural studies (see Slee, 1996, pp. 86–88).

A more theoretical critical question is often raised as to whether Fowler's developmental scheme is to be regarded merely as *descriptive* of how human faith does develop, or as representing an intentionally or unintentionally *normative* prescription of how faith – and therefore spirituality? – should develop. Certainly, Fowler's Stage 6, for which there is so little empirical support, must be regarded as a normative extrapolation from Stage 5. Fowler himself allows that his theory has:

established a normative thesis about the shape of human maturity and fulfillment. . . . [since] other things being equal, it is desirable for persons to

continue the process of development, engaging in the often protracted struggles that lead to stage transition and the construction of new and more complex patterns of meaning making.

(Fowler, in Astley & Francis, 1992, pp. xi–xii)

Yet he also insists both that each stage has its own dignity and integrity, and that each may be appropriate: that is, the right stage ‘at the right time’ for a person’s life (1981, p. 274).

Certainly, people at later stages are not to be regarded as more valuable, nor as more ‘religious’, ‘saintly’ or ‘saved’ – and, similarly, not as ‘more spiritual’. Without doubt, however, people in these later stages reveal an increased capacity for understanding complex experiences, and frequently a wider and more consistently human care for others.

Many scholars have insisted that Fowler is most vulnerable in his reliance on a framework of cognitive developmentalism based on Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget (see, e.g., Day, 2001; Heywood, 1992 and forthcoming). Such theories, it is alleged, hardly do justice to the complex, multi-faceted nature and context of human development, or the influences that bear upon it. Fowler himself has recently admitted that ‘the most vulnerable feature’ of formalist stage theories such as his own is ‘the tendency to overtrust the structuring power of the formally describable operations of knowing and construing’, acknowledging that this can be ‘only half his story’ of what shapes and maintains a person’s worldview (Fowler, 2001, p. 169). The rest of the tale surely requires reference to a person’s cultural environment and life history, and perhaps to his or her personality as well. Fowler, with a nod to Heinz Streib (see below), even proposes his own theory of types (but of people rather than of faith – e.g. ‘rational critical’, ‘diffuse’), which could ‘crosscut stages but not replace them’.

It should be pointed out that, although Fowler's recent work has focused more on practical theology than on the psychology of religious development, there have been some shifts in his thinking on faith development. These include the integration of psychodynamic and psychosocial categories from the work of Robert Kegan (1982) in Fowler, 1987, and of Daniel Stern (1985, 2000) and Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1991) in Fowler, 1996. These modifications have begun to take the account of faith development beyond the narrow confines of pure structural developmentalism and the rather etiolated notion of faith that it generates.

Heinz Streib is another who criticizes faith development theory for its narrow point of view, resulting from its espousal of cognitive development as the motor of religious development (e.g. Streib, 2003b, pp. 124–126; 2003c, p. 7). He argues that faith development theory needs to account not only for structural diversity, but also for diversity in the content (especially the narratives) of faith (Streib, 1991; 2003a, p. 36). Drawing on his own empirical studies, Streib has proposed a reformulation of faith development theory. He prefers a typology of religious *styles of faith* that places more emphasis on narratives about a person's life history and accounts of her 'life world', as well as research evidence from the psychodynamics of a person's representation of God. These faith styles are modelled as a series of overlapping curves, which replace Fowler's sequence of non-overlapping stages understood as structural wholes connected by periods of transition. The curves that represent each faith style rise from a low level and 'descend again after a culminating point' (Streib, 2001, p. 149); each then persists at a lower level while succeeding styles come into their own. Each of these styles may begin to show its effect rather earlier than Fowler's theory of stages would allow, and each continues to be relevant after it has reached its biological peak. At any one time, then, an individual may have access to a range of different faith styles. Unlike the sequential, invariant and hierarchical typology of stages as structural wholes that are

restructured and *transformed* during development, this revised perspective sees development largely as a matter of an individual's operating through and coping with his or her integration of a number of faith styles.

Streib's theory designates five religious styles, each of which show obvious parallels with Fowler's stages:

- (1) the *subjective* religious style of the infant;
- (2) the *instrumental-reciprocal* religious style of later childhood, which is dominated by story-telling;
- (3) the *mutual religious* style characteristic of adolescence;
- (4) the *individuating-systemic* religious style, which focuses on reasoned reflection and adopts a critical distance from matters of belief, while at the same time hungering for intimacy and relatedness;
- (5) the *dialogical* religious style, which is more open to beliefs different from one's own and involves a certain 'letting go' of the self.

In the latest edition of the *Manual for Faith Development Research*, the authors write:

While the perspective that faith development proceeds in a sequence of stages by which persons shape their relatedness to a transcendent center or centers of value is the basic framework of faith development theory and research, the assumption that a stage forms a 'structural whole' cannot be postulated a priori and prior to empirical investigation, when, besides cognitive development, the psycho-dynamic and relational-interpersonal dimensions of development, the (changing) relations to self and tradition, are included and when we theoretically allow for coexistence, for regressions to, or revivals of, earlier biographical forms of meaning-making. . . . Thus, it cannot be excluded that

individuals may revert to earlier styles, that elements of different styles are at the disposal of a person at the same time.

Taking up and trying to integrate these recent contributions, faith development research accounts for the multidimensionality of faith development, including biographical, psycho-dynamic and social contexts.

(Fowler, Streib & Keller, 2004, p. 13)

Writing some years before, and from a far less research-based perspective, the Christian educationalist John Westerhoff also proposed ‘four distinctive styles of faith’: experienced, affiliative, searching and owned faith. He likened these to the annual rings of a tree, with the individual retaining the earlier faith style as a new one is added, and being capable of re-adopting the earlier style at any time (Westerhoff, 1976, pp. 89–103). In his later work, Westerhoff declared that he had moved on from speaking of faith development and (surprisingly) of ‘four stages of faith’, expressing a preference for the metaphors of ‘pathways’ or ‘trails’ in the journey of faith: the affiliative–experiencing, illuminative-reflective and unitive-integrating ways. Unlike Fowler’s understanding of sequential faith development, these may be travelled ‘at any time, in any order’, with the individual returning at will to an earlier track (Westerhoff, 1983, pp. 44–46).

Relevance and Implications

Despite the criticism voiced by Nelson and Aleshire about the limitations of Fowler’s research method, these authors concluded by asking whether the developmental journey that he traces “‘rings true’” with travellers who reflect equally seriously on their own constructions of meaning, values, relationships and centers of power’ (in Nelson & Aleshire, 1986, p. 200). Many have responded to the question in the affirmative. Thus Nicola Slee

writes that Fowler's work 'continues to offer a rich resource to educators, pastors and others concerned with the development of spirituality' (Slee, 1996, p. 92). A number of areas of faith development theory and research have been cited as providing a relevant and illuminating perspective on human spirituality and wellbeing, and the work of the helping professions (see Streib, 2003a, pp. 16–19).

Religious education. Education into (rather than nonconfessionally 'about') religion is the area of practice that has adopted the faith development conceptualization most enthusiastically (see Seymour & Miller, 1982, ch. 4; Hull, 1985, ch. 4; Fowler, Nipkow & Schweitzer, 1992; Astley & Francis, 1992, section 8; Astley, 2000a; Fowler, 2004, pp. 413–415). This may seem surprising, given that Fowler's theory deals with human development rather than learning, but educators need to take account of the stage of development of learners in planning their teaching (see Stokes, 1982; Moseley & Brockenbrough, 1988; Blazer, 1989; Astley, 1991, pp. 70–77; Fowler, 1984; 1991a). In this context, for example, Fowler's work encourages religious educators to recognize the importance of images with learners at Stage 1, and of stories with those at Stage 2. It might also influence them to be more sensitive to the adolescent who is at Stage 3, and not yet ready to take responsibility for his or her own decisions about beliefs and value. They might also anticipate the rather rigid 'Either/Or' ideology of the person at Stage 4, which contrasts so markedly with the 'Both/And' openness of the more mature adult at Stage 5. We should note, however, that according to Fowler, 'it should never be the primary goal of religious education simply to precipitate and encourage stage advancement. . . . Movement in stage development . . . is a by-product of teaching the substance and the practices of faith' (2004, p. 417).

Much religious education in churches and elsewhere is targeted at groups rather than individuals, and often needs to accommodate people at a variety of faith stages (as is the case

with many sermons and services). For Streib, a religious styles perspective should release educators to get children and adults to ‘understand and anticipate the higher stages . . . and [even] . . . adopt them on a trial basis’ (Streib, 2004, p. 432).

Pastoral work (including spiritual counselling) is the next most influenced area, with Fowler’s monograph on faith development and pastoral care (Fowler, 1987) being a particular inspiration here. Those with both educational and pastoral interests are likely to take seriously Fowler’s remarks about the importance of the ‘modal development level’ of a congregation or other religious community (its average expectable level of adult faith development); as well as the significance of generating a ‘climate of developmental expectation’ by providing ‘rites of passage and opportunities for vocational engagement that call forth the gifts and emergent strengths of each stage of faith’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 296). Many of the mainstream topics in pastoral care – including the interaction of religion with health and coping – seem open to enrichment from a theory of faith stages or styles.

In brief, ‘the pastoral care of individuals needs to be informed by as full account as possible of “where they are”’ (Astley, 1991, p. 66; cf. Astley & Francis, 1992, section 7). Spiritual counsellors, like educators, will need to take account of people’s developmental stage in seeking to help them walk their own spiritual paths (see Stokes, 1982; Fowler, 1984; Astley & Wills, 1999).

The family is another area where pastoral care and educational concerns overlap. The family has its own developmental history which overlaps with the faith development of its individual members; it also provides a paradigm of a social unit that comprises people at different faith stages (or styles), who need to live, work, care and learn together. The family with its shared stories, memories, celebrations and rituals – representing a shared faith content – may be

viewed as a faith community or ‘domestic church’, where both the problems and possibilities of unity-with-diversity may be helpfully informed by an account of the variety of ways of being in faith that it comprises (see Fowler, 1990, 1992c).

Public theology has been a growing interest of James Fowler in recent years. In this context he takes up Martin Marty’s concern for a ‘public church’ (Marty, 1981) that contributes towards understanding and enriching the common good of society. Faith development theory is relevant here if, as Fowler argues, a postconventional (and, preferably, a Stage 5 faith) is necessary for a public church of this kind.

History of ideas. In some of his writings (see especially Fowler, 1992b and 1996), the sequence of faith development has been used by Fowler to illuminate the oft-remarked shift in cultural consciousness from a society structured by external authority (which parallels Stage 3), through the Enlightenment focus on reason and autonomy (Stage 4), to our current ‘postmodern’ (Stage 5) outlook of openness to multiple, dialectical perspectives on the truth. This claim might illuminate the cultural and intellectual context of much contemporary spirituality.

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