

The Stages of Faith Development

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Stage 1

Learning the patterns of discovering a sense of caring by others, and the ability to feel a sense of belonging and welcome, and to feel that his or her environment has value.

This first stage represents the first two years in the life of the child. The quality of parenting is the essential item in this stage. The schema of the developmental theories also emphasise this as a foundation for human growth and development. Here, Fowler reinforces the fact that the environment, and the very first kinds of non-verbal communication, insure the beginning of a healthy life, and, in this case, the beginning of a *healthy faith life*.¹

If we relate this stage to spiritual formation, there are at least three issues we need to consider. How the seminarian has come through this stage of development is important. At present, a growing proportion of tertiary students has come from transitional communities of the nation, and not just the traditional community. Studies have shown that reasonable, well-adjusted parents, who are secure in their own environment, and confident of their role, will reflect this in their parental caring. In turn, this security and confidence becomes a part of the life experience for the infant and the growing child. Erickson has said, “the amount of trust derived from earliest infantile experience does not seem to depend on absolute quantities of food, or demonstrations of love, but, rather, on the quality of the maternal relationship”.

Let us apply a theological interpretation to this parenting role, in the foundation years of 0 to age 2. Martin Luther used the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed to highlight the role of the family in God’s order of creation. In the Small Catechism,

¹ James Fowler, “Faith Development: Theory and Research”, unpublished paper no 1972, Cambridge MA: Harvard Divinity School.

Luther points out how the infant/child receives, not only existence, but an identity, via the parents.² The family is the context, through which God places life, and this context becomes the framework for how, in turn, this life becomes a response of service to God. Later, we will return to this concept of the centrality of the family in faith formation.

A second issue, is the concern for spiritual formation of the seminarian and spouse, who, in addition, might have a parenting role. The attention, and the interest, of the seminary in this situation is a very real aspect of spiritual formation. The seminarian, and the family, need to be aware of the stress they face while in the seminary community. If the issues of insecurity and threat they feel are not examined and understood here, these same emotions will follow them out of the seminary.

And there is a third issue. As seminary lecturers have a responsibility in the process of formation, it is important that they have some ideas about their own developmental origins. We are all, in some way, a product, of image, of how we have passed through our developmental stages. It is relevant, then, that seminary lecturers explore their own unique family of origin. In this exploration, one's own history of the adequacies, and the inadequacies, of development help to better understand the seminarian, and also better enable the seminary lecturer to assist the seminarian to grow, and to be able to help others.

Stage 2

Intuitive-Projective Faith

The child is beginning to test his/her limits related to adults. In this limited understanding of cause and effect, the child is placing (projecting) wishes, or expectations, onto what has been experienced. The child is aware of piety and faithfulness in parents, and others, who are significant teachers, or examples. In this stage, religious

² From the explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed., Philadelphia PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1959.

action, or valuing, is in imitating others. The observation, and the imitation, of moods, language, and even gestures, gives the beginning of structure, which will later help to define faith.

In Fowler's schema of faith development, Stage 2 points to the family as the primary place where the child learns the concrete reality of what we call community. Fowler describes the child's family of origin as the means of achieving, what he calls, "belonging" ("we", and "those of us", or "those like us").

In Stage 2, we would say that the way in which a child imitates what is seen and experienced in the family structure is important in the process of establishing the seeds of faith. We can observe how children (age 2-4 years) imitate adults, who carry bilums; handle, and use, bush knives or axes; work in the garden; or how they sing the songs they have heard from others. In the same way, parents, by folding hands at prayer, offer a particular example, which the children will follow. Within the community of origin, the child is learning about life outside himself or herself, and the authority for this learning is the family. And at the same time, it is this same learning process, which is creating the interior person.

Today, we must also take note of the impact of transitional culture in the Stage 2 development. Children, growing up outside of their parents' communities of origin, are exposed to a variety of cultural patterns. And it is these patterns, often imitated by marriages made by the children, that are both cross-cultural and cross-religious, which are concrete examples of the changing culture, in which children grow up today. Now, let us turn our attention to Religious Socialisations, an important part of this Stage 2 development, and our discussion of spiritual formation.

Religious Socialisation

For a start, we may say that there are at least three elements fundamental to the process of socialisation.

First, the way we think things to be, and our resulting behaviour, are learned in a social context: through the interaction of family members, kinship ties, peers, significant others, and through the participation in a community. This community, we could say, is the distinctive culture, from which one has his or her origins.

Second, the fact that such a group can continue to exist over a long period of time, is due to the groups being able to reach agreement as to how they understand life, and to exercise the appropriate way to think, to feel, and to behave.

And third, socialisation takes place, because people transmit their way of life from one generation to another. How these thoughts and behaviour and values are transmitted might be accomplished either formally or informally, either planned or unplanned.

John Westerhoff III, a religious educator, has made some valuable observations about faith, and its relationship to the issues of spiritual formation, that we are talking about now.

Before we talk of religion, as the container of faith, Westerhoff would say that we need to understand the nature of faith. He says: "Faith is the expression of meaning, revealed in a person's life-style, or that foundation, upon which persons live their lives, that point of centredness, or ultimacy, that underlies, and is expressed abstractly in a worldview, and value system, or, more concretely, in the way persons think, feel, and act."³

Religion, he would say, is the reality of faith, or it is form, and the content, of faith given some shape. And so, we would expect that organised religious communities, with rituals and symbols, and expressions of belief and organisational patterns, are answering the need for meaning in life, by supporting and nourishing what we call faith.

³ John Westerhoff III, and Gwen Kenneth Neville, in *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed., Philadelphia PA: Muhlenburg Press, 1959, p. 40.

The important point that Westerhoff makes here is that faith is given meaning by those who live and act in the community. He says that, while this is a life-long process, it is particularly important in the early years, when a child observes and identifies acceptable role models, and later in adolescence, when young people are encouraged to participate with adults in performing actions sanctioned by the community as expressions of faith.

The cultural anthropologist, Ruth Benedict, has said that we are both the producer (creator) and the product (creature) of our culture. Today, in Melanesia, we might ask ourselves if the traditional beliefs, or even the more-recent Christian beliefs at the time of missionisation, are as authoritative today, as they once were? It seems that the diffusion, and the ambivalence, of values today is a weak link in the chain of what is meant to nourish and fortify the community of faith. Without the strong communities of faith, on which the young can focus, we have the possibility of a spiritual wilderness.

Whether we want to admit it or not, the “seminary community” is an artificial community. But, like it or not, it is the only community we have, in which the process of adult spiritual formation takes place for ministers and priests of the church in Papua New Guinea. Artificial or not, it is likely that the seminary is the first place, in many years, that a candidate has had to identify with a family of faith; to bear the responsibilities and obligations of a family, and to face the consequence of inappropriate behaviours of faith; transgressing “community law”.

It is sufficient, we say, for the lecturer to concentrate his time and effort in theological study, and class preparation. To take a parenting role, seems to be asking too much. If we examine how seminarians respond to, and accept, the basic symbols and rituals of faith, we can better understand that they are, for the first time in their lives, confronted with them. The value of the seminary community cannot be underestimated, in both faith development, and spiritual formation.

I think enough has been said about Stage 2. We can summarise by saying that the child's faith development is influenced by the process of religious socialisation. How seriously is a child's development affected by the stress of the changing culture, in which parenting takes place today?

Stage 3

Affiliative-Conventional Faith

The family of origin has a continuing influence, however, because experience in the world beyond the family requires the making of comparative judgments. As the child's abilities and skills increase with involvement in the world, there develops a right way and a wrong way to do things. Where there is exposure to persons of faith, and a community of faith, there will be a sense of belonging, and a feeling of being glad that one belongs. Unless some unforeseen excessive seriousness about faith symbols develops, the child will continue to draw primarily on the beliefs and values of the parents, or other nurturing sources, to express and to act out faith.

In his analyses of Stage 3 faith development, Fowler provides more information in our search to identify adequate structures for spiritual formation at the seminary level.

He indicates that, as the child moves from the second stage of a more-protected and guided environment of socialisation, the reality of the world – a world of differences from the family – requires that concrete judgments must be made about certain issues. In other words, there is a growing sense of what is right and wrong, based on experience within the family, or the community or origin. Fowler comments that some children, in their primary school years, are perhaps frustrated by parents, who, in the effort to be "fair", are unwilling to say, "this is the right way to do it", or "this is the way we do it in our home or community".⁴

⁴ Fowler, "Faith Development", p. 7.

Of particular interest for us, is the observation that, as the child is encountering values and beliefs that differ from his or her own, there is a need for the continuity of personal meaning, within this context of change. Here, we would agree that, for many growing up in Melanesia today, there is more change than continuity. Of course, within these changes, not all are detrimental to development.

While preparing this paper, it was interesting to have a 1973 MLS graduate say that he has just sent his VCR home: “home” being a somewhat isolated coastal area in the Morobe Province. And, even in that brief statement, he commented that he wondered if technology was really “appropriate” technology. To say, “there is no difficulty in identifying, and moving between, changing culture today” is to minimise and underestimate the decisions that Melanesians make that have some ultimate bearing on continuity and change.

Stage 3 of Fowler’s schema indicates that faith development is a process that takes place in the family or origin, *but*, more importantly, it is inter-generational. One American theologian makes a strong case that a child’s exposure to fathers hitting mothers increases the likelihood of husband to wife, and wife to husband, aggression in the next generation.⁵ On the basis of a variety of researches, Smith points out that a way to predict the occurrence of future physical abuse in the family is to look at violence in a spouse’s family or origin.⁶

These observations are relevant, both to Stage 3 Faith Development, and to spiritual formation, because they form a basis for the concrete measurement of faith and action, based on experience within the family of origin. How does this apply to spiritual formation?

⁵ Archie Smith, Jr, *The Significance of the Religion of Jesus to People who Stand with Their Backs Against the Wall of Family Violence: a Vision for a New Humanity: Implications for the Pastoral Care of Souls*, an undated monograph.

⁶ D. Kalmuss, “The intergenerational transmission of marital aggression”, in *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46 (1984), pp. 11-19.

First, seminarians, with the assistance of their spiritual advisers, need to have some awareness of their history, and its implications for their life. Inappropriate behaviour, due to poorly-formed self-identity, can have lasting cross-generational consequences. It seems that early family relationships, which contribute to uncertainty and ambivalence about roles and behaviour, will sometimes, for the individual, become “unfinished business” that, as the basis of values and belief, become what is transmitted across the generations.⁷

Also, the seminarian, on the basis of the beliefs and the values, which he learned in the family, forms the attitudes that become the background for the learning and the practice of pastoral care, both at the seminary level, and later in the ministry.

This raises the inevitable question, how consciously, and how effectively, does the community of faith – the parish – serve as the place, or the context, to serve the primary relationships of people in their formation and nurture of the Christian life? This is the point that Westerhoff was raising when he talked about the function of “religious socialisation”.

We seek the ideal relationship between the generations and the community of faith, and this search is an area of concern in spiritual formation. Smith suggests that a part of the problem is the struggle with “power relationship”. Although Smith was not addressing his remarks to Papua New Guinea, they are relevant here. Here, in Papua New Guinea, what he sees is much evidence of discontinuity between cultures of yesterday and today. As individuals, and even cultural communities, move into interaction with new cultural forms, the challenge of change, or dislocation, comes at the same time.

In a typical confrontation with cultures, some Melanesians opt for the possibility of status and wealth, which can easily become an individual, rather than a community, goal. Another option, on a theological basis, is submission in a faith life, described in Eph 4, which speaks of the body of Christ. In this

⁷ Smith, *Significance of the Religion of Jesus*, p. 37.

way, the new Christological faith forms the basis of a new community. Now, it must be understood that Smith is directing his remarks towards a clearer understanding of marriage and the community of the family. But the implications of this new community go far beyond a limited understanding of family relationships.

Schroeder raises an interesting point about theology and family formation. In comments on the explanation of the Apostles' Creed by Luther, he indicates that the family is not primarily an instrument of gospel. The family is a system that provides and sustains, but "exposes each one's sin".⁸ We could say, however, that it is in this exposure that God's presence is revealed, and the issue becomes the agenda of faith.

Stage 4

Individuation and Ideological Faith

Aided by the ability of abstract thinking, the young person seeks to form a reliable image of social meaning and value – what is actual, and what is possible. The questions, "who am I to others?" and "who can I be to others?" are being asked. There is a new and more-serious effort to find reasons, or causes, for loyalty and commitment, that conform to a new selfhood, and which are not dictated by family-of-origin authority. The person sees many options available in a new awareness of values and meaning in life. He or she comes to an awareness that the richness and the variety of religious symbols, and explanations previously experienced, have a deeper meaning, not yet explored.

As a word of transition from Stages 3 to 4, I mention a letter, received during the preparation of this presentation, from a former lecturer at Martin Luther Seminary. He informed me that, before Easter, his father had died. He said, "I thought that I had grown to be on my own, and that I would not mourn so much, I

⁸ Edward H. Schroeder, in *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed., Philadelphia PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1959, pp. 107-108.

had not realised the meaning, and the influence, of this faith on my life.”

Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg, who also offer stage-development theories, agree with Fowler that, between the ages of 5 to 8, the development of a moral consciousness to make decisions occurs cross-culturally, with universal regularity. There is something, however, for us in Melanesia, to note regarding moral development in Stages 2 and 3. Theologically, we can speak of guilt, but, in some cultures in Papua New Guinea, shame is the issue, and not guilt, as we normally understand the term.⁹

The importance of shame can be related to how a person, growing up, either contributes to the name and the reputation of his or her clan, or detracts from it. This Stage 4 seems an important time for making the distinction between shame and guilt, as the questions are asked, “Who am I to others?” and “Who can I be to others?” It is, perhaps, a time when loyalties to the extended family of origin, self, and the community of faith, are tested by the fire of reality. Faith development during this Stage 4 is acknowledged by different sources to be a time for comparing both the ideals of what one has for their life, and the reality of experience. There comes a more-conscious analysis of the cultural community, and the faith community. This stage is a time when the young adult wants the content in life to be clear, exact, rational, and to be functional.¹⁰

In the changing culture of Melanesia today, clarity, exactness, rationality, and functionality are sometimes more abstract goals than concrete reality. Wealth, status, and family have been issues in the development patterns of traditional culture. Today, however, the context in which these goals are pursued, and the means for achieving them, are quite different from the traditional context. One anthropologist has said:

⁹ Paul Brennan, *Enga concepts of moral development: a personal paper regarding morals and ethics at the secondary-school level in Enga*, 1974.

¹⁰ Paul J. Philbert, “Readiness for ritual”, in *Alternative Futures for Worship*, vol 1, Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987, p.73.

A prerequisite for cultural continuity is for the social group to reproduce itself for the next generation by (1) finding suitable marriage partners for the young people, and (2) providing ways to enculturate the offspring of these unions. Both social reproduction, through mating properly, and cultural reproduction, by the process of socialising the young, are necessary to produce a viable, ongoing community. In such a community, children will grow up to be like other adults of the ethnos; they will have absorbed, from all the informal and formal educational signals, the set of rules for being a full participant in the culture.¹¹

This same anthropologist studied an ethnic community in the United States, which had developed, in their culture, some very strong religious ties. She observed, in this cultural religious group, a people, who identified themselves as a community, because of their baptism. This particular group held yearly reunions to bring people back to the origin, and the heritage, they shared together as members of the Christian community, in which they were baptised. In fact, the name that these people shared was “children of the Covenant”.

In her analysis of this particular Christian community, she noted that its success came from the fact that people of a common history, but separated by their varied locations, still kept in touch with their community of origin. In coming together, the community was able to share and strengthen the faith, which originally brought them together. In this experience, she observed, it is possible that “sacred communities” can be the instruments for the strengthening of people, who live in the midst of secularisation and modernisation. It was in the community of faith that this particular cultural group was able to presence itself in a trans-generational way.

Here in Melanesia, we must take seriously the fact that the traditional “communities of faith”, that would have existed in a village situation, are no longer as strong as they once were. If we

¹¹ Westerhoff, and Neville, *The Book of Concord*, p. 55.

looked at the intake of seminary students, we would find a marked change from the enrolment of those primarily from village situations to those who are now from the urban areas. We would probably find that, in either case, the seminarian, today, comes from a background where the issues of secularisation have been a part of the seminarian's life experience.

And for faith development, the question must be asked, has the seminarian, in the turmoil of change, discovered a sustaining "community of faith"? Is the Christian community providing the home, in which the family of origin of future seminarians is able, successfully, face the challenge of secularisation? Let us turn to Stage 5, in Fowler's schema, where these issues will be considered.

Stage 5

Consolidative – Functional Faith (Relativist)

The young adult begins to ask questions, "What are you for?" "Whose will you be?" "To what cause will you give your loyalty and energy?" The answers to these questions reflect a faith, in which there has developed an inner meaning. So, these questions do not require a new approach each day. Where the young adult has had important interaction with the community of faith, and where respect for symbols and beliefs remains strong, faith remains a fundamental part of the decision-making process in life. At the same time, the young adult is developing the need to cope with crisis situations, which are a part of the entrance into adult life. The young adult begins to recognise contradictions in life that are in opposition to the meaning and values that were a part of the earlier stages.

If the faith development theory of Fowler is useful in trying to talk about spiritual formation, then this stage 5 is especially important. It is during this stage development that our seminarians are making choices for their post-secondary future. And it is, at this same time, that young adults are experiencing the most stresses of peer relationships, and the pressures exerted

in the cultural, political, economic, and religious issues of the day.

The big question of the young adult revolves around how these issues fit into life, and how the answer will affect the future. For many years now, the cultural continuity, and stability, that would assist in answer to these questions, has been gone. As one writer describes the situation: “We are now challenged by the process called modernity.”¹² O’Donnell helps us to understand the impact that modernity makes on young adults, who are pre-seminarian, and seminarians here in Papua New Guinea. Following are some issues of modernity that illustrate how the faith of the young adult in Stage 5 is challenged today.

First, modernity is morally neutral. Modernity sees the immediate value of something, rather than analysing deeper values. Some would say, that, in modernity, values are unknown. Modernity reduces traditional cultures into what is a single culture, which is accepted as the norm for all cultures. Modernity, in an evil way, is critical of all other cultures.¹³ Because nations like Papua New Guinea are eager to adapt the applications of modern research and technology, modernity is set into motion for good and for evil.

Modernity is something like an addictive drug. “It satisfies curiosity, power, prestige, and possessive attitudes. It says – often accurately – that:

faster is better than slower;
newer is better than older;
now is better than later.

It lures us through five stages of addiction:

from the unneeded to the attractive;

¹² Des O’Donnell, “The process called modernity”, from a Sedos Seminar 1988.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88/146.

from the attractive to the useful;
from the useful to the necessary;
from the necessary to that which cannot be given
up.¹⁴

The result of modernity is to weaken, and ultimately destroy, the link between the life of people, and their cultural and faith communities of origin. *Belonging*, for instance, is an important aspect of culture and faith. Modernity inspires economic motivation, which often leads to mobility, which is in tension with the basic values of belonging.

As the value of belonging is influenced by mobility, there are other issues affecting faith development in this Stage 5. Alienation is one. Urbanisation draws together masses of people, but their presence to be for one another, and to be present with one another, in a personal way, does not happen.

People, who are separated from their family, and faith of origin, tend to stand alone in their own self-awareness. The anxiety they experience in living explains some of the physical and mental health problems that we see on the rise in Papua New Guinea.

And the message conveyed by the media, and strengthened by the possessive nature of modernity, is: consume! This message to control and manipulate, both people and the environment, is often in opposition to the message of community solidarity, and a faith response to values that are timeless, and not just for the moment.

Martin Marty, a respected church historian at the University of Chicago Divinity School, said recently, "Institutional church life is in decline, people are not staying with the roots of their church, but picking and choosing, as a consumer, what pleases them at the moment."¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 88/149.

¹⁵ Martin Marty, *International Herald*, April 27, 1989.

Stage 5 faith development, in the context of Melanesian culture, is then a challenging period for the young adult. As it is a time of great change, the symbols and content of faith learned from the community become very important. And, the quality of the nurturing of faith during this stage would also seem to be important. Fowler likes to describe faith as a verb. Through these stages, faith is in action. Here in Papua New Guinea, that fits well with our cultural concern for relationships. And, during this Stage 5, as faith is expressed in relationship, by doing and belonging, the subject of values and moral responsibility is important. About the relationship between this moral development and the church, Smith has said: "The parish is primarily an all-inclusive and trans-generational community of faith, gathered to worship God, to hear the good news of the gospel proclaimed, in word and song, to share the sacraments, and to experience the mystery and grace of God. *It is also a context for moral and spiritual discourse, and discernment, as well as relationships.*"

Stage 6

Universalising Faith

This stage is a movement from the truths and values that are beyond the person's own interest and identity. In this stage, the trust and the "knowing" of what is beyond seeing does not hinder, or block, relationships. In this stage, the symbols of the past become important for the value they have been in having an understanding of God, which is beyond just symbols.

Now, let us try to call on Fowler's theory, to see where we are today in Papua New Guinea, and in our search for some methods of spiritual formation.

Through the process of faith development, there emerges the reality of a covenant. This covenant is a binding of people together in mutual trust and loyalty, with God as the centre of values. And, in this covenant, people stand in relationship with others, in the reality of the world. But, one more important step in the process is the renewing, and the regular making alive, of

this covenant, as the source, and the centre, of reality, and values, and power.¹⁶

Faith can be understood and evaluated by knowing and observing the results. Development of faith, through the stages, is related to what a person knows. James says, "Faith without works is dead." And, in Matthew, "By their fruits you will know them."

Fowler says, "Faith is a knowing, which includes loving, caring, and valuing."¹⁷ But Fowler makes an important addition to this first aspect of faith development, and the meaning of faith. He says, "Faith is knowing and valuing, as patterned processes, and not only the knowledge itself."¹⁸ It is the content, then, of the images, and the relationships, and the symbols, which come out of the person's community of faith, which are essential for shaping values, and determining behaviour. For our purposes, the value of Fowler's stage theory reminds us that there is a structure to an eventual faith knowing.

And we are reminded about the reality of Melanesian culture, now in the midst of dramatic changes. Modernity and secularisation do affect the knowing and the doing of faith.

Some Conclusions

Our knowledge of faith development, as a process, is helpful in several ways. For us in the church, we have the vocation to lead the search of the wholeness of faith. The stage development analysis for faith helps to emphasise the importance of this wholeness. We are also encouraged in our vocation to "re-vitalise" and "re-vision", and re-imagine the first seeds of our faith, in whatever community of origin we have had.

As we examine the stages of faith development, we are also forced to analyse how the continuity, and the discontinuity, between traditional cultures, and the transitional culture, affects

¹⁶ Fowler, "Faith Development", p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

faith. By understanding faith development as a process, we can examine, with greater dare and sensitivity, how modernity and secularisation are challenging the seminarian we meet today.

The relevance of our family of origin, and our community of faith, tell us that it is more than just spiritual formation for the seminarian that should concern the church. We need to be concerned about the basic re-awakening of faith, and seriously struggle with the contention of Fowler that faith is really a verb and not a noun. Our life, and our relationships, need to be seen as exercising faith, and not just as having a content of faith principles.

A psychiatrist tells how human spirituality was, for a long time, a taboo subject for those involved in the healing arts. It seemed, for a long time, that the objective behavioural sciences were the means of diagnosing a problem and offering help. As a closing thought, I share his insight about spirituality.

“The study of human spirituality cannot take place in the same way that one might study sexuality or aggression. To objectify spirituality in this way is to clearly miss it. At barest minimum, we need to recognise the difference between thinking about something, and being in something.”¹⁹

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¹⁹ Gerald G. May, “The psychodynamics of spirituality: a follow-up”, in *The Journal of Pastoral Care* XXXI-2 (June 1977), pp. 86-87.

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