

FOWLER AND FAITHFUL CHANGE

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Abstract

The Faith development theory of James W Fowler was first published in 1981 under the title: Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning. This extensive title captures the essential nature of Fowler's Theory: the concept of faith being related to the field of human development. In his most recent book Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life (1996), Fowler applies his theory of Faith development in an attempt to interpret current cultural and intellectual changes. According to Fowler, North Americans live in a time of radical change that involves all aspects of their lives. He explains his intentions very clearly, as to: 'explore parallels between the transitions in structures of consciousness identified in the stages of faith and the larger movements from pre-modern to modern consciousness in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Does the transition from the Synthetic-Conventional stage of faith to the Individuative-Reflective stage in individual lives offer a model for better understanding the transition in cultural consciousness that we call the Enlightenment? If so, might the transition from the Individuative-Reflective stage to the Conjunctive stage provide a useful model for grasping some of the aspects of transition in the structures of consciousness we seem to be undergoing at present?' (Fowler, 1996, p. 147). But before we can go any further we need to have a closer look at the theory.

1. Faith and the faith development theory

Faith and interpretation

In order to understand what Fowler means by faith, one must notice the distinction he makes between faith and belief. This distinction is not original to him. He uses well-known theologians such as Paul Tillich, H Richard Niebuhr and Cantwell Smith to provide the theological arguments for this understanding of faith. The work of Smith (1979) deserves special mention since he too worked extensively on the definition of a universal faith.

Quoting Smith, Fowler (1981) contrasts faith and belief. Faith is, 'deeper, richer, more personal. It is engendered by religious tradition, in some cases and to some degree by its doctrines, but it is a quality of the person not the system. It is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbour, to the universe, a total response (p.12). He also agrees with Smith (1979) that faith is:

- 1) universal
- 2) ecumenical
- 3) all-inclusive and
- 4) absolutely true (Fowler, 1981, p.14).

Therefore, faith exists before certain beliefs are formulated. But, faith also represents the most 'fundamental category in the human quest for meaning' (1981, p.14). As such, faith is described as, 'The process of constitutive-knowing underlying a person's composition and maintainment of a comprehensive frame (or frames) of meaning generated from a person's attachments or commitments to centers of supraordinate value which have power to unify

his or her experiences of world thereby endowing relationships, contexts and patterns of everyday life, past and present with significance' (quoted in Dykstra, 1986, p.25). This centripetal centre is also known as the '*Centre of Value and Power*' (CVP).

Faith is therefore primarily a hermeneutical activity of an individual. The person's 'attachments or commitments to centers of supraordinate value' provide the interpretative key to interpreting the text of life. It is then possible that this 'center of value' may lose its effectiveness to generate meaning and the individual may experience a 'hermeneutical conflict' of sorts.

Faith and the dimensions of faith

Fowler identifies three dimensions of faith as knowing, as valuing and as committing (1986,p.25). These dimensions can also be identified as the epistemological, ontological and the axiological dimensions of faith, or the scope of faith (De Kock, 1990, pp. 89ff). The epistemological dimension of faith received more attention in the above mentioned definition. Fernhout (1986) is of the opinion that the 'core of the cube' of faith is to be found in faith as commitment, rather than faith as knowing (p.87) while, Hanz Streib-Wickum (1989) suggests that the ontological dimension of faith should rather be the starting point, since it places the emphasis more on the hermeneutical function of faith. In explaining the nature of the ontological dimension, Weickum states the significance of our embeddedness in the 'world', the significance of our 'en-worlded-ness' enables us to give meaning to it. Accordingly, the ontological dimension allows one to link the embeddedness of 'faith' in the community to our embeddedness in a 'world' and, finally, to our embeddedness in an ultimate environment' (p. 52). Changes in our environment impacts our faith.

Fernhout and Streib-Weickum agree with Fowler that faith is a *dynamic process of constitutive knowing*, rather than a *static product*, to know. It is a verb, rather than a noun (Fowler, 1981, pp. 16ff). Faith seen in this light is the way in which people give meaning to life throughout the human life cycle. In fact, a dynamic understanding of faith could involve 'both the finding of and the being found by meaning' (Fowler, 1988, p.20). According to Fowler seven hierarchical, sequential and invariant stages of faith, or styles of giving meaning, can be identified. We will describe these styles in more detail below.

Faith and styles of giving meaning

A faith stage could then be described as 'an integrated set of operational structures that constitute the thought processes of a person at a given time' (Fowler, 1981, p.49). Faith development seen from this perspective involves the transformation of these 'operational structures'. New experiences can either be assimilated into present structures or if these structures are unable to assimilate them, accommodation has to take place and a 'new' structure created. These descriptions of faith stage and faith stage change reminds one of Thomas Kuhn's (1970) well philosophical understanding of paradigms. A paradigm is a constellation of beliefs and values that are shared by a specific group of people at a specific point in time. Once these beliefs and values are no longer adhered to, a conflict develops and a paradigm shift may occur (pp.182ff).

The development is therefore a process of orientation, disorientation (caused by the 'hermeneutical conflict') and a re-orientation. This ongoing process guides the development of the individual. Every faith stage represents a re-orientation of sorts: a person may settle into a stage or (due to internal and/or external factors) may become unsettled and enter the

process of settling into a new faith stage. Conflict in this model, as in other developmental theories, is an asset rather than a liability (De Kock, 1990).

In short, the path of this development is, 'from the *adualism* of the infant and Primal faith, and the egocentrism of the Intuitive Projective Stage, we have seen a steady widening in social perspective, taking as we have considered each subsequent stage. Gradually the circle of 'those who count' in the meanings of faith and selfhood expands, until at the conjunctive stage it extends well beyond the bounds of social class, nation, race, ideological affinity, and religious tradition. In Universalizing faith this process comes to completion' (Fowler, 1987, p.75).

Because faith is primarily a hermeneutical activity through which individuals give meaning to their 'world', and to their embeddedness in the world, it follows that the manner in which they relate to others in the 'world' will be at the heart of development in every stage. Special attention will be given to synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective and conjunctive faith, since Fowler argues that these stages explain the transition from pre-modern to modern to post-modern societies. The remaining stages will only receive cursory attention for the sake of contrast and the fuller picture.

2. Faith and stages of faith

Stage 0: Undifferentiated faith (Chronological age 0-2 years)

This stage provides the individual with a basic orientation in life. 'The quality of mutuality and strength of trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites) develop in this phase (or threaten to undermine) all that comes later in faith development' (Fowler, 1981, p.121).

Stage 1: Intuitive - Projective faith (Chronological age 3-7 years)

The child's world is fluid and 'magical'. Meaning in life is found intuitively. Since the child's imagination is not restricted by rational logic, listening to stories with strong symbolism and images enables the child to interpret '*en-worlded-ness*' in an episodic and egocentric way (Fowler, 1981, p.133). It is not important at this stage to distinguish between what is real, and what is not.

In this stage of first self-awareness, first representations of God are also undertaken (Fowler, 1996, p.59). Fowler agrees with Rizzuto (1980) that the image or representation of God functions as a kind of 'transitional object'. The teddy bear, as a transitional object, may symbolize qualities such as steadfastness and love. In a similar fashion, God becomes a 'transcending representative' of the constancy the child depends on from significant others (1996, p.49). This 'god representation' of constancy is important in the consolidation of the self. In the case of parental neglect or abuse the child could develop defenses and the self and God may undergo splitting or disassociation (p.59). This results not only in a 'false self', but God is experienced as a difficult deity to please. One who shames and who uses guilt to drive us to perform to be accepted.

Stage 2: Mythic - literal faith (Chronological age 8-11 years)

Through concrete operational thinking '*en-worlded-ness*' is more linear and therefore less episodic. The intuitive forms of knowing of the previous stage are subordinated to more logical and prosaic modes' (Fowler, 1996, p.60).

In the previous stage the child was carried along, by the power of the symbols of stories. In this stage the child begins to make sense of life and to construct a world through the medium of story. Now no longer as the listener only, but as the story-teller, the narrator.

The ability to critique these stories however, are still lacking, with the result that they are perceived as literal. Fowler uses the analogy of a river to explain the phenomenon. They offer these stories from the middle of the river of their lives, they are unable to reflect on the bigger picture. They can not step out onto the bank to see where this river comes from and where it is really going (Fowler, 1996, p.60).

A moral dimension is added to the understanding of the ultimate environment. The principle of reciprocity determines the way God is viewed and relationships are managed. God is seen as a good, fair parent, who rewards goodness and punishes evil. God has his place. He is in control of the universe and we have to accept our place. Towards the latter years of this stage the child may experience his or her first atheistic episode, when the child discovers that 'moral reciprocity' does not always work. Bad things happen to good people, bad people get away with 'murder'. And the 'eleven-year-old atheists' (Fowler, 1996, p.61) are born.

Stage 3: Synthetic - conventional faith (Chronological age 12+ years)

Being-in-this-world now means being in relationships. But a transcendental perspective, or so-called *third person perspective taking*, has not yet developed to the extent that it is possible to evaluate these relationships. Instead, the youth depends on significant others for this kind of knowing. Fowler even speaks of the 'tyranny of others' to describe how meaning is given to life.

All the voices, and all the relationships makes faith conventional and synthetic. It is conventional, because the adolescent is not sure enough of his or her identity and therefore relies on the 'expectations and judgments of significant others' to make sense of life (Fowler, 1981, p.172). But faith is also synthetic, since the faith of others - especially significant others - is accepted in an uncritical way.

This is even true for how representations of God are constructed. The youth conforms with 'beliefs, values and elements of personal style that link them in conforming relations with the significant others among their peers, family and other adults' (Fowler, 1996, p.61). The youth is not able to give a reflective articulation nor a critical analysis of her or his worldview or ideology, instead, it is lived, asserted, strongly felt and tacitly held even though it may contain apparent contradictions. Group consensus plays a very powerful role in legitimizing authority. The person's world view is derived from the authority of significant others and the interpersonal group they belong to. Contradicting views as well as strangers outside the group are ignored or excluded from these homogenous values. Limited attempt is made to try and reason these views out. It should be noted here that while Stage 3 has its rise in adolescence, 'for many adults it becomes a permanent place of equilibrium' (1981, p.172).

Stage 4: Individuative - reflective faith (Young Adulthood and beyond)

Persons in this stage are over-confident in the 'conscious mind and critical thought' to give meaning to their 'en-worlded-ness' (Fowler, 1996, p.63). Two very important developments takes place. (1) Values, beliefs and commitments that once provided a system of understanding and meaning are being 'critically examined'. This phase involves a *de-mythologizing* of a deeply held but largely unexamined worldview with its symbols and stories. (2) Authority that was previously invested in others are reinvested in the individual's ability to think for herself or himself. 'The two essential features of the emergence of Stage 4, then, are the critical distancing from one's previous assumptive value system and the emergence of an executive ego. When and as these occur a person is forming a new identity, which he or she expresses and actualizes by the choice of personal and group affiliations and the shaping of a lifestyle' (Fowler, 1981, p.179).

Emotional development often lags behind the cognitive functioning of the individual. This is especially true for men in this stage. People may be confident in their jobs, able to analyse and systematise, but often unaware of 'the sharp limits of their empathy and their abilities to construct and identify with the interior feelings and processes of people' (Fowler, 1996, p.63). It will be easy for people to develop a dogmatic view and religious beliefs.

Stage 5: *Conjunctive faith (Early Mid-life and beyond)*

The dictum 'Beyond the desert of criticism we wish to be called', (Ricoeur, 1967) depicts this stage of faith adequately. The rigors of consciously maintaining the self (perhaps a false self) and its boundaries and the lack of emotional access in the reflective-individuative brings many people to a place of emotional burnout (Fowler, 1996, p.64). There is a new realisation that we have a conscious mind, but that not everything can be explained consciously. An 'epistemological humility' emerges (Fowler, 1996, p.65).

He or she now returns to certain historical truths in order to give *new content* to them. An example of this can be seen in church history in the rising and challenges of neo-orthodoxy. Fowler explains it, 'It generates and maintains a vulnerability to the strange truths of those how are 'other'. Ready for closeness to that which is different and threatening to the self and outlook, this stage's commitment to justice is freed from the confines of tribe, class, religion, community or nation' (Fowler, 1981, p.198).

Stage 6: *Universalizing faith*

This is the omega point of faith development. In the previous stage, there was a commitment to 'the commonwealth of love and justice' beyond the narrow boundaries of our 'own' communities. The person in stage five is still undecided whether to act on this commitment or not.

But the sixth stage calls for action upon the commitment of the previous stage. The implication is that the person is unreserved in giving of her or himself to see the vision of stage Five realized. It is not difficult to see why these people are sometimes described as *subversive*. 'This kind of trans-valuing of valuing gives rise to strategies of non-violent opposition to entrenched evil in the hearts of societies. It gives rise to activists' efforts, through the pouring out of the self, to transform present conditions in the direction of God's commonwealth of love and justice' (Fowler and Keen, 1978, p.58).

It is clear that faith develops through specific conflicts that arise in the various stages. It is also interesting to note that the development is one of decentralization of the ego: from self fulfillment to self-giving.

3. Faith development and post-modern consciousness

In modern-America three styles of faith can be identified, namely *Synthetic-Conventional*, *Individuative-Reflective* and *Conjunctive faith*. The *Synthetic-Conventional* form of faith consciousness is seen as having the same tenor as *pre-Enlightenment forms of cultural consciousness*. The *Individuative-Reflective* stage with its ability to rationalise, 'to think about thinking' mirrors the *forms of cultural consciousness* introduced by the *Enlightenment*. The *Conjunctive* stage of faith provides a paradigm by which to make explicit some features of a structural model for *postmodern forms of cultural consciousness*. (Fowler, 1996, p.161).

These styles of faith manifest itself in public debates about public policy, such as abortion and the welfare programme of the state. In the USA the debate is between the so-called orthodox coalition (*Synthetic-Conventional*) and the progressive coalition (*Individuative-*

Reflective). A distinction Fowler borrowed from James Davidson Hunter (1991). It is possibly the equivalent to the so-called conservative and liberal coalitions in the South African socio-political landscape. Nevertheless, it is obvious that in different societies these coalitions do not communicate well and would find it hard to find common ground. Using the general theory of Faith Development the areas of conflict can be explained.

The first and perhaps most obvious area of conflict is the locus of authority. In the orthodox coalitions the authority is external, where in the progressive coalitions the locus of authority is internal. The orthodox will turn to leaders who are usually popular and charismatic leaders, to interpret the sacred text of their community. These interpretations are not critically analysed, instead it is lived, asserted, strongly felt and unquestionably held even though it may contain apparent contradictions. In contradistinction, authority is internalised for the progressive coalition. While there is room for traditional interpretations and creedal statements, it is nonetheless open for review, personal reflection and demythologisation. These personal interpretations are based 'upon the experience, reflective judgment, and personal conscience of presumably rational individuals' (Fowler, 1996, p.168). In fact, there is a resistance to authority that is unexamined, since it is too vague, tacit and obscure. Rather, authority that is explicit and autonomous, located within the self and a product of a presumably rational individual, is preferred.

It does not surprise that these coalitions do not share the same vision for community. For the orthodox the community is organic but hierarchically structured. Men, women and children have assigned roles based on deeply shared values and beliefs. Strong moral leadership is provided by a so-called leadership elite 'enjoying the implicit sanction of natural or divinely ordained authorization' (Fowler, 1996, p.167). In the North American version of orthodox coalitions, freedom is defined in terms of economic independence and justice is a function of living morally righteous lives (Fowler, 1996, p.171). On the other hand progressives, see community in contractual terms, the so-called *social contract*. The basic unit of this society is the rational, self-governing, self-involved self, who seeks social membership on a contractual basis. Fowler explains it as follows: 'Social membership is seen as voluntary, and the contractual basis for political society rests on the mutual agreement to respect equally the rights and the freedom requisite for the exercise of personal conscience and the pursuit of personal conceptions of good' (Fowler, 1996, p.170). In a society like this there is no aristocracy that assumes leadership. No one with divine revelations, that will make him or her the master, in control. Rather, meritocracy governs the choice of who will lead. Freedom is therefore defined in terms of human rights and justice is a function of equality and fairness. Unlike, the orthodox coalitions there is no blurring between public and private lives.

Another force in the North American society is a post-modern consciousness. According to Fowler such thinkers, as Paul Ricoeur, Michael Polanyi, Jürgen Habermas, David Bohm, and in theology, David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman point towards this new consciousness. 'In the examination of their work, and that of their co-workers and correspondents, we find characteristics that call for the 'second naiveté' and the dialectical, multi-perspectival structures of knowing and valuing that descriptions of the Conjunctive stage of faith have tried to capture.' (1996, p.158).

While the *orthodox* consciousness concerns itself with the way 'en-worlded-ness' is interpreted by others and *progressive* coalitions are overly confident in their conscious interpretation of the meaning of life, there is very little room for other perspectives. Conjunctive style of faith avoids this path of conflict; rather opposites are held together 'in one frame'. 'In the case of postmodern consciousness there is the juxtaposition - the holding in one

complex range of models - of multiple systems and, indeed, of systems of systems' (1996, p.174). Facts, truths, or events are not the prize objects of the human quest for meaning. But, rather to an ability to construct meanings from different vantage points in a system or systems. All knowing therefore, involves interpretation. 'Multiple perspectives must be taken into account and coordinated - including paradoxical or opposing perspectives (1996, p.175).

5. Concluding remarks

The idea of a fundamental progression in society lies at the heart of Fowler's theory of societal change. A challenge from the natural or social environment induces a quest for meaning in a society. As we have already seen, new experiences can either be assimilated into present faith structures or if these structures are unable to assimilate them, accommodation has taken place and a 'new' structure created. The development is therefore a process of orientation, disorientation (caused by the 'hermeneutical conflict') and a re-orientation. This ongoing process guides the development of society. Every faith stage represents a re-orientation of sorts: a society may settle into a stage or (due to internal and/or external factors) may become unsettled and enter the process of settling into a new faith stage. These fluctuating patterns in society have not gone unnoticed. Heraclitus spoke of the ancient world as, 'kindling in measures and going out in measures'. More recently Hegel saw human history as a spiral development from one form of unity through a phase of disunity, and on to reintegration.

It can be very useful for the study of cultural evolution to discern patterns such as these identified by Fowler. Societies reached their turning point of vitality, when they lose an ability to find and be found by meaning through pragmatic styles of faith. When social structures and behaviour patterns have become so rigid that the society can no longer interpret and adapt to changing situations, it will be unable to carry on the creative process of cultural evolution. It will break down and, eventually, disintegrate.

Fowler seems to suggest that the Conjunctive style of faith provides a flexibility in society. Although the cultural mainstream represented by the *orthodox* and *progressive* coalitions may become rigid by clinging to fixed ideas and rigid patterns of behaviour, a minority of people who occupy *conjunctive* faith will carry on the process. From the broad perspective of faith development, the current time of radical change is part of a larger process, a predictable development of value systems that can be traced throughout Western civilization and most other cultures. The theory of Fowler does however, struggle to account for apparent 'regressions'. He writes: 'If we find parallels between the transition to the Conjunctive stage of faith and what appears to be a culture-wide struggle toward post-Enlightenment modes of consciousness in the present era, how do we account for widespread evidences of *regression*' (1996, p.147). This problem can be attributed to the fact that the developmental theory explains development as 'sequential, invariant and hierarchical'. It is expected that a society as in the case of an individual, would eventually outgrow the limitations of the previous stage of faith. One may ask if it is not perhaps better to explain the development of these three value systems as cyclical ebb and flow and not a sequential linear progression. The former is perhaps closer to real life, it is more messy.

The cyclical flow of interplay between *orthodox* and *progressive* consciousness is mediated by a synthesizing stage – the *conjunctive* – which represents has both synthetic-conventional and individuated-reflective aspects which coexist within an all embracing unity.

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