

# **Faith development theory: a case for paradigm change**

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## Abstract

Despite its influence, James Fowler's theory of faith development (FDT) is in need of fundamental reappraisal. Doubts over Fowler's use of a structural model of human development and the adequacy of his research techniques have been added to in recent years by his inadequate response to the challenge of post-modern thought. It is suggested that, despite Fowler's position, key elements of the theory are very much in tune with post-modern thought and if the abandonment of the theory's underlying structuralism were to be allowed, these might be taken to point a constructive way forward.

## Faith development theory: a case for paradigm change

Since its inception in the 1970s and in particular since the publication of *Stages of Faith* in 1981, James Fowler's theory of faith development has become increasingly influential in the fields of Christian education, pastoral care and pastoral psychology. Contact with the theory has the power to fascinate and stimulate. It has even been claimed that in the US faith development expresses a wider cultural and intellectual mood (Dykstra and Park 1986, 2). Moreover, faith development theory (FDT) has played a significant part in the ongoing development of practical theology from a loosely cohering body of practical skills to a discipline in its own right, with its concern to draw together the more theoretical perspectives of traditional theology with an empirical approach to the study of human life. *Stages of Faith* offered a psychologically based theory of human religious development within the broader framework of a theological anthropology. Fowler's subsequent work has amplified the potential contribution of the theory to practical theology by exploring its application to fields such as Christian education, congregational studies and pastoral care (Fowler 1991, 33-4; Nipkow 1991, 82-90; Parks 1991, 101-5). However, the purpose of this article is to suggest that a re-evaluation of FDT is due: specifically that Fowler has failed to make the case that the human capacity for meaning-making, which he christens 'faith', advances by invariable, hierarchical and sequential stages, and that, although there are clearly observable differences between the ways that people hold their fundamental beliefs, some alternative explanation is required in place of the one that Fowler offers.

My original work on faith development was done in the early 1980s as part of my doctoral research. Part of the outcome of that work was an article in the *British Journal of Religious Education* questioning the appropriateness of Fowler's use of Jean Piaget (Heywood 1986). It

seemed to me that, although several elements of the eclectic mix that go to make up FDT have real value, the importation of a structuralist framework, based on the theories of Jean Piaget, introduced a dissonant element that sits uncomfortably alongside the social psychological approaches that were the original matrix of the theory. In the first place, Fowler appeared to accept the work of Piaget on cognitive development in children, which already supplied the foundation of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, uncritically as the foundation for his own theory. In fact, a range of studies already available in 1981 throw considerable doubt on Piaget's theoretical approach and experimental methods (Mischel 1970; Brainerd 1978; Siegel and Brainerd 1978; Donaldson 1978; Long, McCrary and Ackerman 1979; Boden 1979). Secondly, it seemed to me that the uses Fowler wishes to make of his fundamental insights strain against the rigid straitjacket of structuralism: that structuralism is in fact the wrong theoretical framework for his approach to human meaning-making. This, too, is a conclusion widely shared (Nipkow 1991, 90; Day 2002a, 68).

In addition, it has been disappointing to observe how relatively uninterested Fowler himself seems to have been in the empirical testing of the theory, leaving most of the investigative footslogging to his students while he concentrates on applying his ideas to ever more diverse areas of human life. As well as questioning the use of structuralism, I want to suggest that the empirical case for Fowler's explanation for the phenomenon he calls 'faith development' is very far from having been made. Third and more recently, Fowler's quintessentially modernist approach – the overarching explanation with its separation of form and content – has had to face the challenge of post-modernity. His response has been to attempt to subordinate postmodernism to faith development by presenting a developmental interpretation of post-modernity (1996, 160-178). However, I want to suggest that the attempt is at best half-hearted and doomed to fail. A truer judgement would be to recognise that in many ways the elements Fowler derives from his

work on H. Richard Niebuhr – the activity of meaning-making as a human universal and the ‘triadic dynamic’ of this activity – anticipate post-modernity and offer a surer guide to what is going on in ‘faith development’ than does FDT itself.

In brief, I want to suggest that what is required is a paradigm change: an alternative explanation for the observation that, although people construct their frameworks of meaning in different ways from one another and that these ways may change at different periods of their lives, there is a degree of regularity in the ways these constructions change and compare with one another. I will also suggest that the core of this alternative explanation may not be far to seek: that it lies in the elements with which Fowler began his work but which he unfortunately allowed to become subordinated to the version of Jean Piaget’s theories he derived from Lawrence Kohlberg.

## **Fowler and Piaget**

Fowler’s answer to criticisms of his reliance on Piaget is pragmatic: the use of developmental theories such as those of Erikson, Piaget and Kohlberg is partly responsible for its take-up in courses of professional education. Reliance upon the constructive developmental tradition, “has both made possible an operationalization of the concept of faith for empirical research, and has provided the means for discerning and describing in formal terms the operations of faith knowing and valuing” (Astley and Francis 1992, x). Unfortunately, this response side-steps the force of the criticism and relies on a number of unfounded assumptions. Piaget’s theory may help to provide clarity of definition for faith stages, but the questions being raised are much deeper ones: whether structural development is an appropriate source of such definition, whether it is applicable to the activity of meaning-making and whether this activity is accurately described as ‘faith’. The impression given by Fowler’s response is that now the bandwagon is rolling it is too late to change direction. Nevertheless, I would like to examine two of the most important assumptions

underlying Fowler's work: that Piaget's theory of children's cognitive development is well founded and that the structuralism that lies behind it is capable of extension to the development of 'human faith'.

Introducing his theory in 1974, Fowler wrote, "I hypothesize that these stages, understood as *structural wholes*, are *sequential* and *hierarchical* in their relationship to each other" (1974, 213; author's italics). At least two problems are discernible in this statement. One is that already the idea of stages is the dominant concern of the work, to the relative neglect of the underlying process of development. The major difficulty lies in the words, "I hypothesise ...". The idea of stages as hierarchical and sequential structural wholes is not, strictly speaking, one of Fowler's hypotheses. It does not arise from his own observations but is drawn directly from the structural-developmental model of cognitive and moral development that he has taken over from Kohlberg and, through him, Piaget. In Fowler's work, it functions as presupposition rather than hypothesis. Nearly three decades later, in response to his critics, Fowler was still quoting Piaget as an established authority and insisting that faith stages are sequential, invariant and hierarchical on the basis of that authority (2001, 167). Descriptions of the faith stages vary from publication to publication. In the *Manual for Faith Development Research* of 1986 the influence of Piaget is particularly marked, in *Faithful Change* of 1996 less so but not entirely absent. From the beginning to the present day, FDT has rested on the assumption that Piaget has given an accurate description of cognitive development in childhood.

To make an assessment of Fowler's use of Piaget, it is important to be clear at the outset exactly what it was that Piaget was trying to prove. Piaget's 'genetic epistemology' is only incidentally a theory of child development; primarily it is a theory of evolution. What Piaget hoped to show was that the whole of nature consists of logical structures and that the development of these structures explains the process of evolution. Only then, he wrote, would the problems of biology

be solved (1972a, 177-8). According to Piaget's theory, all structures, biological, psychological, logical and mathematical, exhibit the same characteristics and the same rules of development. The thinking behind his life's work on the cognitive development of children was that he believed this to be a test case for the way in which structures develop. Ability to demonstrate the way the structures of thought develop in children would provide a basis for a comprehensive theory of evolution based on the development of biological structures (1970, 703, 728-9; 1972b, 13-14). This led him, in his experimental work, to concentrate on the logical form of the task his experimental subjects were asked to perform. His interest lay in establishing the logical ability, or lack of it, of children at different ages, and, by demonstrating the differing abilities of children across the age range, to show how the logical structures lying behind their thinking were gradually taking shape.

It is precisely this aspect of Piaget's work that has attracted the most criticism. In fact, it has repeatedly been shown that concentration on the logical aspects of the tasks he set his children led Piaget and his fellow-workers to underestimate the other salient aspects of the experimental situation and as a result systematically to *misdescribe* children's thinking abilities. For example, in his observations of very young children, Piaget noticed that if an object were hidden from view behind a screen the child frequently failed to look for it or, in some cases, would look for the object not in the place where it had disappeared but in another place where it had previously been found. His conclusion was that children at this very young age had no concept of object permanence: as far as the child was concerned, objects that disappeared from view ceased to exist. But placing an object behind a screen is not the only way to make an object disappear; another is to turn out the lights. This is what Tom Bower and Jennifer Wishart did in experiments in 1972, using infra-red TV to observe the children's behaviour. What they found was that the

children typically reached out in the right direction for the object, clearly expecting it to be there (Donaldson 1978, 27).

Before the ages of six or seven, Piaget maintained, children do not understand the concept of class inclusion: in other words, they are unable to compare the part with the whole. If a child of five is shown four red flowers and two white ones and asked whether there are “more flowers or more red flowers”, the usual answer will be that there are more red flowers. Fairly clearly, the children have compared not class with sub-class (“flowers” with “red flowers”) but the two sub-classes with each other (red flowers with white flowers). Piaget’s explanation concentrates on the logical form of the problem: the children were able to focus successively on whole class (“flowers”) and the sub-class (“red flowers”) but were incapable of focusing simultaneously on both. But clearly there are more factors at work in this experiment than logical form. One is perceptual (red - white), another linguistic (the form of the question). In the 1970s a series of experiments were devised by James McGarrigle in which he maintained the logical form of the task while varying the objects used and, most significantly, the wording of the question put to the children. In McGarrigle’s experiments, the success rate of the children was significantly higher than in Piaget’s. His results show that failure to understand the somewhat confusing form of the question is at least as likely an explanation as lack of the requisite logical ability (Donaldson 1978, 42-50).

Piaget maintained that children up to the age of eight were generally unable to take the point of view of another person: that is, in a literal sense, to describe what a person in a different position to themselves would be able to see. One of the experiments Piaget used to demonstrate this involved a table on which was a three-dimensional model of three mountains, each with differing and easily identifiable features. In Piaget’s experiment, children were frequently unable to reconstruct the point of view of the experimenter, sitting in a different position to themselves at



the table. However, a different version of the same task, devised by Martin Hughes, involved models of a doll and a policeman and an arrangement of walls. The children are asked to hide the doll from the policeman, a task that obviously involves reconstructing in imagination what the policeman can see. In contrast to Piaget's experiment, the success rate even of children as young as 3 was around 90% (Donaldson 1978, 19-25).

Paradoxically, although it was Piaget whose influence taught teachers to recognise the great differences between the child's view of the world and that of the adult, it seems that Piaget has actually failed to grasp some of the most salient features of the child's world-view. His interpretation of his experimental results focuses exclusively on success or failure to perform the logical task and ignores such important factors as the linguistic form of the instructions and the 'human sense' of the experimental situation. What explanation can be given for the relative success of children with Hughes's policeman task compared to the relative failure of other children with Piaget's mountain task? One factor is that the mountain task is easier. The child does not have to describe a mountain but only to say whether one doll can see another. The logical form of the task is the same, but in Piaget's experiment the children have an additional hurdle to surmount, the difficulty of description. Another feature of the policeman task is that it presents a situation which, for the children, makes 'human sense'. Even if a child has never tried to hide from a policeman, they know what it means to hide, as well as to have been naughty and to wish to escape the consequences. In other words, the task makes sense in terms of the motives and intentions involved in it. Piaget's task, by contrast, is an abstract exercise, not simply in the formal but in the human sense.

The way in which Piaget set up his experiments and interpreted their results reflected his assumption that form and content could be separated to the extent that the content of the experiment – flowers and mountains, and so on – would have no influence on the results. It is a

classic case of a conclusion influenced by an initial hypothesis. In contrast, the experiments we have reviewed demonstrate that form and content are not independent: children's ability to reason logically is influenced by the content of the task they are asked to perform. This observation is potentially very significant for other theories which take as axiomatic the separation of form and content – of which moral and faith development are examples. Far from being capable of extension to the field of 'human faith', Piagetian structuralism in fact creates problems for a theory of human meaning-making. As has frequently been observed, Fowler has had to spend a great deal of time and effort trying to integrate the 'structuring power of the content of faith' into a approach that, at least in theory, assumes the possibility of treating form and content in isolation from one another (Moran 1983, 110; Fowler and Loder 1982, 134-9).

Two conclusions may be drawn at this stage. The first is that Fowler is quite wrong in assuming that Piaget's work provides an indisputable foundation for his own. The examples I have given are drawn from Margaret Donaldson's *Children's Minds*, published in 1978, since translated into six languages and one of the most influential critiques of Piaget's theory. They could have been multiplied from other sources available to Fowler at the time of writing *Stages of Faith* (Mischel 1970; Brainerd 1978; Siegel and Brainerd 1978; Donaldson 1978; Long, McCrary and Ackerman 1979; Boden 1979). However, Fowler's approach to Piaget is but the most important example of a tendency that recurs throughout his work to assimilate the work of other psychologists and theologians to his own structure of thought without examining it critically in its own terms. Examples that might be given include his use of Daniel Stern and even Immanuel Kant (1996, 25-43; 149-152).

The second conclusion is that Piagetian structuralism is quite inappropriate as the foundation of a theory of the development of human meaning-making. It is to be hoped that Fowler's pupil Sharon Parks is not articulating the generally accepted view of the faith development community

when she writes, “The Piagetian paradigm which centrally informs this perspective is finally an interactive model, which focuses not upon the person alone, but rather upon the relation of the person to his or her environment, particularly the social environment,” (1990, 96) since her statement is fundamentally mistaken. Piaget’s model is essentially constructive and quite different from either epistemological or social interaction. In Piaget’s theory, interaction with the environment and other people is of interest only as it provides the trigger events for the unfolding of innate structures.

Ironically, throughout his career Piaget resisted the criticism of the Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, whose model of cognitive development was, in contrast to that of Piaget, fully interactive and gave central place to social interaction and the structuring power of content in the learning process. Vygotsky’s model, which is equally as capable of operationalization as is Piaget’s, highlights the way in which children’s frameworks of understanding are learned from significant others. It also offers a much better fit with Erikson’s developmental theory than does Piaget’s (Vygotsky 1962, 1978; see Wertsch 1979). It is unfortunate that the students who introduced Fowler to Kohlberg’s theory in the early 1970s were not equally knowledgeable about Vygotsky. In that case, he might have avoided the fundamental wrong turn in the development of FDT that came with the adoption of structuralism. As it is, the idea that human meaning-making can be described as going through a series of stages which are invariant, hierarchical, sequential and consist of structural wholes may be seen to derive from Piaget’s flawed theory of cognitive development and must for that reason be held as extremely doubtful.

### **Fowler’s empirical evidence**

The conclusion above may be said to disregard the fact that Fowler claims extensive empirical confirmation for his theory from the interviews conducted by him and his pupils and fellow-

workers. Accordingly, it is to the subject of Fowler's empirical method that we now turn. In 1986 C. Ellis Nelson and Daniel Aleshire made a number of observations about Fowler's research techniques and he responded (Dykstra and Parks 1986, 180-201, 276-8). There they raised as potential problems the lack of disclosure, the fact that interviewees are not given an overview of faith development theory or told that their responses will be analysed according to an idea of developmental stages; the possible influence of generational difference, the different way a younger person might respond to an older interviewer or an older person to a younger; the influence of the perceived purpose of the interview, whether the interviewee perceives it as academic, ministerial or even therapeutic; and the need for close attention to language, the lack of sufficient time for interviewers to become sure that the interviewees have fully understood their questions or to probe sufficiently to be sure that they themselves have understood the subjects' answers. According to Fowler, Nelson and Aleshire have "grasped the structure of the interview and the logic of its construction rather well". Yet his response to their critique is patchy, to say the least. He acknowledges the problems with lack of disclosure and explains the decision behind it, while ignoring the rest of the points made.

"At every point," note Nelson and Aleshire, "Fowler has opted for the difficult" (1986, 199). So one would expect Fowler to be cautious about how much his research is capable of demonstrating. However, he is regularly confident to the point of naivety. The careful disclaimer in *Stages of Faith*, "It is impossible to determine at this point the extent to which bias or error account for the observations" (Fowler 1981, 323), is replaced in the *Manual for Faith Development Research* with the confident, "We are assured by our research findings ..." (1986, 31). The description of a faith interview as a "blank screen" (Dykstra and Parks 1986, 276) simply sidesteps or ignores the cautions raised by Nelson and Aleshire. His description of his research as "life-span research" in a paper of 1979 (Fowler 1979, 111) is similarly wide of the

mark. True life-span research compares the development of the *same* people at different stages of their lives rather than *different* people with a range of ages, something that after less than a decade of research Fowler was not in a position to claim.

Further doubts are raised about Fowler's research method by the following description of his work:

A faith stage is a structural whole. To break open the metaphor a bit we may say that a stage is organismic – a flexible organization of inter-related patterns of operation. When one analyses a faith interview, one wants to read or hear 'through' to the structural whole underlying the beliefs, values, attitudes and actions described in the linear prose of the respondent. The problem is to read or hear and comprehend in such a way that the content becomes clear, at one level; but on another level one wants to let the structure of a person's faith 'precipitate' out of the content that has been offered. (1976, 186)

There is what Thomas Kuhn (1977, 225-239) describes as an "essential tension" to be maintained in the work of research. On the one hand, the researcher must be thoroughly familiar with the theoretical paradigm within which she is working, so as to know how to interpret her research findings. There must exist a consensus among researchers in a given field about the significance of their research findings and the important questions they seek to answer, a degree of unanimity about how to interpret the results of empirical observation. On the other hand, the researcher must not become so immersed in the paradigm as to be unable to recognise when her results fail to support her presuppositions. She must be sufficiently open, should the results of her research point in that direction, to subject the paradigm itself to criticism.

In faith development research, the interviews are carried out by members of the Center for Moral and Faith Development already proficient in faith development theory and trained in how to interpret interviewees' responses. The researcher's understanding of FDT functions as the

spectacles or filter through which she “reads or hears” the subject’s narrative. The task is to fit the responses into a framework of stage descriptions that are presumed to exist. Consequently, those aspects of the interview the researchers deem as salient are those that help to indicate the supposed faith stage of the subject. Researchers are trained to downplay the narrative connections the subjects themselves may deem important and to give priority to features of the interview that enable a faith stage to be allocated. As Day puts it, “The researcher’s task in the structuralist campaign is to parse through the debris of narrative elements to the real stuff of those features of speech that can be interpreted in terms of stage and structure, to ferret out the treasure and leave the dross behind” (2001, 179)

The implication of this method is that the researcher may just as easily overlook those elements of an interview that fail to support a structuralist understanding of faith development. For example, indications of regression from a ‘higher’ to a ‘lower’ stage may be treated, in accordance with the theory, as evidence of stage transition. There is thus a strong possibility that the basic hypothesis that ‘faith’ exhibits hierarchical and sequential stages is not being tested in any significant way. The most the interviews are capable of is to refine the stage descriptions. The perception of developmental stages is as likely to come from the researchers’ training as from the empirical data. Of course, these perceptions can be expected to be rigorously cross-checked by other researchers. But those researchers will have had the same training; they too will be ‘inhabitants’ of the faith development paradigm, trained to read or hear ‘through’ to the supposed underlying deep structure of faith. Testing of the paradigm itself could only take place if the perception that subjects’ responses reveal the presence of developmental stages were to be compared with an alternative framework of interpretation.

The observations of my own students raise serious questions about the adequacy of Fowler’s stage descriptions. Children in a group of 4 to 7 year olds being told stories of Old Testament

heroes were accepting the story and its moral, but not before questioning the authenticity of the main character (was Samson a real person or a fictitious character made up to illustrate a story?) or asking for supplementary supporting evidence. Children supposedly in the unordered or ordering stages of faith development were using sophisticated educational skills to bring reason to bear on some of the stories they were told. A 7-year-old hearing the story of Noah's Ark from a version of the Bible that neglected to mention the wives of Shem, Ham and Japheth used the questioning skills encouraged by current mainstream educational methods, together with a basic knowledge of biology, to wonder how we could all be descended from 3 men. An even younger child stumped the teller of the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea by questioning the fairness of a God who could wipe out the whole Egyptian army when some of them would have been 'good men'. Under the current system of Primary education in Britain, children of this age are taught to think for themselves and to use sophisticated questioning skills rather than simply to know chunks of received wisdom. Where they are stimulated enough to use these skills, their responses appear far beyond those Fowler expects for their age. But this is not always the case: in fact, the children could easily exhibit features of unordered, ordered and conforming faith stages in quick succession.

The real problem with Fowler's method is that the main lines of the stage descriptions are drawn from the work of Piaget, Kohlberg and Selman and the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, and were in place before the bulk of the research took place. This can be seen most clearly in the case of Stage 6, the supposed culminating point of the process of equilibration said to lead to the most mature expression of faith. The *Manual for Faith Development Research* concedes that Stage 6 is "not, strictly speaking, empirically derived" (Astley and Francis 1992, 56). The description of Stage 6 given there is based on the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: it represents a "radical recentration and reconstruction of one's perceived relationship to the

principle of being itself” (Astley and Francis 1992, 57). In other writing Fowler describes the definition of Stage 6 as “a kind of abstract poetry” (Fowler and Keen 1978, 90). The appendix to *Stages of Faith* makes it clear that only one person out of 359 interviewed prior to the book’s publication had been scored at the final stage of development (1981, 318). This person, we know from *Life Maps*, was a person who was recommended to the researchers as “someone who ... seemed most representative of the spirit of Stage 6” (Fowler and Keen 1978, 91). Clearly, in respect of Stage 6 the theory came first, the empirical work only subsequently.

Reviewing the early stages of its development, McBride (1976, 214) wrote of FDT, “It is a well-informed hunch, articulated into a broad series of unproven assumptions, a veritable library of a prioris.” The research base was inadequate and the theory was based not on concrete research but on theological and philosophical presuppositions. The jump from the idea of development to that of stages had been made too quickly and without sufficient evidence. Fowler was relying on Kohlberg and Piaget for his account of psychological process while ignoring criticism of their work from within the psychological field. In 1982 Bruning and Stokes criticised the concentration on stages to the relative neglect of process: their charge was that Fowler was drawing on the stage descriptions of Erikson, Kohlberg and Piaget without paying attention to their fundamentally different descriptions of the process behind these stages. They noted Fowler’s tendency to accept uncritically the work of other scholars which appeared to be “advanced” and his failure to consider whether the differing models of development on which he draws could, in fact, be used together (Stokes 1982, 16-61). Clearly much work remained to be done, and one of the most disappointing features of the past three decades is Fowler’s own relative neglect of the basic empirical work his critics were saying was still needed in favour of the application of the theory to other areas. As a result, all the features criticised in the early stages remained in evidence, such that Tamminem and Nurmi could conclude, “The existing



measurements and descriptions are in many cases still relatively inaccurate or artificial” (1995, 302) and Day, “The supposedly universal character of religious judgement or faith reasoning ... emerges in our research as little more than an artefact of research methodology” (2002, 69).

## **The post-modern challenge**

Uncritical reliance on Piaget and Kohlberg and lack of empirical rigour in FDT are serious enough, but an additional disappointment is Fowler’s response to the challenge of post-modernity and post-modern thinking. To begin with, he rightly recognises that FDT contains a number quintessentially modernist features. It separates out form and content, it aspires to universal applicability, it seeks to ground itself on empirical evidence and it sets forth an ordered sequence of stage-like progression covering the most fundamental aspects of human experience. In particular the idea that at Stage 6 it may be possible to resolve the tensions inherent in the historically and culturally relative situations in which we all stand is a characteristically modernist aspiration.

Fowler’s initial response to post-modernity was to reiterate the modernist credentials of FDT and to attempt an explanation of the movement toward postmodernism in terms of his theory. In *Faithful Change*, he likened the Enlightenment to the transition from synthetic-conventional to individuative-reflective faith and hypothesised that the movement towards post-modernity may come to be seen as a similar transition from individuative-reflective to conjunctive faith (1996, 147-78). Such an attempt to side-step the crucial issues is disappointing. Even more so responding in 2001 to what he perceives as pressure to relinquish some of the modernist features of FDT, Fowler reiterates his reliance on Kant, Piaget and Kohlberg as authority figures; describes his encounter with graduate students well versed in postmodernism as “frustrating”; selects a particular author as significant because of her challenge to postmodernism; and

describes a trawl through 247 articles relating to human development and post-modernity to find one he deems most helpful because it attempts to reinstate modernity in social science research (2001, 165-9). This failure to engage with post-modernity is further illustrated in 'Faith development at 30', albeit an article that shows signs of having been written in haste, but one in which he again fails to recognize any of its key philosophical challenges,

Clearly FDT is a theory increasingly out of synch with the trend of contemporary thought.

Moreover, it is to be doubted whether Fowler's attempt to hold back the tide of post-modernity is the wisest course of action. It is not too difficult to find in the theological roots of faith development resources for a constructive dialogue with post-modernism. Chief among these is the recognition, intrinsic to both H. Richard Niebuhr and post-modern thought, that all knowledge has a fiduciary base: our knowledge does not arise from universal laws of objective observation and empirical deduction but from the activity of shared meaning-making in human community. Post-modernity emphasises the importance of context, the truly interactive rather than constructive nature of our knowing and valuing, a hermeneutical approach to meaning and the 'structuring power of content'. The observation that human meaning-making lies at the heart of knowing and that orientation to life is influenced by shared centres of value and power are characteristic features of post-modern thought.

These observations add weight to the suspicion that structuralism is the wrong theoretical framework for the programme of theological anthropology Fowler wishes to pursue. A coming to terms with post-modernity also suggests the wisdom of abandoning another of the most confusing and controversial features of FDT, namely the designation of the process of 'meaning-making' as 'faith'. The universality and hermeneutical nature of human meaning-making and the recognition that all belief systems arise in specific contexts as attempts to orientate their followers to life is an axiom of post-modern thought. Given the widespread recognition of this

fundamental tenet of FDT, it is no longer necessary to use the word 'faith' to draw attention to it. Far from requiring a rearguard action against the advent of post-modern thinking, the idea that human meaning-making is the matrix in which specifically religious faith arises is a characteristically post-modern perception. The word 'faith' can return to its normal sense as a designation for specific sets of values, beliefs and practices – Christian, Moslem or Hindu faith.

### **What is the alternative?**

FDT has the look of a paradigm nearing the end of its useful life: at odds with the tenor of contemporary movements of thought and displaying increased rigidity and defensiveness in the face of challenge. But paradigms typically do not die only because of internal inconsistency and a deficit of empirical confirmation. Rather, they make way for new paradigms which make better sense of commonly recognised observation. Despite what one observer calls the "dissonant orchestra" of critiques (Streib 2002, 6), drawing attention to the weaknesses of FDT as it currently stands is not enough. Some attempt must be made to sketch an alternative.

Before doing so, one point must be clearly made: there is a difference between observation and explanation. Although Fowler's theory has virtually colonised the field, he is not the only one to have observed regularities in the different ways in which people shape the meaning of their lives, nor is his the only explanation available. In the early years, Sam Keen, Gabriel Moran and John Westerhoff III all proposed alternatives (Astley 1991, 51-6). Westerhoff, for example, while acknowledging his debt to Fowler, has stuck with his own explanation for what he sees as different 'styles' and 'pathways' in faith, based on pastoral observation (Westerhoff 2000, 87-103). For some time, doubts have been expressed as to whether Fowler's framework is equally applicable to women as to men (Slee 1996, 88-91). More recently, Heinz Streib has begun to advocate what he calls a 'religious styles' perspective (2001, 143-58) and James Day a

perspective in which the language through which faith commitments are expressed is seen as a chosen response to the 'religious' or 'moral audience' rather than the expression of a universal deep structure of religious reasoning (2001, 176, 180-81). All these are examples of divergent *explanations* for a similar range of *observations*. The abandonment of Fowler's explanation for what he calls 'faith development' does not entail abandoning the observation that people construct the meaning of their lives and faith in different ways, that these constructions may change in significant ways during the course of their lives, nor that they display regularities which may profitably be compared. It does not entail a denial that there is something there to be explained, only that Fowler's explanation is not the correct one.

My suggestion is that a better explanation than the one offered by Fowler and FDT might be found in the field of reference group theory (see Shibutani 1962, 128-147). A possible advantage of my proposal is that it would be congruent with several of the existing insights of FDT. Indeed, I would argue, it would be more faithful to the original roots of Fowler's theory than the essentially alien import of structuralism. Reference group theory is an element of social interactionism. Its origin lies in the work of George Herbert Mead, which also plays an important part in the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr. His work is in fact the origin of Fowler's 'triadic dynamic' of human meaning-making, the triad consisting of self, others and the shared perspective or commitment of a given group, derived by Fowler from Niebuhr's unpublished 'Faith on Earth' (see Fowler 1974, especially chapter 5).

Reference groups may be large or small, temporary or permanent and are created and maintained by channels of communication. They may consist of colleagues at work, members of a choir or football team, readers of a newspaper or members of an internet forum or chatroom. Families, nations and political parties are reference groups and even non-existent groups like 'posterity' may qualify. Their characteristics are triadic: the self, the others who make up the group, and the

particular perspective they share in common. Thus a family is held together by ties of love and loyalty but also by shared values and a shared understanding of the world. Members of nations share a common history and inheritance, common values and, ideally at least, the degree of consensus that makes political and social life possible. Schools share an ethos; companies have mission statements, rules and shared expectations; newspapers communicate views and attitudes along with the news; churches, mosques and temples teach certain beliefs and promote certain values. A pluralistic society consists of a network of overlapping reference groups – family ties, working colleagues, leisure activities, religious commitments – which typically compete with one another for the loyalty of their members. Decisions to work late, to take time off to care for a sick relative, to spend time at the pub rather than at home are made on the basis of the attractiveness of the group ethos, sentiments towards the members of the group, the importance in one's own value system of the group life or shared perspective, and all are affected by the level of self-esteem brought to those decisions. How valuable are those shared values, how powerful those centres of power, will vary according to circumstances and the ability to make independent choices.

Two inter-related sets of factors may be said to lie behind the observable regularities in the way people express meaning in their lives. One is a predisposition either to loyalty to the people who make up a particular reference group or to the group's shared perspective: is it personal relationships with fellow-members that keep me belonging to this group or commitment to its values and perspectives? The second is the progress of identity formation and maintenance: do I base my identity more on the affirmation of others, and in particular the groups to which I belong, or rely more on internally held beliefs and values? Space rules out a detailed exploration but some reflection on the characteristics Fowler claims to have observed in his stage progression, at least in adulthood, is possible.

For Fowler, the transition from Stage 3 ‘conforming’ or ‘synthetic-conventional’ faith to Stage 4 ‘choosing’ or individuated-reflective faith represents a step in a directional and hierarchical sequence, from a less to a more well-developed underlying meaning structure. From the point of view of reference group theory, this distinction may reflect individual predisposition or preference to base one’s loyalty on relationships with members of a particular group or agreement with its shared perspective. Moreover, this predisposition may vary with different groups, thus accounting for the large number of supposedly ‘transitional’ scores recorded. From the point of view of identity formation, it may represent a tendency to rely on external authority – the authority of the group or its significant members – rather than the internal authority of one’s own decision, and again this may vary according to the group in question. In some cases, these commitments or *loci* of authority may be difficult to disentangle. Am I loyal to this political party – or this faith – because it was the party or faith of my parents, because I am impressed with its leaders, because I believe its doctrines for myself, or a combination of all three? A transition from one to the other may represent significant progress in identity formation, or it may not, depending on circumstances. But orientation to people or to perspective may be seen to be a significant factor in the supposed Stage 3 – Stage 4 distinction.

And what of the transition to Stage 5 ‘conjunctive’ faith with its ability to hold in tension often incompatible perspectives? Typically the characteristics of people with this ability tend to be seen more often in people in later life. Are these the people who have learned that the positions in which they believe are often held also by people of whom they disapprove? Or that those with a claim on their loyalty may disagree with them over fundamentals? Are these the people with the ego-strength to reconcile the predisposition to personal loyalties and ideological belief? Security of identity in the face of the conflicting demands of pluralist society may come to mean relative independence of the opinions of others or of the strongly held but possibly brittle beliefs

previously required for ego support. Are these then the people with the ability to maintain a relatively stable personal centre without requiring either external authority or ideological agreement for that sense of sameness and continuity which is the basis of secure identity?

A step back from Fowler's stage descriptions, driven as they are by structuralist theory and his own liberal theology, may be required in order to take an alternative view of the differences between forms of faith to which he draws attention. A return to the early roots of FDT in the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr and the psycho-social theory of Erik Erikson may mean sacrificing the theory-driven precision of those descriptions, but may yield greater likelihood of a fit to life.

### **Radical monotheism**

If FDT is to come to terms with post-modernity, it will also be necessary to reinterpret Stage 6. One of the paradoxes of the research programme is that, whilst Stage 6 serves as the normative end-point of the stage sequence and provokes the greatest interest from observers, empirical confirmation of a final stage such as Fowler describes remains elusive. In my opinion, the conclusion is inescapable that the reason why it is possible to score so few people at Stage 6 is that it does not exist, and that the perception of stage 6 characteristics in some interview subjects is a projection of the researchers rather than an accurate description of characteristics of the small number of people concerned. To step outside the ambiguities of our pluralistic culture is impossible: we all create our frameworks of meaning within this tension and this, for our contemporary era, is part of what it means to live by faith rather than by sight. In any case, the *Manual for Faith Development Research* concedes that Stage 6 is "not, strictly speaking, empirically derived" (Mosely, Jarvis and Fowler 1986, 56). In other writing Fowler describes the definition of Stage 6 as "a kind of abstract poetry" (Fowler and Keen 1978, 90). His description

of Stage 6 is in fact read off from H. Richard Niebuhr's theology, in particular his idea that in a pluralistic culture of competing loyalties, 'radical monotheism' would mean a commitment to Being itself (Fowler 1974a; Niebuhr 1960).

The importance of this for FDT is twofold. First, radical monotheism is applicable in principle to any religious faith and even to some non-religious belief systems. Secondly, it introduces a distinction between mere belief and what Fowler calls 'good faith'. "The issue," he writes,

is finally not whether we and our companions on this globe become Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Taoists, Confucianists or Christians, important as that issue is. The real question is, will there be *faith* on earth and will it be *good* faith – faith sufficiently inclusive so as to counter and transcend the destructive henotheistic idolatries of national, ethnic, racial and religious identifications and to bind us as a human community in covenantal trust and loyalty to each other and to the Ground of our Being (1981, 293).

The 'good faith' of Stage 6 is held up as a norm against which the adequacy of any particular expression of religious or other faith may be judged.

Now this is not Christian faith. Christian faith is centred on loyalty to Jesus Christ and to the character of God the Trinity as revealed in and through him. From a Christian point of view, what Fowler is doing is extremely problematic, but is a move that he shares with the proponents of what, in Britain, has come to be called the 'pluralist' approach to people of other faiths: namely, to propose a standard of faith external to Christianity against which to judge the adequacy of a given person's Christian's faith (see for example Race 1983). This tendency is a product of the modernist misconception that there can be an objectively guaranteed source of knowledge more reliable than the beliefs and values arising from religious commitment and against which they are



capable of being judged. It is one of the positive gains of postmodernism to have shown this to be an error.

A Christian has to acknowledge the many possibilities of what Niebuhr and Fowler call a 'henotheistic' expression of Christianity: commitment to a gospel of prosperity, to the God of America, the God who makes me that bit better than my neighbour, or the God who guarantees me a place in heaven. However, it is possible, following the clue Niebuhr provides, to suggest an alternative to Fowler's picture of a 'better' faith, the kind of commitment he looks for in 'radical monotheism'. In order to do this, it is necessary to introduce some technicalities of epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge. From an interactionist perspective, our knowledge is a construction. We do not know the world directly: we construct an internal 'model' of the world through a process of interpretation. Because we are in touch with the external world through our perceptions, this model is always open to correction and modification, but it remains a constructed model rather than simply a copy of reality (Heywood 2004, 15-32). This model of the world includes our interpretation of the whole of our experience, our values and commitments as well as the facts we remember. It includes also our representation of God, as we have come to understand him or her.

Thus the religious believer has a choice. Is her commitment to the God of her church or community? Or is it to the God of her constructing, her own 'model' of God, assuming that this is different from that of the community? Or is her ultimate commitment not to the God of her own construction, who may be the God merely of her own party or faction, or a comfortable prop for her own preferences, but to the real God, whom she does not know completely, but of whom her own construction of God is, she hopes, a reflection and guide? To put it another way, Does the believer recognise that his own picture of God, while expressing his search for the truth, may yet be imperfect, limited to what he is able to grasp, and that while that picture may offer a guide to

the truth, the reality that is God transcends it? As a Christian, my picture has a name; I believe that I find the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”, who is “the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4-6). But I must recognise nevertheless that my best understanding of Jesus is just that – my best understanding. I must be open to the “renewal of my mind” (Romans 12:2) and to the possibility of greater understanding. Thus my ultimate loyalty must not be to the picture of Jesus preached by my church or to my best understanding, but to the real crucified and risen Jesus who will only be completely known when seen “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Thus ‘good faith’ is not the faith of Stage 6. It is a way of holding faith in which the believer recognises both the provisionality of all constructions of the divine and, at the same time, the necessity of living up to and being guided by her own construction and that of her community. This way of holding faith is likely to make the believer more open to people of other traditions, not because the issue of her particular commitment does not matter, but because she believes that through dialogue with others she may gain a better insight into the God she worships. It is a commitment to a continuing pilgrimage in faith rather than the conferring of absolute status on any particular human formulation.

### **Why does this matter?**

Why propose the dismantling of the structuralist paradigm of faith ‘development’ and its replacement by an alternative? I would suggest that there are several important reasons. The first and simplest is the search for truth. Since it is generally agreed that there *are* differences between people in the way they hold their faith, it is important that these be adequately and accurately understood. Concern for truth is amplified in the case of a theory as influential as FDT. Streib quotes a 1996 survey by Woodrow Walter of the most influential books amongst adult religious

educators in the US and finds *Stages of Faith, Faith Development and Fowler and Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle* occupying three of the top four positions (2002, 3). In the UK, interest has been slower to arise but is nevertheless significant. In 1988 a Church of England report on the place of children in churches recommended a study of faith development (1988, 52-3), which eventually took shape under the title *How Faith Grows* in 1991. The findings of FDT have been used not only in the study of pastoral care (Jacobs 1988), but, interestingly, in studies of why people leave churches (Richter and Francis 1988; Jamieson 2002). It regularly forms a topic in introductions to pastoral theology for those in training for ministry and figures in student textbooks (for example Fraser, Nye and Savage 2002). In view of this growing influence, it becomes of first importance for pastoral counsellors, for example, to have a clear understanding of their clients, for ministers to understand the dynamics of spiritual growth. If the stage descriptions of FDT are inaccurate because over-influenced by structuralist theory the counsellor or minister may become a poor listener or a wayward guide.

Concern is raised in particular by the nature of faith development as a normative theory.

According to Fowler, his stage descriptions offer “formally normative criteria for determining how adequate, responsible and free of idolatrous distortions our ways of appropriating and living from our particular traditions really are” (1981, 293). Such a claim would be astonishing, if not outrageous, did it not follow from the logic of the theory itself, the idea that stages follow in strict succession, each more adequate than the one before. If this claim is inaccurate, the pastoral counsellor who thinks she detects in a client’s account of their situation the beginning of a transition to a more “adequate” form of faith could become not merely misguided but positively dangerous. In particular the idea that there exists a Stage 6 providing a standard to which all believers should aspire, if inaccurate, itself involves an idolatrous distortion of the meaning of faith.

Finally, as I have argued above, this matters because Fowler's theory is both implicitly and explicitly pluralistic. As with its normative character, its pluralism is the logical outcome of the theory. But it is worrying that Fowler bolsters his pluralistic argument by wrenching the words of Jesus out of their context, providing the illusion of a Christian justification (Luke 18:8 quoted in 1981, 292). As Nelson pointed out in 1982, Fowler's theory tries to do three things at once: to develop a theory of human faith that matures by stages; on the back of that theory to describe an ideal state of affairs against which to judge anything that claims human allegiance; and then to interpret the Christian religion in a way that fits both the stages and the ideal (Nelson 1982, 162-73). Since I do not subscribe to the stage theory or to Fowler's description of the ideal, I would want to argue also that his interpretation of the Christian religion is in error, and for a believer that must be the most important reason why this matters.

## **Conclusion**

A paradigm as described initially by Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn 1970; 1977) is a many-sided entity. It involves a research community sharing results with one another and maintaining communication through journals, conferences and other personal contacts. It involves a 'disciplinary matrix' including the theory at the centre of the paradigm; a received account of its history, derivation and significance; agreement on appropriate methods of research and standard examples or exemplars (also sometimes known as paradigms) that illustrate particularly well aspects of the theory and serve as benchmarks or guiding analogies in research. Each of these features may easily be illustrated for FDT: the Center for Research in Moral and Faith Development, the *Manual for Faith Development Research* with its instructions for the conduct of faith interviews, methods of coding and paradigmatic examples, the advocacy by Fowler himself and pupils such as Sharon Parks of the significance of FDT in a variety of areas of religious and social life. It is also a characteristic of scientific paradigms that, although committed in theory to the

disinterested pursuit of truth, this quest is liable to become contaminated by social and even political considerations such as the influence of group loyalties, personal academic prestige and the need to secure research funding.

According to Kuhn, there exists in the scientific community a shared set of values against which the adequacy of any given paradigm is to be judged (1977, 320-39). These include accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity and fruitfulness. They may also include values related to external considerations, such as social utility. Individual scientists and whole research communities may differ as to the weight to be given to one or more of these values. In the case of FDT, it is fairly easy to see that scope is given considerable value: faith development can be applied to individual spiritual growth, pastoral care, public life, and even the intellectual history of Western civilisation. Fowler's response in 1992 to questions about the appropriateness of structuralism as a key element of the paradigm clearly values accuracy over consistency. The framework structuralism provides is valued because it, "has both made possible an operationalization of the concept of faith for empirical research, and has provided the means for discerning and describing in formal terms the operations of faith knowing and valuing" (Astley and Francis 1992, x). So, although all paradigms go through a process of development and eventual replacement, differences in the weight given to these shared 'values' mean that decisions as to when a given paradigm may be ripe for replacement are not easy to make, and agreement over such decisions is generally even harder to secure.

I have suggested that FDT is an example of a paradigm reaching the end of its life. Fowler's increasingly lengthy descriptions of the genesis of the theory in recent publications may even indicate a crisis of confidence (Fowler 1991, 2001, 2004). Its most serious negative feature is inconsistency: the impossibility of reconciling the psycho-social approach of Erikson, which played such an important part in the early stages of the theory, with the structuralism of Kohlberg

and Piaget. It is also worth noting the signs of over-complication and consequent loss of simplicity in the need to postulate an additional concept of faith types to supplement the original stages (Fowler 2001, 170-71). This in itself is a response to the perception of a certain loss of accuracy, the increasing difficulties in discerning an ordered pattern of stage progression of which Fowler complains (2001, 169). Finally, there is the loss of that most highly weighted of values, scope, in the failure so far to come to terms with the challenges of post-modern thinking.

A paradigm comes under increasing pressure when there are viable competitors in the field. One of the reasons for the continuing high profile of FDT may well be the lack of suitable alternatives. In this article I have made a tentative suggestion as to where such an alternative might be found. The contributions of Streib and Day are also relevant, although it remains in doubt whether either one has provided a coherent explanation for the observed development of people's ways of holding their most fundamental beliefs and values. The invitation to respond to Fowler's anniversary article in *Religious Education* 2004 together with the volume of his output marks Streib as a principal conversation partner. However, his interest in adding 'styles' to 'stages' threatens to stretch the simplicity of FDT to breaking point, while his suggestion that conjunctive faith is available to children and adolescents leaves its theoretical grounding and empirical claims in ruins.

There remains the most striking element of FDT: fruitfulness. The excitement of so many when encountering the theory for the first time strongly suggests that Fowler is 'on to something' when he describes the way in which people create meaning and the ways in which this meaning-making changes during the course of their lives. The satisfaction of so many interviewees who remark how seldom one has the chance to "talk about things like this" testifies to the importance of that dimension of experience he seeks to uncover. The fact that faith development offers insights for pastoral care and throws light on the reasons people leave churches, to name just two areas,

further suggests the value of its central insights. However, it is vital to bear in mind the distinction between observation and explanation. Faith development as a theory grows out of the observation that people construct meaning for their lives in interaction with the society and culture around them and significant others, and that religious faith is not something alien to this activity of meaning-making but arises from it and provides an expression of it. It draws attention to what is becoming a commonplace of post-modern thinking: that our ways of knowing and constructing the world are based on values and commitments. It thus, as part of a general movement of thought, helps to reinstate the importance of the personal and the interpersonal, loyalty and commitment. The faith interviews provide the opportunity for people to reflect freely on these areas of experience and grant them value and significance.

The fruitfulness of FDT is thus tied to its central observation and research method rather than the particular explanation it offers. On the contrary, I suggest that its basic explanatory tenet, the idea of sequential, hierarchical stages of development, is an erroneous description of the rich complexity of personal knowing. The attempt to fit this complex pattern into six or seven stage descriptions may in fact do violence to the manifold variety of the paths by which people arrive at the meaning of their lives. I submit that these circumstances taken together imply an overwhelming case for paradigm change.

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