

Case Studies in Faith Development Cross-Cultural Analysis: Russia, 2007

In January 2007 during a month long visit to Russia, I had the opportunity to do preliminary study in how culture affects faith development. Presented here is a brief background, two interview summaries, a third interview with verbatim text followed by observations and theory integration.

Interview Context

P is a regional/state capital five hundred miles from Moscow. PC is smaller city about twenty miles from P and was my home for two years

Interviews were in each woman's home. We sat on a sofa and I held a small digital recorder between us. A week prior I had explained the purpose of my visit and that I would like for them to tell me their life stories, especially concerning the development of their knowledge and relationship with God.

The women are all English teachers, and have worked at some time as an interpreter of English and Russian, so we spoke in English. The fact that they were speaking not in their native tongue however, but in each case, their second foreign language is significant in their choice of vocabulary and the limits placed on the expression of their ideas.

The interview itself was very informal and loosely structured around the request to "Tell me your story about your relationship with God". During the interview, I let the woman tell her narrative freely, interrupting only with questions to clarify a point, or to probe deeper into an idea that she introduced.

Natasha's Story: Saturday, January 13, 2007 3:57 pm (35:30 minutes)

Natasha is a thirty-three year old wife and mother of one young son. She is currently working as a preschool aid so that she may work her son's schedule. Her early life was devoid of awareness of God, except for a grandmother who was an Orthodox believer. Natasha remembers hearing her pray and was baptized in her teens, solely to please her grandmother.

In 1996, Natasha took an interpreter position with our ministry team for the income and thought using English with foreigners would be interesting. It was her first exposure to talk of God and the Church. In the spring of 1997, Natasha became a Christian by praying alone in her apartment after interpreting for a Christian film showing. Looking back, Natasha now believes God was present in a childhood near-drowning experience, and as she read books as a young adult about cults that did not ring true in her spirit.

Much of Natasha's story included how her faith intersected with the lives of her husband, son and family of origin. She used the image of God as friend and father, and stated that her understanding of God's love became deeper when she experienced motherhood. Bible study, worship, music and prayer are all very important to Natasha as she continues to grow in her relationship to God. Explaining that she likes different Bible verses at different times, she said that her favorite is in Isaiah about how although seemingly stable things like mountains may move, God's mercy will not go from us, that God's mercy is above all His feelings towards us.

Olga's Story: Monday, January. 15, 2007 1:41pm (66:23 minutes)

Olga is 53 years old and the mother of two adult children. Olga's husband is a missionary-pastor in a village four hours from PC. She is in frail health from a deathly illness suffered two years ago. She currently teaches in city schools as a substitute and teaches private English lessons in her home.

Olga recalls her Orthodox grandmother as being a strong early influence in her life. The contradiction of her grandmother's devout prayers and faith with the godless vacuum taught in the rest of her world raised many questions, but no one would answer them.

Olga had much going on in her life; a busy job, a divorce from an abusive husband, being a single working mother and then a remarriage. Exhausted from her own problems, a turning point for Olga was when her young daughter started having emotional problems. She started seeking answers outside of her own resources and through the support of some neighborhood ladies, began to look to God. Her story is one of God's presence in family trials, health struggles and an unexpected trip to the USA. She speaks often of God's spirit "speaking" to her and is an avid Bible reader. She says that she has learned as humans we can not love enough and that people need to know God's love, not her love. Forgiveness has been an important part of Olga's journey.

When Olga speaks of God's character, she speaks first of God's love. Then she mentions God's mercy and holiness. Olga's life today is still difficult, but she talks with joy of the many changes that have happened over the years since her repentance.

Irina's Story: Saturday, January 20, 2007 4:38 pm (39:31 minutes)

Irina is an English teacher in PC who is in her mid forties. She has a twenty-two year old daughter from her first marriage. Irina was widowed and is now remarried.¹

My father was a communist...he was a party member. He was even a leader at the army forces. He was an officer... a military man and he was in charge of teaching communism to his soldiers and so as far as I remember at our home there were always a lot of magazines... science and religion that I always read because I was interested in religion... but I didn't know anything about God because I didn't hear about Him. We couldn't think about God in our country because of socialism, in those days of socialism...we didn't think about God because there were no churches and to go to church was illegal

so it was always of interest to me to speak English, to have practice of English...I was maybe 30 I heard about that Americans are coming to our town and they will present the Bible to us... it was in 1991...so my friends and me went to this meeting just because it was interesting ... so we came to listen to them and to get the Bibles. I don't know why, but everybody in those years, at the beginning of the 90's were eager to get the Bible... We were told there is no God... that it was impossible to think about God, but we were eager to have the Bible because we heard that there was such a book. We were given the Bibles... we spoke a little with the Americans... and when we came home, I put the Bible on the shelf and sometimes I took it and opened it and began reading and didn't understand anything. I wanted to understand what is written because it was incredible that I

¹ Verbatim interview is in the indented portions, with speaking pauses indicated with ..., and my interjections italicized.

relation to faith development are a difficult fit. These women came into faith awareness as mature, intelligent adults who suddenly had a whole new dimension of life opened. It is a different situation than dealing with an individual who remains in certain stages because of malformation or immaturity. There are no previous stages for these women. I question the usefulness of these types of theories for this study.

I noticed during the interview that each of the women spoke more of their life in relation with others, parents or husbands or children, than they did as individuals. I remember wondering if I should interrupt their narratives to move them in a more personal direction, but was afraid that by doing so I would cover over part of the cultural differences that I was trying to ferret out. The USA values individualism and stories tend to be told in first person singular. It might be more consistent with the Russian perspective of community that so much of these stories were told in first person plural.

The other factor that might influence this commonality is that all of the interviewees were female. Carol Gilligan speaks with great conviction about the gender differences in identity and personality formation focused around social interaction and personal relationships. She maintains that women define themselves in connection with ongoing relationships.² When Natasha, Irina and Olga all talk about their faith lives they often do so in relation to the belief or unbelief of their spouses and families.

When examining Fowler's claim of universality for faith development theory, Furushima writes "the critical orientation of Stages 4 and 5 reflected especially in the social awareness and authority aspects cannot be assumed cross-culturally."³ In Natasha and Irina's telling of the absolute authority of the schools teaching no God and Irina's fear of getting kicked out of university for rebellious questions, it is clear that external authority has a greater influence in Russian society than in the USA. Irina's comment that she was "thankful for our pastor that he allowed us to marry" also gives a church authority perspective that is not typical in Western churches. Furushima also mentions "the *critical impact of history* upon personal and social faith identities."⁴ The historical worldview of Russia and the West is very different. Russian citizens have very little history of life without an oppressive government. Frequently, *mercy* is mentioned in God's character. Defining *mercy* as withholding of a deserved punishment, it is understandable that those who have been so oppressed would treasure that quality. In a free society like the USA, the need for mercy is maybe less apparent. Inversely, only Natasha used the word *grace* which is so prominent in Western theological conversations. Understanding *grace* as unmerited favor, would explain its appeal to a prosperous society while those who have experienced so little in the societal structure would not mention it. I agree with Furushima that Fowler's theory needs more work to fit cross-culturally.

Not surprising, I do think Vygotsky has some relevant insight into the lives of these three women. Even as an early twentieth century Russian, Vygotsky shares many similar cultural influences with today's Russians. There is certainly more of a collective identity present in his theories, which reflect Vygotsky's short life in the midst of the socialist revolution. His stress on community and social life is illustrated by the lives examined in this paper.

This of course fits well with Vygotsky's idea of *zone of proximal development*. In order to have a "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent

² Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). pp. 5-23.

³ Randall Y. Furushima, "Faith Development in a Cross Cultural Perspective" *Religious Education* 80 (1985), p. 416.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 417.

problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers⁵ there must be more than one person, thus necessitating at least a small form of society. It is a model used intuitively by many who are exploring issues of faith. Natasha worked closely with believers, daily interpreting the gospel, for fifteen months before she becoming a Christian. Irina attended church three or four years before repenting. There was three years between Olga's first visit to church and her baptism. During each of those time periods these women were watching and listening to those who were already followers of Jesus Christ. They were learning what it would mean, what kinds of risks were involved, where the most secure footing was located and who they could trust to assist them if they chose to "climb onto the scaffolding"⁶ of Christianity.

Vygotsky also placed importance on communicating in spoken language. "Vygotsky believed that language presents the shared experience necessary for building cognitive development. He believed that talking is necessary to clarify important points but also that talking with others helps us to learn more about communication."⁷ Irina emphasized how knowledge of the English language has changed her life and the lives of countless others in Russia. Olga found reading the Bible in English to be a source of great strength and growth. Natasha draws near to God with the English lyrics of worship music. As new interpreters, working for teachers who were new to public speaking through interpretation, good communication about the language was critical. Talking about God and the Bible were vital in these women's lives and since it was often in a second language, even more time, attention and understanding was needed.

The other theorist who I would add to this discussion is James Loder. Loder brings a critical ingredient into the equation for faith development that is missing from the secular theories which is a conscious acknowledgement of the One who created the developmental learning process of humanity. God is at work in all of life, but the dynamics change when the creation acts in cooperation with the Creator.⁸

Olga's story has numerous examples of working in cooperation with God's Spirit. She repeatedly uses the phrases; *hearing God speak to her*, *God's call on her life* and *God's empowering her*. Both Natasha and Irina were passionate about the need to study the Bible and hear God's Word so that they might know how to live better lives.

Loder gives four steps in the process of spiritual development. "*Awakening in the Spirit* is the outcry of the whole person who recognizes the vast abyss between herself and God, and simultaneously knows this is recognizable only because "the kingdom of God is at hand."⁹ *Purgation* is that "first love" dynamic that desires a deeper relationship with God, and a willingness to make personal sacrifice in order to grow more Christ-like. *Illumination* is being at the space of relationship security; feeling God's love as Christ becomes the source of living water. *Toward Unification* is when the person realizes that "living eternally in spiritual union with Christ is the ultimate longing"¹⁰ and that is related to living with restored and healthy relations with the created world.

⁵ Ibid. p. 86.

⁶ Carol Gahart Mooney, *Theories of Childhood: An Introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget & Vygotsky* (St. Paul: Redleaf Press, 2000) p. 86.

⁷ Ibid. p. 90.

⁸ Loder, 66.

⁹ Loder, 65.

¹⁰ Loder, 69.

graduated from the university... I studied many books... many teachings maybe...but it was incredible to me that I don't understand this book.

Irina began attending the local Protestant church where she first heard the Americans. Through the preaching she began to understand the Bible and her need for a Savior. She told of her husband's drinking problem and the difficulty she had showing him God's mercy. He died in 1999.

When 3 years of my loneliness passed, I met Sergei, my 2nd husband. So we began dating and we spoke much of God and I understood that he was seeking God because he liked to speak about God.

And then after a year of dating we decided to put a sign in our passport... to marry...and so ... and our pastor allowed us to do it because he said of course he's not baptized, he didn't repent at that time, of course our pastor told us that there's no, it's not to his liking that we are going to marry because Sergei is not a newborn, didn't repent at that time, but he believed that Sergei was close to do it, and it happened and so I am so thankful for our pastor that he allowed us to marry

Irina said that she attended church for three or four years, her understanding growing gradually, before she repented. She knew that she did not want to take this significant step in her life without thinking. One day she understood that her heart had changed, that she could not live without God.

As she reflected back over her life, Irina believes God loved her all along, even before she recognized it. "Now I feel that God loved me... just loved me. I don't know, now I think that it was God brought me life in His two hands." She said that since becoming a believer she has found so many good people and made friends with many kind people.

When I think about God, the first thing that comes to my mind is love... just love...and tolerance. I am very thankful to Him for forgiving my sins... I'm very thankful to him.

Irina expressed several times how important Bible Study, teaching children's Sunday School and sharing her faith with others was for her growth.

Observations and Reflections:

Caution must be used when handling this data so that broad sweeping generalizations are not made. Although women share little person history, they do come from the same region and are now greatly influenced by the same church leadership. Russia is a very large, diverse country, and it would be grossly inaccurate to assume Natasha, Olga and Irina speak for every Russian woman. There are some commonalities in their stories however that might address some of the cultural influences helpful to consider when studying faith development.

The first characteristic that was strikingly similar was their declaration of the total spiritual void in their childhood. Although Natasha and Olga remember their grandmothers' Orthodoxy, they both were adamant about never thinking about God, because everyone else in authority told them God does not exist. Spiritual awareness was not developed in conjunction with physical and psychological development, so the theories of Erikson, Kolhberg and Piaget in

These four steps seem to aptly describe the faith journeys of my Russian friends. Natasha and Olga were looking for something beyond the physical world to answer questions. Natasha, Irina and Olga all faced ridicule, misunderstanding and rejection from family and friends when they chose to accept the Bible as Truth and become believers. Natasha and Irina are savoring the love of God and thirsting to growth in their knowledge and experience. Olga's time spent at death's door changed her perception of eternity. She seemed to be not only more chronologically mature than Natasha and Irina, but her attitude towards believers of other churches, acceptance of other people and offers of forgiveness to restore broken relationships seemed to indicate a deeper level of relationship with God.

As all of us journey through life moving toward full realization as children of God, we are indeed shaped by the world around us. Cultural differences are not a bad thing, but they do create varying worldviews and developmental processes which can lead to misunderstandings and conflict. These three journeys has made me cognizant of the need for non-Eurocentric theories of faith development.

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