
EDITORIAL

What is religious faith? Where does it come from (and therefore how might it be taught or caught)? How do persons mature in their faith over time? How does religious faith impact (or how is it impacted by) cognitive capacities, ego identity, moral behavior and decision-making, worldview, communities of belonging? These questions are among the fundamental concerns of religious education.

Over the past 30 years one prominent way of addressing such concerns has been through the lens of “faith development theory.” In the late spring of 1974 James W. Fowler first published his emerging research in the pages of this journal articulating “a provisional description of stages in faith development” (Volume LXIX, 2: 213). Some might say the rest is history. Fowler’s theory was widely tested, employed, disputed, celebrated, and ultimately appropriated as part of the basic landscape of the field. Fowler proceeded to publish several volumes, the centerpiece being *Stages of Faith* in 1981; his work has been the subject of numerous books, even more dissertations, and innumerable articles and chapters. However, the history of a developmental perspective on faith goes back considerably further than the 1970s and extends considerably beyond Fowler’s faith development theory.

In the history of American Protestantism, Horace Bushnell (1802–1876) serves as a way of pointing to a centuries old tension surrounding the character and sources of faith formation. In the context of 19th century New England pietism, characterized by fervent revivalism and a strong emphasis on life-altering conversionary experience, Bushnell argued for gradual religious development within the family and faith community as a viable and preferable path to Christian faith. This marked a shift of focus among those interested in nurturing faith—a shift toward attention to ordinary processes and practices (in family and ecclesial life) through which persons develop into faithful believers.

This budding developmental perspective was fed by the rise of modern psychology. At the founding of the REA in 1903 John Dewey correctly predicted that psychology would be a productive partner for religious education and urged religious educators to attend carefully to “the principles of growth and development” emerging in psychological research (1903, 66). Many have so attended across the 20th century and into the present. Concerns for the nurturance of religious faith

and morality in persons and communities has been fruitfully linked to “principles of growth and development” in many and various ways. The field has also seen rigorous and repeated debate about the appropriate roles of psychology and other human sciences as methodologies for understanding theologically articulated religious faith. Nonetheless, for over a century now, principles of psychological growth and development have been and continue to be centrally important concerns in religious education.

In varying ways, the papers in this issue relate concerns of human psychological development with religious faith: some directly, some indirectly; some revisiting established models, some seeking to name new possibilities. As the title of this issue implies, the relationships among faith, morality, and development are not always clear and rarely agreed upon. But they are persistently focal concepts in religious education research.

In the Forum section, James W. Fowler shares a first hand perspective on faith development theory 30 years out. Beginning with a personal account of the origins and emergence of his research and ending with current postmodern challenges to the nurture and development of faith, Fowler takes stock of faith development theory’s history and trajectory.

Two essays in response to Fowler follow, by Gloria Durka and Heinz Steib. Both Durka and Steib have long histories of learning from and working with Fowler and Fowler’s theory, which has significantly shaped the course of their own work. These essays further flesh out the historic role of faith development theory as well as current problems and possibilities.

Among the featured articles in this issue one examines Fowler’s work directly, while the remaining three report on research related more broadly to developmental concerns. Timothy Paul Jones provides an analysis and critique of underlying theological assumptions embedded in Fowler’s understanding of faith. Arguing for the necessity of content specific beliefs as a central character of Christian faith (contra Fowler’s emphasis on faith as a way of structuring), Jones seeks to provide a fresh way of understanding Christian faith as distinguishable from but developing within Fowler’s stage-development framework.

In her article on “Cognitive Complexity and the Learning Congregation,” Elizabeth Box Price examines “the relationship of individual cognitive complexity to the cognitive complexity and functioning of what are known as learning congregations.” While cognitive

theory would lead one to assume that an advanced level of cognitive complexity (“fourth order”) would be required of persons in a (“fourth order”) learning congregation, Box Price suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Rather, “conventional thinkers” may be both carried along by a fourth order organizational structure and nurtured toward more complex levels of cognition.

Based on an empirical study with 78 tenth graders, Shraga Fisherman examines the relationship between spiritual identity and ego identity among religiously observant adolescents in Israel. Fisherman finds a positive correlation between belief and general ego identity as well as between belief and some specific identity dimensions in his research sample. Further analysis of the data shows gender specific variations in correlations between belief and general ego identity and specific (named) identity dimensions.

Finally, Judd Kruger Levingston reports on field research with Jewish day school graduates in metropolitan New York. Focusing on one of six participants in the study, Levingston provides a thick description of the construction of moral identity in a Jewish male adolescent. He also articulates a theory of three distinguishable “moral outlooks” to describe observed patterns of moral behavior and decision making in his sample.

These papers do not exhaust current uses of psychology or developmental approaches in religious education. But they do remind us that a psychological developmental perspective on faith *is* part of the landscape of our field. And they provide an occasion to remember especially the contributions of James W. Fowler in this regard.

Theodore Brelsford, Editor

REFERENCES

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- Fowler, J. W. 1974. Toward a developmental perspective on faith. *Religious Education* LXIX(2):207–218.