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## FAITH DEVELOPMENT AT 30: NAMING THE CHALLENGES OF FAITH IN A NEW MILLENNIUM

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### ***Abstract***

Thirty years ago this summer *Religious Education* published its first article on faith development theory, entitled, "Agenda Toward a Developmental Perspective on Faith," published in *Religious Education* in volume LXIX, March–April 1974, pp. 209–219. At the request of the editors of this journal, it is a privilege to offer an account of some of the author's present reflections on faith development research and theory.

Like many dimensions of our lives, faith seems to have a broadly recognizable pattern of development. This unfolding pattern can be characterized in terms of developing emotional, cognitive, and moral interpretations and responses. Our ways of imagining and committing in faith correlate significantly with our ways of knowing and valuing more generally.

This article begins with a somewhat personal account of the origins and emergence of faith development research. It continues with reflections on some of the ways religious educators have adopted and critically reflected on faith development theory and its implications for religious nurture and growth. In a third section, I review some of the critical and constructive assessments of faith development theory by scholars in the field, through the lenses of several volumes of collected articles. A fourth theme addresses the renewal of religious education in the context of the present lively focus on the significance and power of *practices* in faith formation and growth. The last two sections offer some thoughts about some of the challenges to faith nurture and development stemming from what we are learning to call the conditions of postmodern life.

## ORIGINS AND GROWTH OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND RESEARCH

To know something of where faith development theory came from it may be useful to sketch some of the most influential factors shaping the author's early life and faith. My father had become a Methodist minister before my birth. My mother, a Quaker, adopted his Methodist tradition. We lived in the state of North Carolina. My first memories were of a mill-town named Concord, an awareness of the dangers and seriousness of the Second World War, and the religious influences of my parents and my maternal grandmother who lived with us, also a Quaker.

My father's preaching affected me from an early age. This occurred especially when I accompanied him when he went to preach occasional revival services. In these settings, I experienced the passion and the actuality of his faith. At age 5, with my father, and at age 11, and again at 16, with other preachers, I had experiences of emotional awakening and of dedicating my life to God in Christ. My father and family were neither fundamentalists nor evangelicals, in today's sense. They were Methodists in the tradition of John Wesley's sacramental, musical, scripturally based, and intellectually informed preaching and teaching.

As Methodist ministers did in those days, our family moved every 4 years until I was 13. Then, in 1953 we moved to Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, near Waynesville. Junaluska, the summer Conference Center for the Methodist Churches of the Southeast, provided the opportunity both to hear and interact with inspiring world class religious leaders. My years as an undergraduate at Duke University brought religious influences, both from the excellent courses in Old and New Testament I took, and from the several theological courses in which I participated. In addition, the Methodist Student Center at Duke, led by the Rev. Arthur Brandenburg, introduced me to critical social ethics, and strengthened my commitment to racial justice in the early period of the Civil Rights movement. I was bitten by "theological lust."

My wife, Lurline, and I moved from Duke to Drew University's Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey, where both of us studied and served in a church; I served as Youth Minister, and she served as Director of Christian Education. Strong teachers in theology, scriptures, ethics, pastoral care, and Christian education furnished good intellectual and practical grounding in Christian faith and community. Our work in the Madison United Methodist Church enabled us to

learn and lead practices of Christian education and ministry. Theologian Carl Michalson made a particularly strong impact on my formative experience at Drew, as did John Godsey, Howard Clark Kee, and George Kelsey in Ethics. We were there for three years, 1962–65.

As we were preparing to leave Madison and Drew, our first child was born. We moved with her to Cambridge, Massachusetts where I enrolled in a doctoral program at Harvard, called Religion and Society. There I studied ethics with James Luther Adams, John Rawls, Michael Walzer, and Judith Shklar. I studied sociology of religion with Talcott Parsons and Robert Bellah. I deepened theological grounding by studying with Harvey Cox, Richard R. Niebuhr, and Gordon Kaufman. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on H. Richard Niebuhr's teaching of ethics and his theology of the sovereignty of God. Through a then unpublished manuscript Niebuhr wrote, titled *Faith On Earth*, I began to attend to faith in ways that informed faith development theory. Paul Tillich's influential book, *Dynamics of Faith*, also had an impact.

As I began my dissertation writing on Niebuhr in 1968, a scholar-pastor and powerfully influential figure in my life since my teen years, Carlyle Marney, invited me to come back to Lake Junaluska, to work with him in a significant new ministry for deepening clergy and lay persons in faith and vocation. Marney, with a Th.D. in Church History, was a widely influential ecumenical Baptist. He called this new ministry *Interpreters' House*. In 7 3-week intensive seminars that year, I learned to participate in and lead 15 to 20 men and women at a time in a most significant 3-week process of deepening and, in some cases, transforming their personal, vocational, and spiritual lives. In addition, in several weekends I hosted a total of some 250 African-American youth claiming proud Black identities and leadership in the Civil Rights movement.

Interpreters' House drew its name from John Bunyan's *Pilgrims' Progress*. The "House of the Interpreter" was a place where pilgrims on a journey could stop and rest and "receive things that would help them on their journey." The disciplines I learned at Interpreters' House taught me to listen carefully to men and women as they gradually came to share, with growing candor, their journeys in faith and vocation. Deep listening, and the hermeneutical skills of helping men and women bring to word their experiences of calling, of woundedness, and of blessing—some of which they had never previously brought to word—helped us know how to create a "holding-environment" where adults could experience powerful processes of transformation and renewal in faith and vocation.

As a framework for holding and illuminating the kind of *telling* the participants had begun, during the first week I would lead them in an overview of chapter 7 of Erik Erikson's classic, *Childhood and Society*. In that chapter, Erikson lays out his eight ages of the life cycle. The framework Erikson provided invited participants to revisit their childhoods and youthful experiences of becoming, and to attend to both the blessings and the wounds experienced in their growing up. Erikson's narrative and developmental frame provided a stimulus that frequently led to participants retracing many significant moments and relationships that had blessed their growing up, as well as those that had wounded or distorted their faith and their growth.

There is much more to tell about that intense year, about Marney's unique mentorship, and the deepening experiences that Interpreters' House provided. At midyear, however, I received a call to come back to Harvard Divinity School to lead a continuing education program for clergy, and to teach in the School. With this invitation I faced a difficult choice. It was hard to contemplate tearing away from Interpreters' House, and from Marney; we had just begun our partnership. On the other hand, finishing my dissertation and beginning to teach there were very compelling factors. At the end of our year, we moved back to Massachusetts. What stands out to me now about that return to Harvard is that, from my work at Interpreters' House, I brought with me a commitment to experiential learning. I brought some weight, some authority in practical theological leadership, and some significant skills and understanding that would inform my work with students, clergy, and lay folk in new ways. Unexpectedly, it would give rise to faith development research and theory.

### **THE BIRTH AND NURTURE OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

Harvard Divinity School in 1968 was a place where a very diverse community of students studied theology in the context of the bitterly dividing struggle in the United States over the Vietnam War. It was also a time when polarization in the Civil Rights movement intensified. Against those backgrounds, I developed my first course for Master of Divinity students out of my experiences at Interpreter's House, and my interest in the kind of practical theology that attends to and expresses the human experiences of growth and of awakening to faith.

I wanted students to honor the dynamics of doubt, as well as the formative faith experiences in their families and faith communities. I called that first course “Theology as the Symbolization of Experience.” H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich provided theological starting points, which I correlated with readings from Erik Erikson, Robert Bellah, and a number of other social scientific sources. With a class of 40, I supplemented the twice-weekly class sessions by meeting my students each week in 4 separate discussion groups of 10. In these weekly small group meetings, the dynamics of the Interpreters’ House pattern found a place in the students’ candid and searching sharing, with me and each other, and in their wrestling with the texts we read. Many of them were deeply engaged by the moral challenges of the war in Vietnam, with the struggle for full civil rights for African Americans, and other pressing social justice issues.

Early in my teaching, students began to ask if I knew the work of then new Harvard Professor, Lawrence Kohlberg. At Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, Kohlberg was just establishing the Center for Moral Development, building on his research and development of the stage theory of Moral Development. I soon sought out Kohlberg’s unpublished writings. Through our students he and I met. His use of Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, along with his interview research and theory of moral development, complemented the work of Erikson and the theological figures I was teaching.

Under the influence of coming to know Kohlberg and the stimulating circle of younger investigators around him, in a year or two, I began to have my students conduct what we came to call faith development interviews. Using a questionnaire that we constructed, and eventually, a set of interpretation and analysis guidelines, we began to form the baseline data that would result in the construction and validation of what came to be known as Faith Development Theory.

Among the blessings to my life and work in that period was the presence, in the early ‘70s, of three Jesuits in their Tertianship year in one of my courses. They sensed that my faith at this point was very cognitively oriented, and that my deeper needs for prayer and spirituality might not be being met. They introduced me to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Eventually this led to my participating in a fruitful Nineteenth Annotation guided retreat, in the Ignatian tradition, under the leadership of Fr. Robert Doherty, S.J.

In the meantime, my ties to Kohlberg’s circle at the Harvard Graduate School of Education grew and deepened. Carol Gilligan, Robert Selman, and eventually, Robert Kegan, and theologian educator,

Sharon Parks—along with many others<sup>1</sup>—were formative in a rich environment of structural developmental studies. When the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation provided a substantial fund for faith development research, I formed a team of graduate students from theology and developmental psychology. For 3 years, along with my students, we conducted and analyzed the 359 interviews on which *Stages of Faith* is based.

The growing influence of Kohlberg's theory of moral development and its pedagogical implications found strong acceptance in many Catholic schools across the nation, and indeed, the world. The educators who had claimed the structural development theory of Kohlberg, seeing its kinship to the natural law tradition, were primed to engage the emerging research and theory of faith development. This interest led to an invitation that would draw me into a ten-year relation with Boston College's Summer Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Ministries, a program that drew hundreds of nuns, priests, and lay Catholic educators each year from the United States and across the world. The refinement, adoption, and dissemination of the emerging faith development theory greatly expanded through these Boston College connections. The invitation to write what became *Stages of Faith* and to publish it with Harper, San Francisco came in 1979, and was partly the result of my summer students copying and sending the notes and handouts for the course to colleagues all over the world. In 1977, I had moved to Emory University's Candler School of Theology to teach and do research. There, with strong support for the faith development enterprise, I was able to complete *Stages of Faith*. The book was published in 1981. It is now in its 40th printing, if you count both the hardback and paperback editions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See the full list of those who are named and thanked in Acknowledgments on pages ix–x in the front of *Stages of faith*. Harper San Francisco, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>Since the publication of *Stages*, there have been four other books that extend faith development research and its implications for practical theology: *Becoming adult, becoming christian*, Harper 1984, Jossey-Bass (Revised) 2000; *Faith development and pastoral care*, Fortress Press, 1987; *Weaving the new creation*, Harper 1991, Wipf and Stock 2001; *Faithful change: The personal and public challenges of postmodern life*, Abingdon 1996. A thoughtful collection of essays by international authors honoring and critically engaging this author's work in faith development and practical theology appeared in 2003. Edited by Richard R. Osmer and Friedrich L. Schweitzer, it is titled *Developing a public faith: New directions in practical theology*, Chalice Press, 2003 [see Book Review, *this issue*].

## RESPONSES OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS TO FAITH DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Clearly, those who claimed faith development theory and first used it in practices of Christian education were Catholic religious educators, in both parochial schools and in ecclesial religious education. As mentioned earlier, the impact of Kohlberg's research and teaching on moral development, in both schools and colleges, had spread widely among Catholic educators in the 1960s and '70s. Among the approximately 750 international educators I taught in large summer classes at Boston College over a 10-year period, most were teachers or administrators in parochial schools. They were drawn to faith development theory and its implications for education because it seemed a logical next step for institutions that had been influenced by Kohlberg's work. These schools were working on strengthening the moral atmosphere for students, and on implementing the discussion of moral dilemmas in classrooms to further their efforts toward their students' moral development.

Catholic theology's anthropology, while it acknowledges original sin, builds on a Thomistic trust in the power of reason, informed by faith, to help discipline and offset the corrosive effects of the Fall. Catholic teaching on ethics also relies on notions of natural law. The same soil that made Kohlberg's work on moral reasoning appealing to Catholic educators made them hopeful that the stages of faith, identified in our research and employed in parochial schools, could provide a map that would include and expand approaches in education for the moral and faith development of children, youth, and adults.

Among Protestants, faith development theory received a decidedly more mixed evaluation. Perhaps the strongest interest in the implications of faith development theory came from traditions that emphasized the rational potential of human persons and communities, if they were rightly socialized, and if their capacities for moral reasoning were nurtured by precept and example. Unitarian Universalists, in particular, were drawn to faith development theory and research. United Methodists and liberal Baptists, along with Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, and Reform Jews, also recognized the stages' sequence of developmental moves as empirically sound and useful for teaching. However, they rightly expressed caution that human rationality is "fallen" and prone to selfdeception and moral complacency. In various ways, they spoke of the need for repentance, and for reliance on the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, in ongoing redemption, to offset the

distorting and self-focused anxiousness that underlies our proneness to sin. Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Orthodox Jews, in my experience, were least likely to entertain hopes of “moral improvement” or “responsible selfhood” associated with development in faith. In various ways, their strong awareness of the human proclivity to sin—*anxiety, self-concern, self-deception, and the dynamics of personal and social self-interest*—made them cautious about the espousal and usefulness of faith development theory in religious education and formation.

### **FAITH DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

Among the contributions of faith development research and theory that have been frequently affirmed, the following stand out:

First, Faith development Theory, many have said, offers a characterization of faith that combines a phenomenological account of what faith *does*, with a conceptual model of what faith *is*. Faith is deeply related to the human need to find and make meaning, and to do so in a trusting relation to the divine Being and Spirit from whom creation issues. Faith orients one to life and its purposes, and to creation, with its origins, its ordering, its enormity, its hospitality to life in its myriad forms and expressions, and its mystery. Faith development theory suggests the implications of faith, and our relations to life and its Source, for ethics, for law, and for ordering the purposes of humankind. It aims to give ways of understanding faith, in its many dimensions and traditions, without being reductionistic. It seeks to avoid dissolving the “penumbra of mystery” that makes faith resistant to reductive understandings. It seeks to displace the superficial understandings of faith seen as the product of merely projective and selfdeceived forms of wish fulfillment.

Second, Faith development theory and research have sought to extend the structural developmental traditions in the research of Piaget, Kohlberg, and others. To characterize faith requires, however, that we go beyond a dominantly *cognitive* perspective. We must include a richer range of dimensions of the constructive knowing and committing that honors the role in faith of imagination, emotion, and a moral sense. In addition to the stages of knowing and of our growth in logic (Piaget), and in addition to growth in the stages of moral reasoning (Kohlberg), Faith Development Theory has made explicit the role of social perspective-taking (Selman). It has then added four



additional constructive dimensions that involve the interweaving of example, emotion, knowing, discernment, and response: These include: 1) The capacity for responding to and evaluating sources of authority (*Locus of Authority*); 2) The quality and extent of our capacity for both a deepening and widening of the imaginative construction of the perspectives of others (*Bounds of Social Awareness*); 3) The imagination and construction of a coherent and meaningful experience of the “world” (*Form of World Coherence*); and 4) A developmental account of the growing capacities, in humans, for shaping and responding imaginatively to *symbols*, *narratives*, and *rituals* that invite participation in the sacred, and that touch the deepest dimensions of our relatedness to the Holy (*The Symbolic Function*).

Attending to these seven developmental aspects in Faith Development Theory makes it complex to teach and to employ. We have claimed, nonetheless, that this integration of developmental strands helps in describing the operations of mind, imagination, will, and emotion, that orient us to the Holy, and to a view of the world as seen through the lenses of faith.

Third, to religious education, faith development theory offers implications, and points to methods, that resonate with what we think we have learned about how religious nurture and formation can most “faith-fully” do its work. Among these learnings, and their implications for religious education, the following stand out:

1) *The need for a relational nurture that receives the child as God’s blessed creation, and as worthy of our love, care, and formative support.* This involves making privileged place and space for children in our lives. It means attending to the capacities of the child in each of the stages and phases of growth. It means introducing them to the narratives and the practices that provide experiences of God’s love, and that convey—as we guide, teach, and discipline the child—that he or she is a gift of God, loved by God, and loved and honored by us as Children of God.

2) *The need for ways of engaging children and youth that enable the sacred practices and texts of a community of faith to become meaningful and sustaining resources in their imaginations, will, knowledge, and moral development.* Prior to the child’s or youth’s capacity to begin to form concepts and explicit understandings of religious teachings, they apprehend the meanings of those teachings through the *emotions*, through the **images** and through the **practices** of faith. Let me say just a word about **images**. The image, at any age in our lives, involves a *gestalt* of meanings that hold together both a knowing and

an encompassing emotion. We grow in understanding as we come to points where we can bring our images to conscious claiming, and can discern their meanings in the substance of our faith. We can be sure, however, that our images—like the symbols that ground our faith—retain and carry what Paul Ricoeur calls a “surplus of meaning.” True symbols have depths and breadth of meaning that spill over our interpretative categories and abilities. They grow in depth and richness as our abilities to interpret them develop.

I am convinced that the young child has a capacity for images of both the “uncanny” and the “Holy.” Carl Jung might have attributed this capacity to *archetypes* transmitted by a genetically influential heritage of religious practices. Whatever the source, the conveying of images in narrative, in art, in symbol and ritual, can awaken and nurture what we may call the *spiritual imagination*. The motions, the symbols, and the interest inspired by observing loved ones and others participating in the practices of prayer, praise and worship—or of observing dietary restrictions, and participating in special holy days, or rituals—attract and form children’s imaginative capacities and their desire for *worthy participation*. Adults’ seriousness and attentiveness to their children and youth’s participation in ritual, involving the employ of sacred garments, sacred movements, sacred music, holy words, and sacraments address and name what seems to be an innately given sense of the uncanny or the supernatural, and a desire to know their community’s stories, names, and rituals relative to these practices.

As children mature, good religious nurture invites and stimulates the growing person to claim a shared sense of identity in relation to the Source of Life’s being and meaning. This happens by participation in the community’s shared symbols, practices, and teachings. They come to know and trust *God’s love* and *cherishing* for themselves, as it is expressed in sacramental action, in teaching and proclamation, and in the warm and faithful sponsorship and affirmation of their presence and worth, by a community of faith.

While the previous paragraph might suggest that we worked primarily with children, the 359 subjects in the research and theory of faith development, as presented in *Stages of Faith*, includes a range of 359 interviews involving an age span from age 4 to the early 80s. Children, adolescents, young adults, and adults, spread across the spectrum of middle age and aging, are all included. Appendix A and B on pages 311–323 of *Stages of Faith* give a full account of the questionnaire, the spread of ages and stages of interviewees, and the statistical

representation of persons in each of the stages of our primary sample of 359 interviewees.

### **SIGNIFICANT DISCUSSIONS OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND RESEARCH**

There have been four collections of writings in which commentators and critics of faith development research and theory have written. The first appeared in 1980, and was initiated by Dr. Christiane Brusselmans, a Belgian religious educator from the Catholic University of Leuven. She, with her colleagues at Leuven, and with the Harvard developmentalists, Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler, and Robert Kegan, convened a conference in the 12th-century Cistercian Abbe' d' Senanque in the South of France in 1979. This conference brought together an international group of scholars, principally from Belgium, Switzerland, Ireland, and the United States. It included Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. The collection of essays from this fruitful conference was published by Silver Burdett in 1980 with the title, *Toward Moral and Religious Maturity* (Brusselmans 1980).

The second collection of writings was edited by Professor Craig Dykstra, then on the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, and by Dr. Sharon Daloz Parks, then a professor at Harvard Divinity School. With the support and hospitality of President Barbara Wheeler, of the Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, Professors Dykstra and Parks convened a group of 13 professors of theology, psychology, and religious education in New York to give papers that provided constructive criticism and suggestions in critical engagement with faith development theory and research. A striking theme in this conference grew out of the intentional inclusion of feminist voices in commenting and proposing alternatives to faith development theory, based on gender studies and women's theological voices. The conference occurred in 1982, and its proceedings were published in 1986 under the title, *Faith Development and Fowler* (Dykstra and Parks 1986).

A third collection of critical engagement with Faith Development Theory took form under the editorship of Dr. Jeff Astley of the North of England Institute for Christian Education and Dr. Leslie Francis of Trinity College, Carmarthen. This volume, unlike its predecessors, did not result from a conference. Rather, the editors drew together a set of Fowler's writings and of commentaries and critical articles on faith development by other authors from the United States and the United

Kingdom, many of which had been published previously in journals. The authors included primarily religious educators and scholars from developmental studies (Astley and Francis 1992).

The fourth volume of critical commentary was primarily prepared by and for European scholars, though it was translated for English-speaking readers as well. Edited by Karl Ernst Nipkow and Friedrich Schweitzer, of the University of Tübingen, the essays in this volume placed Faith Development Theory alongside the work on religious development of Swiss scholar Fritz K. Oser, whose research in the structural developmental tradition of Jean Piaget has strong empirical grounding, particularly in relation to the study of children and youth. Oser wrote to inform the teaching of religion in Swiss and other European countries' schools (Fowler, Nipkow, and Schweitzer 1991). Both Fowler and Oser owe debts of gratitude to Lawrence Kohlberg, as well as to Jean Piaget. In this volume some, of the most penetrating commentary on the background and criticism of structural developmental theories come from Nipkow and Schweitzer, from Clark Power of Notre Dame University, and from Nicola Slee of Rohampton Institute, Whitelands College, England. From the standpoint of religious education, Gloria Durka of Fordham University, Gabriel Moran of New York University, and John M. Hull of the University of Birmingham (England) provided trenchant insights.

### **A CRITICAL ISSUE IN THE DISCUSSION OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT THEORY (FDT)**

The most central divider between religious educators who embrace faith development with few reservations and those who have some strong critical resistance lies, I believe, in FDT's effort to define faith in a functional and structural form that can be inclusive of the dynamics of faith in many traditions, and even for some persons or groups who hold secular ideologies. Those who embrace the use of structural developmental theories, with their focus on different levels of cognitive, moral, and emotional operations, generally find the research and stage theory helpful in addressing questions of readiness and of matching educational methods. They find that the scaffolding that the theory offers is also helpful in shaping the educational aims involved in teaching and exploring faith traditions. They acknowledge and assert—as I do—that the substantive *contents* of faith traditions,

with their scriptures, liturgies, ethical teachings, and visions of the Holy, *do provide strong, distinctive, and unique elements for religious formation*. The “structuring power” of the *substantive contents of faith make tremendous impacts* on the perceptions, motives, visions, and actions of believers. The stage theory makes its contribution, however, by helping to match the competences of each stage—and the operations of mind and emotion that characterize them—with ways of teaching and with the symbols, practices, and contents of faith at different levels of reflective inquiry and complexity. Educators of this mindset find Faith Development Theory helpful for preparing persons to teach at different age and stage levels, and to match their methods and communicative practices with the groups’ probable stage or range of stages.

On the other hand, there are those who, for theological reasons, hold faith to be unique and particular to the Christian, or to another specific religious tradition. For them, faith is not generic, and it is not definable apart from the contents and the practices of particular traditions. In his first article in the volume *Faith Development and Fowler* (Dykstra and Parks 1986, 221), Craig Dykstra engages in a close argument in which he objects to distinguishing the structuring and functioning of faith from the substance, content, and practices of Christian faith. When I spoke of the resistance and skepticism of many Presbyterians and of other confessing Christians and Orthodox Jews to Faith Development Theory earlier in this article, this was the issue to which I referred. It pleases me, however, that later in that same volume, Dr. Dykstra provides a strong and clear account of the usefulness of the stage theory for helping to guide and check the appropriate levels of teaching and curriculum for persons based on their structural stage—if the *structuring power of the contents of faith are not excluded or treated as interchangeable with other traditions or secular orientations* (225–230). This issue is an important one, and it should be made clear that the structuring power of the *contents* of religious faith traditions—the teachings, scriptures, practices, and ethical orientations, with their substance and power—are never to be ignored in the use of faith development theory. ***It should never be the primary goal of religious education simply to precipitate and encourage stage advancement.*** Rather, paying attention to stage and stage advancement is important in helping us shape our teaching and involvement with members of religious traditions. Movement in stage development, properly understood, is a ***byproduct*** of teaching the substance and the practices of faith.

## FAITH DEVELOPMENT, FAITH EDUCATION, AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Of all the themes I might discuss in the last sections of this article, the most important seems, to me, to be related to how faith development theory serves—or does not serve—the current and future challenges of religious education. The author of Faith Development Theory grew up in an era when liberalization of religious traditions seemed to be the apparent path toward keeping religion current with modernity. Faith development theory provides a model, and some strong empirical evidence, that spiritual nurture and approaches to ministry that embrace education—and that address the complexity of modern life and its technologies—have much to offer persons among the increasingly well educated groups in our societies. Preaching and teaching that engage minds prepared for some complexity in their religious thought and practices have played a key role in maintaining member loyalty in those religious groups that embrace critical thinking and serious studies of the sacred books and holy practices of our traditions.

However, ours is a period when, for many persons and groups, higher education is giving way to technical and occupational learning, and economic survival depends increasingly on nimbleness in acquiring ever changing technical skills. Books are giving way to the Internet, and newspapers are giving way to television and the Web. For many, the time for contemplation and learning is usurped by travel on congested commuter lanes, or to online conversations and chat rooms. Megachurches, and would be megachurches, provide spiritual stimuli, emotional praise music, and practical wisdom, combined with a theology of warm welcome and support for family unity and commitment.

“Mainline” or “Oldline” denominational leaders may find it tempting to take comfort in this slightly pejorative characterization. There are, however, practitioners of ministry in this new mode who are evolving well tuned approaches to a mass-appealing religion for economically insecure middle and rising class folk. In the midst of job shakiness and rapid shifts in employment opportunities, their members look to faith and to charismatic pastors for support and blessing in sustaining a sense of worth, of belonging, of family support, and for coping with an insecure future.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>For one influential and widely read example among many, see Warren (2002).

I am sure that the consistency, the certainty, and the charismatic authority that many successful megachurch pastors exhibit, provide for many a vital model of faith in uncertain times. To the degree that such leaders can create organizations to provide programs that offer support and practical wisdom for coping with a very uncertain economy and world, they become the pillars of faith on which a new and more sophisticated version of the Synthetic-Conventional stage of faith takes form.

Megacongregations seem to be restoring a vital liveliness in ministry to new Christians, and to many who depend for tutelage and support on small prayer and praise groups in the context of large pastor-centered communities. At the same time, there are renewal movements taking place in older, “Mainline” or “Oldline” denominations. In many of the Protestant denominations and among Catholics, there is a growing turn toward the renewal of religious practices, including prayer and spiritual disciplines. They also include biblical study in committed groups, where covenant loyalty makes possible deep personal sharing in conversation with Scripture and each other. In a country where governmental support for unemployment and healthcare are increasingly declining, many in our communities find themselves in serious need of medical care in coping with chronic medical challenges, or in providing childcare and assistance for singles working long hours outside their homes. Churches are gearing up to help address these needs, both through practices of hands-on care, and through practices of influencing or mobilizing public and private organizations to extend their care.

With this reclaiming of practices as a principal thrust in churches that are choosing relevance in their missions, we find ourselves in a new time. The struggle over doctrine, or with defending the Christian tradition from the attacks of “the despisers of religion,” are not front and center. This may mean that growth in faith in this era is not monitored so helpfully by analyzing its appeal in terms of the cognitive and emotional structures they address. Rather, we may need to evaluate faith development more by its intelligence and commitment in practical engagement with the life issues that threaten to overwhelm so many among us.

I have no doubt about the validity and usefulness of faith development theory, but it is clear to me that the fundamental tasks of formation and the shaping of practices in this era become the frontline of faith development formation in today’s churches. Faith development occurs where working theologies are being hammered out in practices

of care for the common good, and for those in need. The promises of the gospel are being tested in the face of economic insecurity, the movements of the displaced families and the influx of immigrants, and the shrinking participation of government in meeting these challenges. Many that are “other” to us call out to our churches for material and spiritual support. We are challenged to generate the will and the capacity to welcome strangers whose need for friendship and assistance will either be met by our care, or, in many instances, go wanting. We are also challenged to harness the political power and influence that can restore proper governmental roles in providing quality education and available and affordable health care.

There is one particular place, however, where faith development, not only as a theory, but as a vigorous context for practices of transformation in faith, is vitally needed. This need is found in the prisons of our country where young men and women, who have found no way to be part of society, let alone of churches and higher education, are incarcerated. Imminently—and already—many are now being released from prison having had little or no rehabilitation and meager preparations to return to society. They often bring with them a proneness to violence, venereal diseases, AIDS, and a lack of education and social skills—and in many, a deep and violent anger. Faith development, with many of them, will have to begin at the very early stages and be accompanied by medical care, group therapy, and spiritual development, including treatment for drug and alcohol abuse. Most of all, the healing power of human love, and of the Holy Spirit’s presence are required for opening hearts hardened through abuse, and through and the wrongful influences and actions that have shaped their lives.

### **MEETING THE MORAL AND SPIRITUAL DEMANDS OF POSTMODERN LIFE**

Robert Kegan’s 1994 book, *In Over Our Heads*, carries the subtitle “Meeting the Mental Demands of Modern Life.” Ten years later, I would like to frame a book to be titled something like this: *In With All Our Hearts: Joining Systems Understandings with Practical Faith, Justice and Hope*. The Conjunctive stage of faith calls for minds and spirits that can hold together a deep conviction and loyalty to God—and to God’s people and God’s creation—while combining that loyalty with a shared intelligence and will, regarding how to manage and hold accountable the social and political systems we have inherited



and created. If we depend on a politics of personality (Synthetic-Conventional Faith), or a politics of the balance of competing interests, grounded in possessive individualism (Individuative-Reflective Faith), we will fail to engage the global systems challenges that we and Earth must address. The politics of this new millennium must be a politics of *systems justice*. We must redraw the timetables for reckoning our policy paths to be at least as imaginative and faithful as the Iroquois Nation, who, long ago, required that Council take into account the impact of a proposed decision or policy on those persons six generations beyond ours, and as yet unborn.

Religious education—and public education influenced by a vital coalition of world faiths—seems, to me, to be the most likely source of vision, leadership, and courage for calling our nation, and other pace-setting nations, to move with determination toward ministry to the persons and systems that shape and sustain viable life on our Earth. Only through faithful change at the level of global systemic operations can we turn the Titanic of our interest-driven, short-term policies and charts toward a course where “all men, all women, all children, everywhere” can participate in sustainable life and the joys of trustworthy communities and faithful governance. This is a time for a faithful, courageous, and insistent renewal of a religious education for leadership that, in the power of God’s Spirit, draws us toward a global faith and ethics.

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