

**Being Conscious of Connectedness:
The Role of the Teacher of Religion in the School, the Church
and the Public Sphere.
Some Reflections on the Background of James Fowler's Stage Model of Faith-
Development**

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I. Introduction

Among the many approaches to the current task of Practical Theology James Fowler's more recent publications, and the secondary literature concerning his work, have proven significant in formulating theories concerning that task¹ This can be explained by the close proximity of Fowler's work to actual life-experience.

In the 19th century Friedrich Schleiermacher defined the general task of Practical Theology as the knowledge concerning the work of the church leadership in its function of furthering religious communication. This task can be understood today as the knowledge of every kind of activity directed toward shaping all forms of communication which have the function of expressing that which is of ultimate concern. I generally approach the task of Practical Theology from the perspective of my own area of interest, the practical theological subdiscipline of religious education. I focus in particular on the role of the teacher of religion in the church, the school and in the public sphere.

In this paper will proceed as follows: First, I will describe Practical Theology's significance – or lack of significance – in the Post Modern Era with reference to the work of the practical theologian, Friedrich Schweitzer. Schweitzer discusses the relevance of stage-theories of the human life-cycle in an age marked by the collapse of (religious) traditions. Second, I will summarize some of the more recent secondary literature pertaining to Fowler's stage-theory of faith development. I will also discuss the theories proposed in this literature from the perspective of their significance for the role of those who teach religion. In order to keep the length of this paper manageable I will assume that Fowler's internationally acclaimed stage-model of faith development is well-known in his own country.

I will close the paper by referring to one of Fowler's recent publications and use it to help formulate a position which would support teachers of religion in their effort to find effective forms of communication directed toward helping others and themselves bring to expression that which is of ultimate concern in the Postmodern Era.

¹ Cf. Friedrich Schweitzer, "Practical Theology and Postmodern Life. Do We Need a New Paradigm?", in: *JJPT* 5, 2001, 169-183. Schweitzer connects this inductive approach to life-cycle theories in general.

II. The Challenge of the Postmodern Age for Life-Cycle Models

Friedrich Schweitzer proposes a well-founded thesis that life in the Postmodern Age cannot be adequately described by developmental theories of the Modern Age – among these he includes the work of Erikson. In the aftermath of Erikson one always referred to the categories of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, but now one must admit that the stage-model has become much more complicated. Other stages of development have been defined and belong to any serious discussion of this topic: post-adolescence, the midlife crisis and the various subcategories of old age, to name a few. The experience of real life progresses much more rapidly than any theories which attempt to define and categorize that experience. Even the first three stages mentioned here – childhood, adolescence and adulthood – have lost their key characteristics. For example, childhood is no longer a relatively quiet period of time experienced within the stability of an identifiable nuclear family.

This change in biographical development should not necessarily be perceived as a loss. According to Schweitzer it can also offer new opportunities. For example, the prevailing idea of autonomy is very ambivalent and too narrow to be the guiding norm for adulthood in the Postmodern Age. The *postmodern* life-cycle requires a *postmodern* approach – particularly regarding the practice of the Church. In the Modern Era, which held to a value system inherited from the Enlightenment, adulthood was defined in the terms of autonomy, independence and rationality. Correspondingly, the significance of religion was seen in its support of rational autonomy. The emotional dimension of religion had no place in adult life. From this point of view, however, there is an exclusion of those who show an interest in religion and spirituality as things or processes which reflect a consciousness of interdependency, emotionality and the capacity to enter into relationships. The spiritual quest is a characteristic of the Postmodern Age. This must be included in the life-cycle theories.

If Practical Theology has the task of reconciling the modern with the current postmodern culture, then the life of the individual must be observed under postmodern conditions. However, current developments which can be helpful must be differentiated from those which should be subjected to critical resistance. In the Postmodern Age we also have to deal with individualized religion. According to Schweitzer, if the church wishes to play a role in the public sphere, it must do so convincingly. The capacity for relationship found in particular forms of faith and ethics must be connected with a universal responsibility for the well-being of all citizens and creatures; the church must become a “*public community*”². Practical Theology must find a way to combine the church, individual religion and the public sphere and to keep the interrelationality of these three elements in view. It is here that a theology of life-cycles becomes necessary if the church is to do justice both to the life of the individual and to the role religion plays in the public sphere. The church must take up the task of being an intermediary in the process of transition from the Modern to the Postmodern Age. To that end it needs clear theological criteria.

² Ibid., *Practical Theology and Postmodern Life*, 178 (emphasis in the original).

Theology raises three questions pertaining to the discussion of the postmodern life-cycle model: First, the question of “faith”: What is the object of my trust and hope? Second, the question of the acceptance of responsibility. And third, the question of religious communication. Schweitzer does an analysis of these three questions and uses them to define the current tasks of Practical Theology.

To the first question: Even if the rise of the Postmodern Era implies the end of master stories and, therefore, also the end of the transmission of the Judeo-Christian tradition, there remain areas of human experience that are inherently religious: birth and death, fear and trust, autonomy and dependence, identity and self-denial. These are all categories of experience which imply a quest for meaningful answers and are, therefore, potentially religious questions. A theology of the human life-cycle then should have its starting-point in the area of fundamental anthropology. The first task of a theology of the life-cycle is twofold: it consists, first, in establishing a correlation between the Christian tradition and the experiences of the postmodern life-cycle³ and, second, to show by means of fundamental anthropology how faith and the human life-cycle inherently connected even after the Modern Era.

To the second question: Regarding the category of responsibility or, in theological terms, Christian Ethics there are once again two dimensions that should be addressed: First, there is the responsibility necessary *within* the life-cycle and, second, the responsibility *for* the life-cycle. Life-cycle theories cannot simply be seen as tools to help individuals encounter and experience a given and clearly defined set of stages in life as established in categories supplied by modern thought. Faced with the flexibility and contingency of postmodern lives it has become necessary to accept responsibility *for* the life of the individual, that is, not only for understanding the structure of human life, but also for the *act* itself of structuring the life of the individual under the conditions of the Postmodern Age. There are decisions to be made concerning the role of the individual, the family and the occupation. Assumptions held by the church or political bodies which determine the familial, social and economic parameters for the shaping of the life-cycle need to be considered under the aspect of responsibility. The life-cycle process is not simply a given which is to be experienced and accepted without question.

Third: Regarding the question of religious communication Schweitzer observes that due the individualization of religion in the Postmodern Age religious discourse has become very difficult. Furthermore, the language of the public sphere is no longer adequate for expressing religious topics – not to mention the fact that most people do not acquire the ability to express themselves in religious terms any more. At most one uses the perspective of the social sciences to speak *about* religion. But that is quite different from an interreligious dialogue over different faith experiences. This situation can be further differentiated and defined in three ways. 1. In anthropological terms, a whole dimension of human life is no longer accessible for the purpose of human communication. 2. In our society there is no longer any significant exchange over matters of ultimate meaning. 3. Every form of public communication over matters of faith and religion has become difficult. Therefore, a theology of the human life-cycle has to propose models of religious communication viable both to the church and to the broader public sphere.

³ Ibid., 181.

III. Implications for Religious Education

After this long summary of Schweitzer's position I would like to discuss three suggestions he makes for a practical theology directed toward the postmodern life-cycle. I will address them in view of their significance for religious education and the role of the religion teacher.

1. Anxiety: A Category of Fundamental Anthropology

Regarding the first topic I will limit myself to a discussion on the level of fundamental anthropology as to how faith and the life-cycle can be brought into dialogue even after the Modern Era. I will do this with the help of some material from Joachim Scharfenberg⁴. According to Scharfenberg, anxiety has both external and internal sources which are necessary for human development, but at the same time are conditioned by that process of development. The mesh of internal and external factors has to be reassessed in every given circumstance. To this end it is necessary to identify and differentiate between the various developmental patterns in the life of a child, and then consider which educational and pastoral services can be seen as destructive or helpful in the given situation. Scharfenberg understands Fowler's stage-model to be a collection of ideas of what problems and conflicts to expect when a child or young person goes through a certain situation. Scharfenberg interprets Fowler's theory as a contribution toward understanding the developmental process of anxiety and uses it to create helpful principles for pastoral care. I think that these principles are also significant for the area of (religious) education. I will refer to a few examples of how the stage-model can be reinterpreted for the teaching situation. Scharfenberg uses a specific case to describe the typical anxiety of a person in the second stage of faith, according to Fowler's model, and dominated by his own impulses: A small boy could not sleep at night due to the sudden appearance of "wolves". Scharfenberg interprets this image as an expression of internal impulses overwhelming the boy, who then articulated in this manner. In such a case it is important that the adults with whom the child identifies maintain the communication in the

⁴ Joachim Scharfenberg, "Hier habe Wölfe keinen Zutritt", in: Richard Riess; Kristen Fiedler, (eds.), *Die verletzlichen Jahre. Handbuch zur Beratung und Seelsorge an Kindern und Jugendlichen* (Chr. Kaiser: Gütersloh 1993), 209-225. In connection with this question Schwöbel emphasizes that through the Christian faith certain basic human experiences can be interpreted and mastered in a specific way. But it is just as important to emphasize that there is no bare, unexplainable basic human experience which subsequently receives its expression i.e. through Christian symbols. The language of the Christian faith would then appear to be a selected codification of general basic experiences. Instead Schwöbel emphasizes that the Christian faith's catalogue of symbols serves primarily the function of naming and mastering such basic experiences through biblical texts. The religious catalogue of symbols cannot simply be equated with an assumed hermeneutic of the basic human situation. Nevertheless, through the Christian catalogue of symbols a basic experience is formulated which indeed claims to have the character of basic human experiences. But this character becomes first apparent in the catalogue of symbols of the Christian faith and cannot be presupposed to it. This can be shown in the experiences of createdness or of sin, guilt and forgiveness. Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, "Glaube im Unterricht", in: Hartmut Rupp; Heinz Schmidt (eds.), *Lebensorientierung oder Verharmlosung? Theologische Kritik der Lehrplanentwicklung im Religionsunterricht*, (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 2001), 45-56, 54.

child's specific symbolic language. The father used his imagination and, together with his son, painted a no-trespassing sign for wolves, thus solving his son's difficulties in getting to sleep. What the father did here was to give a meaning to an individual story which allowed the creation of an analogy between internal and external structures. Also important for children at this age that the act of setting limitations for them is done in a way that they can understand. Simply forcing them to conform to certain behavioral patterns can release forms of anxiety.

The person of the third stage can feel threatened by performance anxiety, that is, the anxiety of not achieving the success and self-confirmation so important to a person at this stage. It is helpful here to offer the young people roles that are both limited and realizable. As I have experienced it, this can happen through the children's participation in school worship services or in the acceptance of minor responsibilities in the school's daily life. There was a time when two fifth-graders always appeared at the our teachers' room shortly before my religion class and asked if they could carry my guitar and my bag to the classroom. I expressed my thanks to them for their offer and for their loyal execution of this voluntary service. I know from Catholic colleagues how seriously children take on the task of being acolytes during this phase. Their age is not a detriment to playing a role in the service, instead they are allowed to don liturgical vestments and take on responsibilities during the mass. They have a task which they can indeed fulfill and thus serves as a strong support against the fear of failure.

In his interpretation of Fowler's stage-model Scharfenberg emphasizes that the mixture of internal and external factors contributing to anxiety have to be redefined in every given situation. Through this he has opened his interpretation for further reflection under the conditions of the Postmodern Age. For example, a typical phase of anxiety for young people takes place when they go through puberty. A characteristic of this anxiety is the fear that they are not attractive enough. The widespread occurrence of *anorexia nervosa* is a witness to this phenomenon. The task of those teaching religion is to use the material offered by Christian anthropology and thus to reflect on the acceptance of the young people, including their bodies, just the way they are.

2. Taking Responsibility for One's Own Life

Regarding Schweitzer's second question I will concentrate on the problem of how the responsibility for one's life, that is, for shaping and organizing it under postmodern conditions, can take place. Modern stage-models simply do not have the capacity for considering the situation of young women in the Postmodern Age. The special value that women place simultaneously in deeper relationships and in personal (occupational) fulfillment does not fit into the life-patterns assumed by the stage-models.

To address this question I will draw on the work of the feminist theologian, Nicola Slee⁵, who did a study on the patterns and processes of women's faith development on the basis of Fowler's theory. Her study contains qualitative-empirical research interviews, that is, open interviews with women between 30 and 67 years of age who differ greatly from one another in their family situations, in their relationship to the Christian church and in their cultural backgrounds. Using Fowler's faith-interviews as a model,

⁵ Nicola Slee, "Some Patterns and Processes of Women's Faith Development", in *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2000.

these women were asked to express their views about their own faith experience. One of the most important results of this study is that, in spite of the differences in these women's faith-experience, they all had three developmental phases in common: The process always begins with a crisis, which Slee refers to as *paralysis*. At this stage women feel isolated, powerless and lacking energy – something which becomes noticeable in interviews through silence or negative metaphors. The stage lasts until the woman is able to find her identity in the patriarchal society, overcome her estrangement from herself and then perceive her own life as meaningful. The second stage is known as the *awakening*. Major events such as becoming a mother or taking up a job (again), but also the experiences of love or separation play a major role at this point. Common to all women during this phase is that the powers of suggestion and instinct, and the experience of harmony between the internal and external Self are greater determinative factors than rational thought. New energy and feelings are released. The Self and the reality surrounding it are renamed. There is even a new naming of God. Slee refers to the third stage as the stage of *relationality*. At this point the women recognize that the human being exists in union with God, the world and their fellow human beings and creatures. Even though the image of God varies from case to case, all women describe God with images of steadfastness, trust, interdependency and with metaphors such as that of a bridge. Relationality accompanies the faith journey of every woman throughout her whole life and helps her through times of crisis. Slee summarizes the results of her study with the following thought: In principle, Fowler's model has the capacity to describe female faith-development. Unfortunately his model falls short when one considers the affective and relational dimension of women's faith development. Women describe the feelings experience during times of crisis in a manner which does not fit into Fowler's model. Fowler's model falls short in that it pictures the developmental stages exclusively in *progression*.

How can one describe the role of the religion teacher using the implications of Nicola Slee's revised version of Fowler's stage-model? In order to answer this question I would like to refer to Carol Gilligan. She and other researchers interviewed young girls between the ages of 7 and 18 as part of a project at Harvard University⁶. They wanted to find out why young women in the process of growing up always experience a crisis when they enter puberty. They observed that girls between the ages of ten and eleven still know exactly what they want, hold to their opinions and even have the tendency to be dogmatic. During adolescence, however, a noticeable change takes place: The girls become more careful, quieter or even silent. The girl's voice – or the act of losing her voice – does not denote her real voice, but rather represents the act of losing her self, her identity as a person. In a reversal of the situation during childhood, the girls become more susceptible to stress than their male contemporaries. They get easily depressed and other signs of instability such as eating problems occur. They sometimes even injure themselves. The results of the Harvard project show that girls who grow up

⁶ Carol Gilligan, Lyn Brown (eds.), *Meeting the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girl's Development*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1992). My discussion is based on the report on Gilligan's study by Annabelle Pithan. Cf. Annabelle Pithan, "Die Stimmen von Mädchen hören und ihnen Gehör verschaffen. Geschlechtsspezifische Sozialisation im Religionsbuch", in: Sybille Becker, Ilona Nord, *Religiöse Sozialisation von Mädchen und Frauen*. (Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln: Verlag W. Kohlhammer 1995), 35-54.

in Western civilization also go through an educational crisis. The interviews indicate that girls know a lot about themselves and what happens around them, but at the same time they fear that this knowledge will hurt their relationships to other people. Young women in the process of growing up then find themselves in the dilemma of how to mediate between themselves and others. They ask themselves if it is better to acquiesce to others and give themselves up, or to come to terms with themselves and give up their friendships. Gilligan refers to the termination of relationships to others as “disconnect- edness”, and the estrangement toward oneself as “dissociation”. A young woman often tries to find a compromise between the relationships to herself and to others. Some be- gin to live with a split consciousness. They will speak with two voices, that is, they will hold to two versions of the same story. As a result of this split, and in the effort to keep their relationships to others going, many young women deny significant parts of them- selves – their voices, vitality, brilliance or creativity. Their feelings are too important to them that they would risk the danger of being subjected to rejection or being ignored. The task for female adults, teachers and instructors consists in listening to the girls and young women, to take their perspective seriously, but also not to hold back their own opinions from the perspective of adulthood. Taking responsibility for one’s own life also means to support women in the development of relational symbols of God and their faith.

3. Models of Religious Communication Open to the Church and the Public Sphere

3.1 Heinz Streib and his co-author Albrecht Schöll

I will turn to the most recent publication by the Fowler-researcher Heinz Streib⁷. His book represents a unique approach to the fascination that young people have for the occult. The book also analyses the biographical context of this fascination, the role of (church) religiosity, and the psychological crises and suicidal tendencies that occur among the youth. It provides insight into an *individualized* form of religious behavior not untypical for the youth in the Postmodern Age. This is another case where Fowler’s theory is put to the test as to whether or not it is able to provide appropriate theological answers for life in the Postmodern Age. The question at hand is whether the theory is able to help transform an individualized form of religious communication, as found in youth-occultism, into a form of religious communication understandable in the context of both the church and the public sphere.

Streib and his co-author, Albrecht Schöll, had to find a starting point by which to ana- lyze the occult-fascination of the youth – a cultural phenomenon which is anything but harmless. They began by holding narrative interviews with young people involved in the occult scene. In the main part of their book the authors include 15 representative narrative interviews with young people between 13 and 23 years of age. The “home base” of the project was the university in Bielefeld. Of fundamental importance to this research project were the following insights: Through the use of methods of high qual- ity from the area of biographic-reconstructive social research they hoped to determine

⁷ Albrecht Schöll; Heinz Streib, *Wege der Entzauberung. Jugendliche Sinnsuche und Okkultfaszination. Kontexte und Analysen.* (Münster, Hamburg, London: LIT 2000. Schriften aus dem Comenius-Institut, Bd.1)

the depth of the motivation behind the fascination with the occult, and how much time this phase of occult-fascination actually occupies in the biographical development of the individual. Their new theory concerning the fascination with the occult contains the following: 1. Occultism consists of magical thought and behavior, which, according to Streib, is also expressive behavior. It is based on alien thought patterns and expressed in the form of symbols and rituals. 2. The youth perceive a purpose in life, that is, the occult creates deep impressions on young people which demand their attention and cause them to try to work through this experience. 3. The styles of magical thought and behavior need to be considered: With reference to the stage- or phase-models proposed by James Fowler, Robert Kegan and other developmental psychologists and theologians, the authors propose a new variation of the stage-model which enables a differentiation between the specific styles of magical thought and behavior that develop during, and with, the individual's process of maturation. They have observed an "oceanic-participative" Style of magical thought which provides the basis for other styles of magical thought: They are termed "defensive-pacifistic", "reciprocative-instrumental", "mutual-participative", "systematic-controlling" and finally a complementary-integrative approach to, and association with, magic. 4. Using the methods available from the sociology of religion, the authors interpret and categorize the religious rituals practiced by young people with the intent of proposing a plausible interpretation for the current fascination for the occult: On the one hand young people are open to possibilities for further personal development and they do want their freedom of space. On the other hand they are also under the pressure of *having* to determine their lives and lifestyles for themselves – which can lead to isolated and particularized daily routines. In addition, the youth turn more and more to the occult in order to cope with their own life situations. But as a result they turn over the responsibility for developing their own lives to "spirits", or to some psychomotoric automatism.

The practice of the occult on the part of the youth, however, cannot simply be understood as a misguided world-view. On the contrary, the magical thought and behavior expressed in the occult reveals a potential for development. This potential needs to be discovered by those who accompany the youth through the various stations in their lives: particularly in school, the church and in therapy. According to the authors the work of raising and educating young people must consist in supporting their search for meaning. This includes guiding them away from seeing spirits as real and concrete beings and to offer them a demythologized or symbolical understanding of the spirits – possibly through methods that deal with the didactics of symbols. Working through major questions about life with the help of narratives may not prevent these questions from being taken up in the practice of the occult – resulting in the uncontrolled spread of central existential questions into the context of occultism, but this kind of work does help make the problems treatable. Supporting young people in their search for meaning can help them transfer the forms of communication learned and put into practice during their occult phase into the life-style offered by the school, church or other organizations as an application of available knowledge to a new life-experience.

Fowler's model has thus stood the test to be a valuable tool for approaching this form of postmodern religious life-style. However, a question does remain open which pertains to Streib and not to Fowler: In the closing capital of his book Streib refers repeatedly to the "ideal goal" of attending to youth who have fallen under the spell of the occult as

helping them “to become adults with a sufficiently autonomous view of life and life-style”. Is this an appropriate use of the term “autonomy”? Could one not phrase this a little differently as Carol Gilligan does in her criticism of Kohlberg, or as Fowler does in his acceptance of suggestions that women have made for improving his model? One could define the goal as “helping the youth to become adults with a view of life and a life-style that includes a sufficient capacity for relationship with others”. The point of it all is not that the individual lives his newly found style of faith autonomously and this, in the end, is not Streib’s intention.

3.2 The Work of Robert Kegan

The significance of the public sphere for the (religious) understanding of the individual is of central importance to Kegan’s work⁸, which is a necessary point of discussion in order to do justice to the task taken up by this paper. Robert Kegan was a member of Fowler’s research team. Kegan uses the term “cultural embeddedness” to indicate that the human being is a creature that creates meaning. The Self is built from the perspective acquired through interaction with others. Kegan is interested in the significance one gives to oneself and to others in the process of interaction. The concept of “embeddedness” means that at every developmental stage one receives a qualitatively new form of support. The state of embeddedness is a general characteristic of one’s development. At each stage of development the individual looks for a new form of organization. Our culture is our psychosocial soil, our womb. The development of the personality takes place in the interaction between the organism and its environment. What matters to Kegan is the act of creating meaning. He uses his developmental theory to study which communities are the kind that repeatedly and successively support the members who grow up in and emerge from them. He asks the question: What is the nature of the succession of embedding cultures as a principle for the determination of one’s own life? From Kegan we can learn how to ease the passage from one cultural context of development to the next. According to his model the maternal environment is constitutive for the incorporating Self of the fetus and the infant. This environment provides the experience of security, nurture and gratification. For the impulsive Self of the small child, the parental or familial environment provides the certainty of continuity, but also teaches the child to stay within necessary boundaries. The sovereign Self of the child in elementary school experiences the family, but also the school and peer-groups as bases of support. The inter-individual Self of the adolescent experiences this support through one-to-one relationships. I will stop here, because my discussion is concerned with school children, in particular. For every passage from one into another form of embeddedness there are also specific forms of help. A teddy-bear can ease the passage from infancy to childhood, or a good friend can be helpful in the passage from childhood to adolescence.

⁸ I use here to the summary of Kegan’s position by Friedrich W. Bargheer in his book *Was Menschen-Leben hält und trägt. Kirchliche Gemeindepraxis (und andere Lebens-Praxen) im Licht von Robert Kegan’s Konzept der Haltenden Kultur*, (Hamburg: E.-B.- Verlag 1997). The main work to which Bargheer and others refer is Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self. Problem and Process in Human Development*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1982: 13. Ed. 1996).

The theologian Friedrich Bargheer coordinates phases of transition with rites of passage: First baptism, then the church service that takes place in Germany when the children begin school and finally confirmation. Bargheer does not make any suggestion for the next phase, higher education, and I think that portrays our situation in Germany quite well: At American colleges and universities one tries to ease the transition from high school to higher education – a new stage in life – through the well-known freshmen week. The students are made to feel at home through sports activities, church services, counseling-sessions and parties. In Germany there is very little offered in this direction and my students at the university do complain about it.

What does all this mean for the role of the person whose job it is to teach religion? As one can see on the basis of an individualized religion such as adolescent occultism the role of the teacher is to discover the students' specific styles of faith, and to help them live out their faith in a new dimension. The hope is that their faith develops in such a way that their self-incapacitation and dependency gives way to gaining a new style of religion, that is, a style with the capacity to discuss the question of Ultimate Concern in the public sphere (churches, schools, etc.). Teachers also have the task to work toward the creation and preservation of cultures of embeddedness in the church, in the school and in other places of public responsibility.

IV. The Challenge of the Postmodern Age for Teachers of Religion

1. Introduction

For the purpose of developing my thoughts concerning the current role and the task of today's religion teachers I will report briefly on the situation of religious education in my own country, and then I will discuss Fowler himself.

In Germany religious education takes place in public schools, and not as in the United States where it lies exclusively in the hands of church congregations and private schools. The church in Germany is responsible for the content of religious education. As one of many other subjects that are taught in a public school, "Religion" is also part of general education.

In my interpretation of this twofold task, the subject "Religion" must support the individual-biographic quest for meaning, as well as offer the richness of that, which is of ultimate concern from a Protestant perspective. Religious education has a public dimension in so far as the church is founded on the redeeming and liberating work of God in Jesus Christ. In particular, taking the side of the least of the brothers and sisters (Mt 25, 40) is a public task of the church.

Having taught almost 1000 hours of religious education in public schools, I find Fowler's theology of "Faithful Change"⁹ to be a particularly adequate answer to the questions of personal and public life with which I am confronted as a person responsible for the faith development of my students, as well as for value education in the public sphere a pluralistic age.

⁹Fowler, James W., *Faithful Change. The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

2. „Faithful Change“ – The Significance of Fowler’s Method in the Age of Pluralism

In the third Chapter of this book Fowler discusses „Faith and the Challenges of Post-modern Life”. He integrates public policy issues into his analysis in the assumption that they are deeply connected to faith development, theology and the church. He applies his faith development theory to the theological analysis of culture. Fowler suggests (1) a correlation between the movement from the Conventional to the Reflective and historical transition of cultural consciousness of pre-Enlightenment (orthodox, pre-critical) to Enlightenment (progressive, critical), and (2) a further correlation between the movement from the Reflective to the Conjunctive and the transition from Enlightenment modes of consciousness to postmodern modes. Fowler affirms practical postmodern consciousness as necessary for today’s reflective person. This may be a way of understanding the relationship between premodern, modern and postmodern (Conjunctive) consciousness.¹⁰

Fowler derives from faith, as an essential human element, the necessity to offer the richness and wisdom of our particular tradition as resources for guidance and courage in facing the collective changes of the new millenium.¹¹ I would like to discuss this approach now in its relevance for religious education as a task for future public education in the particular situation of my country, the Federal Republic of Germany.

Two federal churches have been responsible for setting the curricula for the subject “Religion” in the federal state Baden-Württemberg (South Germany). But an analysis of these curricula by theologians at the university in Heidelberg reveals a tendency to reduce the existential dimension of theology to a quest for superficial harmony that avoids all forms of paradoxical insight. There is also a tendency to reduce theology to a type of secularized moralism. The curricula also tend to banalize and secularize Christianity. As stated by a newspaper journalist: The church “... comes under pressure to justify its very own matter of religious education.”¹² The subjects Philosophy or Ethics, it seems, can easily replace Religion.

The analysts of the curricula speak of a tendency towards playing down specifically Christian contents. This playing down has four aspects: reference to transcendence is eliminated, the concepts of sin and the power of evil are avoided, the depth of the concept of God is concealed and eschatology is neglected.¹³

The Stages of Faith stand against these secularizing tendencies, because they describe meaning as the quest for the existential dimension of the Holy. The triadic faith structure always has the element of transcendence. Fowler interprets *faith* in the tradition of Tillich. The person “... who enters the sphere of faith enters the sanctuary of life. Where there is faith there is an awareness of holiness.” ... “The awareness of the holy is the awareness of the presence of the divine, namely of the content of our ultimate con-

¹⁰ Cf. Walter E. Conn, Review of: Fowler, *Faithful Change*, *Horizons* 24 (Fall 1997), 326-328.

¹¹ Cf. Fowler, *Faithful Change*, Introduction.

¹² Cf. Heike Schmoll, “Selbstbanalisierung im Religionsunterricht. Die Lehrpläne für Evangelische Religionslehre in Baden-Württemberg unter theologischer Perspektive“, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11.7.2001.

¹³ Hartmut Rupp, Heinz Schmidt (eds.), *Lebensorientierung oder Verharmlosung? Theologische Kritik der Lehrplanentwicklung im Religionsunterricht*, Preface.

cern.”¹⁴ So the Stage Development Theory is a hermeneutic tool that helps us to become aware of religious styles¹⁵ of life and to interpret them as different variations of the quest for the Holy.

We could juxtapose the inability to develop curricula that express or help to express the different aspects of the *fascinosum et tremendum*, on the one hand, and the religious life styles of young people, in particular, in their quest for the Holy on the other.

The German Catholic theologian Georg Hilger has made an empirical study called “What is holy/sacred to the youth” („Was Jugendlichen heilig ist”).¹⁶ He presented an incomplete sentence, “Holy to me is...” („Heilig ist mir ...“) to almost 1000 teenagers. This sentence had to be completed in writing. An analysis of the texts results in a list of priorities ranked as follows: Holy to me is: 1. family, 2. friends, 3. stereo, computer, telephone, vehicles or objects (of reminiscence), 4. values (reliability, health, love, friendship), 5. explicitly religious subjects (God, praying, church), 6. places (one’s own bedroom, meeting points for young people), 7. animals, 8. my life. There are some astonishing parallels with the issues addressed in Fowler’s faith interviews .

The general human quest for the holy has many faces. And of course, “ ... the ambiguity of the holy is its demonic possibility. Our ultimate concern can destroy us as it can heal us. But we can never be without it.”¹⁷

3. Critique and Appreciation of Fowler’s Model in View of the Current Task of Religious Education

Fowler’s stages offer a healthy way to relate to the Holy, and to value the objects of our everyday life in like manner, that is, in relation to that which is of ultimate value.

Trust, reliance and hope (Stage1), significant relationships (Stage 4), or the care and struggle for the rights of oppressed minorities (Stage 6,7) can be inspired by the ultimate concern.

In *Faithful Change* I find a special affinity to Niebuhr’s thought. Niebuhr not only discusses faith development on the basis of the sociological analysis of the phenomena of culture, but also emphasizes the revealing act of the sovereign God in Jesus Christ. Fowler not only looks at faith development from the vantage point of experience, but also from the vantage point of God’s providence, which is revealed in his acts of liberation, redemption, creation and sovereignty. Through this double perspective, Fowler avoids a reduction of the Holy to human needs or to a secularization of the „ultimate

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Writings on Religion/Religiöse Schriften*, ed. Carl Heinz Ratschow, vol. 5: Dynamics of Faith, 1957, ed. Robert P. Scharlemann, (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1988), 231-238, 237f.

¹⁵ Religiöse Stile sind „...*Modi des Zugangs zu und Umgangs mit Religion in ihren narrativen, symbolischen und rituellen Ausdrucksformen, die multifaktoriell, nämlich lebensweltlich und lebensgeschichtlich generiert sind.*” So Heinz Streib, Religion als Stilfrage. Zur Revision struktureller Differenzierung von Religion im Blick auf die Analyse der pluralistisch-religiösen Lage der Gegenwart“, in *Archiv für Religionspsychologie* vol. 22, ed. Nils G. Holm et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 48-69, 66. Translation: Religious styles are:”...modes of access to and the involvement in religion in its narrative, symbolic and ritual forms of expression, which are generated by multiple factors, that is, by biographical environment and history.“

¹⁶ Vgl. Georg Hilger, “Heilig ist mir ...“, in *Katechetische Blätter* 6/1999, 411f.

¹⁷ Tillich, *Writings on Religion*, a.a.O., 238.

concern“, and at the same time he acknowledges the possibility ”To See the Kingdom“¹⁸ within human experience, development and the struggle for a life in a public sphere that takes the side of the least of the brothers and sisters. Conjunctive faith as a stage of faith in a postmodern age may help us “... to eschew *relativism*, while acknowledging *relativity*.”¹⁹

Fowler generalizes central contents of the Christian tradition, and of the so-called cultural heritage of the western world, as universal categories of the life cycle. Sometimes he does not pay enough attention to the fact that both he and Erikson, who is one of his main sources, do not consider in depth the patriarchal background of this heritage (the covenant) or the patriarchal reinterpretation of originally female virtues (i.e. the wisdom tradition). Furthermore, in the postmodern situation of radical pluralism with its corresponding life styles, and the question of what is to be considered a successful life, still needs to be thought through more critically. Moreover, in order to emphasize the process of faith development as a gift of grace, the stage model could be structured more under a cyclic idea of development, or as a spiral, as in the Christian liturgical calendar. Also, Luther’s theology of a *fides infantium* reminds us that growth in faith is not only a gain of maturity, but also a loss of innocence, unconcern and ease.²⁰

Nevertheless, Fowler has given us good reasons for appreciating a perspective in which a set of norms, established through the relatedness to symbols and through the orientation of human life toward them in Postmodern Age, can only be thought of if there is an explicit inclusion of the relationship to God.

Once again, Fowler’s stages offer a way to relate in a healing way to the Holy, and to value the objects of our everyday life in a healthy way and in the context of that which is of ultimate value.

The relevance of Fowler’s approach can be summarized as follows: *Public responsibility is the result of biographical developmental processes of relatedness. It is structured by perceptions and reflections of an ultimate environment.*

The task and the role of those involved in teaching religion is to open personal faith development, and the theoretical description of that process, to the perception of the Holy, and to use the results drawn from this process for the purpose of public educational discourse in the Age of Postmodernity.

¹⁸ This is the title of Fowler’s Dissertation. Cf. James, W. Fowler. *To See the Kingdom. The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1974).

¹⁹ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, p. 175.

²⁰ Cf. Dieter Seiler, Frühe Schicksale des Glaubens. Überlegungen zur Fides Infantium, in *Wege zum Menschen* 48/1996, 70-95.