Stages of Faith - a tool for curing souls?

1. Introduction

For 12 years I was a vicar in Coventry. It was quite a large parish, and the population was increasingly elderly. As a result we took a lot of funerals: between 60 and 80 a year, on average. I didn't take them all, but my personal average was just above one every working week through the year. One of the things I found was that in bereavement, suddenly assailed by waves of emotion that feel out of control, a very high proportion of people worry that they're 'going mad' – that was often the phrase they used. And I found that for some, knowing that there is usually a generic pattern to the experience of grief, was an enormous reassurance, because they found that they were not alone in thinking, feeling, or experience, as they feared. For me in a pastoral role, therefore, having a working (though hardly expert) knowledge of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Cycle of Grief[1] was really important. It helped me to reassure people that they were actually quite normal, and it helped me to spot the occasions when someone had got stuck in one phase of the cycle. This theoretical framework, which is not rigorously proved in scientific terms, was originally really a way of distilling the wisdom which Elisabeth Kübler-Ross had acquired in her own work with dying patients as she saw similar reactions played out before her. But it always needs to be held in tension with the truth that every person grieves in their own distinctive way. Differences must be honoured, but similarities can help us to see what's distinctive.

The Cycle of Grief is a useful tool in bereavement work, and there are now a good many other tools which we can use in helping us to understand other people in order to help them understand themselves better. The Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator, the Enneagram, *Strengthsfinder*, Tuckman's stages of group formation, Transactional Analysis…we could go on. It would be easy to be overwhelmed by the proliferation of these tools, but each has its place and is designed for a slightly different task. By using several of them, at different times, you may be able to locate a crucial issue, and, most importantly, find a vocabulary that enables the person you're working with to develop a new understanding of themselves and others, and themselves and God.

Like Kübler-Ross's Cycle of Grief most of these tools come under the category of wisdom rather than rigorous science, and need to be held to lightly, as guidelines rather than strait-jackets! Often these tools are criticised as if they were scientific models and are found wanting, and sometimes the originators of them have made claims that are too great for them as objective scientific models. But actually they are tools in the work-bag of those of us who are called to the ancient task of 'curing souls', to use the delightful phrase re-appropriated in recent years by Eugene Peterson.[2] What we're looking at today is the tool developed largely by James W.Fowler that goes under the name of 'Faith Development Theory' but is perhaps more often referred to as 'Stages of Faith.' As with grief, so with faith; there does seem to be an observable pattern to how human faith grows. But, equally, every person develops their faith in their own way. Differences must be honoured, but similarities

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[1] See Elisabeth Kübler-Ross *On Death and Dying* (Tavistock Publications 1970).
[2] See Eugene H.Peterson *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (William B.Eerdmans 1989), Chapter VI. Also available online at: http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/19218.htm.

can help us to see what's distinctive, and help us to discover what's unique and particularly precious in the story of the person we meet – the particular gifts of grace that God has given them.

2. Situating James W. Fowler and Faith Development Theory

James W. Fowler is an American Methodist minister and practical theologian, born in 1940 and, from 1987 until retirement in 2005, Professor of a specially created chair in Theology and Human Development at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Influenced in particular by the work of the Swiss educationalist Jean Piaget, who developed a theory of cognitive developmental stages in children, Fowler in the 1970s began extensive field-work conversations to research the processes by which faith develops in human beings. Similar work in the area of ethical reasoning and the stages of moral development had already been done by Lawrence Kohlberg, though his work was highly contentious in some respects (not least because his initial field work was restricted solely to male respondents!).

The idea of stages of development was in vogue across a range of fields during the mid-20th century. A good, and influential, example, is Erik Erikson, whose neo-Freudian theory of human psychological development offered 8 'ages of the life cycle' in his book *Childhood and Society* (1950). It was Erikson who coined the phrase 'identity crisis', and this and much of his work has become the stuff of popular amateur psychology. Erikson himself had a strong interest in the religious aspects of personal identity, and his study of *Young Man Luther* (1958) crystallised a striking example of these, at the same time having an impact on theologians who felt he was trespassing on their ground and were uncomfortable with his naturalistic explanation of the Reformation. Erikson's main contribution to Fowler's thinking was his contention that developmental stages are sequential, that is, the subject cannot move to a further stage until the present one is completed, and they must be followed in order. Hence the widespread belief in the West today that issues or tensions over trust, for example, cannot be addressed as an adult until issues unresolved in childhood are faced and worked through. Erikson has been criticised for holding his theory too rigidly, especially the way he ties the stages to specific age ranges, and for claiming a scientific rigour that his work does not have.

Fowler takes his place amongst the 'adult developmental theorists' such as Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson, but he situates them (and himself) not so much as scientists as those who 'have come to play the role in our society that storytellers and mythmakers once played in primitive and classical cultures.' They have, he says, 'In a time of fractured images of the human vocation and fragmented religious and cultural symbols…helped us gain a holistic grasp of the course of human life'[3] in our present culture in a way that theologians in the past offered the framework for a way of salvation. He defines such people, semi-humorously, as 'gossips', because they tell stories about other people in case-studies, but relates that the origin of the word 'gossip' was a description of 'one who has contracted spiritual affinity with another by acting as a sponsor at baptism.' He goes on to suggest that this is exactly in fact what developmental theorists do today: they serve as 'a sponsor in a critical rite of passage.' [4] But other developmental theories can easily bracket out faith, or relegate it

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[3] James W.Fowler *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (Jossey-Bass 2000) p.10.
[4] Ibid. p.12.

to a private, essentially unknowable sphere (following a Kantian epistemology). Fowler, who is also of course a theologian, is in some sense seeking to build a bridge between world and Church and to reintegrate faith into developmental psychology. Fowler appropriates the insight of the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann that 'it is the special temptation of modern persons (though it did not begin in the modern era) to believe that our life springs from us, that we generate our own power and vitality, and that within us can be found the sources of wholeness and well-being.'[5] Rather, the biblical God is one who calls us into covenant relationship with him, and we are grounded in his being, not 'self-grounded' as most post-Enlightenment thought would have it, in our own. Fowler sums this up by saying that 'We move from the question "Who am I?" to the question "*Whose* am I?"'[6] Therefore, in Christian terms, Brueggemann argues that the corollary of the covenanting God is that everyone is on a journey of vocation, and that identity, indeed existence itself, is in fact derived from our response to the call of God. Fowler writes that 'Vocation is bigger than our careers or our professions, though it may include both. Vocation is the response we make with our *total selves* to the call of God (acknowledged or unacknowledged) and to God's call to partnership. In this more comprehensive sense, vocation refers to the orchestration of our leisure, our relationships, our work our private lives, our public lives, and the resources we steward, It is the focusing of our lives in the service of God and in the love of the neighbour.'[7] Thus vocation is worked out in relationship with the 'Other' who is God. This approach radically distinguishes the basis of Fowler's theory from his fellow developmental theorists.

Fowler nevertheless wants to take the best insights from developmental psychology and to relate them to the work of the Christian 'gossip', gossips being those who help others make transitions to different stages of vocation. It is helping people to negotiate the transitions safely that is one of Fowler's key aims in setting out his theory, and he sees a sponsor as having a vital role in this. As such he emphasises the need for a mentor to participate in the covenanted relationship we have with God that is faith: 'A sponsor is one who has gone before us' he says. 'He or she knows the terrain we enter into. The sponsor and the sponsoring community have maps and models to offer pilgrims. They know how to walk alongside, to encourage, and to help pace the movement of the pilgrim.'[8] Knowledge of the human condition, how human beings work, is natural knowledge partly derived from empirical observation by developmental theorists. Fowler wants to read this knowledge together with the insights of Christian tradition, within the overall framework of God's calling of humanity collectively and individually. Sponsor is a good word here for a guide, with its resonances of early Church baptismal practice, but it can sound specialised and formal. What Fowler is describing is in fact someone with a good intuitive sense of human nature, who is wise and patient to listen. The term gossip itself, whose roots are *God* and *sib* – the latter word meaning 'related to', i.e. someone who connects you/is connected to God[9] - is one which spiritual directors might like to take up again for themselves as capturing something of the sense of homespun but hard-won wisdom that curing souls requires!

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[5] Walter Brueggemann 'Covenanting as Human Vocation' in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Fortress Press 1995), Chapter 8, pp.151-52.
[6] Fowler *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* p.75.
[7] James W.Fowler *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Fortress Press 1987) p.32.
[8] Ibid. p.115.
[9] Fowler *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* pp.11-12.

3. **'Stages of Faith'**

Fowler has described his stages of faith theory several times, first in *Stages of Faith* (1981). It has not undergone much revision over the years, and is re-stated in most of his subsequent books.[10] In terms of Isaiah Berlin's classification of thinkers into hedgehogs and foxes-- the former having one big idea and the latter knowing many things – Fowler is definitely a hedgehog. The terms used within it are, as Jeff Astley notes, 'rather jaw-breaking',[11] but rather than reword them, as Astley does, I have felt it important to work with Fowler's language as the terms help to illuminate the concepts he is trying to capture.

I shall outline briefly below the seven stages, but focus most subsequently on the key transitions between what Fowler labels stages 3, 4 and 5.

In chart form the stages of faith look like Fig. 1. Fowler links the stages with certain age ranges, which I have included, but I have also felt that the seasons of life, which are less age-specific, offer a slightly clearer way into the rough approximations of the age at which people tend to make the transitions. It is important to note, however, that Fowler considers that many people reach the early stages and do not make a transition beyond them, expressed in the diagram by the continuing blocks of shading.

It's also important to note that Fowler strongly resists the tendency to classify one stage as better than another. Rather, he points out, each stage is 'more complex, differentiated, and comprehensive',[12] but this does not imply that one is easier, more comfortable, or 'higher' than another. A moment's reflection reveals that, while the age-specific connections may seem prescriptive, what they are trying to point up is that it is not 'better' to be 45, 65, 25, 15 or 5, but rather that each stage of life has a level of being appropriate to it. Similarly with faith: the situation of life at certain ages will tend to lend itself to a stage of faith-understanding that is appropriate, and there are usually some similarities in the expression of this understanding. Fowler concludes that the age-specific connections should be understood to mean that 'There are minimum ages under which it would be unusual to find a person at a particular stage…But transitions…can come much later or for some persons not at all.'[13] He further notes that 'developmental stage transition is a complex and often protracted affair. Transitions cannot and should not be rushed. Development takes time',[14] which suggests that a wide range of ages may apply to post-childhood transitions.

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[10] E.g. Fowler *Faith Development* pp.57-77, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* pp.40-57. Jeff Astley offers a shortened description in 'Insights from Faith Development Theory and Research' in Jeff Astley (ed.), *Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education* (Gracewing, 2000), Chapter 6. Also available online at:
http://passingonthefaith.org.uk/docs/Insights%20from%20Faith%20Development%20Theory%20and%20Research.pdf)
[11] Astley 'Insights'
[12] Fowler *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* p.45.
[13] Fowler *Faith Development* p.67.
[14] Ibid. p.81.

Childhood   Adolescence   Young adult   Middle age   Mature life

0. Primal faith (ages 0-4)

1. Intuitive/Projective faith (ages 3-8)

2. Mythic/literal faith (ages 7-12)

3. Synthetic/Conventional faith (ages 11-18)

4. Individuative/Reflective faith (ages 17+/30+)

5. Conjunctive faith (rare before 30)

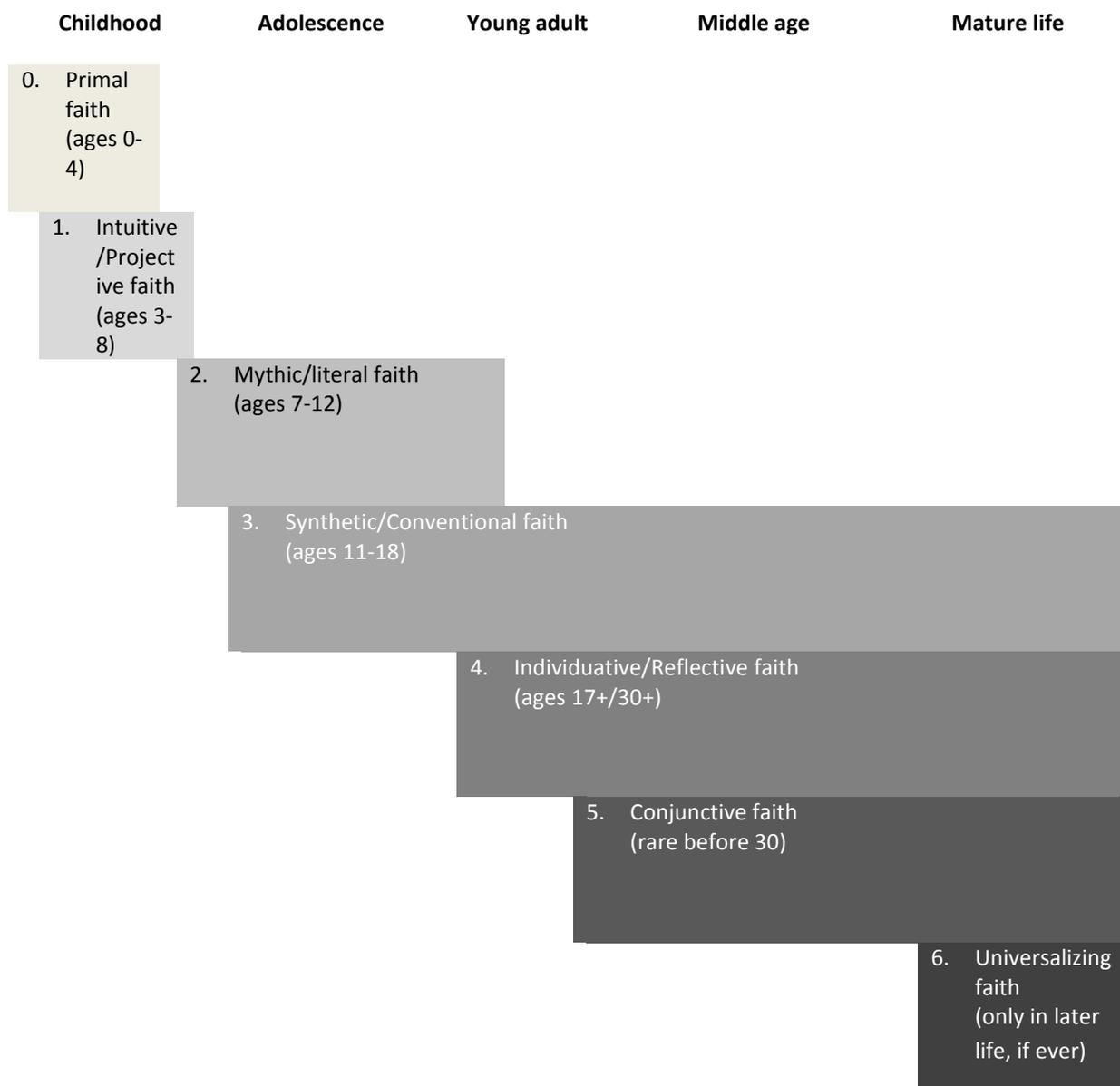6. Universalizing faith (only in later life, if ever)

Fig.1 Stages of Faith according to James W.Fowler

Stages 0-2 are the stages of childhood, and consequently are largely dependent on the home and school environment. The basis of belief is built here, and primary relationships of trust established (or sometimes not).

A crucial step is a movement into Stage 3, which only rarely begins before the age of 11, and is related to Erikson's concept of the 'identity crisis.' This stage is synthetic in the sense that it weaves together faith out of a variety of sources, in a synthesis: Fowler describes part of the work as learning to 'form a story of one's stories'.[15] It is conventional in that faith is at this stage formed in a social or group context (e.g. family/gang/church), and the individual follows the norms of the group

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[15] Ibid.p.65.

rather than adopting particular views after thinking them through for themselves. In Anglican terms, this stage often relates to teenage confirmation. A good many people stay at this stage, according to Fowler, with 'a set of tacitly held, strongly felt, but largely unexamined beliefs and values.'[16] (Fowler estimates as many as 30% of adults remain at this stage).

The transition to stage 4, what Fowler terms 'Individuative-Reflective Faith', is a major one, rarely encountered before the early twenties, according to Fowler, though occasionally occurring in late teenage, or in the early 30s. The tacit nature of the previous stage is often brutally exposed at this point, and it is no accident that many people do not make the transition to continued Christian faith, but move instead to atheism or agnosticism.

There is a process of disembedding first, from the conventions of the group that form the basis of stage 3 faith, followed by the adoption of a new faith identity, which may be connected to previous expressions, but on a new basis and now fully 'owned' in a personal sense by the individual. Fowler puts the question at the heart of this stage well when he says 'One faces the question, Who are you when you are not defined by being so-and-so's daughter or son or so-and-so's wife or husband?...Who are you when you are not defined by that occupational or professional role or by that circle of friendship and belonging?'[17] This can lead to 'a fear of the loss of self.'[18]

Much less stress in stage 4 is laid on literal truth, and a greater awareness grows of the symbolic nature of faith statements. Fowler notes that losses are also connected to this, however: 'a symbol that is recognized as a symbol no longer has the power of a symbol.'[19] The effect of this transition can be hugely destabilising and traumatic, and the process may be painful and drawn out. At its best, this stage affords a strong sense of 'self-dependence and self-ownership'; but when the things that support this sense crumble in the face of a crisis, as often happens in mid-life, the stage is set for a further transition.

Stage 5 is called 'Conjunctive Faith' by Fowler, because he wants to recognise that this stage above all begins to tolerate tension and paradox in a way that earlier stages tend to resist, the conjunctions which we have sought previously to resolve. 'As regards faith and its expression in this stage' he writes, 'we must speak of epistemological humility. The Conjunctive stage recognizes that properly we stutter when we speak of the Divine.'[20] Fowler draws on Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'second naiveté' here, recognising a renewed sense of 'readiness to enter into the rich dwellings of meaning which true symbols, liturgy, and parable offer.'[21] There tends to be a new openness to others at this stage, a concentration on what truly matters and a reduction or loss of anxiety over what does not, summed up in the phrase often credited to Michael Ramsey: 'As I get older I believe more and more in less and less.'

Fowler offers a sixth stage, of 'Universalizing Faith', which he finds hard to describe and regards as extremely rare. He sums up this stage – the inhabitants of which remain 'finite creatures with blind

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[16] Fowler *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* p.49.
[17] Fowler *Faith Development* p.70.
[18] Ibid. p.69.
[19] Ibid. p.70.
[20] Ibid. p.72.
[21] Ibid. p.73.

spots, inconsistencies, and distorted capacities for relatedness to others' – as being composed of people who 'manifest the fruits of a powerful kind of *kenosis* or emptying of self', and 'in quiet or in public ways…live as though the kingdom of God were already a realized fact among us.'[22]

This is the gist of Fowler's theory of faith development. He offers a means of charting a course through the shoals, rapids, storms and doldrums of spiritual life. In the next section we shall examine some of the critiques of his work before assessing the gains that his work offers to those engaged in the work of 'curing souls'.

4. Critiques and Gains

Fowler's Faith Development Theory has had a quite a contested life. The first and perhaps most serious critique relates to the empirical basis of the theory. Fowler says that he developed it out of extensive field-work in the USA from the 1970s onwards. In fact the empirical basis is quite slim – some field-work was done, the theory formulated (in conscious dependence on Piaget and Kohlberg), and subsequent field-work has tended to be taken as confirming the theory rather than being a means of testing it. David Heywood, one of Fowler's most trenchant critics, remarks that 'the main lines of the stage descriptions…were in place before the bulk of the research took place'[23], and have not subsequently been refined, or the theory's overall outline evaluated. Heywood points out that the empirical evidence for stage 6, 'universalizing faith' is virtually non-existent. Fowler says this is because it is a stage very few people reach; Heywood responds that it is in fact not empirically derived at all, but has actually been read off from the theology of H.Richard Niebuhr as the peak of human religious consciousness. Heywood concludes that 'the reason why it is possible to score so few people at Stage 6 is that it does not exist, and that the perception of stage 6 characteristics in some interview subjects is a projection of the researchers',[24] that is to say, they find what they are seeking because they are already sure that it is there. In effect the 'stage-theory' pattern, which was such a feature of different forms of developmental psychology in the mid-20th century, has been uncritically adopted, and adapted to the phenomenon of faith development.

The implication of this critique is that the theory becomes a strait-jacket, restricting (ironically) the possibilities of development in the theory itself. Heywood says, 'For example, indications of regression from a "higher" to a "lower" stage may be treated, in accordance with the theory, as evidence of stage transition.'[25] The theory as it stands shows no signs of having become more flexible or having changed to accommodate new evidence, and this is suspicious, for a hallmark of genuinely empirically-based scientific theories is that they do this, shifting and being refined in the light of further experimental testing.[26] Despite its apparent complexity (reinforced by the jargonistic

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[22] Ibid. pp.76-77.

[23] David Heywood 'Faith Development Theory: A Case for Paradigm Change' in *Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education* 29 (2008) pp.263-272, available online at: http://www.davidheywood.org/articles/fd%20paradigm%20change%20full%20length.pdf.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Hence Heywood's invocation of Kuhn's theory of paradigm change in his article.

terms given to each stage), Fowler's theory may in fact be too simple to do justice to the complexity of human faith.

And what is 'faith' for Fowler? The reliance on Piaget has tended to make Faith Development Theory privilege its cognitive component at the expense of any other: Fowler describes the stages as 'integrations of knowing, valuing and meaning construction', but these are predominantly rational processes rather than emotional or affective ones. Carol Gilligan's significant revisions of Lawrence Kohlberg's work on moral development pointed out that Kohlberg's approach to ethical thinking centred around ideas of justice, but that because this tended to be primary for men, the result was that when women were added to the study they mostly ended up categorised in an early stage. Changing the terms by asking what ethics based on a primary value of caring, rather than justice, might look like, introduced a very different perspective and decisively changed the theory.[27] Similarly, Fowler's stages of faith may be a description of the development of the cognitive aspects of faith – but this is not necessarily the same thing at all as the development of faith. Where, for example, does the Alzheimer sufferer fit into the pattern, as cognitive powers are transformed in later life? Perhaps this might lead to an alternative sixth stage, but the cognitive basis of Fowler's theory does not allow for this. In fact it seems to me that Fowler's term 'faith' might better be understood as 'beliefs'. Faith is a catch-all phenomenon with a wide range of reference, whereas mostly Fowler seems to be discussing the development of belief systems. An illustration of what this means is that it seems to me that most of his descriptions could apply equally well to non-religious faith in politics or football teams, for example. Fowler has sought to offer a theory that is largely content-free in terms of what exactly is believed, and for this reason proposes that his theory applies to all faiths, not just the Christian one. He has been strongly criticised for this, on the basis that his default faith is clearly Christianity, and the vast majority of his field-work has been done with Christian believers.

Fowler's age-specific labels for different stages can also be misleading because they tend to assume upbringing in a predominantly Christian (or at least faith-based) environment. Given the theory's origins in the USA of the 1960s and 70s this is understandable, but it should lead to caution over how closely faith development might mirror human development. Increasing number so people do not encounter faith at an early stage of life. If they do meet it later, then their faith development is not likely to be in sync with their human development. For someone becoming a Christian in their later 20s, for example, a degree of personal maturity may co-exist with quite unformed faith that is happy to be at stage 2 or 3. For someone in this position, careful and sensitive work will be required before they begin to integrate quite literal beliefs with the reality of the world. Issues to do with answers to prayer, for example, may become real obstacles (both when prayers are answered and when they are not).

In the prefaces to his description of the stages of faith, Fowler writes powerfully and well of the vocation to be human, called into partnership with God. But, though Robert Davis Hughes suggests that faith development is best envisioned as a synergy between internal human growth and the presence of the Holy Spirit…grace must be operative from the start', he also recognises that 'even

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[27] See Robert Davis Hughes *Beloved Dust* (Continuum 2008) p.177.

though it is not theologically best to do so, one can envision the first six stages as purely "natural".'[28] This may be the perpetual danger for any Christian theologian who seeks to be in dialogue with naturalistic science: God is easily bracketed out of the process. But this surely will not do if the subject is faith. In theological terms, Fowler's theory offers a fertile description of what faith development might look like 'from below' – that is from the human perspective – but ignores (except in his prefatory remarks) the perspective of revelation 'from above'. The effect can be to emphasise in a characteristically Western (and American) way that faith is something that human beings make for themselves. Fowler wants to resist this, but the substantial lack of real dialogue with theologians in particular and Christian tradition in general is a weakness in his theory, well pointed out by Gerald May who queries Fowler's identification of faith development with human development. May's critique fascinatingly grows out of his long-term work in spiritual direction amongst adults with learning disabilities, an area in which he has seen great depths of faith that cannot be accounted for 'naturally' by regular processes of human (and cognitive) development.[29] For all that Fowler approvingly quotes Brueggemann, he has perhaps not sufficiently grasped the latter's emphasis that 'The covenant-making God wills and has the power *to make something new*. Real newness (*creation ex nihilo*, resurrection from the dead, justification by grace) is the peculiar capacity of God.'[30] How this insight into the radically disruptive character of God's action in human lives could be accommodated in Fowler's naturalistic model would require some major work, and it may be that the best conclusion to be drawn is that Fowler offers a descriptive account of how human faith *usually* develops – with the proviso that God may sometimes actually choose to work differently.

Related to Fowler's debt to Piaget and others is the grip which evolutionary thinking seems to have on his theory. The sequence of stages does not allow for regression, and there is a sense of relentless progress through them. There is insight in the recognition that people do not leap from stage 3 to stage 5, for example, without going through stage 4, but surely it is equally possible to return to an earlier stage. Admittedly this is likely to set up significant psychological tensions in the person concerned, which will need to be resolved, but the recognition that a good many people stay at stage 3, for example, may point up that there are more factors at work than simply psychological well-being based on values of belief. What I mean here is that it is not uncommon, in my experience, to find Christians who will retain a certain mind-set or form of belief because they do not want to leave the group they find themselves in (be it a marriage, family, church and so on). Many clergy in fact find themselves in this position, for example, and who is to say that the individual's present needs should outweigh the collective wisdom of the group as a whole? In other words the evolutionary determinism that drives Faith Development Theory needs to be questioned. Fowler points out that there are no 'higher' or 'lower' stages.[31] As someone else helpfully put it, can we really say that a caterpillar is better than a butterfly?[32] Yet the Piagetian origins of Faith Development Theory tend to create an evolutionary imperative within the model.

What are the gains that Fowler's work offers to those whose calling is to 'cure souls'?

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[28] Ibid. p.182. Hughes, slightly confusingly, renumbers Fowler's Stage 0 as 1, and so on.
[29] See Hughes *Beloved Dust* pp.177-78.
[30] Bruegemann 'Covenanting as Human Vocation' p.153.
[31] Fowler *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* p.45.
[32] See Alan Jamieson *Chrysalis* (Paternoster 2008).

Returning to some of my earlier comments on the value of this and other tools, it may be best to see Faith Development Theory as more of an art than a science. Arts have their logic and expertise too, based more on wisdom than science, and offer a different way of knowing that is based on practice rather than theory. For me, though Fowler's work is dressed in the clothes of developmental psychology, it makes most sense as a gathering of pastoral wisdom. A very early critique described Fowler's theory as 'a well-informed hunch'[33], but this may not be the devastating blow to his work that it first seems. Heywood points out that 'Although Fowler's theory has virtually colonised the field, he is not the only one to have observed regularities in the different ways in which people shape the meaning of their lives.'[34] Though Heywood is highly critical of Fowler, nevertheless he acknowledges that 'There remains the most striking element of F[aith] D[evelopment] T[heory]: fruitfulness. The excitement of so many when encountering the theory for the first time strongly suggests that Fowler is "on to something" when he describes the way in which people create meaning and the ways in which this meaning-making changes during the course of their lives.'[35] Heywood cautions, though, that observation is not the same as explanation: Fowler has spotted a genuine phenomenon (as have others) but this doesn't mean that his explanation of it is correct.

Perhaps the greatest gain that Fowler offers is a more nuanced approach to faith development than traditional teaching on spiritual life sometimes provides. Gerard W.Hughes' widely read and enormously helpful *God of Surprises*, for example, outlines three 'stages' of spiritual growth: infancy, adolescence and adulthood, which he terms institutional, critical and mystical, though he is clear that elements of all three are required for healthy faith.[36] In effect this stops at the transition from stage 3 to stage 4 in Fowler's terms. Fowler's addition is to show that there can be a stage beyond that for some people, and perhaps even another one after that. In other words, adult faith too grows and changes, it does not remain frozen in time. In terms of leadership and public ministry, someone who remains at stage 3 is unlikely to be able to cope with enhanced responsibility unless they have truly made their faith their own, and made a transition to something like stage 4; otherwise, when a crisis of whatever sort comes, they suddenly realise that their faith is built on the foundations of others rather than their own, and the re-examination and re-evaluation that ensues can have catastrophic effects not just for them but for those around them.

Yet perhaps 'stages' is not quite the right terminology. Maybe we might refer to 'states' of faith instead. For many Christians faith is a settled state, and Fowler's observation shows a good proportion to be apparently content with largely unreflective stage 3 faith, of a synthetic-conventional sort. If this is a state rather than a stage, it implies that it's fine to stay there. Probably a good many church-goers stay in this state throughout their lives, content for others (often clergy) to define the limits to their belief and behaviour. Culturally this state has been far more common in the recent past, however, than it is today. The value of 'states' versus 'stages' is that it becomes less imperative for the spiritual mentor guide or gossip to help people move to transition. Learning theory in recent decades has encouraged us to see that people only usually learn when they want to do so. Similarly, there is danger that a spiritual guide who wants to help someone through 'stages'

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[33] A.McBride 'Reaction to Fowler: fears about procedure' in T.Hennessy (ed.) *Values and Moral Development* (Paulist Press 1976) p.214, cited in Heywood 'Faith Development Theory'.
[34] Heywood 'Faith Development Theory'.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Gerard W.Hughes *God of Surprises* (Darton, Longman & Todd 1985) Ch.2.

may miss the call of God for them to stay in the state they currently occupy. The assistance required may be to help them enjoy and relish the present, not seek the illusory green grass of the next pasture.

Fowler's theory also gives us the gain of recognising that change, when it does come, is not the enemy of faith. Often its presently constructed form will need to be dismantled, and though this is frequently painful and hard it is ultimately necessary if a new form of faith is to develop. Faith may sometimes have to be lost in order for it to be found again – the risk is that there's no guarantee except that God will seek you out. Yet it is in the disjunctions that he is most likely to be found and his presence be renewed again.

The insights of Faith Development Theory have recently been taken up by those who have been studying why people leave churches (and often organised Christianity altogether).[37] This may in part be because social habits of deference, deeply rooted in those of the pre-war generation, have given way to a very different approach to authority amongst baby-boomers, born between the early 1940s and the early 1960s. 'Church-leaving' has been a significant phenomenon amongst this generation, for whom some form of transition to individuative-reflective faith has been a cultural imperative, something which has perhaps unsurprisingly caused problems for hierarchical organisations like the Church of England at parish and other levels. For later generations a much wider experience of university education among the population may have forced the issue of transition from stage 3 to stage4. Robert Davis Hughes draws attention to the 'extended moratorium Western culture provides in college and graduate education', and enters a wise note of pastoral caution: his experience suggests that the transition into stage 4 may be expressed in 'intimacy issues' which affect one or more of three areas: sexual identity; faith identity *vis-à-vis* a partner; mystical experiences of a quasi-erotic tendency with God and/or Jesus.[38]

Faith development Theory has been related particularly to an evangelical-charismatic context, most influentially by Brian McLaren's 'Generous Orthodoxy'. McLaren offers a simplified scheme of Simplicity/Complexity/Perplexity/ Harmony, which corresponds to some extent to Fowler's stages 3, 4 and 5 (McLaren's Complexity/Perplexity relates to the two aspects of Fowler's stage 4).[39] McLaren's scheme is easier to grasp than Fowler's, and it can be a very helpful simplified way of analysing why people in one church community, for example, have such widely differing expectations of their clergy. Equally, however, and controversially, McLaren has also argued that many clergy prefer to keep their congregations at the Simplicity/Complexity stages, where the faith of the congregation is really an extension of the faith of the pastor. Churches that handle Perplexity/Harmony are rare, in his view. As a means of analysing the present concerns about sexuality and marriage, his scheme has a good deal to commend it – but that is beyond the scope of the present paper!

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[37] See Alan Jamieson *A Churchless Faith: faith journeys beyond the Churches* (SPCK 2002) and Leslie J. Francis & Philip J. Richter *Gone for Good? Church leaving and Returning in the 21st Century* (Epworth Press, 2007).
[38] Hughes *Beloved Dust* pp.180-81.
[39] See Brian D. McLaren *A Search for What Makes Sense (Finding Faith)* (Zondervan 2007) and McLaren's presentation online at: http://www.slideshare.net/brianmclaren/stages-of-faith-1920055.

5.   **Conclusions**

Fowler's Faith Development Theory is not the scientific explanation of how faith grows that it seems at first sight to be. This is a good thing, for faith must be a rich, many-sided thing, mostly beyond our control and in the hands of God. Seen through more modest lenses, Fowler's work has perhaps been a marker in the secular academic world that faith too is a fundamental aspect of human being.

His work offers a tool for those whose work is curing souls to use; and tools are meant to be used rather than debated. The criterion for their usefulness is practicality rather than intellectual elegance. It won't be the right tool to use all the time, but its function is to provide a means of analysis and a framework for reflection which describes broad patterns of human behaviour in the construction of belief and identity *vis-a-vis* God. Above all it is a reminder that, if we or others encounter changes and challenges in our faith, these are not something to be resisted or feared, but to be seen as a means by which God beckons us on to a different perspective on and experience of relationship with him as we fulfil our vocation to be drawn in to him and be sent out by him into the world.

I have a particular affection for tools because my grandfather was a motor-mechanic and all-round mender of broken things. He used to say that the key to doing a good job was choosing the right tool. Standing by him sometimes as a small child, holding the tools, I learned a great deal. After my grandmother died, I spent much of the Summer when I had just turned 16 working with him on their flat as he redecorated, laid a new carpet and fixed some electric sockets and plugs. 'You need to learn some of this' he said, 'because it won't be long before you'll be married yourself and have a house.' He died that Autumn and I inherited his tools.

That experience often comes back to me in the work of curing souls. For all we do is watch the master at work, and sometimes have the privilege of holding the tools or making a small intervention that makes a difference in the lives of those on whom the master is at work. One of my favourite prayers, which I have found comes increasingly to mind in vocations work, is this:

> Lord Jesus Christ, Master Carpenter,
>   who through wood and nails fashioned our salvation,
> wield well your tools in the workshop of our lives,
>   that we who come to you rough-hewn and splintered
> may be formed into a truer beauty by your hands,
>   to serve you and your mission in our world. Amen.

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