Applying Faith Development Theory for the Teaching of Religious Education: Sharing Knowledge to Benefit Religious Educators

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to discuss the implication of the faith development theory for the teaching of religious education. In his distinction, Fowler stated that faith and religion are not synonymous and should not be considered as such. Hence, faith is defined as a generic feature of the human struggle to find and maintain meaning. Fowler holds that faith permeates and informs our way of being in relation to our neighbours, and to the causes and companions of our lives. The zero stage of faith development occurs in the first preverbal year of life and it provides the foundation of trust and mistrust on which all later faith builds. In the first stage of faith development, morality is learned through experiences, stories, images and the people that the child comes in contact with. Stage two is characterized by seeing God as an anthropomorphic being in the sky. Stage three characterized by conformity to authority and the religious development of a personal identity. Stage four is characterized by two essential features namely; a critical distancing from one's previously assumed value system and the emergence of executive ego. Individuals in stage five begin to realize the limits of logic and starts to accept the paradoxes or contradictory views in life. In the last stage of faith development, people typically exhibit qualities that shake our usual criteria of normalcy. Following the above stages, the strengths, weaknesses as well as the implications for the teaching of religious education have been identified and discussed systematically.
Keywords: faith development, holistic orientation, religion, religious education, teaching.

1.0 Introduction

According to Fowler (1995), faith is defined from the human side as a process of handing on story, values and beliefs through the rituals, stories, symbols and witness of both living and dead members of a believing community. He describes faith as a dynamic process which is a way of knowing, a way of valuing and a way of seeing (Fowler, 1991). Fowler holds that faith permeates and informs our way of being in relation to our neighbours, and to the causes and companions of our lives (Chapko, 1985). Faith to Fowler is a holistic orientation, and is concerned with the individual's relatedness to that which is universal, even though the religious context be relative (Fowler, 1995). It can also be said to be the motivation one has to enable him or her discover meaning in life. Faith is a holistic orientation, and is concerned with the individual's relatedness to that which is universal.

In this regard emphasis is placed on how an individual relates to a supreme being or the object of worship. Additionally, this resonates with the fact that faith is the complete positioning of an individual on a supreme being or the object of worship. He also defines faith as the motivation one has to enable him or her to discover meaning in life. In this respect, it involves anything that moves an individual to find meaning in life. The aim of this paper is to discuss the implication of the faith development theory for the teaching of religious education. However, in our walk around, we would take cognizance of the following; profile of James Fowler, his concept of faith, the method used, stages of faith development, strengths and weaknesses. Finally, we would highlight the implications of the theory for teaching religious education.

2.0 Brief Profile of James Fowler

James W. Fowler, born on 12th October, 1940 was a graduate of Duke University and Drew Theological Seminary and earned his Ph.D. at the Harvard University in Religion and Society in 1971, with a focus in ethics and sociology of religion. He pursued post-doctoral studies at the Center for Moral Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (1971-1972). He taught at Harvard Divinity School (1969-75) and Boston College (1975-1976). In 1977 he joined the Faculty of Emory's Candler School of Theology. Emory named him the Charles Howard Candler Professor of Theology and Human Development in 1987. His pioneering research and resulting theory of faith development have earned him international recognition. His best known book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Development and The Quest for Meaning*, is in its 38th printing, and has been translated into German, Korean, and Portuguese editions.

Dr. Fowler has written and or edited ten other books and more than sixty (60) articles, contributing to the fields of practical theology and theological ethics. Four volumes of critical discussion of Fowler's research and

theory have emerged from national and international seminars devoted to his work. He has received the Oscar Pfister Award from the American Psychiatric Association, for enduring contributions to the dialogue between religion. Both awards came in 1994. In 1999, the University of Edinburgh awarded him a doctor of divinity degree, honoris causa. From 1994 to 2005, Fowler served as the full-time director of the Centre for Ethics at the Emory. He was a minister in the United Methodist Church. He is known to have died on the 12th October, 2015 at the age of seventy-five years

3.0 James Fowler's Concept of Faith

In his book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Fowler (1981) explained his understanding of faith and laid out the tenets of his faith development theory. He stated that faith and religion are not synonymous and should not be considered as such, as faith is defined as "a generic feature of the human struggle to find and maintain meaning" (Fowler, 1981, p. 91). However, to Fowler, that meaning does not necessarily have to be found through religion. Questions regarding faith that people ask themselves revolve around what gives their life meaning and purpose, as well as what their hopes for themselves and their loved ones are, among many others (Fowler, 1981).

Fowler (1991, p. 31) defines faith as "universal quality of human meaning making". "Faith is a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives." (Fowler, 1981). Fowler holds that faith permeates and informs our way of being in relation to our neighbours, and to the causes and companions of our lives. Faith" is a dynamic, changing evolving process, a way of being. Faith occurs as individuals place personal trust and loyalty in one or more "centre of value" such as religion, family, money, power and so on (Fowler, 1991). Faith also describes the underlying meaning-making process used by all people regardless of their beliefs (Coyle, 2011).

It is through faith that these questions are addressed, and as Fowler stated that faith is a human universal, and he considered all individuals capable of reflecting on them during the course of their lives (Fowler, 1981). The target of our faith may be a variety of things from our own ego to social structures. "Faith, as a state of being ultimately concerned may or may not find its expression in institutional or cultic religious forms" (Fowler, 1981, p. 5). Faith precedes religious or denominational affiliation and precedes belief or unbelief. All people, according to Fowler, are concerned with how we make sense of life and how we determine what make life worth living. We all look for someone to love us as well as something we value which in return gives us value and something that has the power to sustain our being (Fowler, 1981).

It is important to note that Fowler maintained that faith allows human beings to conceptualize what he called the ultimate environment (Fowler, 1981). This is the versions of the world that religious adherents create in their minds that shape the ways in which they understand and live in the real world. Fowler explained that the differences among belief, faith, and religion are associated with the ultimate environment in that individuals' beliefs allow them to convey their ideas about this environment. Religion operates as a specific method of faith and its notion of the environment.

Faith results from interactions and experiences that individuals have in the various components that make up their lives and unites these components so that they can feel their lives are whole (Fowler, 1981). Faith is seen as a holistic orientation, and is concerned with the individual's relatedness to the universal. To Fowler the focus is on faith as a process and therefore on such aspects as human thinking, rational capacities, moral judging, personal relationships, and social awareness.

4.0 Fowler's Method Used

James Fowler used what is called structural approach for Faith development that he broke down into stages followed the same structure as Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Erik Erikson's theory on Psychosocial development, and Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development. He began to have his students conduct what we came to call faith development interviews. Using a questionnaire that was constructed, and eventually, a set of interpretation and analysis guidelines, he began to form the baseline data that would result in the construction and validation of what came to be known as Faith Development Theory.

5.0 Fowler's Stages of Faith Development

5.1 Stage Zero: Undifferentiated Faith (0-2years)

James Fowler starts with what he calls the pre-stage that begins with the infancy stage and he calls it undifferentiated faith. In this stage, infants develop trust and mutuality with caregivers. Rudimentary awareness of self and others prior to language skills. This resonates with the assertion of Erikson who stated that this stage is characterized by an early learning of the safety of their environment (i.e. warm, safe and secure, hurt, neglect and abuse). If consistent care is experienced, one will develop a sense of trust and safety about the universe and the divine. Conversely, negative experiences will cause one to develop distrust with the universe and the divine. For Parker (2009), this stage is a pre-stage that occurs in the first preverbal year of life and it provides the

foundation of trust and mistrust on which all later faith builds. This is foundational to further faith development. Transition to the next stage begins with integration of thought and languages which facilitates the use of symbols in speech and play.

5.2 Stage One: Intuitive-Projective Faith (2-7years)
At this stage spirit's unprotected exposure to the unconscious and marked by fluidity of thought patterns. In the words of Conn (2005), morality is learned through experiences, stories, images and the people that the child comes in contact with. The child is egocentric and imitation of the faith of others. The child's imaginations are formed. Imagination runs wild in this stage, uninhibited by logic. It is the first step in self-awareness and when one absorbs one's culture's strong taboos. The advantages of this stage are the birth of imagination, fantasy and the growing ability to grasp and unify one's perception of reality. Stage one is also dangerous, though, in that the child's imagination can be "possessed" by unrestrained images of terror and destruction from the unconscious, and the exploitation of the fertile imagination by enforced taboos and indoctrination. Individuals develop language and are capable of drawing on stories that have been told to them as well as images they have seen to form conceptions of God, though the ways they describe Him are vague and somewhat "magical" (Fowler, 1981, p. 148).

5.3 Stage Two: Mythic-Literal Faith (7-12years)
This stage is characterized by seeing God as an anthropomorphic being in the sky. That is, they see God as a parent figure. Children at this stage relies on stories, values and rules of authority. Children also have a strong belief in the justice and reciprocity of the universe. For example, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". Children at this stage would want to follow the rules of God. At this stage, authority figure overrides personal perspectives. They start understanding the world in more logical manner. During this time metaphors and symbolic language are often misunderstood and are taken literally. The ability to imagine and construct the interiority of others is not fully developed; thus, one may show limited understanding of another person's motives when judging human actions. They are able to capture life and meanings in narrative and stories. They imitate adults in singing and folding hands at prayer.

5.4 Stage Three: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (13-19years)
Most people move unto this stage as teenagers and continue to adulthood. This stage of faith development is characterized by conformity to authority and the religious development of a personal identity. Personal worth is determined by the approval of significant people (Parker, 2009). Again, beliefs and values are deeply held but have not been subjected to critical analysis or reflection. They adopt some sorts of all-encompassing belief system (beliefs, values, behaviours) but come from norms of society. At this change the individual tend to have a hard time seeing outside their box and do not recognize that they are inside a belief system. Fowler says that at this stage, any conflicts with one's beliefs are ignored at this stage due to the fear of threat from inconsistencies. The person can now reflect upon past experiences and search them for meaning and pattern. At the same time, concerns about one's personal future, one's identity, one's work, career, or vocation and one's personal relationships become important. At this stage authority is placed in individuals or groups that represent one's beliefs.

5.5 Stage Four: Individuative-Reflective Faith (20-35years)
Fowler also calls this stage of faith development as the stage of anxiety and struggle. This stage is characterized by two essential features: (a) a critical distancing from one's previously assumed value system and (b) the emergence of what Fowler (1981) called an "executive ego" (p. 179). The ability to step back and critically distance oneself from one's previously assumed values emerges as one develops awareness that beliefs and ideologies have a particular history and that various worldviews have grown out of the life experiences of those adopting those views. The executive ego refers to taking explicit responsibility for one's beliefs and lifestyle. One further understands that social relations involve social systems. In addition, the meanings that one attaches to symbols are seen as separable from the symbols that mediate them. This is a stage of de-mythologizing, where what was once unquestioned is now subjected to critical scrutiny. They begin to critically examine their belief on their own and often become disillusioned with their former faith.

5.6 Stage Five: Conjunctive Faith (36-45years)
This stage involves the embrace and integration of opposites or polarities in one's life. Here, symbol and story, metaphor and myth, both from our own traditions and from others, seem to be newly appreciated. Individuals in this stage begin to realize the limits of logic and starts to accept the paradoxes or contradictory views in life. They begin to see life as a mystery and often return to sacred stories and symbols. Having looked critically at traditions and translated their meanings into conceptual understandings, one experiences a hunger for a deeper

relationship to the reality that symbols mediate. In addition, at this stage, there is a reclamation and reworking of one's past as well as an openness to the voices of the "deeper self". That is, one becomes aware of deep social influences that shape the self (e.g., myths, ideal images, prejudices that grow out of one's nurturing by a particular group). Fowler (1981) stated that this stage includes a kind of dialectical knowing that recognizes and appreciates the power of both rational and intuitive ways of knowing. In this stage it becomes important to let biblical narrative draw us into it and let it read our lives, reforming and shaping them, rather than our reading and forming the meanings of the text. People at this stage are also much more open to other people's faith perspectives. This is not because they are moving away from their faith but because they have a realization that other people's faiths might inform and deepen their own.

5.7 Stage Six: Universalizing Faith (46years and above)
The last stage of faith development is Universalizing faith is often reached by very few people. For example, Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King Junior and Mother Teresa. James Fowler describes people at this stage as having a special grace that makes them seem humbler, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us. People at this stage can become important religious teachers because they have the ability to relate to anyone at any stage and from any faith. They are able to relate without condescension but at the same time are able to challenge the assumptions that those of other stages might have. People at this stage cherish life but also do not hold on to life too tightly. They put their faith in action, challenging the status quo and working to create justice in the world. Issues of religious authority are important to people at this stage. For younger adolescents, that authority still resides mostly with their parents and important adults. For older adolescents and adults in this stage, authority resides with friends and religious community. For all people in this stage, religious authority resides mostly outside of them personally. Persons in the universalizing stage are grounded in oneness with the power of being or God. Their visions and commitments seem to free them for a passionate yet detached spending of the self in love. Such persons are devoted to overcoming division, oppression, and violence, and live in effective anticipatory response to an in breaking commonwealth of love and justice, the reality of an unbreaking kingdom of God. In the words of Fowler (2000), persons described by stage six typically exhibit qualities that shake our usual criteria of normalcy. Their heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality give their actions and words an extraordinary and often unpredictable quality. In their devotion to universalizing compassion they may offend our parochial perceptions of justice. In their penetration through the obsession with survival, security, and significance they threaten our measured standards of righteousness and goodness and prudence. Their enlarged visions of universal community disclose the partialness of our tribes and pseudo-species. And their leadership initiatives, often involving strategies of nonviolent suffering and ultimate respect for being, constitute affronts to our usual notions of relevance.

6.0 Strengths of the Theory
One of the benefits of Fowler's model is its coverage over the whole lifespan which exceeds previous religious development models which only focused on childhood and adolescence (Coyle, 2011). Additionally, the broad definition of "faith" enables the application of the model to a wide range of religious and non-religious domains. For example, Neuman (2011) suggested the use of Fowler's model to help paediatric nurses and paediatric practitioners address the spiritual needs of children and adolescents in their care. Also, Fowler's theory provides individuals with a framework to identify where they and others are in terms of faith development (Lownsdale, 1997; Love, 2002; Parker, 2011).

Other studies have applied the model as a framework to explain the faith development of specific individuals. For example, a study of Thomas Merton by Raab (1999) and certain groups, for example, study of Catholic teachers by Barnes, Doyle and Johnson, 1989; science and religion students by Gathman and Nessan (1997). This is a characteristic that is especially useful for counselors or student affairs professionals who may work with individuals who are struggling to understand the role that faith or spirituality plays in their lives. Moreover, as Fowler differentiated between faith and religion, individuals who do not necessarily identify with a particular religion but derive meaning and purpose in their lives through other sources of faith are still recognized in his theory (Dykstra, 1986).

Finally, Dykstra (1986) stated that a strength of Fowler's theory is that it focuses generally on the levels of faith that individuals operate at, rather than on what it means to be practicing respective religions at each stage. In explaining this point, Dykstra (1986) stated that it "is normatively more important to be at, say, stage five (regardless of one's religion or lack of it) than to be, say, learning the beliefs, values, and ways of living of the Jewish or Christian or Muslim faith increasingly more deeply" (p. 53).

7.0 Criticisms of Fowler's Faith Development Theory
Although the model is widely used, there are serious criticisms over many of its aspects. Among the harsher

critics is the view that faith development model has irreconcilable flaws and consequently is a paradigm reaching the end of its life (Heywood, 2008). Fowler's use of a structural approach to organise the faith developmental stages and his definition of "faith" are problematic in several ways. As a structural theory, it is assumed that faith development unfolds in a uniform way across universal, hierarchical and irreversible stages (Day, 2001). Psychological research suggests that development involves much more fluidity and a rigid stage-like theory is limited in its ability to capture the richness and diversity of religious development (Coyle, 2011; Heywood, 2008).

Secondly, Keeley (2010) stated the limitation that because Fowler's theory is encompassed by stages that individuals are said to move through as they develop and too much focus may be placed on the age groups that each stage is associated with. This is limiting because there can be great variation amongst individuals and their developmental processes. Keeley (2010) also pointed out that because Fowler's theory is based on the work of Kohlberg, Erikson, and Piaget who are individuals who developed theories that also have limitations, his theory is thus inherently plagued by these limitations as well. (Keeley, 2010).

Thirdly, Streib (2003) stated that researchers have suggested that women do not move through faith stages in a systematic and linear way, but rather have a "whirlpool experience of faith" (p. 27). Furthermore, researchers have identified Fowler's (1981) fourth stage, *individuative-reflective faith*, as especially problematic for women in that it may not adequately describe the factors associated with movement from the *synthetic-conventional faith* stage to this one (Streib, 2003). Streib (2003) did mention that Fowler proposed a potential revision of stage four to include women's tendency to experience life in a relational way.

Fourthly, Broughton (1986) pointed out that while Fowler (1981) mentioned that he met one man who he determined to have reached the stage of *universalizing faith*, he did not provide readers with any further information on him. In addition, when providing examples of individuals who have reached this last faith stage, Fowler (1981) mentioned Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi, people whom he did not interview. Thus, as illustrated by Broughton (1986), Fowler was inconsistent in the methodology that he used to develop his stages (excluding the pre-stage in which interviews could not be conducted due to the verbal limitations of those associated with this stage).

Furthermore, Broughton (1986) stated that because the men that Fowler (1981) used as examples of individuals operating at stage six had high levels of education, they may have had the benefit of learning certain concepts that contributed to their perceived high faith functioning, rather than progressively developing. According to Broughton (1986), this possibility threatens the apparent naturalness of the stage sequence. Due to his failure to find personalities operating at the stage of *universalizing faith* and failure to provide information on the one person he did claim to have found operating at it, there are methodological differences he used in developing his sixth stage compared to his other ones (excluding the pre-stage). There is a possibility that the individuals he did indicate as operating at the sixth faith stage may not have reached this through the process of development that is fundamental to this theory.

Moreover, Clore and Fitzgerald (2002) claimed that although Fowler initially stated in *Stages of Faith* that his faith development theory was universal. However, research has suggested that "full development as Fowler sees it may occur only in more 'developed' cultures" (p. 98). This is certainly a cultural limitation of Fowler's theory in that it may not be applicable to all individuals, but only to people similar to those he interviewed prior to developing it. Thus, it may be likely that Fowler's theory is best applied to individuals living in highly developed countries.

Finally, many scholars have criticized Fowler's theory as being based on Western Christian conceptions (Keeley, 2010). In fact, Broughton (1986) pointed out that over 80% of the people that Fowler interviewed and based his theory on were Christians. This is another cultural limitation of his theory in that it may not be well suited for non-Christian individuals or those who are Christian but do not live in Western nations. In taking account these two cultural limitations, the cultural group that Fowler's theory most applies to is Christians living in highly developed Western nations. (Clore & Fitzgerald, 2002).

8.0 Implications for Teaching Religious Education

1. Teachers of religious education should use stories in teaching since the theory emphasize children's formulations of meanings through the stories told them.
2. Religious educators and teachers in general are to portray a good sense of basic needs of children right from their infancy because the theory states that the consistency of what is experienced influences subsequent stages of life.
3. The theory also helps students to respect authority since the theory emphasize the conformity to authority and personal identity (stage three)
4. The theory helps student's and other individuals to be tolerant, since the theory emphasize that individuals at a point acknowledges the views of other people and also understands that there are other religions either their own.

5. Religious and moral educators must teach all the major religious issues and other social issues, since the theory emphasizes that individuals come to accept the views and religions of others either than his own.
6. The use of role modelling is also essential tool because in the theory. Children starts to form the good deeds from their caregivers and parents. On that mark, teachers are therefore encouraged to be role models to their students.
7. The theory will help children also learn to trust in in their parents as the providers of their basic needs rather than finding dubious means of caring for themselves and this is also translated to their trust in God/their Supreme Being as the provider of the needs of humans since the theory begins with the building of trust versus mistrust and the experience of the care and hurt.
8. The theory also helps students to be responsible of the consequences of their actions since the theory states individuate aspect of a person's life where the individual tries to formulate his/her own faith, values and behaviours.
9. Teachers must make use of instructional resource since the theory emphasized that children start to think rationally in their learning.
10. Religious education must be taught in way that will make the learners get themselves committed to God/the Supreme Being.
11. Teachers should teach students to know the need for unity in diversity. This can be done through group work where students of different religious backgrounds come together and work.
12. The theory will also help students to conform to societal norms and values because the theory places emphasis on individual choices emanating from the societal norms and values.
13. The theory also helps students to be committed to task and work.
14. The model also helps students and other individuals to learn seek the welfare of others either than their own, this is a gift from the last stage of the theory which states individuals dying to self and seeking the welfare of others.

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