

FAITH DEVELOPMENT A CRITIQUE OF FOWLER'S MODEL AND A PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE

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Abstract

*Models of faith development attempt to describe the process by which individuals' perspectives on ultimate meanings and values change during the course of life. For the past two decades the dominant model in this field has been James Fowler's theory of **faith stages**. Fowler claims that these stages form an invariant hierarchical sequence, always experienced in the same order and correlated with advancing life stages. This paper challenges that claim on both methodological and substantive grounds. The final portion proposes an integrative model of faith development that avoids the shortcomings of a hierarchical model and aims to be useful in understanding the faith journeys of Unitarian Universalists.*

"If America is about nothing else, it is about the invention of the self," says *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham. "Because we have little use for history, and because we refuse the comforts of a society established on the blueprint of class privilege, we find ourselves set adrift at birth in an existential void, inheriting nothing except the obligation to construct a plausible self, to build a raft of identity. . . . Who else is the American hero if not a wandering pilgrim who goes forth on a perpetual quest?"² The metaphor of life as a spiritual journey has generated not only a phenomenal growth market in the publishing industry, but also a whole new subculture within American society, described by sociologist of religion Wade Roof Clark as the "**spiritual quest culture**." Led by Baby Boomers, the new generation of spiritual seekers yearn for experiences that are personally meaningful, while also acknowledging that no single tradition has a monopoly on religious truth.³ Each year thousands of seekers of all ages appear in the doorways of our congregations.

The guides for these psychospiritual journeys are as varied as the pilgrims themselves. Some, like the Dalai Lama, represent venerable traditions, while others peddle platitudes disguised as wisdom, such as Atlanta evangelist Bruce Wilkenson, whose 94-page tract *The Prayer of Jabez*, has sold more than five million copies. Newsweek religion editor Kenneth Woodward complains that there are "millions of seekers for religious nourishment, but they can't tell authentic loaves of bread from the congealed mush put out by self-serving hustlers. It's a seller's market."⁴ Despite the widespread use of "journey" imagery, few of these authors offer a comprehensive account of the **developmental sequence** that leads from the undifferentiated faith of early childhood to the mature faith of adulthood.

One notable exception is the theory of faith development articulated more than 20 years ago by James Fowler in his book *Stages of Faith*.⁵ The durability of Fowler's model testifies to the care with which it was constructed. At the same time, I believe it is time to re-evaluate his model in light of the new realities of the American religious landscape at the turn of the century. A map is both descriptive and prescriptive. It not only describes the terrain but also tells how to arrive at one's destination. Fowler readily acknowledges the normative implications of his model.⁶ "Stage advancement is something for which persons of faith should strive—both in and for themselves and

in and for others. The goal would be Universalizing Faith. . . .,"⁷ i.e., the final stage in his theory. Fowler's model has served as a guide for the faith journeys of our congregation members and our clergy.⁸ Thus I think it is appropriate to consider his faith stages not just a **theory** but as a **model**—not only "what is" but "what ought to be" the life-long journey of faith.

My intention here is both **critical and constructive**. The critical component is aimed at the model of faith development (Fowler's) that has dominated this field for the past two decades.⁹ The constructive component of this paper offers a model of faith development that is both descriptive and potentially normative, particularly in relation to the spiritual journeys of Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals. Barry Andrews, who is minister of religious education at the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock, writes, "Our denomination . . . is in need of a core curriculum in Unitarian Universalist faith development. . . . First, it should aim to encourage faith development and character formation based on what we know about these matters from personal knowledge and the available literature. Second, it needs to be developmental in the sense that each piece of the curriculum builds from one level to the next."¹⁰ This paper aims to be a step in that direction.

Background of Fowler's Model

The most influential American theory of faith development originated in the mountains of western North Carolina in the late 1960s where a young Methodist minister named Jim Fowler, himself the son of a Methodist minister and fresh out of graduate studies at Harvard, served as associate director of a Methodist retreat center. During his year at Interpreter's House, Fowler listened attentively to the religious pilgrimage stories of more than two hundred people. "During that year," he would report later, "I was beginning to work out a kind of embryonic theory of religious development. When I returned to Harvard to teach [the following year], I was determined to explore that developmental sequence more closely."¹¹ The theory and research that evolved during the next ten years were influenced mainly by three renowned Harvard scholars: Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Later I will argue that their respective influences on Fowler's theory of religious development represent the greatest strengths and the greatest shortcomings of his model.

Let me begin my critical review of Fowler's theory by considering what he means by "faith development." Fowler's understanding of faith relies heavily on the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a distinguished historian of religion. Smith draws a sharp distinction between **faith and belief**. Belief, he says, involves assenting intellectually to concepts or propositions as set forth in religious doctrines and creeds. If we concentrate on religious beliefs, we must recognize the variations among different religious traditions. Faith, on the other hand, is "a quality of the person not of the system."¹² Faith involves "an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions."¹³ As the more inclusive term, faith calls attention to the similarities among different traditions. **While beliefs divide, faith unites.**

Fowler offers a triadic model of faith, which includes self, others and what he calls "shared centers of value and power."¹⁴ His use of this inclusive, theologically neutral term sidesteps the debate between theist and nontheist perspectives. Such a view of faith and how it develops is highly compatible with a faith tradition such as Unitarian Universalism, which repudiates divisive

religious creeds and promotes a more syncretistic approach, not only among different religious traditions but also between religious and non-religious worldviews.

The developmental features of Fowler's model rely heavily on the psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson and the cognitive theory of moral development set forth by Lawrence Kohlberg. I will concentrate here only on the features that figure prominently in Fowler's theory. Both Erikson and Kohlberg are stage theorists who view life as advancing along a predictable sequence. Movement from one stage to the next occurs as the result of "crisis" (Erikson) or "disequilibrium" (Kohlberg) when existing structures are unable to accommodate new experiences.

According to Fowler, Erikson's influence was "both more pervasive and more subtle" than Kohlberg's.¹⁵ Erikson was the first major theorist to propose that personality development continues throughout the lifespan. Three of his eight stages describe post-adolescent psychological development--a notion now commonplace but revolutionary within psychoanalytic circles at the time Erikson first offered it. Erikson firmly believed that later stages build upon the triumphs and failures of earlier stages, borrowing from biology the term **epigenetic principle** to describe this relationship. In Erikson's own words, "Anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole."¹⁶ However, unlike embryonic development, later stages may compensate for the failures of earlier stages, although the earlier the dysfunction, the more difficult will be the later correction. As Fowler puts it, "The stages are cumulative in that one brings to each new crisis the mixed residue of past solutions. Each new stage requires the reworking of past solutions and contains in it an anticipation of the issues of crises in future stages."¹⁷ Erikson was fascinated with religious personalities, undertaking book-length analyses of Martin Luther and Mohandas Gandhi, as well as a brief but provocative study of the Galilean sayings of Jesus.¹⁸ Erikson's use of terms like "ritualization" and "virtues" have led some interpreters to regard his theory as a major theoretical contribution to the psychology of religion.¹⁹ Following Erikson's lead, Fowler devotes considerable attention to faith development as influenced by the crises of adulthood in the case studies he reports in his book.

Kohlberg's influence on Fowler's theory is more explicit. When Fowler began teaching at Harvard in 1972, he joined a circle of Kohlberg's students that included Carol Gilligan and later Robert Kegan, at the very time that Kohlberg's theory of moral development had begun to receive widespread attention.²⁰ Based on both his personal experience and his theoretical interest in Jean Piaget's studies of cognitive development, Kohlberg offered a **structural** theory of moral development. The cornerstone of Kohlberg's theory and method was the **process** rather than the content of children's moral decision-making. Following Piaget's method of interviewing children to discover how they thought about the physical world, Kohlberg devised a method for discovering how people--especially children--arrive at judgments in response to various types of moral dilemmas. The focus is not on the child's final decision but on the thought process underlying it.²¹ Following Kohlberg's example, Fowler devised a lengthy interview method that he claims enabled him "to find and describe structural features of faith that make comparisons possible across a wide range of 'content' differences."²² He believed that by concentrating on the process rather than the content of faith, comparisons can be made both within and across different faith traditions.

The second influence of the structural-developmental school on Fowler's theory is far more controversial. Following the examples of Piaget and Kohlberg in the domains of cognitive and moral development, Fowler says flatly, "I claim that stages in faith development are hierarchical, sequential, and invariant."²³ In other words, **higher stages are preferable to lower ones, the stages are always experienced in the same order, and none can be left out.** These are strong claims. Shortly I will discuss whether the data collected by Fowler and his associates actually support them. To his credit and unlike Piaget and Kohlberg, Fowler does **not** claim that the developmental stages he proposes are universal across different faith traditions.

Fowler adopts one major feature common to both Erikson and the structuralists: the view that conflict is the dynamic force that drives developmental advance. In Erikson's theory, the dynamic force is the conflict between the positive and negative possibilities present during each of the eight stages of psychosocial development, beginning with the polarity of trust versus mistrust in infancy and continuing throughout the life cycle to the polarity of integrity versus despair in the final stage of life. In Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories, conflict takes the form of the disequilibrium or discrepancy between existing cognitive schemas and the onslaught of new experiences they are unsuccessful in interpreting. As applied to faith development, a person's religious outlook matures in response to its **failures**. Following Erikson, Fowler describes each stage of faith development in terms not only of its positive possibilities but also its negative potential.

Summary of Fowler's Model of Faith Development

A paper of this length cannot do justice to the richness and complexity of a theory as painstakingly constructed as Fowler's. My intent is to describe enough of its content to make my critique intelligible. I will not attempt to describe each stage in detail, but instead I will highlight the most significant positive and negative possibilities of the most critical stages. A concise table summarizing Fowler's faith stages theory may be found in James W. White's excellent resource book titled *Intergenerational Religious Education*.²⁴ I have been told that one of Fowler's goals in naming and numbering his faith stages was to avoid a schema that would lend itself to facile memorization. If so, he has succeeded admirably. Here is a stage theory that begins with a "Stage 0"!

The first three stages in Fowler's model (including "Stage 0") are driven largely by the child's evolving cognitive abilities, corresponding to the first three stages in Piaget's theory (sensorimotor, preoperational, and concrete operational). Prior to adolescence, a child's religious conceptions are heavily influenced--and therefore limited--by their immediate surroundings, particularly the views expressed by parents and older children. Stage 3, which Fowler calls **Synthetic-Conventional** faith, represents a watershed in faith development. With the arrival of adolescence and the cognitive capacity Piaget referred to as formal operations, the young person can begin to use logic and hypothetical thinking to construct and evaluate ideas. However, many individuals do not apply the capacity for critical thinking to their personal faith, but conform instead to the beliefs of significant others, including peers and influential adults. In Fowler's words, "At Stage 3 a person has an 'ideology,' a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs, but he or she has not objectified it for examination and in a sense is unaware of having it."²⁵ The resulting faith orientation consists mainly of conventional religious beliefs. Fowler's research data

indicated that about one-fourth of adults age 21 or older in his sample were classified as Stage 3 or lower.²⁶

What propels a person into the next faith stage may be clashes or contradictions between valued authority sources or "the encounter with experiences or perspectives that lead to critical reflection on how one's beliefs and values have formed and changed, and on how 'relative' they are to one particular group or background. Frequently the experience of 'leaving home'--emotionally or physically, or both--precipitates the kind of examination of self, background, and life-guiding values that gives rise to stage transition at this point."²⁷ Many Unitarian Universalists from the Baby Boomer and previous generations can readily identify with this scenario as a turning point in their spiritual journey.

The hallmark of Stage 4, **Individuative-Reflective** faith, is the development of an independent religious orientation based on critical reflection and differentiated from the views of the significant others that were so important during the previous stage. "Stage 4 typically translates symbols into conceptual meanings. This is a 'demythologizing' stage."²⁸ The greatest hazard of Stage 4 in Fowler's opinion is an excessive confidence in rational thinking and "a kind of second narcissism in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self overassimilates 'reality' and the perspectives of others into its own world view."²⁹ The tendency to reduce religious symbols to abstract concepts leads to a "flattening" of their meaning, e.g., the Christian celebration of communion is viewed as merely a totemic ritual. According to Fowler's research, adults who were in Stage 4 or in the transition between Stage 3 and Stage 4 constituted nearly 60 percent of his sample population.³⁰ Those of us who are actively involved in Unitarian Universalist congregations can think of individuals who embody this perspective consistently and at times tenaciously.

What propels a person beyond this level? **Disillusionment and tragedy.** Disillusionment comes with the "recognition that life is more complex than Stage 4's logic of clear distinctions and abstract concepts can comprehend"³¹ More often, the catalyst is tragedy or failure. "Few people ever reach Stage 5 . . . without first suffering major life tragedies or defeats. The oppressed," Fowler says, "get to Stage 5 before the comfortable."³² At this juncture, Fowler's theory offers a potent analysis of the factors that can be applied to the developmental arrest of so many Unitarian Universalists at Stage 4. First, many UUs rely excessively on rational thinking to demythologize and thus reduce the symbolic meaning of religion. Second, our movement may foster the kind of spiritual narcissism that disrespects the faith perspective of others, especially those who are regarded as occupying a lower stage of faith development. Finally, most UUs by virtue of socioeconomic status have been shielded from the grinding daily realities of oppression and defeat.

Now we move into the more rarefied realms of Fowler's model. Slightly more than 20 percent of his sample were judged to be higher than Stage 4 (including those in transition between Stages 4 and 5). He calls this stage **Conjunctive** faith because it "implies a rejoining or a union of that which previously has been separated."³³ "Unusual before mid-life, Stage 5 knows the sacrament of defeat and the reality of irrevocable commitments and acts. What the previous stage struggled to clarify in terms of the boundaries of self and outlook, this stage now makes porous and permeable. Alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions, this stage strives to unify

opposites in mind and experience. It generates and maintains vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are 'other.'"³⁴ The potentially conjunctive encounter with the Other may occur in a number of different ways. It may be triggered by an awareness of **internal** contradictions between one's conscious ego and powerful unconscious forces lurking just below the surface. It may take the form of a significant encounter with a tradition or culture very different from one's own. Or it may involve a **re-encounter** with elements in one's own religious background that have been abandoned during Stage 4. Fowler relates his Conjunctive stage to Paul Ricoeur's notion of the "second naivete," a postcritical, nonreductive openness to the symbolic meaning of religious myths and rituals.³⁵ I find it interesting that the person Fowler offers as an example of Stage 5 is an elderly woman who was raised as a Unitarian but, deeply disappointed by her encounter with the local Unitarian minister, rejected the faith of her upbringing. Decades later, inspired by the writings of Jung and the teachings of the Hindu sage Krishnamurti, she turned to the Quaker faith for the rest of her life.³⁶

In summarizing Conjunctive faith, Fowler writes, "The new strength of this stage comes in the rise of the ironic imagination--a capacity to see and be in one's or one's group's most powerful meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality. Its danger lies in the direction of a paralyzing passivity or inaction, giving rise to complacency or cynical withdrawal, due to its paradoxical understanding of truth. . . . [T]his stage remains divided. It lives and acts between an untransformed world and a transforming vision and loyalties."³⁷

Between Stage 5 and Stage 6 there is a conspicuous gap. It is most evident in the data presented by Fowler himself. Only **one** of the 349 people in his interview sample is classified as Stage 6, which he calls **Universalizing** faith, which he says is "exceedingly rare. The persons best described by it . . . have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community. . . . Universalizers are often experienced as subversive of the structures (including religious structures) by which we sustain our individual and corporate survival, security and significance."³⁸ Many Universalizers become martyrs to the vision they incarnate. His list of examples includes Lincoln, Gandhi, Dag Hammarskjöld, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Even though these individuals are exemplary in their sacrificial devotion to resolving the great moral issues of their time, their personal lives often are not. "Greatness of commitment and vision often coexists with great blind spots and limitations."³⁹ In many ways, Stage 6 represents an ideal type in Fowler's theory, comparable to the apex of Abraham Maslow's pyramid of self-actualization. For reasons I will articulate shortly, I believe that the gap between Stages 5 and 6 is not just statistical, but that it reflects a significant **conceptual** gap in Fowler's model itself.

Critique of Fowler's Model

It may seem ungrateful to criticize Fowler's model from a liberal perspective. Nearly all of his critics have come from the opposite direction.⁴⁰ One of the great strengths of his theory is its **inclusiveness**. By focusing on the process rather than the content of faith development, Fowler sidesteps potentially divisive theological issues. His relational definition of faith in terms of "shared centers of value and power" would include both theistic and non-theistic understandings of the dimension of ultimacy.⁴¹ His depiction of Universalizing faith as the highest stage and

therefore the ultimate goal of faith development is highly compatible with the Unitarian Universalist tradition.

So what is the problem with the Fowler model? I will address this question first at the **methodological** level by challenging the empirical support for his theory. Then I will consider objections to the form and **substance** of the underlying model of faith development. Finally, on the basis of these criticisms, I will offer what I believe is a viable alternative to Fowler's model of faith development that is more suitable for understanding the faith development of religious liberals, both descriptively and normatively.

In terms of its methodological underpinnings, the strengths and weaknesses of Fowler's theory are quite evident. My review will pose a series of methodological questions that might be asked of any research project. First, is the sample population accurately **representative**? His group of 359 interviewees represents a tiny sample of America's total population more than 20 years ago. Nevertheless, the denominational affiliations of his interview subjects are remarkably similar to more recent demographic indicators, at least in regard to the proportion of the American population who identify themselves as Christian: about 50 percent Protestant and 35 percent Roman Catholic or Orthodox. In comparison to current figures, however, Jewish respondents are over-represented in Fowler's sample while "other" respondents are under-represented. The latter category includes not only adherents of other traditions such as Muslims, Mormons, and Unitarian Universalists, but also the portion of the population who label themselves as "none of the above." According to data summarized by sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof, "religious none's" now constitute about ten percent of the American population, but few if any of Fowler's interview sample.⁴² More serious questions about the representativeness of Fowler's interview sample surround its ethnic composition. Only about two percent of his interviewees were African American, and he does not even report how many were Hispanic. Thus it is fair to say that the more than 20 percent of Americans who belong to one of these subcultures are vastly under-represented in Fowler's research data.

How were subjects **assigned** to an overall faith stage? Fowler and his associates conducted semi-structured interviews one to two hours in length, during which the interviewees were asked general questions about their life, as well as more specific questions about significant relationships, present values and commitments, religious issues, and major crises or peak experiences. Afterwards, their responses were transcribed and assigned a stage score according to seven different dimensions or "aspects,": form of logic, perspective taking, form of moral judgment, bounds of social awareness, locus of awareness, form of world coherence, and symbolic function. In arriving at an overall faith stage assignment, the separate scores from the seven aspects were simply averaged.⁴³ That means that these factors are considered of **equivalent importance** for a person's faith orientation. It also means that faith is understood analytically as the **sum total of these separate parts**. Fowler claims that there is a degree of consistency among the different aspects, but I have not seen any published data to support this claim. The fact that nearly one-third of his subjects could not be assigned to a specific stage raises questions about the construct validity of the stage descriptions. Labeling them as "in transition" to the next higher stage can be validated only by follow-up study. This leads to my next methodological criticism.

Do the data collected by Fowler and his associates support his claim that faith development follows an **invariant hierarchical sequence**? I will quote at length from the critical review of Fowler's research by Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade, and Larry Ventis in their book *Religion and the Individual*. "Up to about age 20 . . . there is a clear tendency for stage score to increase with age; from about age 20 on, however, it is difficult to see any clear pattern to the stage scores. . . . These results could as easily reflect a situation in which there is a developmental sequence from Stage 1 to Stage 2 and then to one of the higher stages. . . . Rather than Stages 3, 4, and 5 being hierarchically ordered, one following the other, these three forms of faith may lie alongside one another Overall, then, the results suggest that for adults it may be more appropriate to speak of **styles of faith**, as Fowler sometimes has, not stages. . . . Ultimately, the cross-sectional interviews that Fowler conducted cannot provide the information necessary to assess his claim of a stage sequence. Longitudinal research is needed, in which changes in style of faith are measured within individuals over time. In 1981 Fowler reported that longitudinal follow-up interviews with some of his initial respondents were under way, but as far as we know there is still no published report of these interviews. Until supportive longitudinal data are available, it seems premature to accept Fowler's prescriptive ordering of these different styles of faith as a valid description of the way faith develops in individuals' lives."⁴⁴

These concerns about the lack of empirical support for Fowler's theory of faith development raise fundamental questions about the overall validity of the model itself. The most serious **conceptual** shortcomings of this model are anchored in its origins within cognitive developmental theory. As Fowler himself says, "This theory has a cognitive-developmental focus at its core."⁴⁵ Like Piaget and Kohlberg, he claims that the faith stages he has identified are "hierarchical, sequential, and invariant."⁴⁶ I would describe this as a **vertical model** of faith development, in the sense that changes in one's faith perspective, like cognitive development in general, move from "lower" to "higher" levels. Fowler's model is also "vertical" in the sense that faith development is described primarily as an intrapsychic process, thus minimizing the influence of the "horizontal" dimension of interpersonal relationships. Faith is shaped by the quality of one's interactions with other people and other ideas. A more complete model of faith development must include both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of experience. **Faith develops in an outward as well as upward direction.**

One of the most thorough and convincing critiques of "vertical" models of development is found in Carol Gilligan's pivotal book *In a Different Voice*. Gilligan, who was part of the Kohlberg circle at Harvard that included Fowler, published her book at about the same time as Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, and consequently there are no direct references to it. Nevertheless, some of her objections to male-based theories of human development can be applied to the Fowler model as well. Based on her own research with adolescent and young adult women, Gilligan concludes that models of development based on male experience are inadequate for understanding the psychological development of females. This inadequacy is most evident in analyzing moral development. Kohlberg's hierarchical model regards moral judgments based on abstract principles of justice and individual rights as representing the most advanced stage of moral development. Gilligan argues that moral decision-making based on the impersonal masculine logic of fairness neglects the ethics of care and responsibility, i.e., the logic of relationship, that is more typical of girls and women. The difference in ethical perspective reflects a more general difference in the socialization of males toward independence and females toward interdependence. She does not

argue that one ethic is superior to the other, but that a full account of moral development must include both perspectives.⁴⁷

The criticisms by Gilligan and others can be applied at any of the major stages of faith development from early childhood through late adulthood. I will use them as a tool for understanding the apparent "gap" between those of Fowler's subjects who were classified as Stage 5 (Conjunctive faith) and Stage 6 (Universalizing faith). According to Fowler, these two most advanced forms of faith do not appear until midlife or later, if at all. More than 20 percent of his adult subjects were seen as either in Stage 5 or in transition to it, but only one of his 359 subjects was classified as Stage 6, and none of his subjects was classified as being in transition from Stage 5 to Stage 6. Taken at face value, these figures would suggest that very few adults are capable of moving beyond Stage 5. This is Fowler's interpretation. However, I believe there is a conceptual gap in the model underlying the classification scheme itself. This gap can be filled by incorporating what I am calling the "horizontal" dimension of faith development.

In addition to drawing upon Gilligan's insights about the ethic of care, the horizontal dimension of adult faith development also incorporates Erik Erikson's concept of generativity. When Erikson first introduced his theory more than fifty years ago, he defined generativity as "primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation."⁴⁸ Since then there have been several attempts to explicate and elaborate the concept of generativity as it applies to personality and religious development.⁴⁹ One of the most ambitious extensions has been the work of Dan P. McAdams and his associates. As originally formulated, generativity referred primarily to parents' responsibility for bearing and raising children, but it has been extended to include "a wide variety of life pursuits in a vast array of life settings, as in work life and professional activities, volunteer endeavors, participation in religious, political, and community organizations, in friendships, and even in one's leisure activities."⁵⁰

McAdams offers a multidimensional model of generativity that includes not only cognitive factors but affective and behavioral factors as well. His model of generativity consists of seven different components: inner desire, cultural demand, concern for the next generation, a "belief in the species," a commitment to specific goals, generative actions, and a personal narrative (what McAdams calls a "generativity script") that fits the person's life story into a larger legacy.⁵¹ McAdams and his associates have devised several different methods for assessing generativity within the overall context of a person's life story.⁵² "The most generative adults," he concludes, "are those men and women who are strong enough to create legacies in their own image, wise enough to preserve the best from the past and carry it forward, and loving enough to offer that which they have created or maintained to the care of posterity."⁵³ As Don Browning points out, the hallmark of generativity is **enduring care**.⁵⁴

By discussing generativity at some length, I do **not** want to suggest that an additional stage should be inserted between the fifth and sixth stages in Fowler's sequence. Instead, it illustrates the incompleteness of a model that is as hierarchical and lopsidedly cognitive as Fowler's. Let me reiterate the point made by Batson and others: It is more appropriate to speak of adult faith development in terms of faith styles rather than faith stages. To do so, we must devise a model that is **holistic** rather than cognitive-structural, "**horizontal**" as well as vertical/hierarchical, and **dynamic** rather than invariant.

Outline of an Integrative Model of Faith Development

The theoretical background of this model comes mainly from the field theory of Kurt Lewin and his successors⁵⁵ and the more recent writings of Ken Wilber.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, the diagrams that accompanied my original presentation at the October 2001 meeting of Collegium cannot be transmitted electronically in this paper. I invite the reader to construct an actual or mental diagram to represent the verbal text that follows. The **longitudinal** dimension of this model is not particularly unique, and so I will not dwell very long on it. Life moves along a continuum from birth to death much as described by Erikson and other stage theorists. Following Erikson's notion of the epigenetic principle, earlier and later stages are related to one another **bi-directionally**. That is, later stages not only build upon the positive outcomes of earlier stages, but they can also compensate to some degree for earlier negative outcomes

The **cross-sectional** dimension of the model corresponds to what I referred to earlier as the "horizontal" aspect of faith development. It aims to represent the makeup of a person's faith at any chosen point along the developmental continuum. A two-dimensional diagram of this aspect of my proposed model resembles a target, with ever-wider concentric circles surrounding a small center circle. At the center of the diagram is the **Person**, viewed as a total entity. (Lewin's field theory has been used to diagram the inner makeup of the person as well, but that is not my focus here.) The key construct here is the concept of "**regions**." A region is a **field of influence**. In a schematic two-dimensional drawing, regions appear to be evenly-spaced concentric circles. In real life, however, the contours of regions would vary greatly between persons and within the same person at different life stages. **Regions are arranged from inner to outer rather than from lower to higher**. They differ from one another according to their degrees of inclusiveness, with the outer regions being more inclusive. A region corresponds roughly to what Ken Wilber describes as a **holon**, "a whole that is part of other wholes."⁵⁷

Let me briefly describe and illustrate the regions that make up a person's faith system at any given time. It is important **not** to think of regions as "components" that can be easily separated from one another. There is considerable overlap and mutual influence among the different regions. The boundaries between them are permeable. Furthermore, the relationship between the person and the regions that constitute his or her "faith map" is bi-directional. Regions influence the person and vice versa. Regions both shape and are shaped by the individual.

The region (concentric circle) closest to the person is **Values**, which are internalized standards of conduct that are regarded as intrinsically desirable. Values are the result of interactions between the person and significant others throughout life. They can usually be expressed in one or two key words, e.g., fairness, truthfulness, respect for elders, etc. One of the most admirable efforts to articulate values that transcend cultural differences is Rushworth Kidder's book *Shared Values for a Troubled World*.⁵⁸ At a practical level, values influence one's everyday individual conduct. The area overlapping the permeable boundary between Person and Values is what we call conscience.

Moving further outward, the concentric circle that encloses both Person and Values is the region I label as **Principles**, which are formally articulated value statements. They are usually

expressed in sentences rather than single words. An obvious example is the UUA's Statement of Principles and Purposes, but we could also cite the Ten Commandments in the Judeo-Christian tradition or the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism. At a practical level, principles influence not only private individual conduct but also the interactions and mutual expectations of a large group of people. The practical expression of Principles would be behavior in the public domain that calls attention to widely held principles, as in political campaigns, protests, or public statements. The boundary overlap between Values and Principles is what we refer to as ethics.

The next outer region, which I call **Sources of Wisdom**, includes the great religious traditions of the world, as well as secular worldviews and individual experiences that have had a transformative impact over time. The contents of this region consist not only of articulated principles and shared values, but also the dramatic narratives and historical figures that give traditions their vitality. The UUA's statement, Sources of the Living Tradition, represents an attempt to articulate the breadth and depth of sources that have helped shape our faith movement. For those in other traditions, wisdom may spring from a single source. In any event, this wisdom--whether religious or not--attempts to cast light on the great mysteries of human existence, such as birth, suffering, and death. The practical expression of these wisdom traditions is active participation in the institutions and practices that reaffirm and nourish them.

The most inclusive region--holon with a capital "H"--is the one labeled as **Ultimate Reality**. This region concerns the origin and destiny of the universe, and it includes all other regions. Here we are speaking of the realm of absolutes, however conceived or named: God, the Universe, Universal Truth. Most of the Sources of Wisdom represent attempts--however incomplete--to address the great mysteries that surround this level. Note that this region has no outer boundary. I find it interesting that in contemporary American culture, a new "wisdom tradition" has evolved out of the endeavors of physical scientists to plumb the mysteries of the Universe. One of the best I've read is *Masks of the Universe*, a history of cosmology written by the astrophysicist Edward Harrison.⁵⁹

I believe that this model of faith development is both **inclusive and extensive**. Let me say just a few words about the **dynamics** of this model, i.e., how the different regions interact across time. The driving force for change in one's faith stance is **disequilibrium**, which can occur within or between regions. According to this model, not all of the regions are equally influential at any given time. As people move through life, the regions become more highly differentiated, and thus the opportunities for disequilibrium, tension, and conflict increase. Transitions from stage to stage create disequilibrium all by themselves. Disequilibrium within a given region may be the result of inconsistency between the theoretical and practical levels, or because two mutually discordant elements compete for influence. Different regions do not change at the same rate, although major changes in one region can create disequilibrium in other regions. For example, a college student from a fundamentalist Christian background who takes a course in world religions from a liberal professor might well experience some degree of disequilibrium in several different regions simultaneously.

According to this integrative model, the goal of faith development is not to move toward a highest level of attainment, as seems to be the case with Fowler's model. Rather, the goal is to achieve an **optimal balance between differentiation and integration**, between diversity and

unity, at any given level of development. From a methodological standpoint, the purpose of studying faith development would not be to categorize people as belonging to a particular "faith stage" based on an external yardstick. Instead, the main objective would be to identify the configuration of a person's faith system at a particular point in their life, using a combination of semi-structured interviews and the person's own self-mapping" of their faith regions during different stages of their life. This faith mapping would also include identifying instances of disequilibrium or disproportion among different regions as they may exist presently or in the past.

Other applications of this model could be made in the area of religious education. Among religious educators, the desire for a comprehensive model is apparent in the face of the bewildering variety of curricula presently available. Specific learning experiences could be designed to help individuals identify the missing or conflicting contents of their faith regions. In my work with adult RE classes over several years, I have noticed that some UUs have difficulty seeing the connection between their individual spiritual journey and the UUA's statements about our tradition's principles and sources. Hopefully, a model such as this would help them integrate the two. For younger learners, curricula could be designed that explicitly relate values, principles, and religious traditions to one another at different stages of development. I believe this model could serve as the basis for a core UU curriculum that builds cumulatively from one developmental level to the next. From a developmental standpoint the integrative model is clearly in its infancy, but I believe it holds considerable promise, and I welcome suggestions about how to improve and elaborate it.

NOTES

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² Lewis H. Lapham, "Who and What Is American?" *Harper's Magazine*, January 1992, 46. Quoted in Thomas H. Naylor, William H. Willimon, and Magdalena R. Naylor, *The Search for Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 7.

³ Wade Roof Clark, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); *idem*, *A Generation of Seekers* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁴ Kenneth L. Woodward, "Platitudes or Prophecy?" *Newsweek*, August 27, 2001.

⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981).

⁶ James Fowler, "Stage Six and the Kingdom of God," *Religious Education* 75:3 (May-June 1980), 231-248.

⁷ James W. White, *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988), 119.

⁸ Examples of Fowler's influence on writings from within the Unitarian Universalist perspective include Richard S. Gilbert, *Building Your Own Theology*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000), 91; Scotty McLennan, *Finding Your Religion* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 9-32; and Marcia Bowen, Jeanne Nieuwejaar, and Richard Stower, *Life Tapestry* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1994).

⁹ White (note 7 above) provides a comprehensive review of the literature on faith development.

¹⁰ Barry M. Andrews, "Educating for Faith," in *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education*, collected by the Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee (Boston: Skinner House, 2001), 8.

¹¹ James Fowler and Sam Keen, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1978), 16.

¹² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12. Toward the end of this book, Smith traces the linguistic degeneration of the word *credo* from its original Christian meaning as a statement of trust and commitment to its modern meaning as assent to a propositional truth claim.

¹³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁶ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 92.

¹⁷ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 48.

¹⁸ Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: Norton, 1958); *idem*, *Gandhi's Truth* (New York: Norton, 1969); *idem*, "The Galilean Sayings and the Sense of 'I,'" *The Yale Review*, April 1981, 321-62. Reprinted in Robert Coles, ed., *The Erik Erikson Reader* (New York: Norton, 2000), 465-502.

¹⁹ Don S. Browning, *Generative Man* (New York: Dell, 1973); Hetty Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern: Erik H. Erikson's Contribution to the Psychology of Religion* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990).

²⁰ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 270-72.

²¹ For a summary of Kohlberg's method, see Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Child as Moral Philosopher," *Psychology Today*, September 1968; and *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). For a detailed critique of Kohlberg's theory and method, particularly as related to the issue of cross-cultural validity, see Richard A. Shweder, Manamohan Mahapatra, and Joan G. Miller, "Culture and Moral Development," in James W. Stigler, Richard A. Shweder, and Gilbert Herdt, eds., *Cultural*

Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 130-45.

²² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 99.

²³ Fowler in *Life Maps*, 36. Elsewhere he writes, "The stage level of aspiration for a public church, its seems clear, is Conjunctive faith." *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 97.

²⁴ James W. White, *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988), 118. White constructed this table from a variety of Fowler's lectures and publications.

²⁵ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 173.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182-83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 318.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

³² White, *Intergenerational Religious Education*, 117.

³³ Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, 71.

³⁴ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 198.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 187-88.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 188-97.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁰ See for example James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 255-59.

⁴¹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 17, 92-93.

⁴² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 316. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 125, 320.

⁴³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 244-45. Romney M. Mosley, David Jarvis, and James W. Fowler, *Manual for Faith Development Research* (Atlanta: Emory University, 1986). I am grateful to Gerald E. Wood for providing me a copy of this manual, along with his own paper, "Fowler's Faith Development Theory: Structuralist or Contextualist?" (unpublished seminar paper, Emory University, 1988).

⁴⁴ C. Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis, *Religion and the Individual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 74-75.

⁴⁵ Fowler, *Life Maps*, 40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁷ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Harvard University Press: 1982), 151-74.

⁴⁸ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 267.

⁴⁹ For example, Don S. Browning, *Generative Man* (New York: Dell, 1973) and John Kotre, *Outliving the Self: Generativity and the Interpretation of Lives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press).

⁵⁰ Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By* (New York: Guilford, 1993), 228. See also Dan P. McAdams and Ed de St. Aubin (eds.), *Generativity and Adult Development* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1998). For a concise summary of his theory and research, see Dan P. McAdams, "Generativity: The New Definition of Success," *Spirituality & Health*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 2001), 26-33.

⁵¹ McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 229-40

⁵² Dan P. McAdams, Holly M. Hart, and Shadd Maruna, "The Anatomy of Generativity," in McAdams and de St. Aubin (eds.), *Generativity and Adult Development*, 7-43.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁵⁴ Browning, *Generative Man*, 164.

⁵⁵ Lewin, *A Dynamic Theory of Personality* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1935. Roger G. Barker, *Ecological Psychology* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press).

⁵⁶ Ken Wilber, *Integral Psychology* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000) and *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁵⁷ Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 7.

⁵⁸ Rushworth Kidder, *Shared Values for a Troubled World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

⁵⁹ Edward Harrison, *Masks of the Universe* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1985).

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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