

James Fowler's Description of Religious Education as Transformation in Faith

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Abstract. Although understanding one's concept of religious education is important, not everybody is aware of it, concerned with it, and committed to it. We believe that understanding James Fowler's concept of religious education can contribute to creating people who will inspire others in their faith's journey. This study seeks to answer the question 'How is James Fowler's description of religious education as transformation in faith?' Thus, the study aimed to describe Fowler's concept of religious education. The study used the qualitative descriptive approach applying bibliographical research. The result of the research showed Fowler describes religious education as the transformation in faith which has two dimensions: faith development or faith stages and conversion.

Keywords: faith; religious education; transformation; stages of faith; conversion.

1 Introduction

Understanding one's concept of religious education opens the possibility of developing an educational process to help people in their faith journey. Thus, understanding the meaning of religious education is a decisive step toward an effective educational process. However, not everybody is aware. Not everyone has a concern. Not every person is committed to having a correct understanding of religious education.

The description of religious education given by James W. Fowler is here worthy to be studied since he presented an interesting idea on religious education as a transformation in faith [1][2]. Thus, we try to analyze the dynamic of transformation in faith.

Faith has been defined in different ways. Some people may perceive faith as believing without good reason [3]. Michael Pennock presented a practical formulation of faith by making two distinctions: referring to our human relationship and our relationship with God [4]. Describing faith within Christian understanding B. Marconcini presented faith as an individual total offering to God, known in the revelation through the analysis of the proper fundamental dimension with the world, death, humankind, and history and therefore come to be open to the transcendence and to be aware of the freedom expressed explicitly in responsibility and hope [5]. This understanding underlines at least two aspects of faith namely faith as a gift of God and faith as human free will to offer him/herself to God. For Dyess faith is an evolving pattern of belief, that grounds and guides authentic living and gives meaning in the present moment of inter-relating. Four key attributes of faith were also identified as focusing on beliefs, foundational meaning for life, living authentically by beliefs, and interrelating with self, others, and/or the Divine [6].

It is within this various understanding of what faith is that we will analyze the particular description given by James W. Fowler.

According to Herman Westerink, religious transformation is as old as religion itself and can be defined as the movement from faith to true faith [7]. Transformation in Christian Theology is the change one experiences due to the action of Jesus Christ in the power of the Father and Spirit. It is the reorientation of life toward unity with others, before God the Triune Creator in Jesus Christ. It is the condition "where I am most me, I find that I am most him, or he is most in me, as I am in him... and so most in Church" [8].

Religious transformation in the idea of Day is directed toward the postformal stage which is similar to Fowler's stage four and five and Oser & Gmünder's stage 5 [9]. Postformal stages, Day believes, give way to the upgrading capacity to construct meaning, interact with others, and draw utility for problems in social life. Postformal stages can provide tools for understanding and promoting competence in cognition in situations of complex problem-solving in adult life. It may help us also to understand why and how meaning-making and problem-solving competence may develop within a given domain, and across (or not) domains. This postformal stage is named by Day as the Model of Hierarchical Complexity and consists of four stages namely systematic order, metasystematic order, paradigmatic order, and cross-paradigmatic order [9].

Transformation in faith as a stage of faith or faith development has been studied by Fowler [1][10][11], Oser and Gmünder [12], Bailey Gillespie [13], Richard Kropf [14], Westerhoff [15][16]. Oser and Gmünder depicted the process of religious judgment in five stages. Gillespie presented the process of faith development from borrowed faith to reflected faith, personalized faith, established faith, reordered faith, reflective faith, and finally resolute faith. Kropf's description, similar to Fowler's, consists of seven stages namely undifferentiated or instinctive faith, intuitive faith, literal faith, conventional faith, personal faith, conjunctive faith, and unitive faith. Westerhoff proposed four stages of faith development, namely, experienced faith, affiliative faith, searching faith, and own faith. Based on those studies, transformation in faith is understood as the condition when one leaves the lower stages and moves to the higher stages. It is the situation when the old and less adequate way of constructing value and meaning of life is replaced with a more mature way of constructing it [17]. Transformation in faith can be understood as spiritual formation, perceived by Willard as the transformation of the inner dimension of a human being: heart, will, and mind. In that process "people are transformed inwardly so the person and deeds of Jesus Christ flow out of them in a natural way, whenever and wherever they are" [18].

The history of humanity presented multiple experiences of conversion of many people which is understood as change in their lives. It is the leaving away or falling of the old mental structure of life and the substitution with a new mental structure of life [19]. Many of those changes had religious characteristics to make it possible for us to speak of religious conversion. This religious conversion may be named by one as content other as form. Some others named it as liturgy, belief, institution, or specific doctrine. Tillich named it as the ultimate concern [20].

Gillespie presented several models of religious conversion, namely Old Testament models, New Testament models, historical models, functional models, feminist perspectives, and developmentalist models [20].

Conversion is an experience of change. However, to fit religious conversion, that change must meet five constituent elements, namely the quality of unification-self, positive resultant function, the intensity of commitment to ideology, decisive movement, and identity-oriented [20].

Regarding the factor/context of conversion, Gillespie presented six contexts, namely social context, psychological context, experiential context, developmental context, emotional context, and identity context [20].

Conversion is preceded by some contact with religious issues in childhood and experiencing some problems in the period before conversion. The conversion is stimulated by meeting with a religious person or attending a prayer meeting, which leads to the experience of God's presence, and a cognitive insight into religious matters [21]. Conversion may happen due to intellectual, mystical, experimental, affective, revivalist, and coercive [20] and may take different types: revival movement, dramatic, way out of frustration, and a result of religious experience [19].

The effect of conversion is the transformed self. The attachment to a real or an imagined figure transforms the convert. The convert found a new intimate relationship with God. 'God is no longer an abstract concept but a living reality'. The convert experiences a significant improvement in their sense of self, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-identity, self-perception, attitude, goals, and strivings. This happened because of religious experience [22]. Consequences of conversion include radical changes in spiritual life, increasing subjective well-being, improving social life, and solving the antecedent problem [21].

The purpose of this study is to present James W. Fowler's description of religious education as a transformation in faith. There have been many studies done by Fowler himself and others on this topic. We refer particularly to his explanation in part V of his book *Stages of Faith* which consists of three parts, namely chapter 22 [Mary's Pilgrimage: The Theory at Work], chapter 23 [Form and Content: Stages of Faith and Conversion], and chapter 24 [Faith on Earth].

2 Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach /method applying bibliographical research. We simply call our study expository, analytic, evaluative, and synthetic. We chose this method because our aim is simply to discuss Fowler's idea of religious education as a transformation in faith. Fowler affirms that transformation in faith has two dimensions, namely faith stages and conversion. To be able to come to the description of religious education as a transformation in faith, we have tried to study Fowler's concept of faith, aspects of faith, and stages of faith. We then continue to analyze his idea of conversion. Finally, we have tried to discuss his idea compared with other ideas referring to the theme of stages of faith and conversion.

3 Result

Fowler's concept of religious education has a connection with his life and his concept of faith. Therefore before presenting his idea on religious education, we will have a short look at his life [23][1] and his idea of what faith is.

Fowler's Life and Works

James Wiley Fowler was born in 1940 and was a Christian minister and theologian. He had an interest in theological ethics and the sociology of religion. He studied the development

of H. Richard Niebuhr's theological position as the topic of his dissertation. This was to be his first book 'To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr'.

In 1968 he worked in Interpreter's House, a religious and cultural center founded by Carlyle Marney. Interpreter's House was a place of conversation, dialogue, and hermeneutics. In that place, adults can meet each other from different convictions and races, enrich their experience, and find meaning in their own lives by interpreting their experiences. In this job, Fowler found himself listening to very many people and became familiar with the experiences and life stories of humankind.

In 1969, Fowler taught at Harvard Divinity School for graduate students. He offered courses that were at once theological and experiential emphasizing human formation and transformation. He was influenced by Erik Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, Robert Selman, Daniel Levinson, Carol Gilligan. In the field of theology, he was influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

In the seventies, Fowler and his associates undertook a research study interviewing nearly 400 people from the age of four to eighty-eight and different convictions, denominations, and religions. They interviewed, asked questions, and listened to the life stories. The questions they asked were 'Does life have meaning and purpose? What gives your life meaning? When you are most discouraged, what gets you up in the morning to return to the struggle? When and where do you experience wonder, awe, or ecstasy? What events, persons, relationships, or experiences have most decisively shaped your way of seeing and moving into life?' They named these questions as questions of faith because they allow us to have in-depth conversations that provide rare, intimate glimpses into the various ways our lives have meaning and purpose.

In 1981, Fowler presented a theory of stages of faith in the book entitled 'Stages of Faith. The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning'. He has also written several other books and many articles presented in seminars and published in journals and book chapters. He died on October 16th, 2015 leaving Lurline, his wife who witnessed her gratitude for 53 years living together facing many challenges, chances, joy, and finding many graces [24].

Fowler's Concept of Faith and Aspects of Faith

Since Fowler is a Christian, a minister of the Church, and a theologian, one expects a Christian or at least a religious understanding of faith. It was not his concept. To him, faith has a human universal characteristic. It has a connection with meaning. It is an activity, a verb. It is relational. It is different from religion and belief.

Under the influence of Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Ernst Becker, Fowler confirmed that faith has to do with making, maintaining, and transforming meaning. It is a mode of knowing and being [25]. He stressed that the human being does not live only by bread, success alone, sex alone, and certainly not by instinct alone. He or she requires meaning. She or he needs values and priorities. Fowler believed that the concern for meaning is not necessarily religious. It is a human universal concern. Everyone has a center or, a force field that gives courage and motive for him/her to become a pilgrim of hope, to continue living, to spend one's life [1].

Contrary to the familiar use of the term faith as a noun, Fowler presented faith as a verb to denote the activity, the state of being, or the quality of participation. It is a way of knowing, construing, or interpreting one's experience. It is an active, constructive, and interpretative mode of being [26].

Faith as the activity of knowing, construing, interpreting, and finding the meaning of experience is relational. It deals with two types of relationship, namely bi-polar and tri-polar. In the bipolar relationship the binding, the relation is between the self and other (s), the person and the transcendent (s). In the tri-polar binding, the relation is between self, community, and

transcendent [27]. Faith as a relation has two structures, namely inner and outer structures. The inner structure of faith regards the idea of knowing which is at the same time rational and patational [23]. The outer structure of faith is world maintenance, the holding together of a shared vision of reality in human communities. Here it is important to develop interpersonal faith and faithfulness, to avoid the danger of acting only to maximize one's own survival, security, and significance [27].

Faith, to Fowler, is different from belief and religion. Religion is cumulative traditions that may be constituted by texts of scripture or law, narratives, myths, prophecies, symbols, music, dance, ethical teaching, theologies, creeds, rites, liturgies, and architecture. Faith is the group or person's way of responding to the transcendent value and power as perceived forms of the cumulative tradition. It is a quality of human living. It is expressed in the form of serenity, courage, loyalty, and service, a quiet confidence and joy. Faith gives strength and hope to face catastrophe, sorrow, and confusion, and opportunity with conviction and drive. Faith enables us to face others with cheerful charity. Belief is the holding of certain ideas. It is the effort to translate the experience of and relation to transcendence into concepts and propositions [1].

Fowler presented faith as having seven aspects, namely a form of logic, role-taking, a form of moral judgment, a bound of social awareness, locus of authority, a form of world coherence, role of symbols. He turns to explain seven stages of faith: primal faith, intuitive projective faith, mythic literal faith, synthetic conventional faith, individuating reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalizing faith [1].

Fowler's Idea of Religious Education as Transformation in Faith

The possibility of speaking about Fowler's description of religious education appears from Fowler's explanation of formation and transformation in faith in part V of his book *Stages of Faith* [1]. Although Fowler did not use the term religious education, in these pages we find the fundamental characteristic of education, that is, its formative function. We know that education is not just giving information, but also making possible the formation and transformation of a person.

Fowler started to explain his concept of transformation by presenting the life of Mary, a woman of twenty-eight years old at the time Fowler interviewed her. Mary's life journey could be divided into three chapters, namely from childhood to seventeen, seventeen to twenty-two, and from twenty-two to twenty-eight. During the two previous chapters, she was involved in Eastern religions, pop psychology, the occult, illicit drugs, and sex. She was irresponsible in life. She was disobedient to her parents. At the age of twenty-two, she became Christian after meeting her brother. That meeting changed her life and made possible the transformation of her life. She gained confidence and a sense of inner strength. She had the strength to trust in her judgments more than anyone else's. About her children, she was more providential and was very conscious about the care she should provide for them. Mary's transformation had helped their parent to rediscover their religious commitment. Mary had failed in her first marriage and had decided to remarry. The decision to remarry this time was not a rush, but a solid one. She and her husband had taken time and care to lay a good foundation. She is prepared for and moving toward the greatest progress in her personal growth and faith development [1][23].

Fowler asserted that formation and transformation regard both the form or structure and the content. In describing the structure Fowler refers to the contribution of Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson, and Selman. In explaining the content Fowler refers to his theological background. The content of faith entails the realities, values, powers, and communities in which person rests their hearts. The content of faith has three major elements, namely, the center of value, the image of power and powers that help us, and third, the master stories. The master stories are the stories

about ourselves, the stories we tell to interpret and respond to the events that impinge upon our lives. Those stories may be expressed in phrases like: 'everything runs down', 'there is that God in every man', the universal vocation of persons in the humanization of humankind' [1].

Fowler made a distinction between faith stage change or faith stage transition or development and conversional change. Development is the transition from one stage to the next. Individuals develop from infancy to adulthood through early childhood, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. He or she moves from undifferentiated faith to conjunctive faith through intuitive-projective faith, mythic literal faith, synthetic conventional faith, and individuated reflective faith.

Conversion is the recentering of previous images of value and power and the adoption of new master stories. Individuals experience conversion in the sense she or he gains the reconstitution of pre-images of the Ground of Being: re-establishment or deepening of basic trust. She or he obtained a transformed primal image of Numinous and the Ultimate Environment. She or he produces new stories, meets new people, found a new community of faith. She or he establishes a new identity in relation to the new center of value, images of power, and master story. She or he found a new vocational horizon; a new theology. He or she built a new quality of partnership with Being in and for the world. It is the commitment to reshape one's life in a new community of interpretation and action. It is a significant sudden transformation of a person's loyalty pattern of life and focus of energy [1].

4 Discussion

In the previous paragraph, we have presented Fowler's description of religious education as a transformation in faith with two dimensions: faith development and conversion. Now we need to discuss his description presenting other similar or different ideas and giving our opinion. We will first start with Fowler's concept of faith, then his idea on religious education.

The Concept of Faith

Fowler has stressed the understanding of faith as the activity of meaning-making, relational, different from religion and belief. It is human universal. It does not have necessarily religious characteristics. This kind of perception of faith has a positive contribution both to believers and nonbelievers. To believers, Fowler urges them to be committed to practicing their faith in daily life and not separate faith from life. To nonbelievers, Fowler demonstrates that they cannot escape from the need to engage in something that gives them meaning. By understanding faith as not exclusively a religious concept, Fowler opens the possibility for a dialogue between religious people and non-religious people. Fowler reminds us not to be too fanatic about our own convictions, but to let other convictions become partners that may correct our convictions [28][23].

Despite those positive elements, we also find perplexing points in Fowler's concept of faith. Harvey Cox said that Fowler offends everyone, believers and non-believers. He offends non-believers because he characterizes their profane and mundane activity with the term 'faith' which they reject. He offends believers because he reduces their concept of faith, disregarding the contents of faith. He offends both believers and non-believers because he ignores their particularity by putting them on the same level [23]. The crucial point of criticism has something to do with Fowler's failure to address the content of faith. J. Harry Fernhout affirms that a writing

that deals with the 'how of faith' should include faith in someone, in something definable and tangible. Faith should demand content. Faith means loyalty, and trust in an imminent God [29][23]. Faith, to Craig Dykstra, is dependent upon God and cannot be a reality without God. If there is no such God, then faith is an illusion and if it is not God to whom we are related, then what we have is not faith [30].

Education as Faith Stages

Education, to Fowler, is the activity to make possible the development of the individual from undifferentiated faith to intuitive projective faith, mythic literal faith, synthetic conventional faith, individuative reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalizing faith. This description is similar to the description of other authors [14][13][12]. However, Fowler has a unique description of stage development since he presented development in seven aspects of human life and thus, contributed to a holistic proclamation of the Christian message which emphasizes the interplay between Gospel teaching and human experience [31] and includes an intellectual, affective, spiritual, and sensual aspect of human life and holistic catechesis which implies various functions of the church: liturgy, service, message, community, and answer the three identity questions: Who are we?, For whom are we?, and Whose are we? [32].

De Benedittis then tried to apply stages of faith proposing that in intuitive projective faith, religion is mood; in mythic literal faith, religion is story; in synthetic conventional faith, religion is authority; in individuative reflective faith, religion is ideological certainty; in conjunctive faith, religion is the way of the cross; and in universalizing faith, religion is the fullness of simplicity [32].

By describing education as faith development Fowler proposed the higher stage as the aim of the educational process. Thus, we can say that the goal of every education activity is to help individuals arrive at individuative reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing faith. The process from undifferentiated faith to conjunctive faith is merely a human process, whereas the process of conjunctive faith to universalizing faith requires the intervention of God's grace. Thus, Fowler put us in a difficult and confusing condition. In C. Ellis Nelson word's, 'If he [Fowler] had restricted himself to human faith development..., we would not have the complications of dealing with religion in general or with the Christian religion in particular' [33].

Education as Conversion

Conversion, to Fowler, is the recentering of one's images of value and power. It is also a conscious adoption of a new set. This explanation is similar to the description given by others [20][19]. Moreover, Fowler's description may be expanded to present the motif of conversion [20], typology of conversion [19], models of conversion [20], context of conversion [20], result and consequences of conversion [22][21], and characteristics of religious conversion [20].

5 Conclusion

Our study has obtained the goal of describing Fowler's idea of religious education as transformation in faith through movement from undifferentiated faith to intuitive projective faith, mythic literal faith, synthetic conventional faith, individuative reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalizing faith. He also describes religious education as the recentering of one's image of value and power, a new ability to create master stories and to reshape one's life.

We are conscious that this study did not cover all essential aspects of religious education, stages of faith, and conversion. We are not always able to present our study in a systematic, clear, logical, and easy way to be understood. Therefore, we hope and suggest that other studies will be done either to complement our study or to give correction to it.

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