

# Variety and complexity of religious development: perspectives for the 21st century

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## **Abstract**

*Hundred years after William James' famous book, the question of the variety of religious orientations deserves new reflection. The rapid changes in the religious landscape in our Western societies require a methodological response in psychology of religion research. A challenging example is the new type of religious socialization which I have called 'accumulative heretic' and for which some research results report a generational accumulation. We expect results from research on new religious fundamentalist deconverts to speak to this question also. Has religion become a question of style, of life-style? It appears that our perspectives for understanding and our instruments in empirical research need an adjustment. Based upon James Fowler's faith development theory, but with reference to recent proposals in structural-developmental and life-span developmental psychology, I propose a model of religious styles which, in the first place, is the attempt to better account for the complexity of religious development, including its psychodynamic, interpersonal, life-history and life-world related dimensions. In this way, not only research in faith development could venture more out of its niche and contribute its gift for investigating the variety of religious orientations in religious communities and milieus, but more specifically, new developments in the religious landscape can be taken into account.*

Hundred years after William James' famous text, the question of the variety of religious orientations deserves new reflection. The religious landscape has changed significantly. The growing acceptance for the model of the religious seeker in the scientific study of religion

(Pender, 2000), the felt necessity to account for ‘religion as quest’ (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993) and the recent focus on spirituality<sup>1</sup> can be taken as reflection of and response to the changes in the religious landscape in our Western societies. A challenging example is the new type of religious-biographical trajectory which I have called ‘accumulative heretic’<sup>2</sup> and for which some research results (Roof, 1993; 1999; Beaudoin, 1998) report a generational accumulation, e.g. in Generation X. We expect results from research on new religious fundamentalist deconverts to speak to this question also.

The changes in the religious landscape require not only new efforts in the social scientific study of religion to account for the statistical extent and the life-world relatedness of such increased variety of religious orientations;<sup>3</sup> the new situation also requires conceptual and methodological responses from the psychology of religion. In regard to *development*, we previously already have had reason to call into question any privilege of unilinear explanations such as they are advocated by most of the Piagetian perspectives, because some doubt is justified that they fully comprehend religious development – especially in “irregular” developmental variants such as the vicious circle of adolescent atheism (Döbert, 1991) and fundamentalist conversion in midlife (Streib, 2001a; 2001c). The increased new variety however reinforces the need to take account of the variance of developmental trajectories in the terms of psychology.<sup>4</sup>

The *variety* of developmental trajectories, however, points to the greater *complexity* of human and religious development. Complexity refers to an *internal* variety of factors and dimensions which are involved in development. Models of complexity have surpassed or extended the unidimensional, unidirectional, and unifunctional accounts of development which have dominated the

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<sup>1</sup> There is a growing body of research results, especially in the USA, on spirituality (Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Scott, 2001; Marler & Hadaway, 2002); for a recent overview see Marler & Hadaway (2002) or Streib (2003d).

<sup>2</sup> See my Research Report for the Enquete Commission of the 13<sup>th</sup> German Parliament (Streib, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Social scientific study of religion has e.g. to address the question of whether religion has become a question of style, of life-style (Streib, 1997; 2003c).

<sup>4</sup> Such variance is the theme of most of the chapters in Lerner's & Damon's (1998) volume. See also Lachmann & James (1997).

Piagetian family of theories. This strong focus and the lack of serious consideration of alternative factors, dimensions and perspectives can be traced back to Jean Piaget's own reluctance to seriously engage in a correlation of his ideas and findings with the psychoanalytic view of Sigmund Freud<sup>5</sup> or to take notice of the phenomenological perspective on child development of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>6</sup> Half a century later, we realize with greater clarity the consequences of this momentous neglect. In the decades to follow, we find among Piagetians, especially in the Kohlberg school, energetic engagement in defining the exclusive unidimensional and unidirectional structural-developmental "logic"<sup>7</sup> with its methodic obsession to separate structure from any content.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the acknowledgment of cross-domain asynchrony, of *décalage*, of which we find indeed some notion in Piaget's work had an almost subversive tone and some colleagues felt the need here to defend Piaget against the Piagetians.<sup>9</sup> This speaks to our theme: it gives rise to some doubt that the developmental and religious variety has a chance to find resonance in pure Piagetian theories, if unchanged. Recent contributions therefore

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<sup>5</sup> We have at least a brief recognition of Freud's work (Piaget, 1971); but this presentation before the APA only envisions "a general theory of psychology that integrates the discoveries of cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis;" for the time being, Piaget however denies that "affectivity engenders or modifies cognitive structures" and he concludes that "affective and cognitive mechanisms are inseparable, although distinct: the former depend on energy, and the latter depend on structure" (71). For Piaget's more systematic discussion of psychoanalysis, see his *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood* (Piaget, 1945).

<sup>6</sup> Piaget did not respond in any way to Merleau-Ponty's lectures at the Sorbonne on child development (Merleau-Ponty, 1988). A reconstruction of the discourse between Piaget and Merleau-Ponty which never took place has been presented by Liebsch (1992).

<sup>7</sup> Criteria for "hard" developmental theories are: structural difference, irreversibility, structural wholeness, hierarchical integration and universality (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hower, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> The separation of structure from any content has been criticized heavily (Döbert, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> The Piagetian and, even more, the neo-Piagetian understanding of *décalage* indicates an awareness of non-synchronicity of cognitive development, but of course it explains only a delay of an assumed developmental progression and neither Piaget, nor Piagetian scholars have explicated a 'theory of *décalage*' (Cocking, 1979; Chapman, 1988; Bidell & Fisher, 1992: 110; 116; Case, 1992; Montada, 1998).

maintain “that horizontal *décalage* is the rule in development rather than the exception.”<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately, the field is broader and we may take a fresh approach to understanding the variety and complexity of religious development. Including and expanding on innovative proposals in developmental psychology such as life-span development, wisdom research, narrative approaches, neo-Piagetian and psychoanalytic perspectives may allow to sketch the outline of an emerging model of development which is able to account for the variety and complexity of religious development. I understand these innovative proposals as impulses for modifying our understanding of human development and thus of religious development. They would need to be discussed in more detail, but for reason of time and space, I shall concentrate on the life-span model of Paul Baltes and Ursula Staudinger first and foremost.<sup>11</sup>

### **Lifespan psychology and wisdom research – arguments to take a broader focus in developmental psychology**

According to Baltes, Staudinger and Lindenberger (1998), life-span developmental psychology maintains “that ontogenesis extends across the entire life course and that lifelong adaptive processes are involved” (Baltes et.al. 1998, 1029). This implies a reformulation of the traditional concept of development. The authors maintain that lifespan psychology, in developing and refining a multi-level framework, has “benefited much from transdisciplinary dialogue, especially with modern developmental biologists but also with cultural psychologists” (Baltes et.al. 1999, 499). To go into more detail: In their view of human development, Baltes, Staudinger and

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<sup>10</sup> There is a growing awareness among neo-Piagetian developmentalists that horizontal *décalage* is the rule rather than the exception (Canfield & Ceci, 1992: 289).

<sup>11</sup> Also Richard M. Lerner, in his textbook on adolescence (Lerner, 2002: 51-53), has given prominence to Baltes’ and Staudinger’s model. Lerner concludes that, besides Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective, Baltes’ and Staudinger’s model is “most useful at this point in the history of the study of adolescence,” because we need strong interaction theories which are integrative, but account for the plasticity and diversity of development.

Lindenberger focus not only on interindividual commonalities, but also on interindividual differences, and on interindividual malleability (Baltes et.al. 1998, 1030; 1999, 472). The authors are aware of attempts of some lifespan developmentalists, and here the authors refer explicitly to Labouvie-Vief (1992), who “offer alternative conceptions of ontogenetic development that departed from the notion of holistic and unidirectional growth, according to which all aspects of the developing system were geared toward a higher level of integration and functioning” (Baltes et.al. 1999, 479). Baltes and colleagues however introduce a more radical departure from extant theoretical models of development. Their proposal is an even more flexible construction of development, namely a model of “development as selective age-related change in adaptive capacity”. The authors introduce their functionalist developmental model of adaptive capacity which, in contrast to the traditional monolithic view of development as universal growth toward a single end point, accounts for *cross-domain differences*; the “capacity to move between levels of knowledge and skills” (Ibid., 480) is a necessary condition, when development is defined as ‘selective adaptation’.

Consequently, the new model accounts for losses, as well as for gains in development. The economy of loss and gain has made its way even into the fundamental definition of ‘development’: “Successful development is defined ... as the conjoint maximization of gains (desirable goals or outcomes) and the minimization of losses (undesirable goals or outcomes)” (Ibid., 482). And when, as the authors assume, a certain developmental outcome can not be attributed to a single cause, the concept of ‘equifinality’ receives prominence which holds that different developmental means and combinations of means can lead to the same outcome. If it is true that any given developmental outcome is but one of numerous possible outcomes, then indeed “the search for the conditions and range of ontogenetic plasticity, including its age-associated changes, is fundamental to the study of development” (Ibid., 480).

Explicitly, the authors address the question of whether adult intellectual development follows a structuralist, stage-like logic, they however opt in favour of a functionalist model. The authors’ focus thereby is clearly on adult development. Baltes and colleagues however find little evidence in support of stage theories in general, but grant only some limited, but at least some, value to the structuralist

search for higher forms of reasoning, since it is a “search for bodies of factual and procedural knowledge with a high degree of generality and meaning” which is able to “counteract the lifespan tendency toward fragmentation and specialization.”

For this, wisdom is a prototypical example. In a recent article (Baltes, Glück, & Kunzmann, 2002), Baltes and co-workers reconfirm their proposal to focus psychological theory and research on *wisdom*. While it had been a prominent reason for introducing the concept of wisdom to better account for “what might be positive in adult development and aging” (Ibid., 329), the more recent research focus has been broadened to include not only “the study of positive aspects of human aging,” but to “conceptualize wisdom as an instantiation of a construct that, for all phases and contexts of life, offers the potential for defining the means and ends toward a good or even optimal life” (Ibid.).

## **Toward a new understanding of development**

Successful aging and especially wisdom are valuable constructs of psychological investigation, and the SOC model of Baltes and Staudinger, accounting for selection, optimization and compensation may prove to be theoretically and empirically helpful to understand successful aging (c.f. Freund & Baltes, 1998). In regard to developmental theory construction, I appreciate this view as very comprehensive framework. I agree with Richard Lerner (2002) that, because of its innovative impact, the life-span perspective should be taken into consideration in the field. However, in concern for development and learning of children and adolescents, we need to also have more detailed and focussed expertise which includes earlier and earliest times and experiences in a person’s life.<sup>12</sup> This does not imply calling into question the comprehensive framework of the life-span perspective or reducing it to but one of many specializations in the field of developmental psychology, but it implies going more into the detail without losing the whole. My conclusion for our theme

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<sup>12</sup> Baltes et. al. (1998: 1029) are aware that their deviation from and neglect of more traditional, sequential conceptualizations of development are in part due to their focus on old and very old age.

here is that the life-span development perspective of Baltes and Staudinger may be inspiring and helpful for the advancement of structural-developmental theory building, since it provides strong arguments and opens a perspective for the greater variety and complexity of human and religious development.

It is remarkable that, in Gil Noam's texts (which have been important in my reformulation of religious development so far), we find a view which resonates with the life-span perspective of Baltes and Staudinger. It is Noam's view that cognitive developmentalists have put cart (cognitive competencies) before the horse (the life history).<sup>13</sup> The metaphor of the cart and the horse refers above all to the neglect of the emotional, psychodynamical dimension. Noam suggests to identify the psychodynamic tasks which a person has to deal with as "themata;" then development appears as interplay of themata and schemata. With this model, Noam suggests to go beyond Piaget and to include a decisive focus on the psychodynamic domain. It is further remarkable that Noam structures his schemata as styles of interpersonal relation and thus has incorporated and highlighted the interpersonal domain in development.

I conclude that the innovative contributions in the field of developmental psychology, especially the life-span developmental perspective, help us clarify the contours of a revised model of human and religious development, because:

- it allows to take a step back from mono-causal, unidimensional and unifunctional explanations which have been an all too heavy burden on the shoulder of Piagetian theories, e.g. the Piagetian "logic of development" with its assumption that cognition is the motor of development;
- it suggests to integrate the dimension of function and the psychodynamic and symbolic-narrative content dimensions;
- it suggests a life-span perspective from the start and thus takes for granted the integration of adult life and old age;

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<sup>13</sup> "It is my view that cognitively based theorists have overlooked the central structuring activities of the self by defining the epistemic self as the sole representative of structure. In the process, I believe, the cart was placed before the horse, life history became content to the structure of the epistemic self ... Epistemology replaced life history." (Noam, 1990, p. 378).

- it re-opens the factor field of human development and religious development for a fresh approach of scientific exploration, e.g. by suggesting to consider the dynamics of compensation.

Nevertheless, I see no reason why the life-span model would contradict to (re-) consider the stage descriptions of existing developmental theories. But they have to be understood as heuristic tools – which is possible after the removal of overburdening them with assumptions of causal explanations. However, for reason of clarification, they could be called ‘styles’, because we assume that the concept of ‘stage’ is associated with the strict Piagetian logic of development. This is what I have suggested to do with Fowler’s faith development theory. I thus put up my own proposal for discussion here.

### **Faith development revisited: the religious styles perspective**

My general intention here is a re-examination of contemporary developmental psychology as it concerns and is concerned with religious orientation. Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory will be the focus of my discussion, because his theory is one of the more recent progressions of developmental psychology into the domain of religion which has enjoyed world-wide attention,<sup>14</sup> and can serve, in its strengths and deficits, as instance to develop questions and possible solutions. My concern is with integration and account for complexity and also there I find features in Fowler’s work to expand on. Because, among the contemporary models of *religious* development, I regard James Fowler’s *faith development theory* to be the most comprehensive one and to be open for including innovative perspectives, I have chosen it for elaborating a new perspective on religious development and for putting it in concrete forms of theory and research (cf. Streib, 2001a; 2003b).

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<sup>14</sup> I have searched and described the considerable body of more than 80 dissertations and research projects using the faith development instrument elsewhere (Streib, 2003a).



Let me begin with a somewhat unusual presentation of Fowler's theory. From the beginning of my research and reflection on Fowler's faith development theory, a model has attracted my attention which I have always looked at with a sense of regret that Fowler has not expanded this line of thought, but that he allowed it to reside into the background: The figure, "Toward a Model of the Dynamics of Adult Faith," which has been published in an article in 1982 (Fowler, 1982) includes factors such as biological and cultural time, and socio-economic and cultural influences from the person's environment, and, as part of that, influences from religious institutions. Inside the person, we find notice of the unconscious, of the "structuring power of the contents of faith," and, of course, of the "operational structures of knowing and valuing in faith." Of course, everyone who has studied *Stages of Faith* knows that the operational structures of faith have become the prominent concern in Fowler's theory at the expense of the other factors. If we interpret the spiral model of faith development (Fowler 1981, 275) from this most comprehensive model of adult faith, we realize that, perhaps most importantly, the factor time has been dissociated from biology and culture and restricted to the structural-developmental clock. Here a fundamental predicament comes to our attention which poses one of most puzzling challenges to developmental psychology: the risk or danger of a reductionist focus on precisely defined, but narrow dimensions or domains which later obstructs any attempt to account for the whole. On this background, I appreciate Fowler's comprehensive model, because almost every influence on adult faith development has been included there and the advocate for multidimensionality and complexity may find a path to a more comprehensive perspective.

I have presented my critique of Fowler's theory elsewhere in more detail. Here, I summarize the shortcomings and deficits which faith development theory has because of its all too intensive liaison with the Piagetian paradigm. The shift of emphasis to, even the overburdening of, cognitive development is one face of the coin, the other is the disregard for dimensions which are just as crucial for the constitution development of religion such as: the psychodynamical-interpersonal dimension (the psychodynamic of the self-self-relationship); the relational-interpersonal dimension (the dynamic of the self-other relationship); the interpretative, hermeneutic dimension (the dynamic of the self-tradition relationship); and the life-world

dimension (the dynamic of the self-social world relationship). I turn my critique into a proposal and suggest to terminate the primacy of the cognitive structures as motor and guideline of religious development. In Noam's words, we should stop placing the cart before the horse. Instead, life history and life world should move into the focus of the developmental perspective on religion.

It would be a mistake, however, when such harsh critique would drive us to pour out the baby with the bath water. There is enough indispensable genius in the cognitive-developmental perspective that makes it worthwhile to re-think and revise the Piagetian legacy. Thus taking a more considerate approach, I suggest to set out for a revised model of religious development which nevertheless implies that the developmental psychology of religion gradually moves out of the Piagetian niche.

My answer and proposal therefore is a model which I call the religious styles perspective. A condensed definition reads: *Religious styles are distinct modi of practical-interactive (ritual), psychodynamic (symbolic), and cognitive (narrative) reconstruction and appropriation of religion which originate in relation to life-history and life-world and which, in accumulative deposition, constitute the variations and transformations of religion over a life time, corresponding to the styles of interpersonal relations.* A multi-layeredness of religious styles which can be designated as internal pluralism corresponds to the determined more-perspectiveness. The so-called 'milestone model', brought into discussion by Jane Loevinger (1976), is therefore better suited to illustrate religious style development than stagewise, ascending models. The 'milestone model' draws the respective style as a rising curve which, while descending again after a culminating point, persists on a lower level, while the subsequent styles attain their own climaxes. From such developmental perspective, there are no plausible reasons either why a certain style should not, at least as precursor, develop earlier than structural-developmental theories normally assume, but especially that a potential relevance of a certain style continues after its biographical peak.

Theoretical and empirical accounts of the religious styles perspective have proven effective in regard to fundamentalism (Streib, 1999; 2001a; 2001c), deconversion, adolescent's fascination with magic (Streib, 1996; 1999), children's drawings and interreligious

negotiation in the classroom (Streib, 2001b; 2003e). Thus, theory and research in religious development are able to get out of the Piagetian niche and contribute its gift for understanding and investigating the variety and complexity of religious orientations in the contemporary religious landscape.

## **Outlook on religious education**

Finally, one of the questions concerning the relation of development and education can be addressed: What are the implications for educational psychology, if we suggest to account for greater diversity and complexity of development?

From within Piagetian type developmental theories, a perspective on education is implied which some articles have explicated: "Development as the Aim of Education" is the model and the topic of an article by Kohlberg (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). In the research context of Fritz Oser, this model has found some resonance in Paul Gmünder's article, "Religious Development as aim of Religious Education" (Gmünder, 1979). The expectation is that the intentional creation of assimilation aporia - the best method is thought to be the educational application of dilemmata - cause the need for accommodation, i.e. lead to stage transition. Neo-Piagetian scholars seem to have similar expectations, when e.g. Gil Noam suggests to understand "Development as the aim of clinical intervention" (Noam, 1992), but stronger is the warning of Robert Kegan against pushing people toward developmental stage transition when they are in need of a culture of embeddedness (Kegan, 1982).

From the life-span perspective, but also from a religious styles perspective, we have no reason to reinforce developmental pressure; the variety and complexity contradicts any simple and unidimensional effort. But there are, of course, ideal types of developmental trajectories and progresses which I describe as development toward a dialogical religious style, and which Baltes and Staudinger have described as development of wisdom. In this sense, the new models of human and religious development present educational aims and sketch a direction of an ideal learning process. But the pedagogical intervention method has to be more open, since we cannot rely on the cognitive dynamic of assimilation and accommodation only, but both,

learning and development, involve function, relation and psychodynamic factors.

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