The Hierarchy of Religious Styles

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Development implies change from one point in time to another. Development has a direction and eventually an aim. This is true regardless of what you may assume to be the motor of development, nature or culture, whether a developmental model is supposedly rather descriptive or whether it is explicit about prescriptive aims. Thus most models of cognitive, moral and religious development are based on a hierarchy of styles – or an assumed hierarchical sequence of stages.

Talking about two points in time, it appears strange that, in religious development research, we hardly have any longitudinal study (Keller & Streib 2013). So it is safe to claim that there is no empirical evidence so far for religious development at all. If we get a grant, we may engage in a longitudinal study with the faith development interview, but for the time being all of research, including our own, is designed as a comparison of synchronic data against a model or models of religious development. And these models are rather prescriptive or conceptually normative.

In the following, I will not go into detail about conceptualization of stages, styles and schemata (for the current state of conceptualization, see Streib 2010, 2013a), but focus on an important conceptual aspect of the model: the direction and aim of development. With this, I would like to make a statement about what we should preserve when looking into the future of research in religious development.

I start with an observation and summary of research: In several studies in which we have included the faith development interview – among them, the Study on Deconversion (Streib, Hood, Keller, Csöff, & Silver 2009, Streib 2013b), our Study on Adolescents' Perception of Death (Streib & Klein 2010), our Study on Spirituality (Keller et al. 2013, Streib 2013c) –, we found that higher scores in faith development correlate considerably …

- with deconversion or disaffiliation from religious traditions,
- with lower scores on Religious Fundamentalism and
- lower scores in Right-Wing Authoritarianism,
- with higher scores on openness to experience,
- with the denial of postmortal existence, and
- with preference for the self-identification as "spiritual" over the self-identification as "religious" (Streib 2008, Streib & Klein 2011, Keller, Klein, Hood, & Streib 2013).

In our Bielefeld-based projects, we have originally taken a qualitative approach to religious development and thus have used the faith development interview – which resulted in more than 500 faith development interviews with American, German and Turkish (see e.g. Aygün 2013) participants. But we also moved into quantitative assessment: based on the religious styles perspective (Streib 2001, 2005, 2013a), the Religious Schema Scale (Streib, Hood, & Klein 2010) has been developed, which – as we

assume – helps to estimate with due precision selected schemata that are of central importance in religious or faith development. Also with the Religious Schema Scale, we have very similar results with scales and questions as mentioned above.

These results in faith development may appear surprising, when presented in such summary of results; they are little surprising, when we are aware of the liberal/inter-religious profile of the faith development model. Faith development theory, from its early days on (Fowler 1974, 1976, 1980, 1981, 2004, Fowler & Dell 2006), is proposing a specific hierarchy of religious styles. Autonomous reflectiveness which may include the critical examination and eventually the rejection of religious beliefs, which Fowler has labeled "individuative-reflective faith," is regarded – and scored – higher than convention-based consent to the beliefs of a particular religious tradition (Fowler's "synthetic-conventional faith") and even higher than literal interpretation of, and claims of absolute truth for, one's own particular religious tradition ("mythic-literal faith" in Fowler's term). Furthermore, readiness for dialog and appreciation of the symbol systems, especially of other religious traditions, is regarded and scored even higher: higher than critical-reflective propositionality – and much higher than conventional or literal styles of religiousness. Thus there is a clear hierarchical order of styles in Fowler's model, which spans from imaginative intuition (style 1) and mythic-literal understanding of texts and teachings (style 2) over conventional embeddedness (style 3) to autonomous critical examination of truth claims (style 4); and from there to dialogical openness and re-appreciation of symbols (style 5), to finally open up into universal inclusiveness and concern for all of humanity (style 6). Even if, for empirical and/or conceptual reasons, we reduce the number of styles to 2, 3, 4 and 5, we have four levels which are clearly hierarchically ordered.

How can this hierarchical order of religious styles be justified? What are the arguments? We may first look for an answer to this question in Fowler's (Fowler 1981, 1987) work. From my reading of Fowler's texts, I see three lines of argument to justify this hierarchy of operational structures of faith, to use Fowler's terms.

1. The first and predominant justification of the hierarchy of developmental stages is the 'logic of development' which Fowler shares with Kohlberg. Fowler's six stages of faith conceptually parallel Kohlberg' stages of moral judgment. Moral judgment has become one of seven Aspects of faith. And at least 4 out of 25 questions in the faith development interview probe for moral judgment. In Selman's model of the developmental hierarchy of perspective taking styles, Fowler has seen clear resonance and support of his developmental model of faith; thus Selman was included as an Aspect of faith development. And finally, the inclusion of Piaget's stages of cognitive development were a necessity, even if this inclusion was only possible after dividing formal operations in four subdivisions, which Fowler characterized as "early," "dichotomizing," "dialectical" and "synthetic" formal operations. But taken together, this family tradition of Piagetian structural-developmental models supports a hierarchical and sequential model of faith stages. Thus this logic of development, even if largely unquestioned, has served as role model for four additional aspects of faith (Bounds of social awareness, Locus of authority, Form of world coherence and Symbolic function) which Fowler just added.

2. Second way of justification: Fowler repeatedly refers to an explanation of faith stage transition in terms of the Piagetian dynamic of assimilation and accommodation: the aporiae, predicaments or dangers of previous faith styles are assumed to be overcome by the emergence of the next higher stage. The negative or dangerous sides of styles 1 through 5 can be described as follows: dependency and naïve projection or even total dependency (style 1), fundamentalist rigidity and the image of God as taskmaster deity (style 2), the dominance of one's group or the "tyranny of the they" (style 3), demythologizing reduction and devaluation of the other (style 4), relativistic lack of taking a position (style 5). All of these negative or dangerous sides are assumed to be resolved in the advent of the next higher faith stage. This has been presented by Fowler as

another line of support for his developmental logic for faith – a model of the dynamics of stage transition that is specified for the domain of faith.

3. A third line of Fowler's argumentation for a developmental logic of faith derives from theology. Almost everyone who has read some of Fowler's work is familiar with his identification of stage 6 of universalizing faith with the theological vision of the Kingdom of God. This theological interpretation, which clearly has Methodist imprint, has provoked more critique than agreement: many theologians could not agree with such psychological-developmental interpretation of a theological metaphor. But there was even stronger opposition from psychologist, who could not understand that a primarily psychological theory needs theological backup. This debate may be interesting on the conceptual level; it is less important however in respect to the empirical results, because of the almost total absence of stage 6 rating of faith development interviews. But there is more theology in the sequence of faith stages: the logic of development of stages 2, 3 and 4 definitely reflects the liberal-theological vision of a development toward a self-reflective, autonomous and ultimately individualistic approach to religion. So far the developmental line can be understood as interpretation of the tradition in terms of modern secularity, which P. Berger (Berger 1979) has labeled the "reductive option." But also in the modeling of faith development beyond stage 4, Fowler implemented theological thinking: inter-religious dialog and re-appraisal of religious symbols in a mode of second naïveté. For his hierarchical model of faith development Fowler refers to Biblical metaphors, to the systematic theologies of H. R. Niebuhr and P. Tillich, to P. Ricoeur's philosophy of the symbol, and to the conceptualization of faith and religion of W. Cantwell Smith – all of which are taken as supporting the liberal-theological and inter-religious concept of faith understood in terms of hierarchical and sequential development.

Are Fowler's assumptions still plausible? What deserves to be carried on to a model of religious styles? After decades of discussion with the effect that the logic of development featured in Harvard in the 1980s has lost much of its plausibility – at least for domains such as morality and religion –, and there is little empirical evidence for all the presumptions of hard stages, I hesitate to base the developmental model of faith, religion or religious styles on this ground. And I think that I can refer to plausible reasons for this. But also the third, the theological and philosophical justifications need revision. My approach is minimalistic: I like to identify the elementary principles to justify a hierarchy of styles; then we may look at the data and check whether there is empirical support for the model. We need no more than an elementary core of solid philosophical conclusions about the domains we are conceptualizing, in our case: about religion (and about morality/ethics, because of the proximity of the two domains).

If enlightenment means human being's emergence from minority – "minority" (German: "Unmündigkeit") understood as the inability to use one's mouth to speak for one's own rights –, the hierarchy of stages/stlyes one to four in Fowler's as in Kohlberg's models can be understood as fine-tuned declination of the enlightenment project: Style 1 is characterized as unconscious dependency, style 2 as a first movement of initiative in mythic-literal terms which is manifest in habits such as the do-ut-des schema, style 3 is characterized as embededdness, and eventually: confinement, in conventions, and finally style four is characterized by the use of one's capacities to reflect and take an individual stance, to take responsibility, to use Mündigkeit. To apply this enlightenment project to religion is not new; the discourse on formation (Bildung) in religious education has profiled this project in depth.

But what about religious styles and religious stages beyond Stage 4? The ingenious idea of Kohlberg here was the inclusion of ethical principles in his hierarchy of moral judgment: reference to higher legitimacy and universal principles. This has constituted an intense intellectual friendship between Habermas and Kohlberg, because of the obvious mutual support between Habermas' (Habermas 1981, 1983) communicative action and universal pragmatics and Kohlbergs's morality of Stages 5 and 6. Likewise,

Fowler refers to philosophical and theological lines of thought to argue for the plausibility of his ingenious ideas of conjunctive and universalizing faith.

Despite the lack of empirical evidence for a developmental pressure – a developmental logic – for movements beyond stages 4, we should not pour out the baby with bathwater, but preserve the conceptual genius of higher moral and religious styles. Habermas' universal pragmatics is not falsified because of Kohlberg's predicament to empirically plausibilize it. Likewise, the conceptualization of a semiotic difference (second naïveté), inter-religious dialog and concern for the whole of humanity is not falsified by the scarcity of stage five and stage six ratings.

On the contrary – and this is my proposal –, the direction and aim of development need continuously be based on philosophical arguments. My suggestion of a new concept in this regard is: "xensophia." This idea is not completely new and not exclusively mine: The German philosopher and radical phenomenologist B. Waldenfels (1990, 1992, 1997a, 1997b, 1999) and a dissertation under his supervision (Nakamura 2000) clearly argue for an attitude toward the alien, which is open for the "goat" and thus the "surplus" of the alien, which is the source for creativity and inspiration. This is more than universal pragmatics and individuative reflectiveness; it features dialog and a welcome to the alien.

In the development of the Religious Schema Scale, we have included this specific thematic focus: the third schema is explicitly called "xenosophia/inter-religious dialog. In the horizon of discussions about ethics and science or Erkenntnis und Interesse , I thus opt for the conceptualization of the direction and aim of development in "xenosophic," "dialogical" or, if you prefer: "liberal" terms. It is not at least the rise of fundamentalism and violence in many religious cultures in the world, which make such instruments necessary. With such clear ethical profile, research with the Religious Schema Scale and with the faith development interview is not alone, when one considers the tradition of research with the Religious Fundamentalism Scale, and Allport's (1954) tradition of research about prejudice that contrasts a "religion of an ethnocentric order" with a "religion of a universalistic order."

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