Faith Development Theory and Christian Theological Faith

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Faith Development Theory (FDT) is one of the rare perspectives in psychology, which has emerged as an interaction of theology and developmental theory. Influenced by the liberal theologians as Tillich (1957) Neibuhr (1950; 1961) and scholars of religion as W. C. Smith 1963; 1979; 1998) on the one hand, and developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Kolhberg who proposed cognitive and moral development theories (, Piaget, 1972; Piaget &Inhelder, 1969; Kohlberg, 1969; 1981) on the other, it has touched upon the most subjective and yet universal aspect of human psychology-faith. The objectives of the following discussion are to analyze how faith development theory can be related to Christian concept of faith in which it emerged, what are the similarities and differences, and what lessons can be learned from these comparisons for experiencing religious faith in a globalized world demanding tolerance and understanding of the spirit of religion behind its diverse forms.

Key words: Faith, FDT, theology, moral development

Fowlerian concept of faith

Faith development theory (Fowler, 1981), proposes faith is a universal element of the human condition in which everyone 'believes in something or someone." Religious faith in humans is directed to religious things, in particular to a transcendent God or gods. But everyone has their 'gods', in the wider sense of realities and ideas they value highly and to which they are committed: '*The human heart always rests somewhere*' (ibid). Hence, faith is understood, not as a set of beliefs, but as a way of knowing, a way of constituting one's experience of the world; a sense of what is ultimate for her and him and 'centers of value and images of power' and 'core stories' (ibid).

Faith is a sense of being in a certain way in its totality (Fowler, 1981) along seven *aspects of faith* namely form of logic (the characteristic pattern of thought used in making sense of the world showing movement from chaotic thinking to abstract ordered logic), social perspective taking (view of oneself in relation to others and how well one can endorse the perspective of increasingly different ones), bounds of social awareness (the extent to which, an individual recognizes others as belonging to his or her own 'faith community' and increases as faith develops), moral judgment(how one thinks about morality while making decisions and broadly following the Kohlberg, 1986, stages), locus of authority (how authorities are selected and related to; from conventional authorities to interpersonally oriented ones, rational and fair principles to disciplined inner transcendent subjectivity), form of world coherence (how one understand one's experiences to form a worldview) and symbolic function(how we understand and use symbols). Developing from symbols as sources of magical power, through their literal interpretation, to 'demythologizing' of symbols into concepts, to a post-critical ' second naiveté' where symbols

regain something of their earlier power (Fowler & Del, 2005).

Fowler, Streib and Keller, 2004) recognize these seven structures or aspects of faith as 'windows' into faith. However, Fowler and Dell (2005) maintain this approach caters for the whole, which is more than the sum of its parts, hence parts individually cannot account for the whole underlying faith. These aspects make faith multidimensional, increasingly complex and comprehensive as these aspects interact with one another from one stage to another.

Fowler's Faith Development Stages

Working within the theoretical paradigm of cognitive developmental psychology, Fowler (1996) postulated a sequence of discrete stages, each progressively built on earlier one, and presenting an integrated system of cognitive structures or aspects of faith. Periods of transition in between stages have one or more of the faith aspects shifting in form, until all aspects making up a stage transform and faith is restructured into a next stable stage. Fowler (1996) holds that being in a given stage of faith means to have a characteristic way of finding and giving meaning to everyday life and to have a worldview and moving to a higher stage of faith means to lose one way of faith, to gain another.

The foundations of faith are laid down at pre-stage faith (birth to 3-4 years) where primal or undifferentiated faith is represented by child's primary caretaker and significant other in immediate environment. In this context, faith development begins with a disposition to trust, and our first 'pre-images of God' are mediated through '*recognizing eyes and confirming smiles*' (Fowler, 1981). This is followed by Stage 1 or the Intuitive-Projective Faith(3–7 years) characterized by the great influence of images and symbols, stories and myths that makes up the child's immediate environment. Thinking is intuitive, episodic, viewed magically and forming a chaotic collage rather than an ordered pattern. Stage 2 or the Mythic-Literal Faith (6–12 years) is marked by the development of reasoning skills enabling the child to order her/his experience and to distinguish between true stories and fiction. Thinking being concrete at this stage, the child experiences the symbols in a literal uni-dimensional way. Nevertheless, the story like and narrative structuring of experience provides a central way of establishing

children's identity, through the stories of their own community. At Stage 3 or the Synthetic-Conventional Faith(11–18, and many adults), the adolescent at this stage can now think about world abstractly and reflectively, has the capacity for perspective-taking and is conforming to a group of significant others. It is out of the convictions and values of significant others that the person synthesizes a form of second-hand faith: that is, a heteronomous, conformist and conventional faith. However, the person is not yet aware that she *has* a worldview, or where it comes from. In this stage one is *embedded* in his or her faith outlook. At Stage 4 or Individuative-Reflective Faith (17 or 18 years onwards) when the adult can no longer hang together the diversity of views and roles that make up Stage 3, individuals may truly become individuals by detaching from the defining group and either metaphorically or literally, 'leave home', to decide for themselves what it is they actually believe apart from their parents and others. At this stage one's faith can really be said to be an *owned* faith, as heteronomy gives way to autonomy. The transition to Stage 4 is frequently marked by some form of struggle; recognition of the variety of possible worldviews, opting one's own and bringing to conscious control and will one's faith and worldview and defending one's worldview by rational arguments in its favour. The new capacity and impulse to judge for oneself and to justify one's own truth may make some unwilling to recognize the value of other voices, and over-reliant on their own reasoning powers. Stage 5 or Conjunctive Faithsare before age 30 and only 7% of Fowler's total sample (although another 8% are in transition towards it) is when an individual's own worldview becomes more porous, permeable and flexible to others. The person shows openness to interpretations and meaning made by others and a new willingness to live with 'truths in tension', including the paradoxes and ambiguities of the mature life of faith. This is not, however, the easy relativism that claims that all voices are true, but a confidence in their own viewpoint that allows some people to recognize the multidimensionality of truth. At Stage 6 or the Universalizing Faith(very rare, represented by only 0.3% of Fowler's sample; shown by usually those advanced in age), faith essentially involves a relinquishing and transcending the self, and discovers a new simplicity at the other side of complexity and differences of beliefs. In Stage 6, '*a person more and more becomes herself as she increasingly widens her circle of concern and truth-finding'* (Astley, 2000).

FDT originated in a Christian tradition but had a strong antecedent influence of liberal theology taking Biblical concepts to existential, individualistic and developmental grounds. Concept of faith has been critically analyzed for its compatibility with Christian theological faith (Avery 1990; Coyle, 2011; Jones, 2004)

Christian theology and faith development

Numerous interpretations of Bible specific to context represent many verses that generally convey the idea that faith grows, with human effort and endurance, and makes believers in Christ closer to an idea of perfection in which God originally created human beings.

Growing in Divine love to fullest of potentials

that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17-19).

Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude(Colossians 2:6-7).

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit(Corinthians 3:18).

Spiritual Progress

Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. (Timothy 4:15). but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ(Ephesians 4:15).

Faith and character development

Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him(Colossians 3:9-10).

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; (Romans 5:3-4)

Faith in Christian tradition is not the mere acceptance of some static beliefs, but a process where belief in Christ leads to personal and spiritual growth. Jones (2004) observes that "*Theologians throughout the history of Christianity have recognized faith as a process. ...Before the twentieth century, most theologians were, however, more concerned with discovering the various aspects of Christian faith than with charting its development...*"

Points of disagreement arise where theological conception of faith in revealed traditions especially, cannot exist without realization of the Divine. Religious faith is relational not to anything but specifically God. There is no growing in faith without Divine Grace and it cannot stand alone without referring to God. *"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing* (John 15:5). Here, Fowler's idea about faith becomes inconsonant with the norms of Divine Grace as held by Judeo-Christian scripture. A particular theology realizes faith within its own set of beliefs. In keeping content apart from stage of maturity of faith, FDT opens up to know more about diverse faith trajectories across specific belief contents, but becomes incompatible of faith as one particular belief system considered right. Theologically, the tearing apart of content and stage is also criticized for its neglect of belief assertions specific to a religious tradition. Jones (2004, p. 352) emphasizes that Christianity is a "content-requisite faith" which depends on both loyalty to Jesus and acceptance of beliefs such as Resurrection of Christ and Jesus as Messiah. Acceptance of other beliefs and content apart from Christian tenets is seen from the Christian viewpoint as idolatry (Avery, 1990). FDT claims that we may convert from one religion to another with different contents of belief, but continue believing in the same way and thus be on same stage of faith maturity, thus contrasts with the Judaeo-Christian scriptural view that particular beliefs would lead to growth in one's

faith.

Fowler's idea of faith in a cognitive terms meets criticism from theology where *"The Word of God is not received by faith when it flits about on top of the brain but when it roots itself in the depths of the heart"* (Calvin 1926, 3:2:36). It is more recent that a cognitive emphasis and highly structured approach to faith development has given way to social, relational, psychoanalytic and affective dimensions being in a total sense (Streib, 2001). Fowler's idea has been regarded as putting restrictions on God's works by encapsulating faith development in a cognitive domain of human ability only. From a Christian perspective, faith owes to Divine Grace rather than striving for self-realization in a void without believing in God (Coyle, 2011). Avery (1990) for example has criticized Fowler's concept of faith as being exclusively a human achievement that resides in cognitive abilities. It is also suggested that reducing faith to a cognitive and psychological process lacks an acknowledgement that God may work in ways that cannot be observed or analyzed by humans through psychoanalytic procedures (McDargh, 2001).

What is neglected in the above criticism is that human beings can only know the knowable and have to put their feet somewhere to start any quest. Given that they are aware and acknowledging of any ideas beyond their immediate understanding and keep modifying and evolving their ideas, the criticism of a human understanding as a limitation of God's work is not valid. Also, given this reasoning, not looking beyond any religious content as the only way to God is also dogmatically limiting of ways in which God makes Himself known to human beings. Here, FDT challenges 'knowing the other,' to theology rather than seeing reality from one's own perspective only. Faith development paradigm does not give up the Divine, nor does it recommend that human beings have to see reality by essentially giving up their idea of the Divine. Rather, it is open to all possibilities around human meaning making the Divine and the human, the secular and the religious, conversion and de-conversion.

Faith and belief

In FDT, the core of theological criticism rests on *belief* versus *faith* debate. Faith development paradigm is criticized for being too generic of its conceptualization, which may or may not pertain to theological domain. FDT acknowledges faith to be pronounced as religious belief, but believers restricting themselves to their own particular religious tradition regard Fowler's notion of faith as *meaning making* erroneously labeled as faith. Dykstra (1986), for example, argues that Fowler implicitly implies that even idolatry is a form of faith.

Fowler's work has been inspired from liberal Christian theological influences, which originated as un-dogmatic ways of understanding God rather than any belief or creedal system as a consequence of Age of Enlightenment. It is inspired by Paul Tillich informing on faith as a function of whatever one holds as ultimate concern and human experience of relating to God as the Ground of Being, and Richard Neibuhr held that faith is relational and a trust placed in centers giving life a meaning, and from W.C. Smith's (1963) idea of faith where faith is a universal feature of humanity contained in particular beliefs rooted in particular geographies, histories and cultures. *Faith is contained in particular beliefs but transcends them as an essence of commitment.* To that extent, the modern particular belief is the 'faith content' in FDT, not what Fowler regarded as faith. "Faith" in Fowler's view is what Smith takes to be personal loyalty that does not reduce itself to the objective acceptance of any specific propositions (Smith 1963, 180-202; Smith 1998, 12, 61, 77, 118; see also Fowler 1981, 11-13).

Smith (1963; 1998) also traces that to have faith means loyalty and commitment among pre-modern Christians rather than being reduced to mere belief which the acceptance of certain facts as being true. Simultaneously, this does not mean denying the importance of belief as they compose a particular reality in which faith is espoused. He does hold that faith is "secondary to, derivative from (and) answerable to, transcendent reality and truth" (Smith 1998, 125). Hence, Smith (1998, p. 117) contends for the current times that "*the modern world has to rediscover . . . what it means to have faith, to be faithful, to care, to trust, to cherish, to be loyal, to commit oneself: to rediscover what 'believe' used to mean*"; and also that '*there is no reason, in the modern world, why in principle an intelligent and informed Jew or Muslim and an intelligent and informed Christian, and indeed an intelligent and informed and sensitive atheistic humanist.. . should have different beliefs. Yet also there is no reason why they should not continue to live in terms of their differing symbols*' (Smith 1998, p. 171). In this perspective, various religions forwarding their particular content as the only form of truth are equal to what is repelled by them as idolatry. Also, denying particular beliefs which are not one's own would amount to denying whole civilizations built on those beliefs. Fowler's "cultural linguistic" understanding of faith, hence does not deny beliefs as restricting faith but as a medium fostering faith. The ability of human beings to look beyond their own beliefs and relate to the other is a natural tendency which stands as a support for faith being fostered by and yet transcendent of particular beliefs.

Faith is invested in a wide range of concepts across traditions. In so far as it transcends beliefs, mature faith involves self-reflection, making sense of one's own faith, as an individual experiences them in particular beliefs, to relate to other beliefs and look across traditions and make quest for a universalizing faith. Just like Niebuhr's (1961) idea of an infant experiencing trust from a particular primary caretaker in order to place a trust in a broader world particular beliefs foster faith but may not restrict the genuine human inquiry, empathy, reflection and a shared sense of being. Hence, FDT brings faith into the realm of 'being.' Rather than making objective attempts at the Divine, the paradigm looks for human meaning making of transcendence. Fowler's ideas have been regarded as similar to Schleiermacher (1958) who sees "the *Gefuehl*", human beings'; absolute dependence on the Transcendent as the core of religion (see Cross & Livingstone 1997, pp. 1463-64). This sense of the infinite is universal across religions, a universal element of life; a general than particular nature of humanity that brings in harmony to all religious experiences and all aspects of human life. The *Gefuehl* is not distinctively Christian, is inherently interpersonal and increasingly communal as it develops in various forms of faith communities. It is precognitive and does not demand knowledge from outside, is expressed through actions, and develops in series of stages as individuals first possess an inherent unity with their contexts, later a differentiation and self-awareness of being in contrast with it and finally an awareness of inner unity with reference to their unique environment is achieved (Christian 1979, pp. 83-84). Jones (2003) identifies at least six dimensions along which Fowler has devised a concept similar to that of Schleiermarcher's (1958)*Gefuehl* and Fowler's "faith" represent the personal and subjective response to the transcendent realm; for Fowler, faith is "the person's or group's way of responding to transcendent value and power" (Fowler 1981, p. 9): Second,

Gefuehl and Fowler's "faith" describe a precognitive experience of the transcendent realm which does not require propositional content (Christian 1965, 205-06; Fowler 1981, 119-21). Both entail an experiential reality where faith transcends belief propositions with the result that one has a relative outlook on all religious beliefs as some facet of reality. Both approaches entail a way of knowing rather than specific knowledge itself and as such involve a structure of knowledge in which beliefs are developed. Both regard faith as an inherent, universal and essential human quality. Whilst a particular theology advocates its own absoluteness, Fowler's conceptualization of faith springs from absoluteness of human being in its totality and not some particularly religious domain.

The acknowledgement of one's own relativity is the first step in human grounds of inquiry towards the Transcendent, if one is to overcome the pitfall of taking belief in Divine leading to thinking with God's mind, taking oneself as absolute and others as trivial. The growth of faith involves looking into and openness to 'the other' which comes from a genuine concern with the infinite and all encompassing. Relating to the other passes through progressive stages so that the awareness of one's own particular location in a social context co-occurs with a commitment with humanity universally. Hence, whereas critics have regarded Fowler's entire developmental structure as stages of interactions between the self and the other, whether it is the social other or at later stages a transcendent other whom one belongs to (Clore 1997, pp. 9-21, 36, 37; Fowler 1976, p. 175; Furushima 1983, p.11), it is concluded that apart from excluding the necessity of Christian beliefs, "other-awareness"—is *not* Christian faith. It is, nevertheless, possible that the growth of other-awareness and the development of biblical-orthodox faith may affect each other" (Jones, 2004). It is true that other awareness is a function of how much inclusive or exclusive a theology is, but theology is itself subject to variations in human understanding. For instance, Rood (1999) notes that Christians are "*more anxious to preserve some sense of uniqueness for the Christian faith, yet equally desirous of projecting an attitude of tolerance and acceptance, are committed to the viewpoint known as Christian inclusivism. In their opinion, though people of another religious conviction may be ignorant of Christ--or possibly even have rejected Him--yet because of their positive response to what they know about God, or even due to their efforts to follow the dictates of their conscience, they are unknowingly included in the number of those who are recipients of Christ's salvation.*"

The above discussion highlights contribution of FDT in human meaning making of any religious theology; it is not a forum of a direct inter-faith dialogue, but proposes human capacity to understand what is their own faith in relation to others. On the other hand, controversy about the belief-faith relation continues as the particularity of beliefs and generality of faith. For instance, W. C. Smith (1967) proposes that beliefs and claims should not be understood as true or false, but 'one's own' and 'other peoples' and that seeking a similarity of beliefs is disastrous for faith. Livingstone (2003) criticized this proposition by holding that from sacred rituals to codified behaviors to myths and commentaries on scriptures; faith is not 'blank' but always in a specified form to be believed in.

It is noteworthy that a 'not content specific' faith has dual implications for theological faith. On the one hand, it seems threatening to one's own beliefs in some absolutes; the notion puts absolutes in a position of relativity to other belief systems. The theological liberalism inspiring Fowler's work had its tendency of

freeing faith from particular religious beliefs was reacted against by theological conservatives who defended the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. On the other hand, a view of faith as transcending the content offers hope for a universal language of faith which all believers can relate to; and 'knowing the other' sets the grounds fertile for diversity of being and experience. Simultaneously, concerns as sacrificing the content and the annihilating tendencies of absorbing others beliefs into one's own worldview have been expressed (Ok, 2004). Appreciating other's perspective remains both a human quest and a necessity of a globalized world and so does affirming one's beliefs in absolutes as basis of one's historical identity, unique values and tradition in a world that would otherwise become chaotic.

The tension of particular theological absolutes and generic quality of faith ultimately has to be internalized in human self where to believe or not to believe is not the question per se; "to be or not to be that is the question." Being is committed to knowing which broadens the horizons of being. 'Other awareness' as a pre-requisite of faith development hence may not a state of disbelief, chaos, uncertainty, or not believing in a particular religious tradition. It is a simultaneous awareness of others beliefs alongside one's own as broadening of a horizon of belief. Understanding the other person, culture, religion, tradition- in their own right and a system in them-selves with their own form of logic, rather than either clashing or fitting in their belief contents with that of one's own. A multiple perspective taking hence would be involved where commitment to 'being' itself is the ideal and beliefs a unique way leading to the ideal. Transcendence is a human and personal capacity than a doctrine of any religion; to transcend above a way needs going through the way genuinely. To be genuine is not to reject anything including any religious belief but to be vulnerable to the truth wherever one finds it as one grows and develops the ability to look at one's own beliefs from outside.

Faith development does not analyze beliefs per se; it is focused on how beliefs are made personally available and interior to the self that determines to what extent beliefs have contributed to faith. No believers in the same religion are hence alike and to be understood in the same manner. For any individual a religious tradition may offer an ultimately satisfying explanation and practice hence leading to conversion; the same may be oppressive or limiting of the ways to reality for another person leaving the religious tradition. Conversion and de-conversion hence are personal meaning making processes where one becomes oneself, committed to one's being through a careful search for meaning (Hunsberger, 2000; Streib& Keller, 2003).

Conclusion

Relating theological faith with FDT and its parent philosophy concludes that whilst faith in FDT has been framed as transcending and *not necessarily* negating of particular beliefs and immediate context which surrounds one by birth, FDT carries profound ethical implications for religion and religious experience in a globalized world. The sixth stage, though reached by only some individuals, is a moral ideal. As *Manual for Faith Development* reads, "*We are also concerned about the function of faith in human becoming. What is disclosed in a faith development interview is not merely the private language of a particular individual but public testimony of the transformative and disclosive power of the Transcendent. What*

stage six describes as the omega point of faith development must be understood paradoxically as, on the one hand, evidence of what is optimally desirable for humanity, and, on the other hand, an "eschatological proviso" for global interdependence" (Fowler et al., 2004).

The above discussion carries implications for faith development and education. FDT has not gained familiarity in academic circles in Pakistan. Owing to both theoretical demands of broadened understanding of the cognitive block for Piaget, Kohlberg and Fowler, as well as the applied problems of religious intolerance, it is recommended that introducing it on formal academic levels would inculcate an unbiased view of other faith traditions.

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