

My Journey Outward
Reflections on my Life as a University Chaplain
For *The Round Table*, Flinders University. 11 March 2004

James Fowler has made an important contribution to our understanding of the way faith matures. Following other developmentalists like Piaget (psycho-motor learning) and Kohlberg (moral development), Fowler identifies stages of faith development which parallel our chronology.

Fowler provides a convenient framework for examining the movements in my own life these last years. For the purposes of this forum, I have simplified and translated Fowler's technical terms.

Fowler's Stages of Faith

STAGE 1: "VIBRATIONS"

early infancy - 6 years.
intuitions, basic feelings, 'do I like this?'

STAGE 2: "STORIES"

years 6-12
share the stories of "our tribe", just want to hear the stories! not interested in variations or rationale

STAGE 3: "THE PARADE"

begins about age 13
unity by uniformity, following significant others

STAGE 4: "ONE MODEL"

earliest about 16 years
a spiritual and psychological necessity to reappraise your own faith and to
PERSONALISE IT, so that from now on it emanates from the INSIDE-OUT.
CONVERSION
take one model, personalise it for you

STAGE 5: "MANY MODELS"

begins about age 30
'both/and'
you can understand, accept and work with many ways of personalising your faith

STAGE 6: "RESOLUTION"

very rare!!
many models working in harmony, mystical quality, 'got their act together'
St Paul type- God lover, people lover, community person, explorer, pioneer, taboo
breaker

One of the implications of Fowler's work is that one's spiritual or faith development may be impeded if there are repressive conditions that prevent one from moving toward the next faith stage. Theologians within the Catholic church, for example, have suggested that for many years the Catholic church was stuck at stage 3. That is, faith was restricted to the act of attending Mass each week.

The film *Chocolat* portrayed such a situation – the church took central place in the village and everyone went to Mass on Sundays. Fowler's Stage 3 was normalised within the life of this community. But when the Pagan woman entered the village and set up her chocolate shop within view of the church, Stage 3 faith was challenged. People had to make up their own minds about their faith within this new situation. Those who are able to explore the new situation positively found that aspects of understanding of their faith grew. Those who were threatened by the new reality fell back on their tradition (Stage 3 conformity) and used it to entrench their own prejudices.

Vatican 2 was a watershed for the Catholic church because it encouraged the movement from Stage 3 to Stage 4. Some would say that currently there is a retro movement going on to return the Catholic church to Stage 3.

I consider myself fortunate to have found myself wandering out of the village of uniformity into the city of ecumenism and more recently into the world of diversity.

The village of uniformity for me was the Stage 4 world of Protestant evangelicalism. I have known the transformative conversion experience some people know as being "born again". I can name a time and place - an amazing experience when one sees as if for the first time, when disparate categories fall into a meaningful framework like elements into a Periodic Table. This is so powerful one wonders whether there can be anything else!

This was the time in my life when I was a Uni student. Unfortunately I was under the influence of those for whom, not only was there "nothing else", but who saw it as their mission to persuade converts like me that "all else" was forbidden territory. So rather than the reality of my experience of God being steps on a journey to an ever bigger world, it was as though I found myself grounded, like a passenger in a railway station waiting room, glorious as that waiting room may have been at the time, but only dimly aware of the comings and goings of other people on their journeys - thinking that the waiting room was all that really mattered. It's easy to begin to think one's world is the only world when one only talks with people for whom it *is* the only world.

But later, much later, I found a person who was completely at home in the village of conformity and knew its language well, but who had discovered the bigger world of the city. He was a preacher called John Smith of God's Squad. He came to a meeting of evangelical teachers I had organised. He came with a pile of books, as well as his battered old black Bible. He read from the *Memoirs of Dame Mary Gilmour* and Henry Lawson poetry. And as he read Henry's poem about the stream of humanity passing by the

window, “Faces in the Street”, tears began to stream down his face. I had not met a man before who was so deeply moved by the plight of humanity. I decided to find out more about this man. I discovered he was as at home in the front bar as he was at a cocktail party, though perhaps more the former. I felt that he was closer to the life of Jesus than anyone I had met at that stage.

So began a five year journey in the early 80’s beginning with taking leave from my teaching to act as a liaison person in a program that saw John speak at every secondary school in the metro area and many country schools. I met with many school principals and most Ministers’ Associations across SA. It became clear to me that we were reshaping the relationship between State Schools and the Churches. So at the grassroots level we were making links between church-based youthworkers and schools, in the interest of serving the needs of students. At the institutional level we were drawing together the heads of Youth Work Departments of the Churches, exploring together how to proceed with this new interface cooperatively. Here was my introduction to *Intra-faith* dialogue within this practical context.

In the city of ecumenism one learns that the word Christian is bigger than one’s own tradition without devaluing one’s own tradition. One of the great joys was in making a wider circle of friends and discovering the treasures of their traditions.

I was moving on from living in Fowler’s Stage 4.

So I was well prepared when starting chaplaincy at Flinders in 1998 to work with the other three Christian chaplains as an ecumenical team, united in our service to the university within the various constraints we each had to work with.

My experiences in State Secondary Schools had shown me the need to serve the needs of all students, rather than sectional interests. So I entered university chaplaincy with this predisposition. Theologically, I had come to understand that Christ died for the whole world, not parts of it; and God showed love to the world by being involved in the world – becoming incarnate – not just talking about it. Love was more than a set of propositions, it was action that inevitably a disturbance to my comfort zone.

So it was not a huge step for me to begin to make contact with, and try to find out how I could help, the Muslim students, who were the most obvious minority religious group on campus. I continue to lookout to encourage other minority religious groups. Theologically, I had come to see in the Gospels that this was how Jesus acted, preferentially for the marginalised and disadvantaged.

In the year 2000 the proposal for a Pagan chaplain arose. Even the juxtaposition of the words Pagan and Chaplain was a challenge! This took my colleagues and I into new territory, demanding a rethink of our theologies. My paper “Toward a Christian Theology of Multi-faith Chaplaincy”, (TCMA Journal) was an attempt to begin this process in an open, transparent way. The process continues.

It seems paradoxical that as one forms close friendships with those of other religious traditions, one is thrown back to rethink one's own faith. As a senior officer of the Uniting Church confided to me "I have never done as much Christology as I have since I have become involved with people of other faiths".

One of the Christian chaplains came to different conclusions to myself and has not been able to agree to being part of a Multifaith Chaplaincy Service. I respect his right.

But my experience has been that as I have reached out with goodwill toward the one who potentially is disturbing to my faith paradigm, I have more often than not been joyfully and often surprisingly rewarded, my fears unfounded. As a result my sense of wonder and awe has deepened.

However if one has defined Christian faith only in terms, say of Fowlers' Stage 3 as the Catholics did for many years, or Stage 4, typical of some Protestant Evangelicals, then clearly those outside these paradigms will tend to be considered non-Christian or apostate, or even demonic by those within these paradigms.

My experience is that as faith matures, one does not lose one's faith, it broadens and deepens to embrace more of God's reality. So I still appreciate all that enriches life within all those stages of faith in my life – listening to the stories, being with others in my Christian tradition, being converted in my inner being. And in embracing those of other religious traditions, I do so as a Christian. Christianity has been the cultural context of my life, and I have no more intention of becoming a Muslim as my Muslim friends, who have been born Muslim, have of becoming Christian.

Yet from my Muslim friends I have learnt as a Christian more about prayer, submission and brother/sisterhood. Discovering spiritual riches in other traditions enriches of my own Christian life.

After Dave Andrews' presentation to the Round Table on Violence I was driving him back to the city and he turned to me and said: "Geoff, you're not a Christian..."
I can say I was a little taken aback!
"You're not a Christian..., and neither am I. What matters is being Christ-like."

I think he knew the sense of uncertainty and aloneness involved in making a transition from one stage of faith to another - like son or a daughter feels leaving home for the first time; he was affirming my shaky hold on faith and expressing solidarity with me. But he was also challenging me, beckoning me on to Stage 6.

I have taken it as a compliment and hope that I may be more Christ-like – more kind, more generous, more patient, more peaceful in my heart.

Geoff Boyce
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