Theories of Child Development & Theories of Religious and Spiritual Development (RSD) in Children

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This essay introduces readers to the foundational theories of child development and the ways in which these theories have been applied or extended to children's religious and spiritual development (RSD). By "foundational theories," I mean the theories introduced in the opening chapters of developmental textbooks.[1] This essay is not a theological critique of psychological theories (for this, see Gunnoe, 2022), nor a "state of the field" review of RSD (for this, see Boyatzis, 2023). Rather, it is a primer on the broad theoretical approaches that *scaffold* contemporary research on RSD.

Introduction to Developmental Psychology's Three Big Controversies

Developmental theories typically focus on development within a particular domain. *Socio-emotional* theories seek to explain our view of self and our relationships. *Cognitive* theories seek to explain our academic-type reasoning skills. Within domain, theories distinguish themselves by their different positions on three controversies. Familiarity with these controversies will help the reader understand the foundational theories and their applications to RSD. The three controversies are: *nature/nurture*, *continuity/discontinuity*, and *early determinism.*

[1] Citations are not provided for content that is standard to any Developmental Psychology textbook.

Nature/nurture

The biggest controversy in developmental psychology is how to parse the contributions of nature and nurture. Developmentalists define *nature* as hardwired genetic instructions. These instructions code for characteristics that inevitably manifest (e.g., Down Syndrome) and characteristics that manifest only in certain environments (e.g., empathy; schizophrenia). Genetic instructions also provide maturational timetables that tell us when to change (e.g., when to begin puberty; when to produce myelin which makes our brains more efficient even as it reduces malleability). Developmentalists define *nurture* as any influence that is *not* genetic. The elements of nurture most relevant to RSD are the emotional and instructional qualities of family, church, school, peers and society.

Contemporary developmentalists refer to this controversy as nature/nurture (rather than nature **vs.** nurture, as we did in decades past) because the characteristics that interest us are typically attributable to the *interaction* of nature and nurture. One specific type of interaction is that nature *elicits* nurture. Qualities specified by nature (e.g., male vs. female; natural curiosity vs. antipathy) "pull out" different types of nurture (e.g., different religious training from caregivers). Another specific interaction is *niche-picking*. Whereas eliciting is involuntary, niche-picking is our volitional choosing of environments that are a good fit for what nature has given us—as society permits. For example, a male who is intellectually curious by nature is more likely to seek a seminary degree than either a male who is not curious or a curious female in a non-egalitarian religious tradition.

Discussions of nature typically focus on genes specific to individuals, but developmentalists are also interested in genes shared by all humans. Shared genetic instructions constitute the *universal* human nature. Theologically-minded developmentalists often frame the universal human nature as a function of humans' creation in the image of God, sometimes applying Mildred Erickson's (2001) distinction between substantive, relational and functional aspects of the image.

Substantively, genes predispose all humans to develop God-like capacities including reason, empathy, and a conscience. *Relationally,* genes predispose all humans to be in relationships with God and others. *Functionally,* genes predispose all humans to (try to) exercise dominion (or in psychological parlance, *agency)*. The degree to which a particular human *realizes* these universal proclivities is attributable to the interactions of these proclivities with nurture. (For more on humans' universal nature, see Gunnoe, 2022, Chs. 2 & 9).

Continuity vs. discontinuity

A second controversy is whether development is more continuous (like climbing a hill with a slight, but constant incline) or discontinuous (like climbing stairs). Discontinuous models are called *stage* theories. Stages are named to emphasize characteristics that distinguish a person from their less and more mature forms. By analogy, a caterpillar and a butterfly are such different forms of the same insect that we require different names to refer to the insect. According to stage theorists, the developing person takes such different forms (e.g., infant, preschooler, adolescent, adult) that we should refer to them by stage.

Early determinism

The third controversy concerns the degree to which development is *determined* by our early life experiences—especially experiences from conception to age 3. Advocates of early determinism emphasize that nature specifies *critical periods* during which a developing organism is programmed to utilize environmental input to alter species-typical patterns of development and/or customize the developing brain for the environment currently being navigated (healthy or not).

The existence of critical periods for structural morphology is not disputed. For example, months 1-4 prenatal are a critical period for the basic shape/form of the brain. The environmental input of alcohol (in the form of high maternal consumption) causes migrating neurons

to pass their genetically-specified destinations, leaving open spaces in the center of the brain, *determining* reduced intellectual capacity and impulsivity (among other things).

The early determinism controversy focuses on whether there are *also* critical periods for functioning not manifestly attributable to abnormal morphology. For some children, environmental input in the form of adverse caregiving (e.g., poverty, abuse, insufficient love or cognitive stimulation) seems to "lock in" functioning that is efficient or protective *in the adverse environment* at the expense of later flourishing. When the early environment is safe and cognitively stimulating, the developing brain retains a high degree of malleability during childhood. This protracted period of development permits it to construct complex neural networks that permit sophisticated *Imago Dei*-type engagement with a complex social environment. But in a dangerous environment, the brain prioritizes basic survival. It may apportion extra pathways to primitive survival tasks. It may also accelerate the myelination process so that these pathways are activated more automatically/involuntarily (rather than taking direction from the executive control center of the brain).

Hyper-commitment to primitive survival tasks hinders our capacity to become religiously and spiritually mature. This is because we rely on the same neural pathways to process spiritual experiences as temporal ones. (Put another way: If you ask me to think about my *parents'* love today and *God's* love tomorrow, the same areas of activation will emerge in a neurological scan. God's love is spiritual, but *my awareness* of it, is physical.)

There are many mechanisms whereby early physical deprivation might determine stunted RSD. If an infant who is neglected constructs limited positive-emotion pathways, they may later experience God's love less intensely than those who had more supportive care. If a toddler who is abused constructs an over-active danger detection system, they may later find it difficult to trust both human mentors and God. If a preschooler must lie to survive, causing them to develop a muted conscience, they may later find it difficult to practice

kindness or self-control (characteristics that Christians consider fruits of the Holy Spirit). And in all of these scenarios, the future adult may struggle to understand abstract theological concepts. This is because linguistic and cognitive potential is often "robbed" to fund survival processes in adverse childhood environments.

Foundational Theories and their Applications/Extensions to RSD

As stated prior, most developmental theories are classified as either socio-emotional or cognitive, but some theories cross domains. I begin with socio-emotional theories to emphasize that the foundation for RSD is laid in infancy before we have any cognitive concept of God. I conclude with James Fowler's Stages of Faith— making Fowler his own category—because Fowler is the best synthesis of the two domains.

Socio-emotional theories

Psychoanalytic Theories

Psychoanalytic theories are unified by their emphasis on partially conscious, partially unconscious drives. The appearance of these drives is scheduled by a genetically programmed maturational timetable, propelling the developing person through qualitatively different stages. Stages are named for the primary socio-emotional concern consuming the person's attention at that point in development.

Stage Theories of Freud & Erikson. The best examples of psychoanalytic theories are those of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Erik Erikson (1902-1994). In both theories, the RSD-relevant issue psychologically consuming the infant is security. The infant must feel safe with their early caregivers for subsequent development to proceed in a healthy manner. (Freud viewed early childhood as *determining*; Erikson viewed it very influential.) In both theories, a parent serves as the child's physical template for their eventual concept of an abstract God.

The primary difference between the two theories is that Freud presented adults' belief in God as a pathological illusion whereas Erikson viewed belief in God as a universal element of healthy development across the lifespan. Freud believed that healthy development (at least for boys) included identification with their father during preschool, followed by the eventual discarding of the infantile need for protection (actual or projected onto God). Erikson acknowledged that belief in God could be a projected human need, but that this would not necessarily be incompatible with the existence of God. Rather, this need "may well have been created so as to plant in the child at the proper time, the potentiality for a comprehension of the Creator's existence, and a readiness for his revelations" (Erikson, 1996, p. 309).

Erikson was arguably more interested in RSD during adulthood than childhood, but he included faith-related content throughout his corpus. A synthesis of Erikson's discursive writings supports this succinct statement of his perspective: Healthy adults are driven to (a) love others, (b) manifest dominion-like care, and (c) reach for God. Nature equips all humans to do these things by hardwiring the requisite psychological structures during childhood. How well this equipment *works* is primarily a function of nurture (especially early care), not a function of reified inherited blight (i.e., *original sin* per Augustine and Calvin).

One piece of psychological equipment particularly relevant to RSD is Erikson's "radiant core." Referencing Matthew 5:16 and 6:22, Erikson proposed that nature hardwires a structural core that reflects the light of influential others. A person's first light source is their mother. A loving mother in Erikson's Stage 1 (infancy) engenders trust, which informs hope. Erikson (1964, p. 118) viewed hope as the "ontogenetic basis for faith." Conversely, infants who only know evil in the temporal world have no foundation for hope/faith in an abstract God. Another piece of psychological equipment relevant to RSD is the conscience which is oriented (or misoriented) during Erikson's Stage 3 (preschool). In this process as well, parents are the template

for the child's concept of God. If parents articulate clear standards, the child internalizes these standards and "now hears, as it were, God's voice without seeing God" (Erikson, 1980, p. 84).

Preparation for a mature faith continues during middle childhood and adolescence. In Stage 4, elementary school children learn whether they have the capacity to accomplish difficult tasks (a mindset that has implications for many aspects of RSD). In Stage 5, healthy adolescents begin to scrutinize the beliefs bequeathed them by their parents, eventually assuming accountability for self. (For more on: Erikson's exploration of RSD across the lifespan; Erikson's radiant core per the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*; and Erikson's conception of original sin, see Gunnoe, 2022, Ch. 6.)

Object Relations Theory. Influenced by Freud and Erikson, Ana Marie Rizutto (1980) proposed Object Relations Theory. In this theory, our early sensations, emotions, and thoughts are organized around "love-objects" (typically people, but sometimes a part of a person like a face or a hand). Our first definition of self is articulated in relation to these love-objects. When we realize (at approximately age 4) that we possess a private psychological world to which our love-objects are not privy, we feel untethered. Needing someone to know us *fully*, we project the characteristics of our love-objects onto the "something" that our socialization agents refer to as God. Per Rizutto (p. 126), "God is the 'invisible being' created by the child in a theistic culture at the moment when the child's wishes and demands must be hidden from his parents and repressed because they are not acceptable." (Note: By *created*, Rizutto does not mean that God does not exist, but that there is a point in childhood when we gather attributes from religious training, life experiences, and imagination and ascribe them to a being we do not experience temporally).

Agreeing more with Erikson than Freud, Rizutto asserted that a healthy faith requires us to repeatedly update our God-concepts as our cognitive capacity and life circumstances change. Updates are particularly needed when our subjective sense of God or self is discordant with our head knowledge. If I declare that God is love, but

my subjective emotion is fear, I need to update. If my subjective sense of God as a protector affords no logical rationale for my current suffering, I need to update. If I do not, I will outgrow the God of my childhood, potentially abandoning faith altogether. Per Rizutto, "faith in God as a conscious activity takes place when the God whose traits we 'know' coincides in the present with whom we feel ourselves to be" (p. 126).

Attachment Theory / Ethology

Sir John Bowlby (1907-1990), the "father" of attachment theory, began his career documenting personality disturbances in children who had experienced early maternal deprivation. Finding psychoanalytic theory insufficient to explain these disturbances, he turned to *ethology*, the study of animal behaviors as evolutionary adaptations. Bowlby was particularly interested in the work of ethologist Konrad Lorenz who demonstrated a critical period in goslings occurring 13-16 hours post hatching. During this three-hour window, goslings' brain tissue is involuntarily organized by a moving object, compelling the goslings to subsequently follow this object. This process (called *imprinting*) is adaptive in a species-typical environment where a gosling's first moving object is the mother goose, but occurs even in maladaptive environments (e.g., when mother goose has been replaced by a toy train).

Bowlby proposed an analogous process in humans. Although attachment in humans is more protracted and less mechanistic, it too happens *regardless* of whether the infant's environment is supportive/species-typical or maladaptive. This involuntary attachment to our early caregiver helps to explain the distress of children removed from an abusive parent. (See Sullivan & Lasley, 2010, for a summary of early brain development in situations where love and fear co-occur).

Central to the attachment process in humans is the construction of two *internal working models* (IWMs). An IWM is a set of expectations (partially conscious, partially unconscious) that enables us to interact

with our social environment with psychological *efficiency.* We discern patterns in our earliest environments and organize our malleable brain and body to act in accordance with these patterns without resourcing too much conscious attention. By way of analogy: In my first car, the gas pedal was to the right of the brake pedal. When I was first learning to drive, I had to think about how to move my feet, but my brain and body quickly began to press and depress automatically. Because my current vehicle has the same pedal placement, I can now drive with psychological efficiency (barely conscious that I am accelerating and braking) while my conscious mind compiles my grocery list.

The first IWM we create is a *model of close relationships*. We do this by trial and error, quickly figuring out what emotions and actions facilitate survival in our early caregiving environment. If our earliest emotion is trust, an inclination toward obedience typically follows. If our first emotion is mistrust, muted emotions and exaggerated self-sufficiency are common.

The second IWM we create is a *model of self*. This second IWM begins to form at approximately 18 months and is complementary to our first IWM. More specifically, if my mother quickly comforts and feeds me when I cry (first IWM), I conclude that I am loveable and valued (second IWM). Alternatively, if my mother fails to do these, I conclude that I am unlovable and not worth much. According to Bowlby, these two foundational IWMs are quite resistant to change, even when social environments do change.

Bowlby did not address RSD, but other theorists including Lee Kirkpatrick, Philip Shaver, Pehr Granqvist, and Jane Dickie have applied Attachment theory to RSD. These theorists have demonstrated that relationships with God are an extension of the two foundational IWMs derived from our early care. According to Granqvist and Dickie (2006) some relationships with God follow a *Correspondence* model, with correspondence manifesting itself in three regards.

1. Children who experience warm supportive care from parents expect God to be supportive.

2. Children who view self as lovable find it easy to imagine that they are loved by God.

3. Children who have benefitted from trust and obedience to parents are likely to adopt their parents' faith/belief system.

In contrast, other relationships with God follow a *Compensation* model. Children lacking supportive parents may create a compensatory relationship with God, using God as their primary attachment figure. Although compensatory relationships with God are better than no relationship, they tend to be less stable than those based on correspondence. Because human relationships are the temporal foundation for spiritual ones, spiritual relationships based on compensation are more readily abandoned if an intimate relationship with a *physically present* attachment figure (e.g., an atheist spouse) is secured.

Like Rizutto's extension of psychoanalytic theory to RSD, attachment theorists' extension to RSD inverts the process of identity development often taught in religious contexts. Religious mentors often teach us to find our identity in God, deriving head knowledge about God from Scripture and using this knowledge to consciously construct a self-concept. Developmental psychologists understand that there is also a process proceeding in the *opposite* direction; early care is the basis for our model of self, which in turn influences (if not determines) unconsciously-held elements of our God-concept. What we are told about God matters a lot, but RSD is also a function of unconscious convictions (that God delights in me, or is never satisfied, or might be able to love others but doesn't really love me). (For detailed coverage of Attachment theory and Christians' responsibility to help all children receive the temporal foundation on which to build healthy spiritual relationships, see Gunnoe (2022, Ch. 7).)

Learning theories

Learning theories are unified by the premise that nature's contributions to development are always trumped by nurture. Learning theories are not easily classified as socio-emotional vs. cognitive and have been applied in both domains. Most textbooks present three foundational learning theories.

Radical Behaviorism / Environmental Determinism. B.F. Skinner (1904-1990) defined learning as an observable change in behavior and insisted that *all* behavior is determined by factors originating in the environment rather than the individual. To the point, Skinner believed that religiosity can be fully explained by appealing to rewards and punishments, experienced and anticipated. Rewards and punishments can be tangible (e.g., candy for memorizing a Bible verse) and intangible (e.g., shunning by one's religious group, assurance of an afterlife). As for internal influences such as free will, often used to explain religious proclivities, Skinner (1972, p. 24 & 199) dismissed these as "explanatory fictions" (i.e., constructs made up by people who don't understand the comprehensive pattern of environmental contingencies associated with a behavior). Although contemporary psychologists view Skinner's dismissal of internal causes as too reductive, there are aspects of Skinner's model which are very compatible with doctrines of *theological* determinism. In fact, Skinner (1983, p. 403) wrote that much of his "scientific position seems to have begun as Presbyterian theology, not too far removed from the congregational of Jonathan Edwards."

Skinner ascribed particular influence to "the promise of heaven and the threat of hell," (1976a, p. 213). In an interview with Richard Evans (1968, p. 31). Skinner speculated that it was explicit Judeo-Christian expectations for the afterlife that permitted some societies to transition from aversive, authoritarian rule to more democratic governments organized by citizens with an eschatological need to behave morally. But Skinner also recognized that reward and fear made a poor foundation for RSD, because "religious faith becomes

irrelevant when the fears which nourish it are allayed and the hopes fulfilled—here on earth" (Skinner, 1976b, p. 185). Skinner's discourse on fear-based religious socialization is rooted in personal experience. (See Gunnoe, 2022, Ch. 7 for more on Skinner's upbringing and his appeals to theology to gain converts to Radical Behaviorism.)

Social Cognitive Theory. Albert Bandura (1925-2021) appreciated Skinner's emphasis on the influence of the environment but faulted Skinner for dismissing cognition as an additional cause of development. Bandura is best known for his studies of *observational learning* defined as learning that occurs by observing a role model. Bandura viewed exposure to organized religion as more helpful than amorphous spiritual experiences. Role models in religious texts (e.g., David, Esther) and within our religious congregations show us how to apply abstract religious principles and help us articulate purpose (Bandura, 2003, p. 170).

Bandura was particularly interested in our learned *self-efficacy* (i.e., our belief in our own capacity to exercise control over our own situation and functioning). Like Skinner, Bandura recognized the boon and bane of religiosity. He characterized religiosity as harmful when it encouraged the "displacement of control to divine agency to solve one's problems." Conversely, he believed that divine agency "viewed as a guiding supportive partnership requiring one to exercise influence over events in one's life… can serve as an enabling belief that strengthens a sense of personal efficacy" (2003, pp. 172-3). The latter approach accords with the Apostle Paul's statement: *I* can do all things, *through* Christ who strengthens *me* (Phil 4:13). (For more on Bandura, see Gunnoe (2022, Ch. 8).)

Sociocultural Theory. The learning theory most applicable to RSD is likely that of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). Vygotsky believed that psychological processes are best attributed to a *culture's* historical experiences, rather than the learning history of a specific individual (Rieber & Carton, 1987, p. 19). Culture is paramount, because "All higher functions originate as actual relations between human

individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). With respect to process, Vygotsky proposed that complex thinking utilizes symbolic representations transmitted through language, numbers, icons, and gestures. Vygotsky called these modes of representation "signs" or "tools." Religious tools include things like scriptural texts, articulated doctrines, songs/prayers/liturgies, and physical postures associated with worship. Vygotsky claimed that we assimilate the tools of our culture and then use them to expand our own mental capacity.

Vygotsky also emphasized the need to consider a learner's *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). Our ZPD is the range of skills we are *unable* to perform independently, but *able* to perform when the situation is structured (or "scaffolded") by more competent mentors. Vygotsky argued that we are most motivated and most likely to learn when (a) we are afforded the opportunity to engage in tasks that are authentically valued in our culture and (b) these tasks are in our ZPD. For example, a 7-year-old cannot organize a worship service that most adults would find authentically valuable, but a 7-year-old can read Scripture from the pulpit as part of a service structured by and authentically valued by adults in the congregation.

Vygotsky's work provides the theoretical basis for Holly Catterton Allen's (2004) promotion of intergenerational settings like worship services, family camps, and small groups. Vygotsky also helps explain Carol Lytch's (2004) third "hook." In her book *Choosing Church*, Lytch argues that successful churches attract teens using three hooks: a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning, and *opportunities to develop competence*" (p. 25). Some of the opportunities to develop competence documented in her ethnographic study of youth-popular churches include 12th graders mentoring 8th grade confirmands, youth planning their own retreats, and highly challenging musical performances. In one church she studied, youth were required to demonstrate evangelistic competence by bringing a nonbeliever to the open youth group before being offered entre into the select youth group.

Cognitive theories

Piaget's Genetic Epistemology and Information Processing Theory

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) proposed that nature propels children through three qualitative (caterpillar-to-butterfly-type) changes in the way they reason about and interact with the world (making for four stages total). Piaget was particularly interested in children's use of *operations* defined as rules of logic that permit one to mentally operate on the physical world. Examples of operations include the reversibility of addition and subtraction or the understanding of volume as base x height x width. Piaget named his four stages to reflect children's increasing capacity for operations.

Piaget's first two stages are:

Sensorimotor (birth - age 2). The mental life of the infant is organized by their immediate sensory and motor experiences. Because infants have no concept of a God they cannot experience with their senses, this stage receives little attention in explications of the *cognitive* aspects of RSD (but is critical to the socio-emotional aspects of RSD, as explained prior).

Pre-operational (ages 2 - 7). At approximately age 2, children begin organizing their mental life using language and other symbols. This change is a watershed in cognitive development, permitting the child to imagine and discuss things that are not temporally present (a rope becomes a pretend snake; wine can represent Jesus' blood). But preschoolers' mental representation is limited and often illogical because they have difficulty thinking about more than one or two things at a time. Piaget demonstrated that if you pour water from a short fat glass into a tall thin glass, most preschoolers will say that they now have *more* water (because they "center" on the height of the water, disregarding the other two dimensions that determine volume). Preschoolers also have difficulty seeing another person's perspective.

Piaget documented *what* changes to expect in children's reasoning and *when* to expect them, but offered limited explanation for *why* these changes occur. To understand why, most developmentalists look to a newer theory named *Information Processing* (IP). Central to IP theory is the concept of *working memory* operationally defined as the number of "bits" of information a person can retain in their memory and "work" with. (For example, if I list four single-digit numbers and you reverse them, stating them backwards, you demonstrate a working memory capacity of 4 bits.) IP theorists have demonstrated that most preschoolers have a working memory capacity of only 1-2 bits. This explains why they do not reckon base, height, and width (3 bits) in a volume problem. It also explains why they often—but not always—have difficulty appreciating another person's perspective. If I have slots for only 2 bits, and these slots are filled by what is riveting to me, your bits need to be more riveting than mine (e.g., you fell off your bike and are bleeding) to bump my bits out of the available slots.

Piaget's third stage is:

Concrete Operational (ages 7 - 11). By age 7, most children have started to "discover" operations. This permits them to reason logically, but only about concrete topics (or abstract topics that can be depicted concretely and do not contradict their existing knowledge of the concrete world).

For example, many elementary school children can solve this logic problem: *If Amy is taller than Tia, and Tia is taller than Meg, is Amy taller than Meg?*

Even as they struggle with this one: *If mice are bigger than dogs, and dogs are bigger than elephants, are mice bigger than elephants?*

Again, the limitations of this stage can be explained by IP theory; the latter problem involves more bits (a rule of logic, the concrete entities I apply the rule to, *and* the need to suppress knowledge that I have previously assimilated about these entities). Increased working memory also permits the concrete operational child to simultaneously

consider their own perspective and the perspective of another. In social relationships, this capacity often manifests as increased attention to fairness.

Piaget's fourth stage is:

Formal Operational (11+). The primary characteristic of Piaget's last stage is the capacity to reason abstractly. Puberty-related brain maturation permits teens to begin to grapple with abstract moral concepts (e.g., what is fair may not be just) and to evaluate propositions on multiple levels (e.g., a biblical claim can be true even if it is not literal). The term *Formal Operational* signifies that those who have been trained in formal systems of logic like algebra can now apply operations to abstract or unknown entities (e.g., they can add 2x to 5x without knowing the value of x).

A critique of Piaget's theory is that the biological capacity to do these things does not ensure formal reasoning. To the contrary, contemporary research suggests that most adolescents and adults employ abstract reasoning inconsistently, and others, almost never at all. Put another way, most pre-pubescent children are held hostage by the concrete world; most adults reside there but are capable of visiting the abstract world when compelled by nurture to do so.

Piaget's epistemology is the framework for several investigations of RSD reviewed by Fleck, Ballard and Spilka (1975). Some examples include work by David Elkind and Ronald Goldman. Elkind investigated children's understanding of religious denomination. He found that children ages 5-7 confused denomination with nationality, ages 7-9 defined denomination in terms of concrete behaviors (*Jews go to Temple; Catholics go to mass*), and ages 10-12 focused on abstract mental attributes (*Jews believe God is one; Christians believe in the Trinity).* Goldman asked children why Moses was afraid to look at God in Exodus chapter 3. Young children gave illogical answers (*God had a funny face*); ages 7–14 gave concrete answers (*God was a ball of fire and Moses didn't want to burn up*); and older teens gave abstract answers (*God is holy; Moses knew he was sinful*).

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Reasoning

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) investigated the reasons people give for moral decisions. Kohlberg sought to discern whether there is a universal progression through stages of moral reasoning, paralleling the universal progression through stages of academic logic documented by Piaget. Kohlberg constructed vignettes that have no clear moral answer, asking whether the protagonist was right to do behave as they did. Example: *Heinz stole overpriced medicine to save his wife's life after the man who discovered the medicine refused to sell at a fair price*. Central to Kohlberg's theory is *conventional reasoning* (i.e., reasoning based on *group norms* as the ultimate authority on matters of right and wrong). Kohlberg articulated six stages of moral reasoning, grouping them into **three levels** of two stages each.

Kohlberg's three levels are:

Pre-conventional reasoning. Until about age 10, children's moral decisions are primarily motivated by avoidance of punishment (*Heinz could go to jail*) or consequences for self (*Heinz will miss his wife*). The former involves fear and deference to those in power. The latter is often guided by the principle of *instrumental exchange* (you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours; an eye for an eye).

Conventional reasoning: Most adolescents and adults are motivated by the "two Rs." Moral behavior means living up to conventional expectations for one's **role** (*Heinz should be a good husband*) and/or following society's **rules/**laws to preserve social order (*Heinz should not break the law; if everyone broke the law there would be chaos*).

Post-conventional reasoning: A minority of adults (typically highly educated and from individualistic cultures) trust self to discern when a moral principle supersedes obedience to conventional roles and rules. Confronted with the Heinz dilemma, a post-conventional reasoner might believe that it is more moral for Heinz to save a life than to obey laws prohibiting stealing.

Kohlberg's theory is sometimes disparaged by religious groups who promote deference to religious leaders and community norms.[2] Academic scholars are more likely to find some confluence of Kohlberg's model and mature religious faith. Both Motet (1978) and Gunnoe (2022, Ch. 4) offered biblical evidence that God often deals with people according to their (Kohlberg) level of moral reasoning. Feder (1984) questioned whether post-conventional reasoning can be reconciled with the Jewish concept of mitzvah—an act performed "not because it is moral, but because God commands it" (p. 165). Feder concluded that Kohlberg's theory may have validity for the religious Jew.

Evolutionary Developmental Psychology (EDP, aka Evo Devo)

All contemporary developmentalists believe that genetic instructions are foundational to human development. Most believe that the genetic instructions characterizing contemporary humans have been influenced by natural selection. Thus, most developmentalists operate (at least implicitly) under the broad umbrella of EDP. Some scholars of religion *explicitly* apply an EDP approach, documenting (presumably) hardwired cognitive tendencies that predispose all children to believe in God/gods.

Researchers who have explicitly applied an EDP approach to children's RSD include Jesse Bering (an atheist) and Justin Barrett (a Christian). Bering (2010) reduces humans' propensity to believe in God to its temporal survival value (e.g., belief in God promotes moral behavior which permits an individual to retain group membership which decreases the likelihood that they will be eaten by a woolly mammoth). Barrett agrees that belief in God promotes temporal survival and sees this as perfectly compatible with a Christian worldview. Per Barrett: *"Christian theology teaches that people were*

[2] It is not just conventional religious groups that have challenged the validity of Kohlberg's theory. One criticism levied by contemporary psychologists is that moral reasoning (stage) is a poor predictor of moral behavior when situational stakes are high (e.g., a person who says that *Heinz* should not break the law per Stage 4 might be guided by Stage 2 consequences to self when *their own wife* has cancer.)

crafted by God to be in a loving relationship with him and other people. Why wouldn't God, then, design us in such a way as to find belief in divinity quite natural?") (Henig, 2007).

Barrett presents evidence for children's intuitive theology in his book *Born Believers* (2012). This evidence includes: infants' ready distinction between agents and inanimate objects; preschoolers' "tendency to see order, purpose, and even intentional design behind the natural world" (even when their parents attempt to refute this); and children's "natural leg up on predicting what God knows, sees, hears, and smells before accurately predicting the same for humans" (p. 10).

To investigate the latter, Barrett and colleagues conducted research on preschoolers' *theory of mind* (i.e., awareness of the content of another's mind). Theory of mind can be tested by replacing the crackers in a cracker box with rocks, surprising the child by showing them the rocks, and then asking what a person *not present* will think is in the box. Prior to ages 4-5, most children have difficulty understanding that the absent person will not know what they know. (*What will mom think is in the box? Rocks!*) However, most children correctly report that *God* will know that there are rocks in the box by age 3. Barrett presents this differential response for God vs. humans as evidence for children's natural affinity to believe in the omniscience of God.

Fowler's Stages of Faith

The most syncretic psychological presentation of RSD is the book *Stages of Faith* (1981) by James Fowler (1940-2015). Fowler proposed six stages and a pre-stage. Because Stages 4-6 are considered adult stages (i.e., are outside the scope of this invited article), I will describe development from birth through the transition to Stage 4.

Pre-stage: Undifferentiated Faith **(birth – age 2 or 3).**

In keeping with Erikson and those who have extended Attachment Theory to faith, Fowler asserted that the foundation for RSD is laid in the nursery. Fowler used the term "pre-images" to indicate that infants form representations of social agents prior to acquiring language and self-consciousness. We become aware of our early caregivers as separate from self and then come to know our self through their care. Although Fowler provided only a brief presentation of undifferentiated faith, he stressed that "the strength of trust, autonomy, hope, and courage (or their opposites) developed in this phase underlie (or threaten to undermine) all that comes later in faith development" (p. 121). The transition to a veritable stage of faith (i.e., a conscious awareness of something beyond our immediate experience) "begins with the convergence of thought and language, opening up the use of symbols in speech and ritual play" (p. 121).

Stage 1:
Intuitive-Projective Faith (typically **ages 3 - 7,** but as early as age 2).

As with Piaget's preschooler, the emergent strength of Fowler's preschooler is a strong imagination. Unlike the infant, the preschooler can imagine agents and events beyond their temporal experience. Once they begin to ***intuitively*** understand the ultimate conditions of existence (good & evil, death), they ***project*** these concerns onto powerful religious motifs (i.e., they use the religious language and concepts of their culture to express these concerns). In doing so, they fuse fact, fantasy, and feeling into long-lasting positive and negative images that will need to be sorted out later. A danger of Stage 1 is that preschoolers' imagination is unconstrained by logic. Some children become possessed by images of terror and destruction, particularly in religious traditions that emphasize fire and brimstone.

This terror is not just the result of religious socialization, but also young children's inability to understand why people behave the way they do. (Recall: Per Piaget, the preschooler has difficulty taking

others' perspectives. Per research on theory of mind, most children are unaware that others don't know what they know until ages 4-5). This limited social understanding facilitates an early representation of God as unpredictable and psychologically flat. Asked to describe God, preschoolers are more likely to focus on God's actions/superpowers than psychological characteristics such as emotions and intentions. Preschoolers may also have difficulty understanding how God relates to them personally. When an articulate 2-year-old in our church nursery was struggling with the question of whether God could see Jonah in the boat, I asked whether God could see her hiding under the bed. This question was easier; she promptly declared: "*No … but my mom can*".[3]

As with general cognitive development, we gain a better understanding of RSD if we remember that preschoolers can work with only 1-2 bits of information at a time. Moreover, they fill their available slots with the bits most personally riveting. (Another little girl at my church refers to the story of Moses in the bullrushes as "the princess story.")

Two other limitations of a "2-bit" faith are:

Difficulty sequencing events. Shown a picture Bible, preschoolers may experience the illustrations as individual snapshots. (If I shuffle the pictures from the story of Daniel in the lions' den, I expect my preschoolers to have strong emotions associated with the lions and to report wanting to be brave like Daniel. I do not necessarily expect them to be able to sequence the picture of the king prohibiting prayer before the lions, or to remember why/how Daniel was brave.) This inability to keep track of multiple events limits preschoolers' understanding of cause and effect, making it difficult for them to extract the main point of a story, let alone a life application.

[3] This story would seem to challenge Barrett's (2012) claim that children intuitively understand what God can see before they accurately predict the same for humans. One explanation may be that my nursery child was reporting a lived experience rather than making a prediction. The discrepancy does raise the possibility that rather than intuitively understanding God's omniscience, Barrett's 3-year-olds had already learned the correct answer to all questions beginning with *"Can God…*?"

Rigid, dichotomous categories. With only two slots to fill, most preschoolers eschew nuance. If their two slots are already taken by good people who go to heaven and bad people who go to hell, there is no slot for sinners saved by grace. This forced-choice dichotomy can make some preschoolers reluctant to admit any sin at all.

The transition to Fowler's Stage 2 is the emergence of Piaget's concrete operations. With a growing capacity for logic, the child becomes motivated to work hard "sorting out the real from the make-believe" (p. 134).

Stage 2:
Mythic-Literal faith (typically **ages 7 - puberty,** but some adults).

During elementary school, fluid imagination gives way to sequenced logic based on experience with the concrete world. In this ordering of their mental life, the child relies on the narratives or "story-***myths***" emphasized by their community, assimilating these narratives ***literally***.

With 1-2 *additional* slots in working memory, the Stage 2 child sequences stories chronologically, extracts the main points, and applies them. They may even generate their own concrete / literal stories to make sense of abstract teachings.

Here is an example from one of my sons, (presumably) trying to work out how Christ could bear the sin of the whole world in his body (I Pet 2:24).

Mom (viewing son's drawing of God): "*Tell me about this pink hair."*

Son: "*It's pink because it's shooting out to the people. God shoots it out to the people and then it gets black because of all the sin and then God takes it back and eats it all. Then he makes it pink again and spits it back out so it can take more sin. God has to take the sin because otherwise it would just bag you down, you know."*

Those in Stage 2 also demonstrate increased capacity to take the perspective of others—including God's. The child who understands that a set of events may not necessarily reveal an agent's intentions can now view God as a rational, decision-making agent who feels and reckons humans' intentions, even when intentions are not manifest. This makes God less scary relative to the God of Stage 1 (but still less intimate than the God of Stage 3).[4]

As documented by Piaget, improved perspective-taking enables greater attention to fairness. In keeping with both Piaget's work and Kohlberg's principle of *instrumental exchange*, Fowler asserted that the Stage 2 individual composes "a world based on reciprocal fairness and an immanent justice based on reciprocity" (p. 149). (More simply, the Stage 2 individual may believe that the purpose of God is to keep track of who is good and bad, and that even God is bound by a system of natural law whereby people *must* get what they deserve.)

A danger of this exaggerated emphasis on reciprocity is that even children taught a Gospel of grace may tend towards works-righteousness theology, believing they must earn God's blessing. One of Fowler's most memorable interviews is with a Stage 2 adult named Mrs. W who faithfully recites three prayers a day. Mrs. W is confident that when she needs God's help, she will have prayers "in the bank" (p. 146). Works-righteousness theology may also prompt those in Stage 2 to view the misfortune of self or another as evidence of bad character. (If Grandma got cancer, Grandma must be bad, even if God is the only one who knows this.)

The cognitive transition from Fowler's Stage 2 to a higher stage is often initiated by a clash in authoritative stories (e.g., Genesis 1 taught as 24-hour days vs. an evolutionary perspective on human origins). This clash troubles the burgeoning abstract reasoner.

[4] Fowler seems to view the elementary school child's relationship with God as less intimate that Granqvist and Dickie (2006) view it. Per Granqvist and Dickie, the parent is still the primary attachment figure in middle childhood, but children can consciously use God as a "parent-substitute" when the parent is absent, from about age 7.

In the socio-emotional domain, the acquisition of a third layer of perspective taking (*I see you seeing me; I see you as you see me*) permits a re-evaluation of self. For maltreated or traumatized youth, implicit self-abasement may now give way to the conscious rejection of a causal link between character/worth and early care. Increased awareness of God's perspective may also create a desire for a more personal relationship with God.

When considering the transition out of Stage 2, it is important to note that Fowler relied on cross-sectional rather than longitudinal data (i.e., he interviewed people of various ages but did not follow the same people *over time* to demonstrate a lock-step progression up the stages). Per Fowler, a person exiting Stage 2 enters Stage 3. But Streib (2001) has argued that general brain maturation only propels children through Stages 0–2. Where they go after Stage 2 is more a function of religious socialization and life experiences.

Stage 3:
Synthetic-Conventional faith (most adolescents, many adults).

A cognitive requisite for Stage 3 is the ability to think *a level above* an individual story. Those in Stage 3 know how their community puts stories together in a "story of the stories" (e.g., what Adam has to do with Jesus). This meta-story is the basis for the community's worldview which typically includes a stance on how to interpret and apply Scripture and how to relate to groups who do this differently. But cognitive capacity is not the crux of Stage 3 faith.

The crux of Fowler's Stage 3 is the person's reliance on the group's worldview for their own story. Feeling tacitly ("in my heart") that their community's worldview is the correct one, they embrace it ***synthetically*** (as a whole) without critical analysis. Synthetic acceptance is facilitated by trust in one's mentors and/or limited exposure to other worldviews. Awareness (implicit or explicit) that they *must* accept their group's worldview to maintain their connection to the group may also be in play. Regardless of whether the person is motivated by psychologically healthy or unhealthy circumstances,

those in Fowler's Stage 3 construct their personal identity in accordance with community norms & ***convention*.** (Thus, Fowler's Stage 3 encompasses both stages in Kohlberg's Level 2).

Paradoxically, a conventional identity may be perceived as entirely self-chosen. Failing to appreciate the degree to which *they* have been shaped by life experiences and sociological systems (e.g., class, ethnicity), those in Stage 3 often project an unchanging self into the future. Failing to appreciate the degree to which *others* have been shaped by life experiences and sociological systems, those in Fowler's Stage 3 tend to explain conflict in terms of the other's personal characteristics (e.g., a "hard heart").

Individuals in Stage 3 may also tend toward pietism. Paralleling their emotion-based relationship with their community of origin, those in Stage 3 often report (or wish for) an emotionally intense relationship with God, placing particular emphasis on their *personal* relationship.

The transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 (*Individuative-Reflective faith*) begins with a formative experience that causes the individual to critically reflect on the teachings of their group. This experience can be positive (e.g., higher education; a friend of a different faith) or negative (e.g., parents' failure to practice what they preach; breach of trust by a religious leader). Fowler proposed that the Stage-3-to-Stage-4 transition rarely happens before age 20, but again, there may not be a lock-step progression after Stage 2. (It is easy to imagine a formal operational teen who *never* accepts the synthetic package offered by their community of origin, functionally skipping over Fowler's Stage 3. There are also faith communities for whom the conventional faith *is* a faith based on individual reflection, representing a conflation of Fowler's Stages 3 & 4). Work by other researchers including Erikson and James Marcia suggests that Fowler's presentation of Stage 3 describes many teens—particularly those in supportive religious communities led by adults with limited formal education—but we should not presume that all youth exiting Stage 2 are headed for Stage 3.

Conclusion

Proverbs 22:6 tells us to train children in the right way, so that they do not stray. The foundational theories of child development help us understand how comprehensive this training must be. They also help us recognize age-specific needs and manifestations of faith so that we can appropriately nurture children from birth.

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