

Fostering Self-Authoring Spirituality in College Women

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The ability to reflect on and analyze one's values and beliefs and synthesize incorporate alternative perspectives when appropriate is considered essential to the development of critical thinking. Research on how students grow and change in college indicates that the college environment can be instrumental in providing the support and challenges needed to help students become more analytical and self directed. Yet much of the literature has focused on outcomes that emphasize intellectual competencies especially when discussing classroom learning. The last twenty years has seen an increase in research that is committed to examining student development in a number of other domains including affective, social, and spiritual. Additionally, since much of the original research on student learning and development was limited to subjects that were primarily male and Caucasian, more research on women and minorities has been an important addition to the literature .

This paper is the result of the authors' interest in examining how college females move from passive to active voice with regard to their faith development. What are women's unique ways of evolving toward a self-authoring spirituality, and what factors influence this shift?

Self- Authoring Spirituality

Self authorship involves taking ownership of one's own feelings, beliefs, and choices. For students to have a self authoring spirituality, they must be capable of discarding untested beliefs through challenging prior truths and assumptions. James Fowler, in his well-known theory of faith development, describes a shift toward self authorship in the transition from his Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional faith to Stage 4 Individuative-Reflective faith. To review briefly, Stage 3 faith is achieved usually in adolescence, and entails a conforming faith concerned with fitting into peer groups and other affiliations. Accordingly, it aligns with Kegan's 3rd order of consciousness, the "socialized mind." Due to adolescents' new ability to take an interpersonal perspective, they construct a sense of identity and worldview in terms of the personal. Their sense of self-worth is tied to the approval and affirmation of significant others, thus maintaining relations with them—especially authorities—is important for coherence. Also seen in personal terms, God is imaged as one who knows us better than we know ourselves and always accepts us. Religious symbols are sacred and authoritative, and beliefs and values are tacit and largely unexamined.

In the shift from stage 3 to stage 4, one moves from conforming faith to a faith owned by an "executive ego."¹ This development is induced usually by "leaving home" experiences

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involving contradictions to beliefs or clashes among authorities. These experiences lead one to separate out from one's group and relationships in order to relocate authority within oneself. In addition, one takes a critical stance toward the previously tacit system of beliefs and values, demythologizing or translating them into explicit, conceptual meanings. Aligned with Kegan's 4th order of consciousness or "self-authorship," Fowler's Stage 4 places strong emphasis on choosing for oneself through independent critical reasoning. Faith development aligns with the traditional psychological theories describing differentiation as a journey of separation.

Critiques of Developmental Theory and its Application To Spiritual Development

There is some evidence to support the idea that women differentiate through relationship rather than outside relationship. Prior conceptualizations of differentiation were almost always narratives of separation rather than connection. The preliminary findings of this study point to a path of differentiation in the context of connection. This paper summarizes recent critiques of developmental theory particularly with regard to stylistic distinctions in voice. Robert Kegan describes this distinction in his 1994 book *In Over our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*.

"Increasing differentiation" may indeed be part of the story of everyone's development, but "increasing differentiation" can itself be the story of staying connected in the new way, of continuing to hold onto one's precious connections and loyalties while refashioning one's relationship to them so that one *makes them up* rather than *gets made up* by them. . . . "Autonomous" means self-regulating, and that regulation might well be on behalf of preserving and protecting one's precious connections according to an internal compass or system.²

As Nicola Slee explains in *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*, none of the major theories of human development can be applied uncritically to women's development, for almost all of them are "gender-blind, inattentive to women's experience and lives."³ Further, many of them promulgate cultural, essentializing stereotypes of women. Most importantly for this study, the classic theories of human development devalue women's propensity for relationship in favor of autonomous individuation. In other words, they describe maturation or differentiation as a linear progression of increasing emotional and intellectual separation from previous beliefs, understandings, and relational ties. Feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and Jean Baker Miller refute traditional psychological theories that do not adequately account for women's propensity for maintaining relationship throughout their development.

These revisionary theories of differentiation in connection help us understand how women's appropriation of faith—including religious symbols, narratives, and practices—are

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¹ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), 179.

² Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994), 221-2.

³ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*, (Ashgate, UK: 2004), 15.

influenced by the dynamics of their attachments to significant others. This perspective is not included adequately in the faith development theory of James Fowler. Therefore, feminist researchers in faith development have corrected and expanded his ideas, particularly his conception of the developmental move from traditional faith to more autonomous, or self-authored, beliefs—what Fowler calls the shift from Stage 3, *Synthetic-Conventional Faith*, to Stage 4, *Individuative-Reflective Faith*.

Relationality is significant in the interpersonal dynamics of Fowler's stage 3 but seems to be transcended in his description of stage 4. Therefore it does not account for the experience of women who develop self-authoring faith while remaining in relationships of care. For example, a study of women with severely disabled children reveals that they moved from an outer to an inner locus of spiritual authority while remaining embedded in their responsibility to their children. "Because they had not made a clear move away from the significant other, they were scored at a lower faith stage [in Fowler's model], even though their relocation of authority within themselves led to a tested, rather than a naïve and unreflective, commitment."⁴

Further, in contrast to the highly cognitive and abstract thought demanded by Fowler's stage 4, feminist studies show that their female subjects employ more concrete, intuitive, emotional, imaginative, metaphoric, and embodied ways of knowing as they move into stage 4. They become self-authoring while remaining in affective connection to God and others.

How might these reconceptualizations be used to understand college females' descriptions of their evolving spirituality? Little is known about how this process unfolds for females in late adolescence and young adulthood. Does the college environment support learning as an engaged communal activity that allows for discernment through connection, or is college merely a time to hone one's critical thinking skills and become proficient in debate and analysis?

A Preliminary Study of College Women's Spiritual Development

In the interest of better understanding college women's transformation into spiritual self-authorship, a preliminary study was conducted. This study sought to investigate the stylistic differences in the ways in which college women move into self-authoring spirituality and the features of women's college experience that hindered or enhanced this transition. Using qualitative methodology, the authors interviewed nine young women between the ages of 20 and 25. Interviewees were specifically selected based on the authors' experience of them as having mature spiritual understanding. Each woman participated in a 45-60 minute interview comprised of questions generated by the research team.

Upon completion of interviews, the authors reviewed the content of each interview with the research questions in mind. Interviews were first examined for structural material, or statements that may indicate an interviewee's stage of spiritual development. Next, the authors reviewed interview content for stylistic material, or statements that indicate an interviewee's preference for growth through connection or through separation. Finally, the authors reviewed interviewee responses to questions regarding aspects of college life that had supported spiritual development and the maintenance of connection. Considered together, participant responses revealed a number of interesting findings.

Three major themes emerged in women's accounts of their spiritual development in the college years. Participants frequently spoke of experiences with doubt and difference as instrumental in their shift toward self-authoring spirituality. The following two quotes illustrate the experiences of two such women. The first is just beginning to take note of differing beliefs, and has not yet made the transition into self-authorship. The second interviewee is making the

⁴ Slee, 35-6.

transition into a self-authoring system, and can describe how experiences with difference led her to question her own beliefs.

I've met a lot of people with different values than I'd encountered before. I never met a Jewish person before, ever I was taught that my way was right and everyone else was wrong But it's neat to listen and see what they have to say but its not what I believe.

I started meeting these amazing people, who maybe didn't believe the same as I did. Hindus and Muslims and others. And, I mean, if there is a heaven and hell, why would this person go somewhere different than me?

Another common theme was the internal struggle to revise beliefs and the external struggle to maintain connections as beliefs changed. Young women who had made the shift into self-authorship consistently described the challenge of revising one's meanings while remaining connected to important individuals and groups. The following quotes illustrate this struggle. One participant stated:

It's a constant dance between discovering who I am and staying connected. But, I'm ok with there being parts that overlap, or that we learn from each other.

Another described her experience of both increasing intimacy, and occasional loss, of relationships through the journey toward self-authorship:

I had to take a stance that was contrary to some of my friends. When I did that it was putting at risk what I was valuing and my relationship with them Some relationships changed for the better, I developed some new relationships and some I let go of

Finally, participants described relationships, organizations, and other environments within their college experience that enhanced their ability to test beliefs and develop an internally-directed spirituality while remaining in connection with God and with other people. These included mentoring relationships, peer relationships, classroom experiences, study groups, and many others. Classroom and peer environments are described in the following interviewee quotes. One woman described a college course that sparked her questioning of previous beliefs:

I took a scripture class that changed the way I view the Bible. I have a new understanding I learned about these councils they had in the early church to determine who is God, and . . . how they decided which books to include in the Bible, and there have been many translations so different words have different meanings. You need to know Hebrew. That's changed the way I see things. The Bible is up for interpretation.

Another young woman spoke of friendships that provided a safe environment for questioning, and a continued feeling of connection:

It was really important for me to process it and talk about it [the doubt and discouragement with her faith], and not keep it in. I am really glad that I had some friendships where I could talk about this stuff and not feel judged or pressured.

Discussion and Recommendations

A Preliminary findings from this pilot study suggest that college women who do question their faith beliefs are concerned with maintaining relationships without sacrificing their own needs and changing perspectives. Participants were at various stages of addressing this dilemma and more research is needed to understand how holding environments might be helpful to encouraging faith development through connection. Perhaps environments can nurture what theologian Katherine Zappone calls a “differentiated connectedness” that “becomes stronger the more we know that we are not identical to another human being.” Our difference from the other highlights our individual uniqueness and inherent value, which we may not recognize outside of the relationship. And the otherness of another challenges us to stretch and grow to accommodate both their difference from us and our point of connection with them. As a result, we learn to value each other as distinctive selves while also appreciating our interrelation, and we grow into a mature spirituality of interdependence, rather than fusion or isolation.

How can we foster such differentiation in connection in college women? In her book, *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, Dori Grinenko Baker presents a method of spiritual education based on “story theology,” which was created to allow for interfaith theological dialogue. “Girlfriend Theology” begins with a young woman telling a story from her own life experience to a small group of peers and an adult facilitator. After the story is finished, the group begins a process of reflecting on it, first taking an “experience near” perspective. They share feelings and associations evoked by the story. Related stories and memories surface, questions are asked and answered, and associations are made, all within an emotional approach to the story. Baker explains that she wants the group to provide a zone of safety “in which adolescent girls could reflect upon their identities-in-the-making and be ‘heard to speech.’”⁵

In the second step, the group’s reflection moves to an “experience distant” perspective, and members of the group look for spiritual themes or images in the story, relating it to scripture, myth, religious traditions, or spiritual practices. The facilitator might ask, “How is God or the Divine present (or absent) in this story?” Further, Baker recommends that the facilitator notice when and where new images can be introduced in a relevant manner. In particular, she encourages facilitators to share examples of women’s resistance to dominant cultural norms found in autobiographical stories—especially those of women of color—and in liberation theologies such as womanist, Latin American and Asian feminist theologies.

Finally, the group considers the question, “How might this story and our conversation around it guide our future action?” This “going forth” perspective is the last step in the process. Thus girlfriend theology “starts with life experience, reflects upon that experience through the lenses of scripture, reason and tradition, and ends by informing action in the world.”⁶ Most importantly this educational model suggests that dialogue that allows for difference can empower young women to re-imagine their God images and spiritual concepts, leading them toward the development of a self-authoring spirituality.

⁵ Dori Grinenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.
