

## Journeys in the Spirit *Nicholas Alan SSF*



'By faith Abraham ... set out, not knowing where he was going' (Hebrews 11:8, NRSV). Faith is a journey, a lived experience of walking into the unknown. And if we walk by the Spirit, then by God's grace we will be guided into all the truth (John 16:13). This experience is witnessed to in different ways by each of the three writers who have shared their journeys of faith in this issue of franciscan. As Sister Chris says: "We need a faith that is always changing, growing and responding".

One writer who has spent much time analysing faith stories is James W. Fowler, whose book *Stages of Faith* (HarperCollins, 1981) has become something of a classic in its field. Fowler bases his analysis of faith on the psychology of human development, describing how children grow in their perception of themselves and others, and how their stages of growth can be paralleled in the growth into maturity of faith. Each stage of development may last well into adulthood with individuals or groups content to stay with this particular way of viewing the world. Not everyone reaches the end of the journey of faith in this life.

The first stage in the development of faith is called by Fowler 'Intuitive-Projective Faith'. Psychologically this stage is typical in children aged between three and seven years, and is characterised by great powers of imagination relatively unimpeded by logical thought. Images are powerfully experienced, and stories intuitively understood creating long-lasting impressions and feelings. Faith at this stage can best be nourished by biblical or life stories; and this is an aspect of faith that continues into adulthood, as any successful preacher instinctively knows. The limitation of this stage is that the difference between self and others is still not clearly discerned, not realising that others may have their own quite different story to tell. The conversation of infants can be a kind of parallel monologue, two speeches happening simultaneously without much mutual understanding. This is not unknown in the interaction of adult representatives of religious traditions...

The second stage of faith is called 'Mythic-Literal Faith.' Here the stories of stage one continue to form perceptions of the world, but they are understood much more literally and applied concretely to moral rules and attitudes. The

actors in the stories tend to be more anthropomorphic, and the morals of the story are worked out in terms of justice and fairness to all. If the stories of Genesis could be compared to stage one, the laws of Leviticus might represent this next stage in the journey of faith.

Stage three, described as 'Synthetic-Conventional Faith', represents the development of a clear sense of being part of a group, which provides a secure basis of personal identity. Psychologically this is most often first seen in adolescence, but for many people it is a stage that feels comfortable enough to be lived in throughout life. In terms of faith it may be characterised by uncomplicated loyalty to a particular church or tradition. The values and authority of this tradition may be unquestioned, but that is seen as of little significance. Here one has found a place, a home; but it is a faith that may be vulnerable if trusted authority figures prove all too human, or if the questioning of others challenges one's own faith too directly.

If such a crisis is constructively managed it may lead to stage four, 'Individuative-Reflective Faith', based on a transition many make in personality terms in late adolescence. Here one literally moves away from home for the first time and begins to form a sense of identity defined by one's own boundaries and inner connections rather than that of the group which previously gave one meaning. It is a stage of critical examination of one's own formative past. It may degenerate into self-preoccupation, or even disillusionment with all forms of faith, but equally it may bring out a tested and refined faith able to withstand the challenges of difficult life experiences.

If navigated successfully, the traveller can then progress to stage five, 'Conjunctive Faith', in which the faith questioned in stage four is re-integrated in a more open and conscious way. While affirming the truths of one's own tradition, the truths of others are not excluded and faith is recognized as pointing to a reality beyond all finite expressions.

Finally there is stage six, 'Universalizing Faith', which Fowler admits is only seen in rare individuals such as Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi. In Christian terms he describes this as radical monotheism, going beyond all narrow tribal identities. Yet this stage also incorporates the 'absoluteness of the particular', with people discovering the absoluteness of God and the imperative of loving-kindness, which transcend all traditions, within the particularities of each individual religion. Faith is not an abstract notion but a lived experience in a shared particular commitment.

Setting out stages of faith in this way is bound to be controversial. Some may feel pigeon-holed into what seems to be described as an immature version of faith; others may disagree that Universalizing Faith is really the goal for all people. Some feminist writers have criticised the theory for being too focussed on the individual, down-playing women's instinctive affirmation of the importance of relationships. Nonetheless, whatever its limitations, Fowler's model does show how dynamic faith can be, how it grows and develops throughout a lifetime in many people's experience.

However the journey of faith is travelled, it is a common realisation that patterns form more clearly looking back than looking forward. Only in retrospect can we make sense of many of the events of our lives, and even then much will remain simply a mystery. But we can have confidence in the God 'who orders all things well', who searches out the lost and joyfully brings them home. If our journeys are in the Spirit, then although we may not know where we are going or even where we have come from, yet we can be confident that all our wanderings will eventually be guided to God's final haven at our journeys' end. **f**