

From Person to Principle UU Theology in Terms of Developmental Theory

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August 21, 2011

One of the anomalies of Fundamentalist Christianity is its disdain for the idea of evolution. It prefers, as we all know, an impossible and literal interpretation of the six-day Creation story found in *Genesis*. I call this anomalous because, long before Darwin and the age of science, even ancient religions recognized the obvious and irrefutable processes of evolution through numerous mudman myths, that is, myths in which humanity emerges from the earth. Indeed, the *Genesis* story itself names its protagonist, Adam, which literally means, “of the earth.” “From dirt you were made, and to dirt you will return.” Similarly, the Egyptian goddess Nun (or Nu), according to the Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, represents the, “primordial ocean in which before the creation lay the germs of all things and all beings.¹ ...inside Nun, before creation, there had lived a ‘spirit, still formless, who bore within him the sum of all existence.’”² This could also be an apt description for DNA. In Babylonian mythology, Apsu is the name of this primordial chaos, this pregnant abyss filled with water from which all life eventually springs, fashioning human beings, in particular, out of mud. In Greek lore it is Prometheus (the Forethinker) who creates human beings by mixing earth and water together, similar to the stories of people (and often animals) fashioned from mud found among numerous Native American and Mesoamerican traditions, as well as in African and Chinese lore. Indeed, the Chinese oracle, the *I Ching*, translated, “Book of Changes,” one of the most ancient texts on Earth, is based on the very idea that all forms, structures, and forces eventually emerge and change from the ground up. Perhaps this is why the root of so many of our words for *human* also mean “earth,” “ground,” or “dirt,” like *Adam*, *Humus*, and, my favorite, *Pueblo*, which refers to both mud houses and the people who live in them. This ancient and persistent understanding that humans come from the ground, that life emerges from the earth, that it evolves and changes over time, might be summed up best, however, in a line from Kurt Vonnegut’s 1963 science fiction novel, *Cat’s Cradle*, “God made mud. God got lonesome. So God said to the mud, ‘Sit up!’”

It should not be too surprising, on the other hand, that a mindset that is itself incapable of evolving, might despise the notion of evolution, the notion that things change, and must change. It’s not that I mean to disparage the religious beliefs of others, but my expertise, my years of research into the psychology of religion, the focus of my doctoral work, leads me to conclude that fundamentalism is not philosophy, and is only respected as a valid outlook to the detriment of society. Rather, fundamentalism is a form of collective or, if you will, institutionalized,

¹ Guirand, Felix, ed., *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Aldrington, Richard & Ames, Delano, translators, Barnes & Noble Books, New York, 1959, 1994, p. 11.

² Ibid.

fixation, which, in turn, refers to being stuck at an early stage of psychological development. Thus, according to my definition, fundamentalism is the very antithesis of evolution. It loathes progress, and progressive ideas, precisely because it clings to the primitive past and resists change with a religious fervor. It wallows in the mud, defiantly refusing to emerge from it.

In light of the research of religious scholar, Martin E. Marty, author of the comprehensive and voluminous work, *The Fundamentalist Project*, and of terrorism expert, Charles Strozier, editor and contributor to, *The Fundamentalist Mindset*, I've summarized my own list of those features I feel best characterize fundamentalism:

- Extremism – Thinking that is polarized, absolute, literal, and irrelative
- Irrational – Thinking that is illogical, contradictory, and inconsistent
- Subjective – Thinking that is biased, unconscious, and unreflective
- Punitive – Thinking that is vengeful, angry, and destructive
- Authoritarian – Thinking that is submissive, overbearing, considered right in every circumstance (and, usually, patriarchal).

What strikes me most about this list, as a student of developmental psychology, is that these are also precisely the characteristics that define the thinking of young children. Children up to age 6 or 7 are dualistic in their thinking, meaning they tend to think in extremes. This is so, according to Jean Piaget, the founder of developmental psychology, because they are unable “to make relations mentally.”³ In other words, children at this stage of development easily grasp absolute concepts like, “hot” and “cold,” or “good” and “bad,” but have difficulty understanding what is meant by “hotter,” or “colder,” or “better” and “worse.” “A child uses ‘big’ and ‘small’ without confusion,” Piaget explains, “since they imply one single comparison...”⁴ but “bigger” and “smaller” can only be understood in relationship to something else. He also said, “they adopt opinions successively, which, if they compared would contradict each other,” but because they don’t yet think relatively, “they forget the points of view which they previously adopted.”⁵ A rule may be fair, for instance when it’s to the child’s advantage, but unfair when it isn’t. Developmentalist, Lawrence Kohlberg singularly touches upon the subjective, punitive, and authoritarian nature of childish thinking in stating that, “At this level the [child] is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right and wrong, but interprets these labels in terms of either the physical or the hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, reward, exchange of favors) or in terms of the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels.”⁶ In other words,

³ Beard, Ruth M., *An Outline of Piaget’s Developmental Psychology*, A Mentor Book, Basic Books, Inc., New York, NY, 1972p. 78.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kohlberg, Lawrence, *Stages of Development as a Basis for Education*, see Munsey, Brenda, ed., *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL, 1980, p. 91.

morality to a young child is based solely upon whether she or he will be punished or not by some external authority that is always right.

Since this is not really a discussion about the nature of fundamentalism, I won't go into specific examples of how fundamentalism also demonstrates such thinking, but do hope I've said enough to draw a reasonable comparison between the two, which is why I consider fundamentalism a form of psychological fixation, and not a legitimate worldview. The Apostle Paul is reported to have written, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things."⁷ Just as there comes a time when children above the age of 7 grow to understand, quite naturally and on their own, that there is no such thing as Santa Claus, the human psyche ought to put away childish ways of thinking—thinking that is extreme, irrational, subjective, punitive, and authoritarian.

What this does mean is that Christianity is not itself a fixated kind of thinking, anymore than humanism, or Buddhism, or Islam, or any other religion necessarily is. I know this, having received my own liberal theological education from both Baptists and Catholics, from Christian professors I still regard in the highest esteem for opening my mind to the plethora of never ending questions regarding all truth. I know this because some of the people I admire most in human history have been motivated by religions other than my own, Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Father Roy Burgious, Thich Nhat Hahn, the Dahli Lama, Meister Eckhart, and so on. And, I know this, because just this past week I marched beside Christian leaders in this very community on behalf of the rising number of jobless and underemployed in our nation. Fundamentalism, rather, is but a state of mind that skews everything else one believes.

Unitarian Universalism, in particular, is the polar opposite of fundamentalism. This is not to say that we don't, like everyone else, succumb to childish ways of thinking now and then. I've known many UU's over the years whom have, at times, demonstrated these same characteristics. As Kohlberg admitted, "It should be noted that any individual is usually not entirely at one stage."⁸ Regressing to childish thinking once in a while is one thing, but lifting it up as a legitimate and responsible mindset and way of life is quite another. Unlike those who prefer to wallow in the mud, Unitarian Universalists strive to emerge from it. This is evident, not only in the way we embrace science and reason, including the theory of evolution, but, more importantly, in our commitment to progress.

Indeed, if there is one thing that defines Unitarian Universalism most, it is our ever-changing identity. We began 500 years ago as Christians who just so

⁷ I Corinthians 13:11

⁸ Kohlberg, Lawrence, *Stages of Development as a Basis for Education*, see Munsey, Brenda, ed., *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL, 1980p. 31.

happened to believe Jesus was born a man and became a god, and disbelieved in eternal damnation, though we still believed in Hell. I doubt if these come anywhere close to the beliefs of anyone in this room today. Then, nearly 300 hundred years ago, we started focusing more on Jesus' teaching than on Jesus, and quit believing in Hell altogether. "Give them hope, not hell," proclaimed John Murray, the founder of American Universalism. A century later, Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested we ought to transcend Christian language altogether, and a hundred years after that, humanism emerged and asked why we should focus on God at all when we ought to be working to solve our own problems. And today, we are increasingly disturbed by the use of any traditional religious language in our services and have adopted a set of seven principles that never use words like, *God, Jesus, worship, holy, sacred, faith, prayer*, or even *church*. Ours is a history of change, of progress, of evolution, and one of our greatest challenges to this day concerns how to best describe ourselves, because even now we are in the midst of changing. We cannot settle on our definition, because, by definition, we never settle. Unitarian Universalism is a religion that continues to evolve. It is defined by change.

What's interesting to me in terms of developmental theory, even more interesting than the similarity between fundamentalism and childish thinking, is that the highest stage of cognitive and moral development is characterized precisely by the elevation of certain principles. Although they call them by different names, most developmental theorists have three stages of development. Lawrence Kohlberg's are probably the most familiar. He calls the first the *pre-conventional* stage, at which an individual tends to understand morality, as already mentioned, in black and white, irrational, subjective, punitive, and authoritarian terms. This is also the stage at which one is mostly motivated to gratify one's own immediate needs and desires, without much thought for anyone else. Kohlberg called his second stage *conventional* precisely because it is the stage when the individual does become aware of the competing needs of others, and so begins playing by the rules, adopting social conventions, doing what is expected, in order to be in the game and get one's share of the social pie. But the third stage, the *post-conventional* stage, is achieved when one realizes morality means more than just playing by the rules and doing what is expected; that there are certain principles that must be upheld even if it means sometimes breaking the rules—a morality that is the basis of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. "At this level," Kohlberg explained, "there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles..."⁹ He goes on to suggest such principles are based on *justice*, which he defines as "general individual rights."¹⁰

Clearly, such justice is the basis of our Unitarian Universalist principles. What's even more remarkable is that, long before Kohlberg came on the scene, the 17th century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism, also came up with three stages of development. He called the first the *aesthetic* stage, because the individual thinks only in terms of one own interests, needs, and

⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁰ Ibid.

desires. He called the second the *ethical* stage, because, like Kohlberg's middle stage, one's morality is based up the ethics, that is, the rules of society. It is a law-abiding stage in which playing by the rules and obeying the authorities without question becomes sacrosanct. But he called the third stage the *religious* stage, because he understood religion to be a "leap of faith," that is, a willingness to step into the unknown by doing something other than what everyone else considers right. He talked about the "absurdity" of being able to do what is right, even if it feels wrong, or doing what might be considered wrong, because it feels right. "A crowd," he said, "in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens [one's] sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction."¹¹ More remarkably, from Kierkegaard's perspective, the highest principle one can adhere to, like Kohlberg, is *equality*. "So there is equality," he insisted, "infinite equality between [everyone]."¹²

Finally, Erich Fromm, the great social psychologist, who also knew nothing of Kohlberg's work, deciphered three stages of *theological* development.¹³ "In the beginning of this development," he explains, "we find a despotic, jealous God, who considers man, whom he created, as his property, and is entitled to do with him whatever he pleases."¹⁴ If we accept the notion, as theologian Frederick Buechner so succinctly put it, that, "All theology... is at its heart autobiography,"¹⁵ then such a notion of God reflects the egocentric and punitive mindset of those individuals at Kierkegaard's *aesthetic stage* and Kohlberg's *pre-conventional level*, or what we might call, the *fundamentalist* stage. Indeed, Fromm described this as an *anthropocentric* phase because it perceives God to be a person, like oneself. At his second stage, which he called the *covenantal* stage, God and humans enter into a kind of contract that can't be broken unless one party violates the agreement. "God makes a covenant with Noah," Fromm explains, "in which he promises never to destroy the human race again, a covenant by which he is bound himself."¹⁶ Again, like Kierkegaard's and Kohlberg's middle stages, Fromm's stage is based on following the rules. But at the highest stage, he says, "God ceases to be a person, a man, a father; [but] becomes the symbol of the principle behind the manifoldness of phenomena..."¹⁷ and that principle, he says, transforms "God from the figure of a father into the symbol of his principles, those of justice, truth, and love. God *is* truth,

¹¹ Stumpf, Samuel E., ed., *Philosophy: History & Problems*, third edition, (McGraw-Hill Book Company, U.S., 1971, 1983) p. 447.

¹² Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination; Judge for Yourselves!* and, *Three Discourses*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1851) p. 5.

¹³ "Since the evolution of the human race shifted from a mother-centered to a father-centered society, as well as of religion, we can trace the development of a maturing love mainly in the development of patriarchal religion." [Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 57.]

¹⁴ Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, *ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁵ Buechner, Frederick, *The Sacred Journey*, (Harper San Francisco, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1991) p. 1.

¹⁶ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, *ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

God *is* justice.”¹⁸ In short, theological speaking, God is no longer a person, but a principle.

I would suggest that this is precisely where Unitarian Universalists are at today in terms of our own evolution. We have become uncomfortable using traditional religious jargon, God-talk, if you will, because our morality is based neither on a fear of being punished, nor upon doing what other expect of us, but upon doing what we expect of ourselves—to uplift and uphold those principles of justice, equality, truth, and compassion, no matter what we or anyone else believes. Hence, most intriguing to me of all, is that Kohlberg’s protégé, James Fowler, in his book *Stages of Faith*, describes the highest stage of faith development as *Universalizing Faith*:

They are "contagious" in the sense that they create zones of liberation from the social, political, economic and ideological shackles we place and endure on human futurity. Living with felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world, Universalizers are often experienced as subversive of the structures (including religious structures) by which we sustain our individual and corporate survival, security and significance. Many persons in this stage die at the hands of those whom they hope to change. Universalizers are often more honored and revered after death than during their lives. The rare persons who may be described by this stage have a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us. Their community is universal in extent. Particularities are cherished because they are vessels of the universal, and thereby valuable apart from any utilitarian considerations. Life is both loved and held to loosely. Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition.¹⁹

Does this describe anyone you know?

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 57f.

¹⁹ Munsey, *ibid.*, p. 149.