

Religious Development Interviews and Case Study

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Introduction

Religious development reflects how people find meaning and purpose in their beliefs, experiences, and identities. Using James Fowler's model of faith development theory, this paper examines two personal accounts of faith development. Interviews with Laura, a transgender woman raised in a strict Pentecostal environment, and Michelle, a young Methodist woman, provide an opportunity to examine how faith develops through trauma, reflection, and life changing events. Their stories reveal how the evolution of spiritual maturity can result from struggle and renewal, and how faith develops actively through the passage of life.

Interview Summaries

Subject 1:

For my first interview, I was able to interview a 30-year-old transgender woman, who chose the pseudonym Laura. Laura had a deep and complex story with reference to her religious/spiritual life and self-development. As a child she was hailed as a "future prophet" in the deeply religious Pentecostal Christian community in which she was indoctrinated into the expectations and rituals of the Church. This is a good example of the highly significant connecting point between one's early religious indoctrination, trauma, personal identity, and the possible ways in which this can connect with the restructuring of a spirituality based on personal growth and healing, through individual autonomy.

Early Faith and Religious Upbringing

As a child, her beliefs were formed from very drastic Pentecostal religious teachings, which placed a high importance on purity, obedience, and fear of punishment from God. For her, God was the "ultimate punisher, the righteous sword," and Jesus was the great "instrument" of that punishment. As she was considered to be a great blessing for the congregation due to her

spiritual devotion, she feared punishment from God for infractions in her ordinary life. Prayer was a “high,” which came to her frequently, but she realized only later that it was “emotional conditioning.” She explained:

Prayer always brought this rush of emotion that made me feel close to Him, like I was touching something divine. Looking back, I think it was conditioning. It was part of the addiction of being a Christian, where that feeling becomes proof that God is real. (Shafif, 2025)

Her beliefs were built from reverence, fear and striving after unrealistic moral perfection.

Trauma and Disillusionment

The first rupture in faith for Laura came about in part through experiences of sexual abuse in childhood and experiences of extreme poverty at various stages. These early traumatic experiences led her to question the justice or legitimacy of a “loving” God who was supposed to care about her. She remembers asking herself, “How could God let such a thing happen to me, especially to children?” Her unanswered prayers for protection were evidence of God’s absence, and it planted the seeds of doubt. The seeds that ultimately ruptured the beliefs that had held her prisoner. The struggle between the factor of suffering and that of faith became a crisis of spirituality. In this crisis, her vision of God shifted from that of a benevolent protector to that of an unfeeling spectator.

Identity Conflict and Faith Rejection

As she grew into adolescence, the realization of her being gay only served to add fuel to Laura’s inner conflict. Her identity was in direct opposition to the indoctrination she had undergone. This produced an unwavering feeling of shame and self-hatred. Laura described praying daily, asking God to allow her to be “made normal” or “made straight.” God’s silence

was a form of abandonment. She stated, "I felt robbed of forgiveness, of the future He supposedly wanted for me" By the time she was fourteen years old, she had fully renounced her religion, telling her family that she did not believe in God. That this was received with anger and rejection was to Laura a means of liberation. She described this as a "justified rebellion," as she was throwing away a religion that had been condemning who she was.

Spiritual Reconstruction and Gender Transition

In the years that followed, Laura was busy experimenting with different forms of religious beliefs and developments, hoping to find something that could give her spiritual satisfaction. She discovered they all have the same requirement of "blind devotion," which was one of the reasons she left Christianity in the first place. For a time, she adopted atheism, having entirely severed her relationship with anything approaching spirituality, but eventually came into contact with the experience of her gender transition. That gave her a new choice of spirituality founded on self-acceptance and embodiment of her true self. She spoke about the experience of incorporating her femininity as "feeling powerful" and "feeling free," and that it brought her in touch with a deep sense of inner peace. Through this transformation, she began to reimagine the divine in feminine terms, remarking, "If God exists, she's a woman and she's proud of me" Her spirituality thus evolved from obedience to creation, from fear to empowerment.

Present Spirituality and Meaning

At the present time, Laura states that she is spiritual but not religious. She has her own definitions of spiritual exercises, tarot cards, crystals, setting intentions, manifestations, not prayer or worship but in terms of self-reliance and energy. Evil she defines as "the intention to harm, or the refusal to prevent harm when it is in our power to do so," a reflection of her

experience with suffering and injustice in general. Her purpose, she explained, is “creation.” The creation of love, art, and safe spaces for others. What began as a crisis of faith has transformed into a spirituality of resilience and compassion. Her journey demonstrates that the loss of institutional religion can become the foundation for a redefined and self-empowered spiritual life.

Subject 2:

For my second interview, I was able to interview a 21 year old woman who chose the pseudonym Michelle. Michelle was raised a Methodist Christian and describes her spiritual development as a gradual marking of questions, maturation, and rediscovery. Unlike the traumatic rupture of faith described by my first subject, Michelle's development is a quieter and more reflective growth of faith. Her story indicates a movement from inherited and accepted religious assurance towards an adult, individualized religion nurtured by compassion, moral reflection, and personal experience. Michelle, through her very personal experience, indicates how faith can be converted not through rejection, but through reinterpretation.

Early Life and Beliefs

As a child, Michelle was raised in a Methodist home where there was a presence of religion but not a strong emphasis placed upon it. She began to attend church with her family at about the age of seven, and she describes her early concept of religion as something that seemed far removed, intangible, and out of the realm of belief. Religion and God "didn't really make any sense" to her at that time. It was not a question of non-belief but rather a situation in which religion had no connection with the concept of God. As she matured, however, her relationship with God became closer. She acquired what she now describes as a "very strong belief" in God's existence and that He has a plan for her, even when that plan isn't always visible to her.

Crisis and Spiritual Resilience

A major point of Michelle's spiritual development occurred following the breaking of her engagement, an event which she describes as very devastating from an emotional and religious standpoint. She explained that it felt like her “path crumbled” in front of her, but interpreted this sad experience as God “moving me towards the right path.” During this time prayer became her tool for consolation and guidance. Even though she did not receive direct answers, she noticed “patterns and behaviors” that helped guide her decisions, interpreting them as subtle signs of divine direction. Even when her family urged her to “work through things,” she found the courage through faith to make the decision that aligned with what she needed.

Her mental health struggles also contributed to her understanding of faith. She sometimes questioned why God would put her in such situations. She stated, “If God’s so great, why would He let me deal with this?” She later came to view this adversity as a means of growth. She began to understand how her struggles were helping her be a better person, and helped her acquire “a stronger sense of God and myself.”

Meaning and Community

Following this period of personal loss, Michelle rebuilt her sense of identity through faith and community. She found deep belonging in “nerd culture.” She found spaces where gaming, anime, and creativity fostered connection among people who often felt misunderstood. She described this community as a gift aligned with her, one that put her back on “God’s path,” providing comfort and acceptance when she needed it most. Her faith became connected with this sense of purpose. She believes that God allows meaning to be found in unexpected places and that life’s purpose differs for everyone. For her, that purpose is “to make others happy,”

inspired by past experiences of loneliness and the desire to ensure, “that other people around never feel the same isolation.”

Mature Faith and Relationship with God

Michelle cited her father, a Methodist pastor, as a model of mature faith. His act of joining the ministry sometime later in life, and his compassion (especially during the separation from her mother) showed her faith can coexist with pain. She noted her father saying, “Even if I am not happy, I want your mother to be happy.” That was a powerful comment, leaving a lasting impression on her that love and acceptance are essential in the process of “gaining spiritual strength and becoming closer to God.”

Her theology represents a balanced idea of divine guidance. To her, faith is not a straight line, but a continual process of trust in God’s redirections. She notes, “Your destination has been planned, the journey has not.” When her nursing career ended in failure, and she finally found her calling in graphic design, she considered this also a part of God’s plan for her, and evidence that the painful failure was and is part of “God’s larger, more ultimate plan.”

Present Spirituality and Worldview

Today Michelle views herself as a religious person, not just spiritual. Her philosophy of life rests on the belief that “the bad will lead to the good,” and she sees Christ’s cross as a symbol of perseverance through suffering and God’s presence across different denominations. Her view of Christianity is one of love and compassion. She gives special importance to the command to “love thy neighbor.” She believes that all people are deserving of love and understanding, because “You never know what someone is going through.” She believes that evil is not a spiritual presence but comes from a lack of faith in people who are “those who just haven’t found their way or have lost their way.”

Prayer is still one of her spiritual practices, used especially at times of stress or in sympathy for others. For example, she silently prays for the victims who have been in a wreck as she drives along, but she doesn't pray ritually. Her beliefs are inclusive and humble. She does not regard herself as being religiously superior to others, and she does not think that anyone should be forced to believe as she does. "Be comfortable in your own belief," she said, "but don't let that make you ignorant toward others' beliefs."

Michelle's story presents a faith that has grown out of struggle, insight, and caring. From a concept that was once far away it has grown to a relationship with God that was fed by grit and love. The pain of heartbreak, the battles with mental health, and community deepened her conviction that faith is not defined by certainty but by endurance and love.

Analysis and Reflection

James Fowler's (1981) model of faith development theory attempts to model the way in which one's beliefs and understanding of faith grow through six stages, where each stage represents a more complex and autonomous sense of self. Faith in this theory is not just limited to belief in God, but it represents the journey of finding meaning and purpose through one's life. Both Laura and Michelle illustrate movement through these stages, though their stories are vastly different, in that one experiences dissolution and reconstruction, while the other illustrates a gradual reflection and redefinition of faith.

Subject:1

In the case of Laura, her early spiritual life aligns closely with Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith. Fowler identifies this stage as characteristic of late adolescence and early adulthood. During this period, belief is determined and shaped by surrounding authorities, family, church, or community, rather than personal consideration alone (Fowler,

1981, pp. 150–153). In the case of Laura, this is illustrated by her early life, which is accurate for this stage. Coming from a rigid and strict Pentecostal environment, she absorbed the teachings that were given by her surroundings as ultimate truth. Her idea of God as the "righteous sword" and "ultimate punisher" is an expression of a faith built on compliance, fear, and a dependence on divine validation. This experience of faith correlates to Stage 3, highlighting the idea that belief is maintained through peer reinforcement rather than introspective thinking.

The work of disillusionment and trauma was what pushed Laura into Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith, the stage in which individuals critically analyze inherited beliefs, and start to build up their own idea of spirituality (Fowler, 1981, p. 179). This stage of development is often reached through crises or events that disrupt old structures of thought. In Laura's case the departure from religion altogether, the acceptance of atheism, and the reconstruction of her spirituality through gender transition represent the process of reflective reconstruction.

Laura's later development of a faith defined by femininity and empowerment shows progress towards Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith. In this stage individuals gain the ability to consolidate the contradictions of spirituality, and accept that truth can be expressed in numerous ways (Fowler, 1981, pp. 184–187). Cherniak et al. (2021, p. 127) suggest that healing from an insecure attachment to toxic religious imagery tends to lead to more empathetic and inclusive beliefs. Laura's story of suffering to self love and empathy is synonymous with this pattern.

Subject:2

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith is common in childhood, when individuals take religious stories and rules in a literal sense and rely on external authorities to define what is moral (Fowler, 1981, pp. 135–137, 150). Michelle's early adoption of the church at the age of seven represents

this stage. Her faith was institutional and ritualistic, but not personal or truly understood at a young age.

As she matured, life experiences, specifically her struggles with mental health and the ending of her engagement were the catalysts for the transition into Stage 4:

Individuative-Reflective Faith. Michelle's reflection on faith that "Your destination has been planned—the journey has not," demonstrates her realization that faith is dynamic. She began to trust her own ability to discern her own relationship with God rather than relying on institutionalized religion as the final authority (Fowler, 1981, p. 179).

Her current belief system illustrates Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith, where individuals embrace complexity and interconnection (Fowler, 1981, pp. 184-189). Michelle places importance on empathy, humility, and religious tolerance. This indicates her awareness of how many forms faith can take and the fact that the truth is not linear. According to Kosarkova et al. (2020, p. 8) personal hardship can lead individuals to reevaluate the meaning of personal suffering and deepen their faith. Michelle's faith development is consistent with this interpretation, since she used her experiences of loss and recovery to strengthen her belief in a compassionate and purposeful God, transforming her religion from a source of order to a foundation of personal growth and meaning.

Comparative Analysis

Both subjects illustrate movement into the later stages of Fowler's model, but through opposite developmental paths. Laura's journey represents a transformational disillusionment, where her faith was dismantled and rebuilt from the ground up after trauma, which is consistent with post-traumatic spiritual growth (Kosarkova et al. 2020, p. 7) Michelle's development on the

other hand, would appear to be a gradual integration and deepening of beliefs through experience instead of rejection.

In Fowler's view, both have transitioned through Stage 3's dependence on external authority into Stage 5's acceptance of complexity and inclusivity (Fowler, 1981, pp. 172–199). The differing circumstances of the two subjects reinforce Fowler's central idea that faith isn't static, but is continually reconstructed to answer the challenges and insights of life. While Laura's spirituality is rooted in autonomy and creation, and Michelle's is rooted in compassion and balance, both are equally mature expressions of Conjunctive Faith.

Reflection

Before conducting the interviews I was nervous about them and the assignment. Through my journalism background I've done in-depth interviews before but never about topics that were this personal. It was a struggle getting over the hurdle of feeling like these were questions I shouldn't be asking near strangers. Once I was doing the interviews however my worries began to fade as my participants were very understanding and open with their responses allowing me to better capture their stories with my questions. I have always been a very open-minded person when it comes to others' beliefs and have had exposure to a wide variety of belief systems, but it was fun being able to sit down and listen to someone talk about theirs in detail. This assignment has taught me a lot about myself and how I can connect with other people and I will seek out more experiences like this to expand my knowledge of the world and other people.

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