

# CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

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MARY, BORN IN 1950, grew up in a conventional Christian family, quarrelled constantly with her mother, went off to college at seventeen, dropped out, and spent five years experimenting with drugs, sex and eastern religions in a search for meaning and love. After hitting bottom in a failed relationship, an auto crash, a shoplifting arrest and a suicide attempt, at twenty-two she was 'convicted of sin' and made a decision to 'believe in Jesus Christ and follow him'.

After her conversion, Mary became obsessed with finding a husband. She had devastating experiences in a number of small Christian communities, including dismissal from one after an unrequited love for a member she felt God meant her to marry. In general, Mary felt miserable and community elders found her unsubmitive to authority. She wandered for two years, then finally found Harry, with whom she shared great needs and an interest in ministry. Within four months they were married. This union was an immediate disaster as Harry soon turned from Jesus to drugs and women. Yet it dragged on for three years before Mary finally let go, taking herself and two children home to her family.

Mary's story features prominently in James Fowler's *Stages of faith*, one of the ground-breaking studies that have helped to make developmental psychology so popular for analysing the spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> This trend has made the developmental work of Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan, along with that of Fowler, and more recently Robert Kegan, one of the primary tools for interpreting spiritual growth.<sup>2</sup> But popularity breeds suspicion, and serious questions have been raised about the relationship between developmental psychology and the Christian spiritual tradition. Are they compatible? Is there a danger of

reducing spirituality to psychology? We will begin our answer to these and other questions about the relationship between developmental psychology and spiritual growth by stating our presuppositions and goals.

Christian spiritual growth is movement into deeper and more comprehensive love. Love is Jesus's only command and the tradition's standard of 'perfection'. The same movement from self-centredness to self-transcendence is the criterion of growth in developmental psychology.<sup>3</sup> Although spirituality cannot be reduced to psychology, both the spiritual tradition and developmental psychology maintain, as their standard of maturity, movement toward autonomy for the sake of relationship.<sup>4</sup> Because both the spiritual tradition and developmental psychology describe the goal of life as intimacy, as authentically mutual relationship, the latter's clarification of human relationship can be profoundly helpful for understanding and promoting the mature relationships of religious experience (i.e., to God, others, self, the cosmos).

Our aim in this article is to develop this thesis by moving in three steps. (I) We will first notice the general pattern of spiritual growth that is consistently taught in the history of spirituality. (II) Then we will explain how developmental psychology describes human growth according to the same pattern. (III) Finally, we will critically examine the implications of this similarity by responding to six questions about the use of developmental psychology in spiritual ministry. Is the enthusiasm for developmental psychology resulting in the reduction of spirituality to psychology? Does the use of developmental psychology in spirituality promote genuine spiritual growth or merely socialization? Are theories of developmental psychology descriptive or prescriptive; do they claim that 'higher is better'? Is a more advanced stage of psychological development holier? How can spiritual growth that demands self-sacrifice be compatible with developmental psychology which seems to aim at self-fulfilment? What is gained and what is lost when one uses developmental psychology to interpret spiritual growth? We will hold these questions for our third section, because they can be answered adequately only on the basis of an accurate grasp of the way these two fields understand human growth.

### *I General pattern of spiritual growth*

Because the richness of Christian spirituality cannot be summarized adequately in a few pages, our goal here is not a summary

but simply an outline of the pattern of spiritual growth that is described repeatedly in the tradition. How does it interpret spiritual maturity and the way to reach it?

*The gospels:* Each gospel has its own way of narrating the pattern of growth called discipleship in imitation of Jesus. Mark, for example, centres on Jesus as the suffering servant Messiah because Mark's community is persecuted and asks: why is this happening to us? The gospel replies that the disciple is one who follows the Master's path of faithful love, giving one's last breath as Jesus did. Luke's community, a missionary church, has difficulty learning to expand its boundaries of sharing and concern. Only slowly does it realize that life in Christ calls one to love beyond one's family and friends, that is, beyond the limits approved in its culture. Matthew's community experiences its identity as commitment to Mosaic teaching, yet it is wrenched by outsiders challenging this identity. The community bolsters its self-understanding by proclaiming Jesus as the personification of God's wisdom, whose interpretation of the Law is the only adequate measure of Israel's righteousness: mercy, forgiveness, trust in the midst of difficulty—the beatitudes.

More than any other gospel community, John's realizes the depth of Jesus's unity with God and their own indwelling in God through rebirth as God's daughters and sons, as friends and sisters or brothers of Jesus, as those in whom the new Paraclete lives and continues to teach Jesus's message. At the heart of the apostolic spirituality of the Fourth Gospel is the experience of being sent even as Jesus was sent from God. This sense of unity does not eliminate disunity, detachment, independence from past religious culture. John's community realizes that it can no longer remain 'in the synagogue', but must sever ties with all that had given it religious security.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, the gospel vision of spiritual maturity is one of deep and inclusive love. It is that relationship to God and others born of the struggle to discern where and how God is present in the community, in ministry, in suffering, in religious and political dissension, and in one's own sinfulness. Maturity is, then, a pattern of free decision (i.e., autonomy) for the sake of deeper relationship. This is the kind of maturity that Mary (in Fowler's story) lacks. Love is most evident in the gospel, yet the dimension of self-direction and adult freedom is also stressed in the language of a

call to conversion and to fidelity in suffering misunderstanding, insecurity, persecution.

*Historical overview.* Spiritual maturity, in early Christianity, continued to be seen as union with God and love of neighbour. Insertion into Greek and Roman institutions caused these relationships to be evaluated not only according to ideals of contemplation and purity of conscience but also with assumptions about sexual abstinence and the subordination of women. Virginity as an ideal, practised by a relative minority, not only prompted renunciation of sexuality but also legitimated a kind of personal autonomy through rejection of social conventions regarding raising a family.<sup>6</sup>

Medieval spirituality envisioned spiritual maturity as whole-hearted conformity to Christ's love and care for all, a care which was often imaged as motherly. New forms of religious life revealed that maturity could be attained outside monastic settings. Free personal judgment was needed in order to discern the appropriate response to forms of apostolic life and to be faithful to interior development understood as both active and contemplative.<sup>7</sup>

Reformers, both Protestant and Catholic, envisioned maturity as surrender to God's free love in Christ and as fidelity to one's interior call to vocation and religious identity. Religious upheaval and reform tended to reinforce the need for fidelity to one's conscience in the midst of uncertainty. Consequently, this era developed rules for discernment, signs which indicate when spiritual darkness may be new life, and guidelines for movement into the interior castle,<sup>8</sup> insights Mary needs for a breakthrough to continuing growth in maturity.

Modern spirituality continued to respond to ideas and events which opened new perspectives on faith and doubt, on mission, science, social structures and world religions. Maturity remained a matter of loving relationships and fidelity to one's personal call and gifts. Radically new possibilities and re-examination of religious authority reinforced the need for discernment which enables one to transcend conventional wisdom, examine inherited bias, and risk being the author of one's own approach to spirituality. At the same time, as Mary discovered in her own Christian communities, religious authority stressed conformity and silenced dissent.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Merton is a paradigm of Catholic spirituality in the last forty years. Long before Vatican Council II, Merton gradually perceived the direction of God's Spirit in his life moving him from a desire to flee the world in order to find God in the sacred sphere

of the monastery, to a realization that his former perspective was an illusion. 'Finding God' was, rather, a matter of entering fully into himself and into every dimension of the world of human friendship, of action for justice, of humanity praising and seeking the Ultimate in non-Christian religions. Catholic spirituality since Vatican II has moved steadily in these directions, rejoicing in the Spirit's gifts and facing the inevitable and profound questions and discomfort associated with new pathways.<sup>10</sup>

In every era Christian tradition has interpreted spiritual growth as a gradual process of detachment and attachment, of free and independent (autonomous) choices to adhere to God in a relationship to Christ as friend, brother, beloved, by the power of the Spirit. Life in Christ, as Mary must discover, goes in the direction of deeper and more inclusive love through a dying process: dying to mere conformity to social or religious expectations in order to commit oneself freely to Jesus's values; dying to control of one's ministry, relationships, and even of one's spiritual growth not in order to give God 'control' and relinquish personal involvement but, rather, to enter a relationship of genuine intimacy with God, others, self and the cosmos.<sup>11</sup> This pattern of growing in adult autonomy, through dying to the security of immature life, for the sake of authentic intimacy, is also the central theme of developmental psychology.

## *II Developmental psychology*

In its relationship to spirituality, developmental psychology is a combination of two approaches: 1) the psychoanalytic version embodied in Erik Erikson's psychosocial life cycle, and 2) the cognitive-structural variety established by Jean Piaget.

Erikson's life cycle is made up of eight bi-polar crises, ranging from the tension between trust and mistrust in the infant to that between integrity and despair in the older adult. In the first months of life, for example, the infant must establish a favourable ratio of trust over mistrust in its relationship with its nurturing parents. Mary's antagonistic relationship with her mother suggests an inadequate resolution of this crisis. Trust is the bedrock on which other ego strengths can be developed and, in particular, the vital core of any future religious faith. Profession of faith is so much 'whistling past the graveyard' for a person who does not *feel* that people, life, reality are good, and can be trusted. But a person whose life has been grounded in such trust will approach the

waning years not in despair and bitterness over a life that could not be controlled, but with a religious sense of integrity or wholeness that flowers from a self-transcending life of fidelity and loving care.

Jean Piaget concentrated his attention on the structures of knowing and the ways they develop from infancy to adulthood, from an egocentrism tied to images to a decentred objectivity based on reflective interpretation of experience. Mary's success in high school indicates the presence of advanced reasoning, but not necessarily the ability to direct it toward herself in a critical, reflective fashion.

While Piaget focused on the logical pattern of scientific reasoning, Lawrence Kohlberg directed the structural approach to moral reasoning, and identified six stages paired at preconventional, conventional, and postconventional levels. Here, again, development moves from the egocentric individual to the socialized person to the autonomous person, who makes moral judgments in accord with universal ethical principles, that is, from self-centredness to decentred self-transcendence. Carol Gilligan reminded us that a mature appropriation of a universal ethical principle such as justice is always relative to a concrete context and integrated with a caring concern for others, a just caring or caring justice. Mary had a caring concern for others, as she clearly showed with Harry, but tied to a conventional moral orientation and a vulnerable self, Mary's caring took a co-dependent rather than mature form which could include herself within the circle of her caring.

James Fowler has taken the structural approach and expanded its compass to include not only forms of logical and moral reasoning but also other aspects of what he calls 'faithing', such as perspective taking, locus of authority, bounds of social awareness, form of world coherence, and symbolic function. Correlating all of this with Erikson's life cycle, he identifies stages of construing meaning in terms of an ultimate environment, stages which develop from the egocentrism of childish faith to the decentred self-transcendence of universalizing faith. Like her moral orientation, Mary's faith, in the years before and after her conversion, is conventional. Her post-conversion faith in Jesus is held firmly but unreflectively, without critical distance, without evaluation.

Along with her conventional morality and faith, Mary has, from Robert Kegan's perspective on the development of the self, a self that is dangerously vulnerable to exploitation. Mary seeks intimacy and community, but because she can only try to find herself in

them and does not yet have an independent self to bring *to* them, she ends up instead with fusion and conflict. Mary is at the third of Kegan's five stages of self. She does not *have* relationships, she *is* her relationships, and thus needs them desperately. Kegan's perspective on self-development as the radical activity of making the meaning of self and others, moves beyond previous authors. Kegan includes the affective and cognitive dimensions of Erikson and Piaget, and leads us to ask further about the quality of relationship a person at Mary's stage of fusion can have with her God. As we left her, Mary is facing the need to die to her present self in order to experience a truly radical conversion to the identity of a new, independent self which will be prepared finally to realize the intimacy and community she seeks.

The last four crises of Erikson's life cycle, centred on identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity, offer optimal occasions for dimensions of Christian conversion, not in the sense of content change (which Mary has experienced), but rather in the sense of structural transformation (which Mary has not yet fully experienced). The adolescent crisis of identity is an opportunity for a basic moral conversion to conventional values. The young adult crisis of intimacy is a time for affective conversion, for a falling-in-love that transforms the self's desire from absorption in its own interests into generous concern for the good of others. The adult crisis of generativity presents an occasion for a critical conversion to a post-conventional moral orientation of responsible caring rooted in universal ethical principles. Finally, the older adult crisis of integrity offers the opportunity for the radical religious conversion of universalizing faith that allows God to move to the centre of one's life, now truly experienced as a gift.

### *III Significant questions*

*Is enthusiasm for developmental psychology resulting in the reduction of spirituality to psychology?* Questions like this usually come from two sources: legitimate pastoral and theological concerns, or misunderstandings about the nature of the two areas under discussion. In the latter case, misunderstanding can be overcome easily by realizing that a correct understanding of the difference between spirituality and psychology makes reduction of one to the other impossible. The term 'spirituality' here refers either to the concrete experience of Christian life or to the academic, interdisciplinary study of religious experience. If one means spirituality as lived

experience it surely cannot be reduced to one field of study such as psychology. On the other hand, if one intends spirituality to mean the academic discipline, it certainly has affinity with psychology since each field attends to human relationships and both fields are theoretical and practical disciplines which aim to promote human growth. However, while spirituality uses psychology, it is only one of many disciplines, such as history and theology, that assist one's understanding of religious experience in all its richness and complexity.<sup>12</sup>

Legitimate pastoral and theological concerns, on the other hand, need no correction; rather, they are areas worthy of attention. Some people wonder about the need to integrate psychology with theological issues of nature and grace. Others speak of reducing spirituality to psychology when, for example, they mean to warn against describing prayer or conversion primarily in contemporary psychological terms without appreciating the limits of psychology or the extent to which the tradition already grasped some of the same issues. Teresa of Ávila, for example, has perceptive discussions of self-delusion, of standards of maturity and immaturity, of appropriate response to persons who are depressed or fixed at certain stages of development.<sup>13</sup> Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales, in their letters of spiritual direction, give excellent advice for dealing with anxiety or compulsive behaviour.<sup>14</sup> If being suspicious about reductionism is a way of expressing concern that some spiritual directors may know more about popular psychology than they do about the classical texts in the history of spirituality or about the theology of grace, this is a valid point. Our advice would be to understand the best sources in both spirituality and psychology and see how the latter assists the former. After all, it is not psychology, but only the philosophical presupposition of some interpreters that is reductionistic. Developmental psychology, in particular, is eminently open to all the possibilities of self-transcendence. Even Kohlberg, realizing that morality cannot finally be explained in rational terms alone, introduced a post-conventional mystical-religious stage that provides an experiential answer to 'Why be just in an unjust world, why be moral at all?'.<sup>15</sup>

Discussion of reductionism can raise another question: *does the use of developmental psychology promote genuine spiritual growth or merely socialization?* Developmental psychologists do trace a process of socialization. That is what their study of pre-conventional and

conventional morality is all about; but they move beyond socialization by describing the shift to post-conventional morality (Kohlberg) and faith (Fowler). These post-conventional stages are characterized by the struggle to make personal choices in adult religious commitment on the basis of universal ethical principles. As psychologists, their task is interpreting data and drawing conclusions that the data support; but Kohlberg is also a social reformer and Fowler is a pastoral theologian and educator. Consequently, they actively promote growth beyond mere socialization. It is this same kind of growth beyond conformity to conventional religious roles that is described and promoted in the gospels and the great spiritual teachers, the growth toward which Mary clearly needs support.

*Are theories of developmental psychology descriptive or prescriptive: do they claim that 'higher is better'?* As mentioned above, developmental theories come in a wide variety of shades. Some are purely descriptive; others are prescriptive as well as descriptive. A good example of the former is Daniel Levinson's *The seasons of a man's life*. Attempting to fill out Erikson's brief consideration of adulthood, Levinson described in terms of eras, periods and transitions, what his research team discovered in interviews with a sample of North American men. Gail Sheehy popularized this descriptive approach in her *Passages: predictable crises of adult life*.<sup>16</sup>

While less detailed and empirically grounded, Erikson's own approach went beyond description insofar as his understanding of crisis (danger and opportunity) included a criterion of successful resolution. For example, in the adult crisis of generativity *vs.* self-absorption, Erikson specifies that a ratio favouring generativity over self-absorption is an essential requirement for maturity. Giving of self to family, community, and world is not optional for the mature person. Erikson had fingered the immaturity of self-absorption long before anyone ever heard of 'Yuppies'.

Cognitive-structural theories (e.g., Kohlberg's and Fowler's) are definitely prescriptive. In Erikson's life cycle, if a person lives long enough she or he will face every crisis and deal with them more or less adequately. In Kohlberg's and Fowler's theories, on the other hand, it is expected that most adults will not reach the highest stages. Kohlberg's research, for example, concludes that most adult Americans stabilize at conventional stages. Cognitive-structural stages are logically hierarchical and not just chronological, and each successive stage is *by definition* better than the preceding stages,

in the sense of being *more adequate* to deal with the complexities of human reality because more cognitively complex and powerful. Cognitive power here means everything from very prosaic social perspective-taking to the ability to use universal ethical principles in the empathic response to human events.

*Is a more advanced stage of psychological development holier?* This is one of those questions that must be answered 'yes and no'. Yes, from a cognitive-structural perspective, a person at a more mature or higher stage is, everything else being equal, holier than a person at a lower or less mature stage. A post-conventional person's range of vision and, therefore, loving, is wider than a conventional person's, for example. But, of course, everything else rarely is equal. So, our realistic answer must be no, a more advanced stage of psychological development is not necessarily holier. Holiness, according to Christian tradition, is not a measure of what one has (abilities), but of what one does with what one has (how well one uses the abilities one has been given). Theoretically, there is no reason to think that a person with a simple conventional faith and moral orientation cannot love as deeply, or even more deeply than a person with a sophisticated post-conventional orientation. Despite the need for wider social vision in a world racked by narrow prejudice, greater cognitive ability does not, by itself, equal greater love. That the sophisticated have no corner on love is a point demonstrated time and again, by the person living quietly in a flat around the corner as much as by a person whose name becomes a household word around the world.

*How can spiritual growth that demands self-sacrifice be compatible with developmental psychology which seems to aim at self-fulfilment?* In Section II we showed that the psychological theories we are dealing with are different from the 'pop psychology' which images the self as a bundle of needs which must be filled in order to gain happiness. These simplistic views lack a standard for distinguishing immature from appropriate adult needs. Developmental psychology sees the self as fulfilled by sacrificing the inappropriate security of fused or conforming relationships in order to grow in the independence which grounds genuine mutuality and intimacy.

Spiritual growth requires that we have a self in order to sacrifice its interests. That is, the criterion of authentic sacrifice is having the possibility of genuine self-transcendence. If one has developed to the stage of adult independence for the sake of deeper relationships, then one can freely sacrifice self-interest for the sake of more

inclusive love. But if, like Mary, one is still fused with conventional religious roles (e.g., servant of everyone else), one's sacrificial behaviour may be the mere 'righteousness of the Pharisees' that Jesus calls us to move beyond in order to experience the insecurity which allows us to find a newer, more inclusive love.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, *what is gained and what is lost when one uses developmental psychology to interpret spiritual growth?* Given the assumptions explained above, nothing is lost unless one loses sight of the criterion of self-transcendence that is integral to spirituality's and developmental psychology's standard of maturity. What is gained is an interpretive tool that has expanded our understanding and evaluation of human relationships. One of the most useful of these insights is the impact of gender. In the past decade, developmental psychology has come to recognize and correct its own gender bias and is influencing spirituality in this crucial area.<sup>18</sup> This is a liberation which Christian spirituality needs every bit as much as Mary does. In summary, what is gained is a detailed empirical study of human relationships consistent with the gospel call to inclusive love.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fowler, James: *Stages of faith* (San Francisco, 1981). Although the term spirituality refers to more than Christian life, for the sake of brevity we will use it here to mean Christian spirituality.

<sup>2</sup> For basic sources, see Erikson, Erik H.: *Childhood and society* (2nd edn New York, 1963 [1950]); Piaget, Jean: *Six psychological studies*, trans Tenzor, A., and ed Elkind, D. (New York, 1964); Kohlberg, Lawrence: *The psychology of moral development* (San Francisco, 1984); Gilligan, Carol: *In another voice* (Cambridge, 1982); and Kegan, Robert: *The evolving self* (Cambridge, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> This is demonstrated in detail in Conn, Walter E.: *Christian conversion* (New York, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> This is developed in Conn, Joann Wolski: *Spirituality and personal maturity* (New York, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> For development of this point see Schneiders, Sandra M.: *New wineskins* (New York, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> McGinn, Bernard, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq, eds: *Christian spirituality I: origins to the twelfth century* (New York, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Raitt, Jill, ed: *Christian spirituality II: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (New York, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Dupré, Louis, and Don E. Saliers, eds: *Christian spirituality III: Post-Reformation and modern* (New York, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Carr, Anne E.: *A search for wisdom and spirit: Thomas Merton's theology of the self* (Notre Dame, IN, 1988). For an analysis of this paradigm shift among women in the United States, see Weaver, Mary Jo: *New Catholic women* (San Francisco, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> For the relationship of this dying to contemporary spirituality, Christian feminism, and the 'dark night', see Fitzgerald, Constance, O.C.D: 'Impasse and dark night', in Conn, Joann Wolski, ed: *Women's spirituality* (New York, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> See Schneiders, Sandra M.: 'Spirituality in the academy', *Theological studies*, vol 50, no 4 (December 1989), pp 676-97.

<sup>13</sup> See *The collected works of St Teresa of Ávila*, vol 2 *The interior castle*, trans Kavanaugh, Kieran, O.C.D. and Rodriguez, Otilio, O.C.D. (Washington, DC, 1980), pp 283-452.

<sup>14</sup> See de Sales, Francis, and de Chantal, Jane: *Letters of spiritual direction*, selected and introduced by Wright, Wendy M. and Power, Joseph; trans Thibert, Péronne Marie (New York, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> See Kohlberg, Lawrence, and Power, Clark: 'Moral development, religious thinking, and the question of a seventh stage', *Zygon*, vol 16, no 3 (September 1981), pp 203-59.

<sup>16</sup> Levinson, Daniel, et al.: *The seasons of a man's life* (New York, 1978) and Sheehy, Gail: *Passages: predictable crises of adult life* (New York, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> For fuller development, see the section on 'Self-fulfilment, self-sacrifice, and self-transcendence' in Conn, Walter E.: *Christian conversion*, pp 19-25.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Conn, Joann Wolski: *Women's spirituality*.