

'Leaving the Fold': Apostasy from Fundamentalism and the Direction of Religious Development

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the direction of religious development implicit in Piagetian-based theories in light of a recent study of apostasy from fundamentalism. The theory-led and inductive thematic analysis of apostate narratives reveals evidence of a 'sociocognitive conflict' that complicates the implicit teleology of traditional theories of religious development. The diverse trajectories produced by this interaction between sociocultural and cognitive influences prompts a fresh analysis of Howard Gruber's question concerning the direction of development: Which way is up? I highlight the complex interaction between cultural and cognitive influences involved in apostasy from fundamentalism and provide support for Streib's Religious Styles Perspective as a theory for investigating multiple factors influencing the conceptualisation and direction of religious development.

Religious Development: Which Way is Up?

Why do apostates leave their fundamentalist folds? While the reasons for apostasy are diverse, this paper addresses the interaction between a theory-led claim that apostasy is a cognitive development and an inducted claim that it is a resolution to a sociocognitive conflict. Apostasy, an English transliteration of the Greek *apostasis*, means literally 'to change standing'. Fundamentalism is notoriously difficult to define but is understood herein as a way of knowing characterised by the primacy, pervasiveness, and relatively premature use of assimilative cognitive strategies fostered in cultural contexts. Accordingly, while fundamentalism need not be restricted to religious cultures, some religious cultures are conducive to fundamentalist ways of knowing. Is 'development' ever an appropriate

description for the change that occurs when an apostate leaves the fundamentalist fold?

Theories of religious development, such as Fowler's Faith Development Theory (1981) and Oser and Gmünder's Stages of Religious Judgment (1991), traditionally privilege the cognitive dimension of the religious self. They assume a particular 'logic of development' (Streib 2001: 144) that leads in a linear direction from egocentric, exclusive forms of religion to more decentred and inclusive forms of religion. In the structural-developmental tradition of Piaget (1971) and Kohlberg (1971), these theories of religious development implicitly and sometimes explicitly attempt to cross the divide between 'is' and 'ought' by positing a particular developmental imperative where the most valued contents of culture conform to the most accommodating structures of cognition. I use 'contents' in keeping with Oser and Gmünder's (1991: 60) definition, to denote the 'words and ways of religious practices' which 'form the basic religious knowledge of a certain culture'. I argue for the logic and value of structural-developmental perspectives, while highlighting the need for complementary perspectives that capture the complex interaction between cognitive structures and the contents of religious cultures in the 'lifeworld', or *Lebenswelt*, of an individual.

The study of apostasy from fundamentalism reveals that cognitive development does not always take centre stage in the theatre of the religious lifeworld and when it does, the price for its performance can be socially and emotionally costly. In developmental terms, the cost is associated with a 'sociocognitive conflict' (Doise and Mugny 1984) between an individual's cognition and a sociocultural consensus. The characteristic fundamentalist fear of a *Nietzschean* nihilistic void beyond its own provincial certainties is perhaps not as developmentally childish as traditional developmental theories of religion first supposed. The study of apostates who step out of the cognitive certainties of fundamentalism prompts researchers in religion to reflect further on the dynamic interaction between the lifeworld of the individual and the cognitive operations and structures with which they navigate it. Collectively, the dynamics of apostasy from fundamentalism prompt a revisiting of Gruber's (1986) confronting question in the context of religious development: 'Which way is up?'

Religious Development: Room for Research

The post-Piagetian field of cognitive development has undergone changes that are yet to influence a field of religious development still dominated by Piagetian-based typologies. For instance, researchers in cognitive

development have long acknowledged, but perhaps neglected to observe, sociocultural influences on cognition. In the context of cognitive development, Doise and Mugny (1984: 7) write, 'at the level of empirical investigations, the issue of a possible feedback effect of the social on the cognitive is not considered; research goes no further than ascertaining the existence of correlations between the two domains'. Current theories in cognitive development grapple more consciously than their Piagetian predecessors with issues of domain specificity (Cosmides and Tooby 1994), interaction between culture and cognition (Boyer 1994; Evans 2000, 2001), and evolutionary understandings of cognition (Siegler 1996). Neo-Piagetian and post-Piagetian conceptualisations of cognitive development emphasise the 'natural selection' and application of cognitive operations in changing environments. As such, they invite a reassessment of the implicitly teleological and liberal Protestant direction of religious development in traditional theories like Fowler's Faith Development Theory. Fowler (1981: 273) noted in his own work a lack of theoretical exploration that takes seriously the structuring power of contents: 'It is true, however, that in trying to construct these empirically founded descriptions of structural stages in faith I and my associates neglected, until very recently, any effort at a theoretical account of the interplay of structure and content in the life of faith', a neglect implicit in the omission of Vygotsky's (1962) socio-historical theory of development in Fowler (1981) and Oser and Gmünder (1991). Likewise, Reich (2002: 12) acknowledges the influence of social factors on cognitive development and notes his own lack of systematic attention to the relationship in *Developing the Horizons of the Mind*, where he proposes a cognitive developmental approach to the relationship between science and religion: 'cognitive performance and development are not independent of the social context... While acknowledging this fact, social context is hardly dealt with here in any systematic fashion as far as discussing relational and contextual reasoning proper is concerned'. Such statements obviously reflect the space-time demands of necessary research emphases rather than any scholarly oversight. However, it is dangerously easy for cognition to assume primacy in religious development in the absence of interdisciplinary studies.

Streib (2001: 143-44; see also 2005) offers perhaps the most recent and pointed challenge to the privileging of cognition in the process of religious development:

On the other hand, the faith development paradigm, with its focus on religious cognition and its almost unquestioned adoption of the structural-developmental 'logic of development,' needs to be qualified in order to account for the rich and deep life-world-related dimensions of religion—but also of fundamentalist turns.

The challenge highlights an enduring gap in existing research that can be filled with empirical studies of the interaction between sociocultural and cognitive factors. Apostasy from fundamentalism provides a context for examining post-Piagetian refinements to the field of religious development, and subsequently, reassessing the direction of development.

The Apostasy from Fundamentalism Project (AFFP)

The *Apostasy from Fundamentalism Project* (AFFP) represents recently completed research at the University of Queensland, Australia.¹ The study provides an exploratory thematic analysis of representative fundamentalist and apostate literature as well as 98 unstructured apostate narratives and 105 open-ended surveys. Surveys were administered online and in hardcopy format. Narratives were collected in hardcopy from regional participants and published anthologies and in electronic form from online archives of apostate narratives. Narratives and surveys were included on the basis of self-reported strength of identification as 'fundamentalist', and for Christian participants, level of past participation in a fundamentalist denomination consistent with Smith's (1990) denominational classifications used in The American General Social Survey (GSS) (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2002). Collectively, this data represents over 200 self-identified apostates from Christian (n = 128) and Muslim (n = 75) fundamentalisms. The surveys and narratives were subjected to qualitative theory-led and inductive thematic analyses with the assistance of data analysis software Atlas.ti Version V. Key Word in Context (KWIC) frequency analyses were used to inform some themes. The survey structure and theory-led thematic coding of narratives was informed by three representative structural-developmental theories: Fowler's Faith Development Theory (1981), Oser and Gmünder's Stages of Religious Judgment (1991), and Reich's Levels of Relational and Contextual Reasoning (2002). The purpose of the project was to apply and to reflect on cognitive approaches to religious development. Accordingly, a set of 'meta-theoretical' themes was also included to analyse narratives in the AFFP and inform a critique of cognitive-structural theories of religious development. These themes identified developmental ambiguities and anomalies as well as sociocultural and emotional factors influencing the direction of development. Several further themes related to physical and spiritual dimensions of development were inducted through an initial reading of the narratives.

1. The study was funded with an award from the University of Queensland Postgraduate Research Scheme (UQPRS) and conducted between 2004 and 2007.

The thematic analysis paid particular attention to the relationship between structure and content in fundamentalist cultures. While conducted independently of Streib's (2001, 2005) ongoing studies into deconversion, the exploratory AFFP provides support for his Religious Styles Perspective as a model of development able to account for the complex interaction between cognitive structures and religious contents. The diverse epistemological trajectories that apostates and fundamentalists take, and the complex cultural and cognitive interactions that produce them, give cause to revisit the direction of religious development.

Apostasy from Fundamentalism as a Sociocognitive Conflict

The study of apostasy from fundamentalism reveals sociocultural and cognitive influences on religious development. Somewhere in the narratives of apostates from fundamentalism there are experiential facts: something happened and, for many apostates, something generic happened. What impetus can possibly cause enough dissonance for the apostate to leave the fundamentalist fold? 'Leaving the fold' is a telling metaphor for apostasy; the metaphor is used as the title for Babinski's (1995) anthology of former fundamentalist narratives and Winell's (1993) social-psychological analysis of apostasy from fundamentalism. It implies an internal impetus that leads the individual beyond the social security and cultural familiarity of the fold.

Self-identifying 'apostates' are rarely individuals who strayed nonchalantly from the periphery never to return; rather, they tend to have moved quite deliberately from the centre of the fold after months, years, and sometimes decades of intense deliberation. This use of 'apostate' is consistent with Introvigne's (1997) differentiation between 'defectors, ordinary leave-takers and apostates' and Kliever's (1995) 'voluntary apostate'. The act of apostasy studied in the AFFP is altogether more deliberate and more reflexive than Introvigne's 'leave-taking' and less socially motivated than 'defection' and 'conversion' where the destination is as clear as, or clearer than, the point of departure. Of course, apostasy eventually involves a reconstitution and, in some cases, this may be represented as a 'conversion to'.

However, in keeping with other studies' definitions of apostasy (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977: 30; Wilson 2004: 2), the focus of the AFFP is on apostates whose point of departure has little to do with a known destination. No doubt these are relative positions, but there is a qualitative distinction to be made in that the majority of apostates in the AFFP leave before they know where they are going and substitute certainty for long periods of uncertainty. One apostate in the study characteristically

recounts having 'Depression for a good 20 years, because I thought that I was wrong for a long time; that I walked away from the absolute religious truth' (AFFP 2006: 338).

Thus, apostasy is a 'walking away' rather than a 'walking to'. This is an important distinction in the identification of apostasy from fundamentalism as a sociocognitive conflict. The apostates of this study have little sense of leaving fundamentalism to embrace a new community with all the safety of its social structures. Rather, they perceive themselves as forced to leave the sociocultural security of fundamentalism to maintain their cognitive consistency. For many, in the early stages of apostasy, there is no clear vision of greener grass, just a strong sense of stepping into fundamentalism's projected 'vortex of nihilism' (Boone 1989: 24). One such apostate recalls 'Absolute terror at the instant that I realized that "no one is driving the bus"... I had suddenly become aware of a thousand foot cliff at my next step' (AFFP 2006: 342). These apostates report being divided between culture and cognition, social security and truth. As such, the narratives of apostates are rich for a study of the interaction between culture and cognition: the exertion of opposing forces in a single psyche. Defined as such, the act of apostasy represents a socio-cognitive conflict that problematises the linear direction of development.

Doise and Mugny (1984) first used the term 'sociocognitive conflict' to identify disequilibrium between sociocultural and cognitive forces operating within the epistemic self. They noted the intense discomfort experienced by children in experimental situations whose individual level of cognitive operations produced responses that did not reflect the consensus of the group they were in (1984: 154). In Doise and Mugny's (1984: 154) terms, 'Conflict may exist...for an isolated individual when the operations he [sic] seeks to apply to a particular situation are contradicted by the existence of various social norms governing this situation'. Expressed in developmental terms:

[...] sociocognitive conflict is a source of disequilibrium. It is disequilibrium that is at once both social and cognitive. It is cognitive disequilibrium in that the cognitive system is unable to integrate simultaneously its own responses and those of others within a single coherent whole. It cannot account for others and itself at the same time. It is social disequilibrium since this is not simply cognitive disagreement. It involves relations between individuals for which this conflict poses a social problem (Doise and Mugny 1984: 160).

The dynamics of sociocognitive conflict are implicitly recognised in other studies of development. Writing on culture and cognition, Barnes (2000: 17) proposes that, 'A culture may maintain a simpler easier style of thought as its dominant style for many centuries or even millennia, even if some individuals go beyond the culture's general achievement'. Do

some apostates go beyond the general cognitive ‘achievement’ of fundamentalist culture? Reich (2002: 150) also ponders the interaction between individual and societal development: ‘Has an individual only those characteristics or patterns of behavior, A, that were generic to the group to which he or she had been assigned...? Or, B, could an individual develop outside that range according to his or her own dynamic of inner abilities and outer stimuli?’. Do some apostates develop outside the ‘range’ of the fundamentalist group? More pointedly, Wulff (1993: 185) recognises ‘the possibility that religious maturity may in some cases be expressed through the rejection of traditional religious views or practices’. Do some apostates feel forced to reject the traditional views and practices of their fundamentalisms as a mark of developmental maturity? Finally, sociocognitive conflict seems implicit in Streib’s (2002b, 2007) ‘clash of styles’. Here, the apostate’s transition is the result of ‘intolerable’ dissonance:

In some cases, the mutuality or the individuating reflectiveness resists complete submission and surrender to the fundamentalist demand. The person experiences a clash of styles. Especially persons who are about to leave the fundamentalist orientation develop an awareness of the clash of styles up to the point where it becomes intolerable (Streib 2002b: 8).

Do some apostates experience a clash of religious styles forced together by individual needs and community identity? Apostasy from fundamentalism is a case in which individual cognition and sociocultural identity are distinct enough to speak meaningfully about their separate influences *and* their interaction.

To identify apostasy from fundamentalism as the product of a sociocognitive conflict, it is necessary to provide evidence for three interrelated criteria: (1) that fundamentalism provides characteristically strong social and emotional incentives that prevent apostasy; (2) that fundamentalism provides characteristically strong emotional and epistemological disincentives to the emerging apostate, and (3) that the cognitive structures sponsored by fundamentalist cultures do not match the individual apostate’s development. Based on these criteria, the AFFP provides strong support for the conceptualisation of apostasy from fundamentalism as the product of a sociocognitive conflict. The following ‘reasons to remain’ and ‘reasons to leave’ are inducted from a thematic analysis of apostate narratives and survey responses.

Reasons to Remain: The Social Attractiveness of Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism provides strong social and emotional incentives to prevent apostasy. The social attractiveness of fundamentalism is a prominent

theme in apostate narratives. Apostates frequently recollect the strength of their social ties within the fundamentalist community and express regret at the undoing of those ties, which often involve close family and friends. A key word-in-context frequency analysis of apostate narratives and survey responses from the AFFP revealed the most attractive characteristics of fundamentalism, as recalled by apostates. In decreasing order of frequency, apostates identify the following as the most attractive attributes of fundamentalism: friendship and family, sense of purpose, sense of belonging, sense of community, sense of certainty, feeling loved, sense of security, comfort, salvation, feeling of power, prayer, and happiness. These attributes are consistently related to the sense of social identity constructed and nurtured within the fundamentalist community. The attributes reveal the affective power of social connection that may conflict with cognition that is potentially disruptive to the social unit, that is, cognition that challenges group-identifying beliefs.

The social and emotional cost of apostasy during the transitional phase is high for most apostates. Of course, it is dependent on the level of commitment and social involvement of the individual apostate, but given the social structure and all-encompassing nature of fundamentalisms, this commitment is usually strong. One apostate typically notes, 'All of my friends and activities were related to my religion' (AFFP 2006: 42). Given the strength of these social ties it is not surprising that many apostates report feeling frustrated with their potentially disruptive thoughts. One apostate recalls, 'I got frustrated because I couldn't believe' (2006: 39). Another characteristically labels the act of apostasy as 'a reluctant parting': 'Leaving my faith was a very slow process. It was in many ways a reluctant parting and it's hard to say how many years it took' (2006: 244). Such statements highlight the need to identify the internalised influence that, for an apostate, opposes the strength of their social identity. It is not adequate to depict the apostate as being against the fundamentalist community during the transitional phase. The fear, guilt, and confusion felt by apostates during the period of transition reveals a divided self. What is the other half of the divided self that somehow draws an often reluctant apostate away from the social comforts and functional truths of fundamentalism? Arguably, the emerging logic of cognitive development proves the stronger influence in some apostates' lifeworlds.

Reasons to Remain: Fear and the Demonisation of Doubt

There is a second characteristic of fundamentalisms that emerges to counter apostasy during the transitional phase. Apostate narratives evidence strong disincentives to cognitive experimentation that could

challenge the fundamentalist culture. These disincentives elicit powerful emotional reactions from apostates during the transitional phase. A key word-in-context frequency analysis of apostate narratives reveals the main emotional effects of transition, in decreasing order of frequency, to include the following: fear, loss, confusion, guilt, rejection, depression, anxiety, grief, suffering, and anger. Characteristic contents of fundamentalisms that elicit such emotions concern eternal punishment and doubt about doubts.

Apostates' narratives evidence a fear that their questions and doubts are the products of supernatural (demonic and satanic) attacks on their cognitive faculties. A Christian apostate typically recalls, 'I can remember being in tears wondering if I was wrong or being deceived or going to hell or whatever' (AFFP 2006: 205). Similarly, a Muslim apostate recalls, 'When I asked "where did Allah come from?" in one of the weekly circles I was told that this question was inspired by the devil' (2006: 268). What is the cognitive effect of such culturally embedded beliefs? The fear of demonic deception has a paralysing effect on apostates that protects the fundamentalist discourse from the engagement of further doubts. It makes the discourse impervious to the possibility of conflicting contents, reasoned objections, and contradictory experiences, as they may, without exception, be attributed to supernatural deception. Descartes' mind-stirring demon is embedded and active in the contents of fundamentalist culture. Such contents influence the direction of development by restricting the diversity of cognitive interactions necessary for development to occur. At this stage, I offer this statement as an observation, rather than a value judgment of fundamentalism.

The direction of development is also influenced by contents concerning punishment. Abrahamic fundamentalists believe in eternal punishment or reward correlated strongly with belief. To doubt fundamentalist beliefs is to risk eternal punishment. Once asked to comment on the difference between an evangelical and a fundamentalist, the late Jerry Falwell (quoted in Boone 1989: 47) replied:

Ask an Evangelical whether or not he believes there are flames in hell, and after a thirty-minute philosophical recitation on the theological implications of eternal retribution in light of the implicit goodness of God, you will still not know what he really believes. Ask a Fundamentalist whether he believes there are really flames in hell and he will simply say, 'Yes, and hot ones too!'

Arguably, the relative difference in the level of certainty and literalisation in the fundamentalist and evangelical responses reveals a structural dimension affecting denominational divisions. Though not the focus here, it is worth noting that the differentiation between mainline conservative

and fundamentalist religion could benefit from a definition with a structural-developmental dimension. In such a definition, fundamentalism would represent a stage-specific way of thinking perpetuated by a particular culture, while conservatism would represent a more selected and relative response in a particular context.

In Christian fundamentalist culture, the potential apostate is confronted with the hell-like consequences of failing Pascal's wager which posits a choice between the acceptance and rejection of Christianity based on the possible consequences of one's choices. Pascal believed that it was more rational to believe and accept the rewards of Christianity than to suspend belief and remain unrewarded (Carter 2000). Alternatively, fundamentalisms tend to emphasise the hellish punishment for suspending belief if one is wrong as a rational motivation for believing. In the divided and dissonant mind of the transitional apostate, the high emotional stakes can arrest or divert the application of cognitive faculties to fundamentalist belief. This fear of eternal punishment is strongly evidenced in the narratives of Muslim and Christian apostates:

The thought of rejecting Islam just does not bear contemplating. The concept of the Kafir and Apostate is built up so much that even now I am scared...that I am going to be struck down by a bolt of lightening or burnt eternally in the lowest pit of hell for my infidelity. Only a Muslim knows how strong this feeling is (AFFP 2006: 268).

A similar fear is characteristically expressed in Christian apostate narratives. One apostate describes an 'Overwhelming sadness to think that perhaps these thoughts or leaving the church would doom me to the fiery pits of hell—that I would be separated from family and loved ones forever' (AFFP 2006: 258). The fear of literal hellfire is so prominent a theme in apostate narratives that it warrants identification and exploration of the factors that first initiate it and then challenge it in the apostate's mind.

In fundamentalist culture, the apostate's challenge to the literalised binary division between Heaven and Hell is attributed not to cognitive development, but often to moral degeneracy (McDowell 1979: 10-11; McDowell and Stewart 1980: 127). Apostate narratives are viewed as simply the retrospective rationalisations of moral failings that made the standards of fundamentalism difficult to maintain. Rather than repent of their moral failings and return to the fold, fundamentalists commonly believe that apostates rationalise their immoral lifestyles by fabricating intellectual difficulties with fundamentalism. Undoubtedly, there are cases where this description provides some explanatory insight. However, it simply does not fit the evidence from the AFFP as a general explanatory theory. It does not account for doubts initiated by increasing cognitive

interplay rather than by changes in moral behaviour, and there is no empirical evidence to show a long-term correlation between apostasy and moral degeneracy. Many apostates merely report new ways of constructing moral judgments that may reinforce or reconstruct the content of previous moral judgments:

My rejection of the existence of God has not led to a nihilistic rampage of debauchery and lechery... I am able to make moral decisions without the aid of the 'still small voice' or the bible. I am not a slave to sin. I haven't been filled with 'six devils, each more evil than the original' (AFFP 2006: 231).

Self-identifying apostates who remain within their parent religion provide similar evidence: 'I still look to the scriptures for guidance, but I am looking at them through a different lens, so some of my conclusions now are different as to what is right or wrong' (AFFP 2006: 109). Collectively, such responses indicate the possibility of a structural change rather than moral degeneracy effecting apostasy from fundamentalism.

Reasons to Remain: Perfect Knowledge

There is another group of contents evident in apostate narratives that pre-emptively restricts the application of developing cognitive faculties to the fundamentalist domain. Fundamentalist contents create the illusion that existing knowledge is perfectly able to assimilate all possible contents (past, present, and future) encountered. There is no need for further accommodation because the received knowledge is perfectly adequate for all environments and contingencies. The fundamentalist contents that strengthen the illusion that fundamentalist knowledge is final knowledge usually pertain to revealed knowledge in the form of a sacred text. A Muslim apostate reflects on this closed epistemology as a characteristic of their former fundamentalism:

Of course the source of Islam is the Quran and the books written by Muslim scholars. Therefore, I felt no need to look elsewhere in order to find the truth, as I was convinced that I have already found it. As Muslims say... The search for knowledge after gaining it is unnecessary (AFFP 2006: 268).

Revealed knowledge is knowledge claimed to be received directly from a transcendent source. There is no higher form of knowledge than revealed knowledge because there is no higher source of knowledge than the posited supernatural agent: an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God. If knowledge is attributed to a transcendent source, then all temporal restrictions and qualifications can be bypassed. For the fundamentalist, the knowledge of special revelation forms a perfect source, superior to, and able to assimilate, all empirical knowledge. Common expressions

such as 'God said it, I believe it, that settles it' and 'Allah knows best' permeate the fundamentalist culture and, by attachment, reinforce particular contents and their embedded structures. Thus any structural change that could affect the expression of these contents must overcome powerful emotional and epistemological commitments to their divine status. These commitments affect the course of religious development.

Fundamentalists tend to be people of one revealed book which takes primacy in all matters of knowledge (Boone 1989; Bruce 2000; Hood, Hill, and Williamson 2005). In fundamentalism, the revealed text is imbued with the magical-numinous qualities of its supernatural source. This totalising conception of authority is revealed in fundamentalist literature. Prominent Christian apologist, Gleason Archer, writes in *Alleged Errors and Discrepancies in the Original Manuscripts of the Bible*, 'We must therefore conclude that any event or fact related in Scripture—whether it pertains to doctrine, science, or history—is to be accepted by the Christian as totally reliable and trustworthy, no matter what modern scientists or philosophers may think of it' (quoted in Boone 1989: 25). Apostate narratives clearly evidence this understanding. One apostate typically recalls, 'For years I lived with complete dependence on the Bible as my source of reality and truth' (AFFP 2006: 229). This textual authority is sometimes acknowledged as the key characteristic of fundamentalisms. Hood, Hill, and Williamson (2005) define fundamentalism in *The Psychology of Fundamentalism* with an 'intratextual' model: fundamentalists are those whose thinking is dominated by a single text. For example, more extreme fundamentalist groups such as the Sunni Faramawiyah prohibit education through any other text than the Koran (Dekmejian 1985: 79). Likewise, some ultra-fundamentalist Christian groups will only use the King James Version of scripture to educate their children.

Culture and cognition interact in ways that enable the cultural contents of the sacred text used by fundamentalists to perpetuate a particular type of cognitive operation. The issue is inadvertently recognised by Korniejczuk (1993: 11-12) who notes a potential clash between cognitive developmental structures and biblical contents:

For people who genuinely believe in the existence of a transcendent God, in His intervention in human affairs, and in the divine inspiration of His Holy Word...the course of their religious development may be different because they grow in their religious development adopting a biblical theoretical framework as their source of beliefs and as their basic conceptual presuppositions.

Is it possible that fundamentalists *do not grow* in their religious development *because* of the adoption of a single framework containing particular cultural contents? Is it possible that some apostates, to revisit Reich's

(2002: 150) dynamic, ‘develop outside that range according to his or her own dynamic of inner abilities and outer stimuli?’. The question of whether or not developmental growth is valuable or adaptively advantageous in all contexts will be considered in a later section. The immediate task is to illustrate evidence from the AFFP that apostasy from fundamentalism is a product of cognitive development that creates a socio-cognitive conflict.

Reasons to Leave: When Culture and Cognition Collide

Fundamentalist cultures are inextricably linked with cognitive structures that apostates characteristically and gradually find inadequate. How are particular cognitive structures embedded in fundamentalist culture and what evidence is that there that some acts of apostasy are products of a sociocognitive conflict? While adopted throughout, Doise and Mugny’s (1984) concept of a ‘sociocognitive’ conflict could perhaps be more accurately, but awkwardly, described as a ‘sociocognitive–cognitive’ conflict. This is because the socially cohesive culture of fundamentalism actually sponsors a particular form of cognitive operations that comes into conflict with apostates’ emerging operations. Streib’s (2002a, 2005, 2007) studies of deconverts found that they scored consistently higher on Fowler’s faith development scale than the members of their former affiliations. A qualitative coded content analysis of apostate narratives in the AFFP supports these results. Apostate responses consistently reveal a structural change across multiple aspects (i.e. symbolic function, perspective-taking, form of logic, moral judgment, world coherence, social awareness, and locus of authority) that reflects Fowler’s underlying logic of cognitive development. Moreover, the difficulty of this structural change seems causally related to the strength of fundamentalist contents that sponsor early structures and hamper the development of later structures. Some examples may serve to illustrate the point.

Consider the development of Fowler’s aspect of symbolic function. Symbolic function relates to the developing perception of a relationship between the symbol and the symbolised. The trajectory of development for this aspect moves through magical, literal, separation, and rejoining phases of symbolism. The early stages are marked by an inability to appreciate the concept of a symbolic relationship and a subsequent tendency to literalise and reject multiple interpretations. The separation stage is marked by a tendency to separate the symbol from the symbolised. This newly developed critical appreciation sometimes manifests as a sceptical devaluing of the symbol. In the final stage of development, the

symbol and symbolised are recognised as complementary concepts. They are rejoined with a new appreciation of this relationship.

Apostates overwhelmingly associate their former fundamentalism with a more literal interpretation of scripture resulting from a lack of appreciation of symbolic function and a presuppositional commitment to scriptural authority: 'The whole Bible is to be taken literally. Symbolic meanings? What are those?' (AFFP 2006: 27); 'Everything [in the Koran] was taken literally, symbolic meaning was not done' (2006: 167). Such characterisations are consistent with the early stage failure to 'distinguish between the symbol and thing symbolised' (Fowler, Streib, and Keller 2004: 56).

Many apostate responses identified a later use of selective and compartmentalised symbolism applied to scriptures that may generate moral or scientific difficulties:

I knew of the distinction between literal and symbolic, but often struggled with it. My inclination was to take things literally at first, especially if it was an issue of the Bible or faith, then if that didn't work, try to view it as a symbol (AFFP 2006: 135).

For apostates, the literalistic readings that characterise their fundamentalism eventually come into conflict with a developing appreciation of polysemy, contextuality, and relativity in symbolic functions. It is perhaps the fragility of the shift between literal and symbolic readings that defines some of the key debates in fundamentalisms. Apostate responses often reveal a literal-to-symbolic paradigm shift on contents such as the six-day creation, the virgin birth, the physical resurrection of Christ, the parting of the Red Sea, the three days of Jonah in the whale, and Muhammad's splitting of the moon. The cultural insistence of the literal reality of these events in fundamentalism increasingly comes into conflict with the apostate's application of emerging symbolic functions.

Fowler (1981: 244-45) characterises the later stages of symbolic function with a 'post-critical rejoining of irreducible symbolic power and ideational meaning'. Many responses from apostates who had long left their fundamentalism reflected this rejoined relationship between the symbol and the symbolised:

The journey went from literal, to symbolic, to literal (on a deeper level), to deeper symbology, and so on, on and on, over the years, and at the place my understanding is currently at seems to have evolved beyond it being an 'either' 'or' situation between literal and symbolic. They are melded together in my mind, and have become a new and fuller perspective with which I view all things in life. My mind has truly expanded in this area (AFFP 2006: 133-34).

In developmental terms, this recognition of symbolic complexity and diversity evident in apostate narratives reflects a level of development

that understands 'the multivalent nature of the symbol [...that] explicit concepts or ideas are only one of a set of possible meanings for a symbol [...and] the time and place relativity of symbols' (Fowler, Streib, and Keller 2004: 58).

Apostate experiences of symbolic function reveal a variety of developmental trajectories while reinforcing the general direction of development. Fowler (1981: 300) describes the development of symbolic function as leading to 'a qualitative increase in choice, awareness and commitment regarding the symbols and representations, which express, evoke and renew one's faith (symbolic functioning)'. This description accurately represents the qualitative change in some apostates' symbolic function. For some apostates, the 'renewal of faith' involves the rejection of the symbolic set of a particular tradition. The cognitive effect of development becomes too powerfully opposed to fundamentalism's protection of particular symbols—this produces a sociocognitive conflict that may, over time, lead to apostasy.

The logic of development is often evidenced in apostate narratives through the use of a colour metaphor. Apostates commonly reflect on their transition from a 'black and white' binary oppositional way of structuring the world to a tendency to see and differentiate 'grey areas'. Apostates reflecting on their former fundamentalist ways of thinking typically claim that 'Everything is black and white' (AFFP 2006: 135), while representing their post-fundamentalist thinking as recognising 'Many shades of grey [where] contextual meaning rules' (2006: 134). One apostate's narrative clearly articulates the transition beyond black and white binary thinking. The apostate identifies their former fundamentalist thinking as 'very black and white' and then identifies a period of transition, 'that diminished around 18, 19, 20 years old', followed by a later form of thinking that is:

[...] not black and white anymore. Life, decisions, people, even God, are more complex than that, circumstances are never isolated, childhood and psychological makeup influences people more profoundly than I'd allowed for in the past... [N]ow I prefer to look at decisions as good or bad as opposed to right or wrong, and the good or bad is on a spectrum, whereas right or wrong was either or, no grey, and was independent of external factors (individual, personal history, mental illness, fatigue, resources) (AFFP 2006: 353).

The above extract demonstrates the interaction between ways of thinking and the contents of thought. Observed fundamentalisms are consistently characterised by the following: a lack of tolerance for ambiguity, oversimplistic categorisation, and dualistic 'all or nothing' and 'black and white' binary thinking. Anthropologist Judith Nagata (2001: 481) writes: 'It also reflects a mind-set uncompromising and antirelativist, as one

response to the openness and uncertainties of a cosmopolitan world, and to chart a morally black and white path out of the grey zones of intimidating cultural and religious complexity'. Such cultures of cognition characteristically reinforce a binary form of operations—what Reich (2002: 52) calls a 'single-track choice of A or B'. Apostate narratives evidence the contents that reinforce this form of operations. For example, a key word-in-context frequency analysis of survey responses in the AFFP identified prominent content binaries structuring fundamentalist thinking including: Heaven and Hell, God and Satan, good and evil, light and darkness, believers and unbelievers. These binaries were also prominent in apostate narratives along with other binaries that included the following: saved and unsaved, lost and found, *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden), clean and unclean, *Dar al-Islam* (abode of peace) and *Dar al-Harb* (abode of war). While oppositional binaries represent normal and necessary operations, it is their relative frequency, strength, and extent of application that characterises fundamentalisms and evidences a self-perpetuating interaction between cultural contents and cognitive operations.

The interaction between the social, emotional, and cognitive domains discussed in the previous section offers some insight into *conversion* to fundamentalism. Though it is not the focus here, conversion to fundamentalism needs an account in terms of the direction of religious development. Streib (2002b: 2) frames the question clearly:

In terms of developmental theory: How can we understand that a person is able to perform formal operations in most domains which are relevant for business and every-day life and that this same person is not able, or not motivated, to apply formal-operational thinking to existential questions, but takes every word of a guru or fundamentalist leader as the revelation of truth?

Fowler sees conversion to fundamentalism as made possible by a sort of cognitive compartmentalisation which allows for domain-specific complexity with low inter-domain integration. Streib's Religious Styles Perspective offers some explanation of the motivation for such cognitive compartmentalisation in the broader lifeworld of the individual. Streib (2001: 153) uses the metaphor of religious styles laid down in geological layers subject to fracture and upheaval as turmoil and trauma force older structural layers to the surface. Implicit in this geological metaphor is some form of regress or resort to a simpler, earlier style that reduces stress and aids coping in relatively confusing environments. A former fundamentalist minister apostate reflected: 'Seeing things in black and white, with no grey areas, made life so much simpler. It precluded the need to think' (AFFP 2006: 243). Apostasy from fundamentalism and adult conversion to fundamentalism reveal the potential for contextualised conflict between cognitive needs and social-emotional needs. Theories of

religious development pose a problem of primacy and direction. Who is developing—the apostate who leaves fundamentalism to pursue the application of ‘formal-operational thinking to existential questions’ (Streib 2002b: 2), the convert to fundamentalism who reverts to an earlier cognitive style to find social and emotional security, or the ‘fundamentalist’ who claims that the application of formal operations to existential questions will eventually reveal the foundational inadequacy of formal operations and warrant an adult return to the fideistic faith of a child? This position finds some expression in the writings of presuppositionalist philosopher Alvin Plantinga (2000) and cognitive evolutionary psychologist Justin Barrett (2004). Arguably, such epistemologies further complicate the definition of fundamentalism.

The Sociocognitive Conflict: Who ‘Ought’ to Win?

Let us revisit Gruber’s ‘Which way is up?’ question in the context of sociocognitive conflict: Against what criteria can the direction of religious development be considered ‘up’? As noted by psychologist of religion, David Wulff (1993: 182), ‘when we turn to religious development, it is virtually impossible to reach a consensus on how to conceive of the ideal end state’. It seems appropriate to explore the directionality of development without the premature presumption that one has arrived at a final destination, especially one that can be captured with a literal description of its contents. In one sense, the closer religious development leads to Wulff’s elusive ‘ideal end state’ (if it exists), the less certain of its finality one will be. In terms of structural development, ‘up’ is the direction toward structures that can coordinate increasing levels of complexity most simply. Thus, fundamentalism (religious or secular) is the attempt to maintain the simplicity of a structure by ignoring or pre-critically reducing the complexity of the contents. It circumvents that adaptive process. In Piagetian terms, fundamentalism upsets the adaptive equilibrium between accommodation and assimilation by adopting a general strategy of assimilation. For a variety of reasons, some apostates become so painfully aware of the disequilibrium that they accommodate the parent-structure in order to better assimilate complex contents. For many apostates, their structural-cognitive change comes into direct conflict with the social and cultural contents of their fundamentalism.

It is implicit in traditional structural-developmental theories like Fowler’s Faith Development Theory that structurally developed stages of cognition *ought* to win in a conflict with sociocultural commitments to an earlier stage. But it would be unfair to accuse Fowler of choosing *a priori* cognitive development over social and cultural cohesion. Fowler, like

later neo-Piagetians, may simply argue that developing cognition is logically correlated with strong social cohesion: it merely enables the individual to broaden the boundaries of group identification. For Fowler, it is logically imperative that cognitive development should drive faith development. Tellingly, his predecessor Lawrence Kohlberg (1971) argued a form of prescription based on description wherein higher stages of development 'ought' to be aspired to because they can be shown empirically to utilise more intersubjective or objective reasoning than lower stages. In this perspective, there is no *necessary* or *a priori* socio-cognitive conflict in the logic of development; the sociocultural and the cognitive are mutually dependent. However, *a posteriori*, where there is a conflict between an apostate's cognitive development and their commitment to the social and cultural cohesion of their fundamentalism, the former takes precedence. Why? Because the experience of some of those who leave fundamentalism reveals that the conflict can be temporary: social and cultural cohesion can be recapitulated at later ages and stages with broadening circles of identification. Thus, the 'crises of faith' that surround apostasy can be seen in retrospect as the growth pains of development.

Of course, the teleological optimism of traditional theories of religious development is confronted by the real complexities of content in the lifeworld. Streib's Religious Styles Perspective counterbalances the cognitive privileging of Faith Development Theory by providing 'more-perspectiveness' and revisiting developmental theory from the 'bottom-up'. It reveals the complexities of development in a lifeworld where cognitive development is not always of primary concern. Streib's Religious Styles Perspective pays attention to the realities of the lifeworld—it recognises the high social cost of apostasy and the relative security of fundamentalisms that self-perpetuate a state of equilibrium. The AAFP lends some support to this perspective. In the context of apostasy from fundamentalism, there are cases in which an individual's cognitive development can threaten their social and emotional well-being, and the well-being of the fundamentalist group to which they belonged. Growth pains can be fatal for some individuals. However, Streib's proper criticism of cognitive privileging implicitly affirms its place in the scheme of development by assuming the value of 'more-perspectiveness'. In identifying the phenomenological insensitivity of the structural-developmental tradition, Streib implicitly affirms a 'logic of development' which values the development of the very cognitive operations that enable 'more-perspectiveness'.

Those who are not fundamentalists (though who can really cast the stone?) probably value a logic and direction of development which expands inter-subjectively from the bottom-up to realise or reject

top-down claims to authority from scripture or sage. The study of apostasy from fundamentalism reveals the fundamentalist tendency to invert this direction of development, to retreat from unknown destinations, or epistemologically detach from the developmental process altogether. Apostates' experiences evidence the Nietzschean-like crisis beyond fundamentalism that can reinforce this developmental retreat or detachment. The apostates who seem to speak from beyond the 'transitional' crisis have not successfully exchanged certainty for uncertainty, known for unknown, Truth for truths, One for many, and God for gods, but can negotiate at and navigate between these symbolic poles with a developing understanding of what it is they symbolise. Some apostates continue to express this emergent 'symbolised' in theistic terms, and some do not. Regardless, the direction of development is perhaps best conceptualised, not simply as 'up', but more complexly as 'into' and 'across' the lifescape between culture and cognition. These directional turns may serve well for future studies of religious culture and cognition that appropriate the metaphor of development.

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