AN ADVENTIST SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE

An Exploration of the Changing Character
of Adventist Spiritual Experience

From a Developmental Perspective

By

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I. THESIS AND DEFINITIONS

Spirituality, as a human response to the divine, can be more adequately illumined by the distinctly human sciences, than by the categories and idioms more singularly in the domain of theology. More particularly, since spirituality embodies the concepts of growth or purposeful change, the methods and insights of developmental psychology are most useful in a descriptive study of spirituality. These assertions will be explored within the context of Seventh-day Adventist belief and experience.

"Spirituality" will be understood as referring to that movement of the individual—called and/or enabled by God—toward authentic self-transcendence, toward owning accountability for basic directions in an emerging self-hood, and toward thoughtful integration within larger realities.

"Developmental psychology" refers to that field of research and theory which explores the nature, direction, and structures of change commonly shared by persons throughout the life span.

II. BENEFITS AND CAVEATS

Inherent in almost all conceptions of spirituality is the notion of a path, a journey, a sequence of development, or a quest for a higher plane of living. In the writings of Augustine alone, there are at least eight accounts of the path of spiritual development. They have as few as three, or as many as seven, stages, but they are all different.¹ Since these concerns are also the domain of the developmental psychologists, the question is implicit about the degree to which these two fields illumine each other. Are they mutually exclusive, since spirituality typically assumes supernatural elements which modern developmental psychology has excluded? Or can we agree with Helminiak in his assertion that they are both talking about the same experience?

If spiritual development were conceived as human development viewed according to a particular set of concerns, the stage theories of psychology would significantly contribute to defining systematic stages of spiritual development.²

Helminiak's point is that spirituality brings to the exploration of human development certain philosophical assumptions, placing development within a metaphysical context. But these assumptions do not alter the nature of the phenomenon which we actually observe.

"Spirituality" is often addressed in religious and theological terms which voice accepted concerns within the tradition. But such terms are often empty of specifically human actions or recognizable, definable responses. For example, is there any ontological substance to such phrases as: "openness to God," "follow the way of the cross," "through the dark waters toward the celestial city," "practicing the presence," "contemplation on the inner life," or "intense movements of the soul to be free from sin"?
Spirituality is the study of people in relation to the divine. But we have no "God's eye view" of things. We have no direct, unmediated access to the divine mind. Even what we presume to know about God is known by analogy to the human, understood by human meaning-making structures, and expressed in words and linguistic conventions vested with meanings that make sense to humans. Thus we are not diminishing spirituality by proposing to explore it through developmental psychology. We are admitting the finiteness of our reference point. The Christian will assume the active role of the Holy Spirit in personal spirituality; but we are still left to observe only the human manifestations of such activity. If we believe that the Spirit is seeking to touch and heal all humankind, our study can include all humans, not exclusively the "Christians," and we can be edified.

If this premise is valid, then we are not at risk of losing essential understanding if we employ "secular" methodology, terminology, and theory in the pursuit of understanding spirituality. Can we meaningfully employ non-religious concepts to discuss what is so patently a religious matter? What I am asserting is that spiritual development is not one more foci to be added to the moral, psychological, cognitive, and psycho-social development. It embraces the whole. It is human development, conceived through the concerns of integrity, openness, self-responsibility, and self-transcendence. Spirituality is a God-endowed capacity of the human spirit; that is a given. And psychology does not alter the givenness of human experience by seeking to explain it. In this context, we may see how fruitless it is to mark a radical disjuncture between the sacred and the secular in human life - as though we could indeed speak only of the sacred without employing secularly-influenced words; or as though a life that is created, sustained, and constantly touched by the divine could be conceived only as secular!

Several theorists have employed categories of understanding the human quest for the transcendent which, though capable of embodying theistic and even distinctly Christian assumptions, are not dependent upon them for meaning. In some respects, the most influential may be Bernard Lonergan, whose works clearly set directions for several later writers, such as Walter E. Conn, Michael Novak, and Daniel Helminiak. Briefly (and Lonergan is not subject to brief summaries), Lonergan employs philosophical and psychological categories to understand the human quest for the transcendent. Standing in the rationalist (as opposed to the empiricist) tradition, Lonergan sees human consciousness as not simply cognitive, but as constitutive. It does not simply register an account of a self-evidently meaningful reality. Reality is posited in the experiencing, organizing, extrapolating, judging and believing of it. The human must not only become aware of this self-constituting activity, but take accountability for it, constituting worlds rooted in transcendent values. Self-appropriation involves being present to one's self; being aware of one's "conscious intentionality" and one's "intentional consciousness." It means not only experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding, but becoming explicitly aware that that is in fact what one is doing by focusing all those actions back on the
subject that is doing them. This is an on-going developmental task, constituting both the self and the world. Thus one is not only more adequately drawn into the world; one creatively, valuing positions one's self within that world. This is authentic self-transcendence. It involves being liberated from the self (in the self-absorbed meaning), and being drawn by the principles of fidelity, love, and caring. This is the highest expression of the radical dynamism that thrusts the subject toward self-transcendence.

The reference to Lonergan illustrates one way in which the categories and terms of the personality sciences can illumine what may be regarded as uniquely religious issues. But there are many variations. Walter Conn, for example, addresses the matter of the mature conscience employing Lonergan's motif of authentic self-transcendence. Daniel Helminiak explores spirituality drawing on the key theorists of developmental psychology. Bailey Gillespie positions personal conversion at the nexus of five decisive factors, each of them the primary domain of the personality sciences. Charles Shelton describes the turbulent era of adolescent spirituality from a perspective informed by Piaget, Erikson, Fowler, and (from another angle) Ignatius Loyola. And James Fowler, viewing faith as a meaning-making function of the human mind that positions life in the context of ultimate centers of power and value, has defined a sequence of developmental stages based on the almost common-place levels of the developmental theorists, yet which apply to personal religious experience.

Which brings us to the need for some disclaimers in speaking to the issue of developmental psychology and its usefulness for understanding spirituality. The first caveat is in recognizing that "developmental stage" is a heuristic notion. It is an artifact that is imposed upon a very complex, intricate network of interacting factors for the sake of recognizing patterns and commonalities in what is largely an individualistic experience. Whether we are talking about stages of ego development (Jane Loevinger), of moral development (Lawrence Kohlberg), of cognitive development (Jean Piaget), of Jungian Pathways (Harold Grant), of psycho-social crises (Erikson), or many others, these are all artificial constructs set somewhat arbitrarily across the top of an ever-changing landscape of human uniquenesses. They are not to be reified, to be viewed as though they had a separate, self-existent reality.

To speak of developmental stages also raises the expectation of a certain linear predictability, as though one could, by understanding one's present stage, plot the sure trajectory for the next phase of one's life. As relevant as this caution may be for children, it is even more relevant for adults, who have claimed even larger shares of accountability for the novel self-direction of their own unfolding lives. Writers of spirituality often have employed the image of a pathway, which evokes a certain linearity of expectations. It may be more fruitful to envision an improvisational dancer on a stage whose free-style choreography may be somewhat influenced by the music that is playing, and by the dimensions of the stage, but whose motions are the more striking by their utter novelty.
A third caution centers around an implied determinism; that if one can plot the beginning points of a journey, and all the essential stations along the way, then certainly we can know the final destination, the desired end-point, of a particular developmental path. But this robs human experience of its uniqueness and freedom. And each stage, rather than having an integrity of its own, is but an incomplete phase of the final end. Developmental theorists struggle with varying degrees of success to present images of the more "advanced" stages which are not closed systems. Even the classic Adventist "end point" of being restored to the "image of God" does not solve the teleological dilemma; it simply moves it to a higher level, for what human can indeed know the nature of the infinite.

And finally, developmental insights that make sense to an individual tend to become a norm by which that individual measures all others. Even Lawrence Kohlberg appears to have overlooked the strong gender bias of his research on moral development. Doing his initial studies on young men, he failed to note that men go about making moral choices in a manner quite different from that of women. It took Carol Gilligan11 to contrast the male morality of logic, justice, and rights with the female morality of responsibility, caring, and relationships. Thus a scheme that interpreted women as inferior to men in moral development was chided for its own imperialism of viewpoint. Any developmental scheme runs similar risks.

III. TRANSITIONS IN SPIRITUALITY

Even with its evident limitations, developmental psychology still carries strong potential for informing our understanding of spirituality. In particular, it can predict with broad strokes some of the ways in which spirituality will be experienced in new ways at different stages of one's life. And one advantage of knowing these likely patterns is that, when they begin to happen, one will not interpret them negatively. What has often been seen as "backsliding," "loss of first love," or "love of the world" need not always be seen as a spiritual journey gone awry; such transitions may in fact be but the wholesome marks of normal psychological maturation as it impacts spirituality.

Paul observed that, when he was a child, he thought, spoke, and reasoned as a child (I Cor. 13:11). When he then announced that, upon growing up, he had done with childish ways, he spoke with a profoundness that we seldom credit to that passage. The language patterns, the forms and capacities of reasoning, indeed the entire frames of reference associated with childhood, experience a radical transformation enroute to adulthood. Since life is a whole, and spirituality cannot be experienced apart from language, reasoning, and ultimate frames of reference, such maturation will have marked effects upon the individual's spiritual life.

Some of these transitions in spiritual experience can be broadly described by viewing them as adjunct to, or manifestations of, psychological stage growth. Using a bipolar reference point, and seeing spiritual growth as motion from one pole towards the other, the following "passages" suggest manifestations of spiritual
growth.

A. Extrinsic to Intrinsic: Religious life is typically viewed as closely aligned with the issue of power, or of authority. What or who is it that determines what an individual should believe, or how one should act? Religion claims to mediate between the human and such sources of authority. For the immature, the locus of authority is external to, and often over against, the individual. Matters of truth and rightness are decided outside of one's self apart from one's own capacities or inclinations, and then imposed (graciously or otherwise) upon the subordinate believer. Spirituality, then, (if such can indeed be said to exist at this stage) is marked by dutiful, uncomplaining submission to one exterior to, and typically holier than, one's self.

But if our working definition of spirituality implies that it is the movement of a self-responsible subject, resulting from openness to an intrinsic principle or dynamism of self-transcendence, then the image of mere submission must be inadequate. To be "conscientiously conformist," to use Loevinger's formulation, has little to do with responsible self-determination. Some have argued that true spirituality is not even possible until one has negotiated her independence from extrinsic authority, from the childhood patterns of conformity, and freely owned the right to self-direction. Gilligan notes how difficult this is for women, whose ingrained ethos is built on nurturing others, and feeling guilty for claiming their own rights.12

One aspect of the transition of the locus of authority from extrinsic to intrinsic is a new openness to the dynamism of one's own spirit toward self-transcendence. Perhaps this was Paul's thrust when he told the Philippians not to wait for an authority to solve their concerns, but to trust the work of God within themselves to produce an internal response (Phil. 2:12,13). If this is so, then to aid spirituality is to diminish the role of the church as a broker of extrinsic authority, and enhance its role as an enabler of responsible freedom.

B. Conformity to Community: In the transition from middle adolescence to adulthood, one generally experiences a subtle but important realignment of relationships with significant others. The adolescent years are marked by an intense desire to measure one's worth by obtaining positive responses from one's peers and from respected authority figures. This potent need predictably leads to overconformity to the expectations of others. One joins groups, including church groups, at least in part from a desire to establish one's personal identity and to comply with parental expectations.

But the years of late adolescence are marked by an intense desire to establish one's individuality, to set aside all groups which mediate corporate expectations, and to "do it my way!" Belonging to a defined organization with well-established behavioral norms is threatening to the tasks of individuation. The quest for autonomy makes institutionally oriented religion seem like a throw-back to the conformity experiences of an earlier stage. Should spiritual pursuits seem appealing at all during this phase, they will likely be very privatized, very insulated from "bodily growth" in the Pauline sense.
Should maturation continue beyond this individualistic stage (and it by no means always does), one will discover a new dimension of corporate belonging, in which affiliation is no longer a threat to the now-established personal identity. The meaning of "church" is now re-imaged as enabling community, rather than as, an intimidating, monolithic power structure. Interaction with others facilitates self-constituting, rather than inhibiting it.

Perhaps it is the broad-ranging tendency for Americans to fixate at the individuation stage that gives rise to Robert Bellah's concern about the excessive individualism and privatization of American religion. Many are excessively absorbed with individualism as a reaction against the remembered conformist pressures of an earlier stage. Since we tend to construct our religious images through what has been rather than through what might be, the church does not appear inviting.

C. Subordination of Self to Self-Affirming: The religious experiences of many who are raised within a conservative religious tradition are laced with poorly-understood admonitions about "denying self," "the battle against self," and the "evils of selfishness." Assuming that the normal self-absorption of the egoistic early years all stand under the divine judgment, and having little basis for understanding the concept of valid selfhood, they settle into a religiously mandated denial of much of what is intrinsic to their emerging personhood. As mentioned above, this is particularly critical for women, who are inculcated to hold self-renouncing, subservient roles. Often, spirituality that liberates a self-directed becoming must first wade through seasons of guilt for paying so much attention to one's self. Gilligan proposes a vision of maturity in which the object of one's responsible caring includes one's self as readily as it includes another, and "the injunction not to hurt, freed from conventional constraints, sustains the ideal of care while focusing the reality of choice."14

Jesus' own vision of spiritual maturity as summed up in loving God supremely, and one's neighbor as one's self, creates cognitive dissonance for the one taught that self-love is evil. Yet the resolution will likely be found, not in some more careful exegesis of the text, but in personal psychological development issuing in self-affirmation as a legitimate posture of the whole being.

D. Manipulation to Alignment: One of the key characteristics of pre-conventional (as per Kohlberg) thinking is that goodness and badness is determined by the dispensing of rewards and punishments by caregivers and authority figures in the child's life. And since these adults also provide the substantive images of the still-abstract Divine Beings in the child's life, it is evident that a child's religious life will center around formula attempts to stroke, appease, and manipulate God, that God's blessings might be induced, and his punishments mitigated. Stories and moralizings in children's religious literature reinforce the notion that good behavior gets rewarded and bad behavior gets punished. Prayer becomes an occasion to change God: to request his care and protection (which he might not otherwise provide), to request his forgiveness (lacking which he would remain hostile, judgmental toward us), to request blessings of meals, Uncle Charlie, and sick
puppies (which he otherwise would likely overlook).

Intellectual maturation puts one in severe tension with the religious assumptions of youth, testing one's well-learned spiritual activities. We discover that puppies get sick and recover for reasons that have far more to do with good care and veterinary medicine than with one's prayer life, and that sometimes the drunk driver hits us even after we have prayed for protection. The mind is drawn to factors far more under our control than an intrusive, manipulated God. We begin to grasp broad-ranging, enduring principles that govern physical, physiological, interpersonal, and psychological functions. The spiritually maturing begin to sense that our role is to thrust ourselves ever more responsibly into the flow of choices, actions, becomings, which shape the human circumstances and structures. Prayer, then, becomes an occasion, not to change God, but to allow ourselves to be changed. The goal is the increasing alignment of one's own values and vision, increasing willingness to bear accountability as those created to care for the earth. Prayer that is a thinly-veiled attempt to shift accountability to God is avoided.

This transition in spiritual activity is not the result of (for example) a formula course in prayer. It is the result of a fundamental shift in one's world view; it is the product of an entirely new paradigm of divine-human interaction with regard to the real world. But it is worth noting that the religious paragons that we construct in childhood are often surrounded with an aura of simple piety, of childlike naivete, that resonates with endorsements of "except you become as children..." And because such conceptual models are often held pre-consciously, there is a vague feeling that to move beyond them is to have been subverted by the "intellectualism" we were warned about when we were young. And for many Christians, an increasing gap begins to appear between one's cognitive, moral, and psychological development stages, and the religious formulas and constructs formed in childhood. Such persons often assume that they have simply outgrown religion; or they relegate religion to the realm of mystical ritual, empty God-talk, or non-relevant doctrinal formulas set apart from real life concerns. But to see spiritual development as concomitant with all dimensions of psychological development could avoid such misdirected conclusions.

E. Dichotomist to Unitive: The religious formulations of the child are rich with fantasy, myth, imagination, and drama. The boundaries between the real, the miraculous, and even the fanciful, are permeable boundaries. God is viewed as over, above, and detached from most concrete concerns. An almost Platonic dualism seems plausible as experience is divided into polar realms: the sacred and the secular; the remnant and Babylon; the saved and the lost; the wicked (them) and the righteous (us); the Truth (our doctrines) and error (theirs). It is a feature of the youthful mind to want to categorize, stereotype, and find closure for all issues. With a low tolerance for ambiguity, young religion wants all the loose ends tucked in, every issue moved into either the black or the white column, and every teaching certified as either entirely true or blatantly (key-text-proved) false. But this is more than a religious style; it is the religious manifestation of
that stage of psychological development.

James Fowler has identified the characteristics of adult faith as including what he calls Conjunctive Faith. No longer threatened by the fear of disconfirmation should one encounter someone who disagrees, the adult begins actually to cherish paradox and ambiguity. He observes:

Persons of Conjunctive faith are not likely to be "true believers," in the sense of an undialectical, single-minded, uncritical devotion to a cause or ideology. They will not be protagonists in holy wars. They know that the line between the righteous and the sinners goes through the heart of each of us and our communities, rather than between us and them. 15

But this profound inner shift in how one handles dissonance has a marked impact on the motivations and passions which so often drive personal and corporate spiritual life. For example, evangelism that is fueled by the certainty that one's own views are not only exhaustively correct, but irreducibly necessary for salvation, that one belongs to the one and only True Church and all others must be rescued, and that sinners are an alien class of people from one's self, will wonder what has happened to his fire when he shifts into a profoundly different mindset. His pastor may wonder the same thing!

The ability to live without closure, to cherish paradox, to find transcending value in superficially conflicting positions, and to sense a common bond of humanness that supersedes all categories that would separate, may radically alter one's initial motivations for joining a church. The "us versus them" self-identity which characterizes many evangelistic thrusts will draw people at the level in which those dichotomist lines are important. The church is presently experiencing some of the trauma associated with many of its members failing to find such antithesis meaningful. We face a great challenge in proposing more enduring reasons to remain Seventh-day Adventists.

F. Behavioral to Essential: It is a well-established fact of human development that young people growing up within a tradition will always learn the accepted behaviors of that tradition long before they learn the essential reasons behind those behaviors. Adventist youth, for example, will learn what they should or should not do on the Sabbath long before they understand why. Hans Kung 16 reminded us that, though form and essence cannot be separated, they are not the same thing. But the form-essence interplay takes on an interesting dimension when seen through the eyes of developmental psychology. Ideally, essence should always be prior to form; but the limitations of the developing human mind put religious life together in reverse order. While this has the temporary advantage of habituating young people to accepted behaviors, it has the grave risk of inducing some to conclude that mastering form is the end goal of religion. Since form can be maintained among the young only by external authority, the emancipation events of adolescence will alienate the youth toward both the authorities and the forms that symbolize their influence.

The more advanced stages of psychological development are
marked by the capacity to operate from universal principles, to
discern the essence of an issue and trace its application to
particular situations. Such persons are often very unsettling to
those whose religious life is secured by formula responses. They
will seek a style of spirituality that does not focus on mastery of
behaviors, but rather will expose themselves to those deepening
experiences of the soul.

IV. SUGGESTED IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVENTISM

To consider spirituality through the perspectives of
developmental psychology may hold important implications for those
who care about the long-range health of the church. A few of such
implications are mentioned here simply as illustrative.

A. An Enabling Style: If spirituality is directly tied to a
network of sustaining psychological maturities, then the church
would do well to be edified by the personality sciences in
understanding how those conditions can be enabled. This much seems
certain: adult stages are inhibited by authoritarian postures by
the church toward its members. This deterrent effect is the more
potent when the church invokes God's name or will on its side over
against its members. Rosemary Ruether\textsuperscript{17} offers us a vivid
challenge when she reminds us that ministry is kenotic, or self-
emptying of power as domination. "Ministry means exercising power
in a new way. . . [it] generates relations of mutual empowerment."
It liberates people to become what God alone can enable them to be.
Any attempt to preclude the direction, timing, and form of the
movement will detract from its outcome.

B. Doctrinal Resolution: Doctrine is a human construct, made
up of elements that have meaning and currency within a group of
people at a given time and place. Those meaning-making elements
(words, analogies, metaphors) are strongly influenced by an
individual's developmental stages, or by the aggregate stages of a
church group. Fundamentally different orientations towards such
key concepts as "sin," "atonement," or "sanctuary" can be traced,
not so much to differing selections of key texts, or differing
exegetical methods, but to diverse developmental stages. As we
seek to deal with doctrinal conflict within the Body, we would do
well to note explicit possibilities for this factor.\textsuperscript{18}

C. Allowing Plurality of Style: Almost without exception,
developmental theorists observe that chronological aging is no
guarantee of psychological development. Indeed, several have
documented that only a minority maintain viability and continue
growth to the highest possible levels. Kohlberg's early research
indicated that only about 25% of adults regularly function at the
level of internalized values and universal principles. (His later
research was even more pessimistic!) Yet the church seeks to
embrace all whom the Spirit calls, without reference to race,
color, gender, or level of development! It brings together those
who believe that offering meat to idols will contaminate the meat,
and those who flaunt the non-existence of idols and scandalize the
"literalist." Our response can be no better than Paul's: "Let each
person be persuaded in his own mind. . . only stop judging one
another!" (Romans 14:5,13)

A church that rigidifies around the forms that are suitable to
the numerical majority, then passes religious judgments against those whose difference is in form, not in essence, is a church that will either fracture or lose its vitality. But a church that refuses to place a religious onus over diversity rooted in diverse levels of development is likely to remain robust and agile.

And that is my desire for this church.
NOTES


3. We might also reflect on how virtually impossible it would be to arrive at a reliable means of differentiating among the "true believers," the immature Christian, the well-meaning but uninformed Christian, the hypocritical Christian, the self-deluded Christian, and the one who, for institutional reasons, makes no religious claims, but is open to the heart-working of the Spirit.


10. "To restore in man the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created...this was to be the work of redemption." Ellen White, Education. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., pp. 15, 16.

12. Ibid, pp. 128-134.


15. Fowler, Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian, p. 67.


18. For a more detailed development of this concept, see this author's, "The Influence of Developmental Factors in the Formulation of Adventist Doctrine," printed in the proceedings of the 1988 Institute for Christian College Teaching, from the ICCT office, 6840 Eastern Ave., N.W. Washington, DC 20012.