Faith, Spirituality, and Religion: A Model for Understanding the Differences

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The terms faith, spirituality, and religion are often used interchangeably, though their definitions are unique and distinct. This article discusses the nuanced differences among the three terms. It presents a model for the interrelatedness among the three important constructs and suggests ways the model can be used for further research.

"Faith" is nearly impossible to define. It means something different to each individual. Faith is understood to be intensely personal and often seen as extremely private. "The term 'faith' ranges in meaning from a general religious attitude on the one hand to personal acceptance of a specific set of beliefs on the other hand" (Hellwig, 1990, p. 3). Yet faith is still superimposed on the lives of our students (Newman, 1998). Though most often seen in religious terms, faith remains an "extraordinarily important construct" (Lee, 1990, p. vii).

Despite the mandate from the Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937) to develop the whole person as part of the student affairs profession, a relative silence has permeated the faith dimension of student development. Even with the advent of Fowler's (1981) faith development theory, it has taken until well into the 1990s for student development researchers to begin investigating faith development of college students.

Within the past few years, however, researchers have called on our profession to begin focusing on this dimension of students' development (Love & Talbot, 1999; Temkin & Evans, 1998). With this call comes the responsibility to make clear distinctions as to the specific focus of our inquiry. The terms faith, spirituality, and religion frequently appear either side by side or are even used synonymously for one another. In fact, the focus of this special issue uses all three terms in the title, including all three as equal parts.

While there is merit to including all three terms for investigating issues and areas of students' development, a distinction should also be made when discussing these three important and interrelated concepts. In this issue alone, we discuss religion, spirituality, and faith, and the developmental issues involved with each. Yet, when we discuss one, are we really talking about another? Where is the overlap of one to the other? Or are we really lumping all three into the same construct?

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Both Fowler (1981) and Parks (1986, 2000) have offered a fairly comprehensive notion of the term faith. Other researchers have taken their ideas and placed them in the context of student development (Love, 2001, 2002; Love & Talbot, 1999). Both Love (2001) and Nash (2001) discuss the differences between religion and spirituality. While Love suggests that religion and spirituality overlap, he does not delve further as to why or how. Nash makes the distinction by saying that spirituality is an inward expression, while religion is an outward expression of faith. While both Love and Nash attempt to define the terms, I feel there is more to understanding these important differences.

First, I will discuss the three concepts of faith, spirituality, and religion. Then, I will propose a model for understanding the nuanced differences among them.

Faith and Faith Development

As a part of sociological research, faith development has been virtually absent until the last 10 years (Hiebert, 1992). In fact, according to Hiebert, faith development as a citation was not present in Sociofile, the computer index of sociological journal articles, until the middle of 1989.

Interestingly, faith – defined as a general religious attitude or accepted set of personal beliefs – was not present in the ancient worlds of Greek and Roman culture. Rather, the concept of faith singularly and directly originates in the Hebrew scriptures (Hellwig, 1990). Hellwig traces the notion of faith through the New Testament, the Church Fathers, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and into the Modern Era. Faith has been a part of religion, and explored by scholars from numerous disciplines (Hellwig, 1990).

However, as Hiebert (1993) points out, Fowler (1981) departs from these conventional notions of faith and "equates faith with individual meaning systems" (p. 321). "Fowler describes the most generic and most profound process of being human, the process of meaning-making, as faith. Faith, in his conception, is therefore often but not necessarily religious" (p. 321).

In his introduction, Fowler (1981) discusses how faith:

> is so *fundamental* that none of us can live well for very long without it, so *universal* that when we move beneath the symbols, rituals and ethical patterns that express it, faith is recognizably the same phenomenon in Christians, Marxists, Hindus and Dinka, yet it is so *infinitely varied* that each person's faith is unique. (p. xiii, emphasis original)

Tying together the uniqueness of individual faith into a workable and plausible theoretical framework, Fowler is careful at numerous times throughout not to confuse it with religion.

Fowler describes faith in human terms. "Prior to our being religious or irreligious ... we are already engaged with issues of faith. Whether we become nonbelievers,

agnostics or atheists, we are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living" (p. 5).

In fact, Fowler spends the entirety of Part I (pp. 3-36) of his foundational work *Stages of Faith* (1981) describing what faith is. He takes enormous care to point out the differences among faith, religion, and belief. Additionally, he discusses faith and relationship, and faith and imagination. Specifically, he stresses the concept of "radical monotheism." Although monotheism is traditionally held to be the "doctrine or belief that there is only one God," (Fowler, 1981, p. 22) as in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, he broadens the concept to be a relation "in which a person or group focuses its supreme trust and loyalty in a transcendent center of value and power, that is neither a conscious or unconscious extension of personal or group ego nor a finite cause or institution" (p. 23). This implies a singular loyalty to the "*principle of being* and to the *source and center of all value and power*" (p. 23, emphasis original).

In addition to being universal, faith is relational, implying the trust of one upon another (Fowler, 1981, 1986a, 1986b). Faith is also seeing and knowing. "Knowing occurs when an active knower interacts with an active world of persons and objects, meeting its unshaped or unorganized stimuli with the ordering, organizing power of the knower's mind" (Fowler, 1986b, p. 19).

Another important concept to understand is Fowler's concept of faith and imagination, specifically what he calls the "ultimate environment" (p. 24). The ultimate environment is the means by which we find order and shape our actions based on what we see going on around us. As imagination, faith forms a comprehensive unit of what we see in our ordered world and deposits value and power in it with regard to self, others, and world. Symbols and metaphors can bring the shared images of an ultimate environment together as expression. Often unconscious or tacit within a community, the ultimate environment poses a tremendous influence in a person's response to life.

Fowler adds that faith exhibits the qualities of a mystery, rather than a problem. "Faith ... is perplexing, because we are *internal* to it" (1981, p. 32, emphasis original). "'Objectivity' about faith inevitably involves our 'subjectivity.' While I have tried at various points to pull definitions of faith together, I have never sought to oversystematize it into a manageable concept," Fowler writes (1986a, p. 281). Tam (1996) concludes that "any attempt to reduce Fowler's understanding of faith to any simple definition is in fact doing injustice to his theory" (p. 252).

Fowler (1986b) provides a summary, composite definition as:

> Faith is the process of constitutive-knowing; underlying a person's composition and maintenance of a comprehensive frame (or frames) of meaning; generated from the person's attachments or commitments to centers of supraordinate value which have power to unify his or her experiences of the world; thereby endowing the relationships, contexts, and patterns of everyday life, past and future, with significance. (pp. 25-26)

Succinctly stated, faith "has to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning" (Fowler, 1986b, p. 15).

This definition of faith naturally leads to a discussion of faith development. Faith development is new to the psychology of religion (Nipkow, Schweitzer, & Fowler, 1991). And, as the limited citations in education and sociology journals prove, it is new to those areas as well. According to Nipkow, Schwietzer, and Fowler, faith development is not about one type of faith or religion, but it refers to the "developmental process of finding and making meaning as a human activity" (p. 1). As has already been noted by Fowler (1981, 1986b), it is "equally applicable to religious and nonreligious, Christian and non-Christian interpretations of self and world" (Nipkow, Schweitzer, & Fowler, 1991, p. 1). Further, faith development is a psychological concept, distinct from any one particular belief. At the same time, faith development can be seen "in such a way that it can also be interpreted theologically and filled with substantive beliefs" (p. 1).

Influenced by Fowler's theory, Parks (2000) provides a detailed view of the young adult faith journey. Love (2001) provides an excellent overview of her theory, depicted as a three-component model as the young adult interacts with forms of knowing, dependence, and community. Ultimately, Parks challenges the community of higher education to serve as spiritual guides or mentors as the young adult faces this faith journey. Student affairs professionals are called to provide challenge as well as opportunities for pause and "ah-ha" moments. Ultimately, these times of conflict, pause, and "ah-ha" allow the growth of the young adult's faith to take shape.

Spirituality, Religion, and Faith

The distinguishing line between spirituality, religion, and faith can become fuzzy. To some, it would seem that they would be interchangeable. Some authors in this issue use them synonymously. In some cases, they perhaps could be. However, they are distinctly different concepts, especially when seen in the light of the model presented in this article. Love and Talbot (1999) provide a discussion of spirituality and an overarching theme to spiritual development, yet do not provide the distinction between it and faith.

How then do such concepts of spirituality and religion figure into the faith equation? Related to each other, but different in scope, they are the constructs that build on the foundation of faith.

Defining *religion* "is often held to be difficult" (Smith, 1995, p. 893). Many attempts have been made to pinpoint a definition. An adequate definition lies in the understanding that "religions are systems or structures consisting of specific kinds of beliefs and practices: beliefs and practices that are related to superhuman beings" (p. 893). The superhuman being or beings, whether male, female, or androgynous, do things ordinary mortals cannot and are "known for miraculous deeds and powers that set them apart from humans" (p. 893).

For sociologists, religion is a "stable cluster of values, norms, statuses, roles, and groups developed around a basic social need" (Smith, 1995, p. 905). The social need to make a distinction between sacred and profane is at the core of all religions. "Religious life thus thickens and solidifies community life, inducing a sense of attachment to the community and its values" (p. 906).

Dependence on superhuman beings within the context of community life has wide and varying implications into all types of religions world-wide. For the purpose of this model, religion is limited in scope to the superhuman in "radical monotheistic" (Fowler, 1981) terms. Religion is still a set of beliefs and practices that revere a god or a center of power and value. Persons do things, such as attend worship services or pray, to show reverence and worship. In short, it is a state of *doing*.

Webster's dictionary (Guralnik, 1984) defines *spiritual* as "of the spirit or the soul as distinguished from the body or material matters" (p. 1373) and *spirituality* follows as "spiritual character, quality, or nature" (p. 1373). Viewing it from the Christian perspective, spirituality:

> is an existence before God and amid the created world. It is a praying and living in Jesus Christ. It is the human spirit being grasped, sustained, and transformed by the Holy Spirit. It is the search of believers for a communion that arrives as a gift. (Wainwright, 1987, p. 452)

To be spiritual or have spirituality, persons attempt to live a life guided by the spirit of their faith. Persons may meditate, pray, or make conscious decisions regarding their actions based on how they sense the Spirit leading them. In short, it is a state of *being*.

The Model

Despite notable attempts by scholars to distinguish among these terms as described above, the current trend is to treat these three concepts as equal and interchangeable. One might use religion to mean faith in one instance. In the next instance someone else may use spirituality to mean religion. Depending on use or application, one may substitute any of the three terms to mean the other.

In contrast to this common approach, in my model, spirituality and religion are a *function* of faith. Both religion and spirituality require faith as a foundation (Figure 1). In other words, faith is the guiding principle by which individuals are either religious or spiritual. Faith serves as both the source and the target of their religion or spirituality. Devotion to religion or perception of growth in spirituality may be seen as a measure of greater valence of understanding one's faith.

Further, one can be present without the other. For instance, it is possible for someone to have faith (KNOWING), but not necessarily be religious (DOING). Or, someone may have faith and be religious, but not necessarily spiritual (BEING). Moreover, in the strictest sense of the definitions, religion and spirituality are not necessary elements to a person's faith. They are, however, indicators of the depth of faith. Because of the value added to faith due to religion and spirituality, they are often seen as overlapping elements to faith, and though not necessary, are critical to faith growth and development.

Movement may
occur along each
continuum, may
ebb and flow
and/or may
move in or out
of "sync" with
each other.

SPIRITUALITY

"BEING"

in Faith

RELIGION

"DOING"

in Faith

FAITH

"KNOWING" of Faith

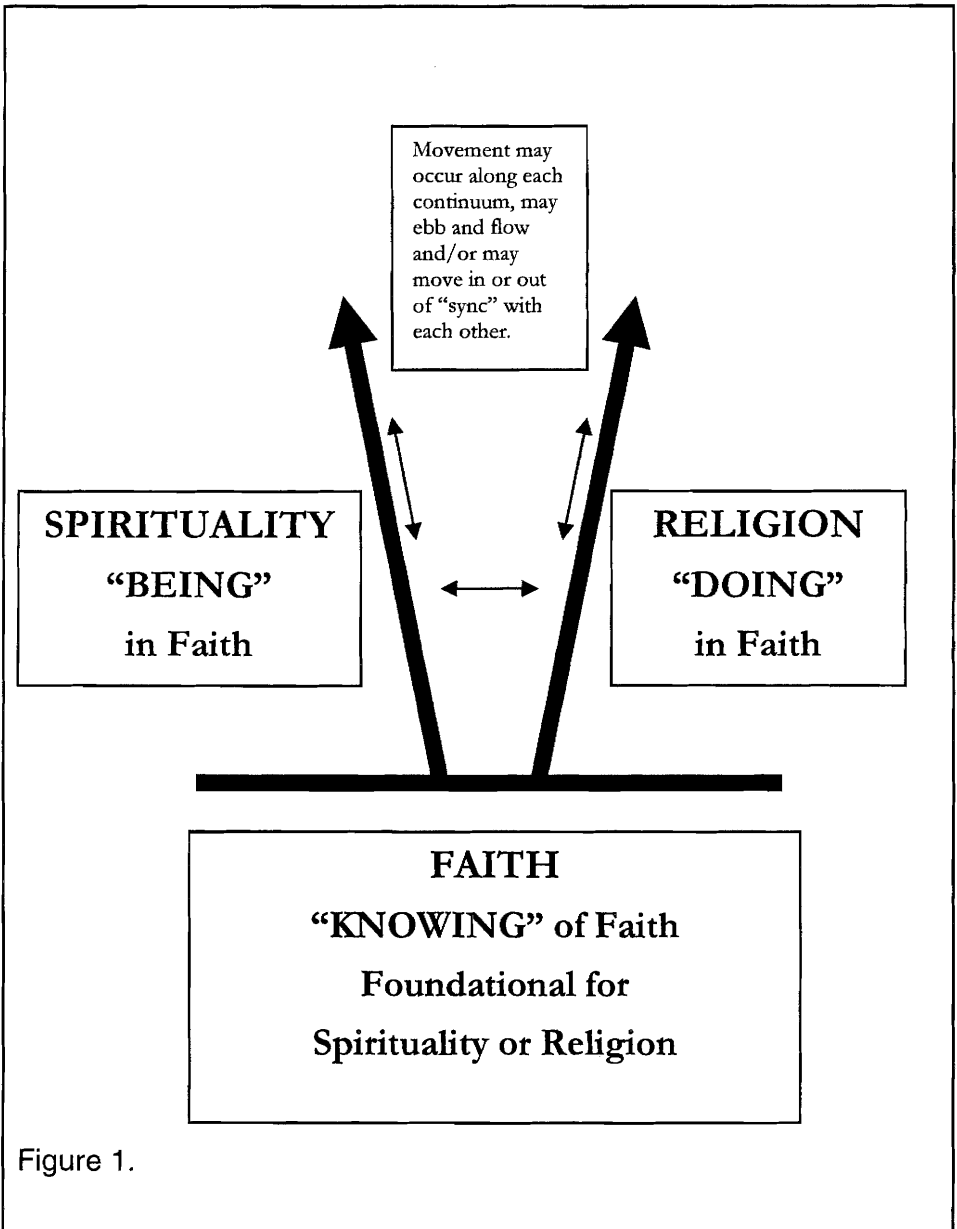Foundational for

Spirituality or Religion

Figure 1.

In fact, people can be spiritual or religious and still have a faith that is not reflected upon. Or, alternatively, the meaning-making system in their own lives may be tacit to the point that acts of spirituality or religion far outpace their ability to articulate their faith. For example, one might say, "I may not be religious, but I'm still a good person." Thus, he or she has not examined his or her own meaning-making system to understand *why* he or she is good.

In my study of the faith journey of 12 students during their first year of college (Newman, 1998), the students talked about how they had "grown spiritually" or described instances of "religious experiences." As stated, though not synonymous with faith, these elements serve as indicators of how student respondents were *doing* and *being* in their faith, and thus how they *made meaning*. Religion and spirituality are indicators of faith.

This model allows the freedom to discuss the three terms interchangeably while giving a context for them. With faith as a foundation, spirituality and religion can be seen as by-products, those things or ways of life which allow an individual to live out his or her faith.

Further, while faith is grounded within an individual, spirituality and religion are dynamic. They have motion. In other words, there is not a threshold that one can or should attain with either one. Rather, individuals ebb and flow along the "spirituality" and/or "religion" continuums. At certain times in life, one may be more spiritual and perhaps not as religious. At other times, it could be the opposite: one is more religious, yet not as spiritual. However, both essences can feed and assist the other in developing. For instance, acts of religion can assist a person to become more spiritual, and vice versa, acts of spirituality may lead to religiosity.

Additionally, the arrows symbolizing "spirituality" and "religion" can take a direction that may plot them to be closer together and heading in the same direction. Or, conversely, the two may be moving in different directions. For instance, one's religious acts may not complement or enhance one's spirituality. Thus, the arrows would be heading in a much wider direction than one whose spirituality and religion both serve to edify the other.

The simplicity of the model allows one to massage and maneuver those things both tacit and explicit that allow one to develop in faith. One can begin to see the distinctiveness, yet interconnectedness of the three terms.

Some Questions For Further Consideration

With this model as a guiding basis for the distinction between the terms, we can begin to investigate the subtle nuances all three derive. For instance, when we discuss spiritual development are we looking at those issues that allow our growth in the realm of *being* in faith? Or, are we still talking about issues that focus on the *meaning making* systems? If it is the latter, then we should refer to it as faith development rather than as spiritual development.

This model can also serve as a basis for further study. How does one exercise faith in light of this model? What makes a person more religious? More spiritual? Are there certain experiences within one's faith development that make him or her more or less spiritual or religious? Do greater acts of religiosity or spirituality actually trigger faith development (such as movement along Fowler's stages of faith)? As student affairs professionals, how do we encourage or mentor the spiritual and/or religious sides of faith development?

Further, the *spirituality* and *religion* sides of the model are fluid and dynamic. At some point, a numerical scale could be assigned to certain points along each continuum, which could allow for empirical research. With such a scale, researchers could study individuals at varying stages along each scale. What cognitive, psychosocial, and typological elements are present in individuals who are more spiritual or more religious or those individuals at any point along the continuums in relation to the three terms?

Moreover, if faith is foundational, how do we investigate those issues for individuals who say they are spiritual or may be religious, yet have not reflected upon their personal faith? How do we uncover the meaning-making systems that lead to spiritual growth? How do we provide the avenues for questioning, examining, pause, and reflection necessary to critically examined faith?

Conclusion

As a profession, we have begun the process of uncovering the faith/spiritual/ religious aspect of development among our students. Just as pulling a single thread can cause more threads to unravel, so too, pulling at the concept of faith presents a torrent of further questions and considerations.

I present a model that provides clarification and definition to the terms of *faith, spirituality,* and *religion.* It is intended to promote discussion about the intricacies it proposes. The model can serve as a means to begin the dialogue needed to increase understanding of this important construct.

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