STAGES OR LIFESPAN? AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT IN ADULTHOOD

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Abstract
The investigation and interpretation of individualised and pluralised religious attitudes and behaviour has been at the top of the research agenda of practical theology for some decades. With regard to the description of religious development especially in childhood and adolescence, but also in adulthood, the stage theories by J.W. Fowler and F. Oser/P. Gmünder have played a prominent role. In current developmental psychology, the lifespan approach has been established as a new paradigm that conceives development as a lifelong and multidirectional process and particularly takes into account developmental processes in the higher and highest adulthood. We will discuss these developmental theories and present the lifespan approach as an additional – and even more comprehensive – theory for the description and understanding of religious biographies, taking up the results of the empirical theological research project “Religious development in adulthood” (cf. Fürst et al. [Eds.], 2003).

Key Words: lifespan; religious development; adulthood

INTRODUCTION

The often described radical transformations of religion and faith into religious individualisation and pluralisation have generated massive tensions between the traditional, historical forms of religion and the pluralistic consciousness of modern society, leading to considerable adaptive efforts being expected of the Churches and religious communities. At the same time these complex processes of change also influence the development of the individual’s personal religiousness, which, in many cases, is characterised today by a marked dynamic progression over the course of a person’s entire lifetime, and demands a constant process of critical individual conciliation of personal experience with the traditional religious beliefs.

These observations initiated the interest of a subject-oriented practical theology in the individual forms of personal religiousness and their correlations with the individual’s biography. To the extent in which the Churches and religious communities have lost their power of defining religion,
individual religiousness obtains increasing importance. In this context individual religiousness is understood as an individually shaped reference to certain (more or less articulated) transcendent, ultimate or absolute realities in the interest of the quest for meaning or coping with contingency.

However, from a practical theological perspective the question arises how to gain access to the empirical investigation into the corresponding operationalisations. Primarily – and this will be one of the focuses of this paper – it is important to reflect on the categories of analysis and schemes of interpretation that are used in studies on religious development.

First, this paper will deal with this topic by calling to mind and discussing the stage models of religious development (1.). Regarding the special challenge lying in the assessment and interpretation of development in late adulthood, the lifespan approach will be presented as a theory of current developmental psychology (2.). If and how this approach can be helpful for understanding religious development throughout life will be discussed on the basis of the empirical theological study “Religious Development in Adulthood”, by presenting its method (3.) and results (4.). Finally, we will discuss whether the lifespan approach presents an appropriate framework for the interpretation of religious biographies and whether it may serve as a stimulus for a revision of established models of religious development (5.).

1 Stage Models of Religious Development

With the works of James W. Fowler, resp. Fritz Oser and Paul Gmünder, two theoretical approaches have dominated the discussion on the development of faith in the psychology of religion and religious education for about 20 years. These approaches transfer the structural genetic model of development sensu Piaget into the ontogenesis of religiousness and draw up stage models of religiousness by analogy with the stages of cognitive and moral development.

1.1 General features of stage models of religious development

For the first time, both Fowler and Oser/Gmünder considered the entire lifespan in their description of religious biographies. They postulate a process of religious development, which in their view is directed towards a desirable target state of mature religiousness, that is determined by theological-philosophical reflection. They differentiate between distinctive qualities of religious judgement (Oser & Gmünder) resp. of faith (Fowler),