

Developmental Aspects of

1. Adolescents and Religious Conversion

Amanda K. Grein

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Abstract

Religiosity is a vital aspect to adolescents and their identity development. Several key developmental theorists will be examined with regard to adolescent identity development and ensuing religious conversion. Since older adolescents are often targeted for cult conversion (Galanter, 1989), a better understanding of what is occurring mentally and spiritually in these teenagers can aid counselors working with this population. Positive religious conversion can help the youth develop a firmer sense of who they are whereas cult conversion can stall and hinder the adolescent leaving their identity underdeveloped or replaced with a group identity.

DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF ADOLESCENTS AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

Introduction

When counseling adolescents, there are many aspects to consider, one in particular being religiosity. Since teenagers in the United States do tend toward spirituality (Santrock, 1996), examining religious and cult conversion from a developmental perspective can be helpful when working with adolescents. Several key developmental theorists will be studied along with examining religious and cult conversion and how they relate to adolescents.

Developmental Aspects of Youth/Adolescents

There are several developmental theorists whose ideas can help explain some of the changes occurring in the adolescent's mind and body. Why is it important to study the developmental aspect of an adolescent along with their spiritual growth? John J. Heaney (1984) states:

Religious maturity and human maturity are intimately connected. An immature religious view of life may be the result of not having negotiated the stages of human growth.

However, religious structures themselves have at times inhibited human growth. (p. 118)

From this, one can conclude that in order to have a healthy, mature faith, one must be a healthy, mature individual. Adolescents are not mature individuals but on the road to maturity. The same can be said about their religious training and beliefs. Some of the developmental theorists who will be studied are Jean Piaget, James Fowler, and Erik Erikson.

Developmental Theorists

Jean Piaget

What are some of the cognitive changes occurring in an adolescent? Jean Piaget's cognitive

theory states that people move from instinctive actions to abstract reasoning as they move from being an infant to an adult (Yount, 1996). From approximately age eleven, Piaget's formal operations stage is entered (Paloutzian, 1996). This stage is characterized by "thinking becoming more abstract and global, can solve abstract problems, scientific thinking, systematic experimentation, complex verbal skills, and concern for societal problems" (Yount, 1996, p. 90). All of these aspects begin to emerge in adolescence and the adolescent begins to realize their new capability for thinking in this way. The implication for this in relation to religious issues "is during this last stage [formal operations] that people are more able to understand the deeper meanings of religions to assess the true value of what they have been taught, and make their own decisions about religion independently" (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 91). Because of this new found way of thinking, the adolescent may begin to doubt and question their earlier religious training received from parents and other adults (Strunk, 1959). This may seem as antagonistic but it is necessary because "honest doubt often leads to faith. A person who does not have the courage to doubt may not acquire the wisdom to believe" (Strunk, 1959, p. 163). After examining Piaget's ideas on cognitive development, a look at James Fowler and his stages of faith development is in order.

James Fowler

James Fowler has six stages of faith development. The two that relate to adolescence are stage three--Synthetic-Conventional Faith (early adolescence), and stage four--Individuating-Reflexive Faith (late adolescence/early adulthood) (Heaney, 1984). Stage three is dominated by the new cognitive ability of the person as seen in Piaget's early part of formal operations (Paloutzian, 1996). Another aspect to this stage is that "feelings tend to dominate conceptual reasoning" (Heaney, 1984, p. 127). This leads to feelings testing the validity of values, beliefs, norms, and truth (Heaney, 1984). The youth's world has opened to include family other than immediate, peers, society, media, and other varying influences (Paloutzian, 1996). Heaney (1984) continues this idea by stating:

The person, now able to see himself/herself *as being seen by a variety of significant others* who occupy a variety of disparate standpoints in his/her world, has the problem of synthesizing those mirror images. Moreover, congruence must be found between his/her own feelings and images of self and the world and those held by others. (p. 128)

The adolescent's faith is there to provide a harmony and unity to these new experiences now seen in a larger, and more complex environment (Heaney, 1984).

Fowler's fourth stage will be touched on briefly. As mentioned earlier, it occurs during late adolescence and is characterized by "a critical reflection on self and outlook and results in 'demythologizing' of faith" (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 118). The youth is developing a sense of their own internalized authority (Heaney, 1984). Along with that is an objective analysis of beliefs and values that are held by the late adolescent/early adult (Yount, 1996). Once again, it can be seen that questioning and doubt may occur as the person examines what they believe and why. After studying James Fowler's stages of faith development, Erik Erikson's identity crisis of youth will now be examined.

Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson believes the development of personality is formed through stages throughout a person's life and each stage is preceded by a "crisis" (Yount, 1996, p. 48). The stage that corresponds to adolescence is stage five called "Identity versus Role Confusion" (Yount, 1996, p. 51). The strength of this stage or virtue, as named by Erikson (1965), that results from positive completion of this stage is fidelity. Fidelity is defined as "the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems" (Yount, 1996, p. 58). The adolescent raises questions during this stage such as:

Who am I? Where am I going? During this time they [the adolescents] begin to question the value system, beliefs, and attitudes they received from their parents, because they discover, to their shock, that adults are not always right. (Yount, 1996, p. 52)

The youth is searching for something more meaningful and true which may lead to behaviors such as continually changing of allegiances, changes in convictions, and searching for a place to lay their loyalty (Erikson, 1963). If this stage is successfully completed, a sense of identity emerges "which produces a sense of being at home with oneself, a feeling of stability, of knowing who one is and what one will do with life" (Yount, 1996, p. 52). If this stage is not successfully completed, role confusion occurs which is characterized by a "basic uncertainty about who they are" (Yount, 1996, p. 52). If identity is taken to the extreme, it can lead to fanaticism which is fixation on a person or an ideology where the adolescent is unable to separate themselves from the other person's identity (Yount, 1996). Role confusion taken to the extreme can result in a "malignant 'repudiation [rejecting, disowning] of otherness'" (Yount, 1996, p. 58). Finally, as mentioned earlier, the healthy side or virtue to the identity stage is fidelity. After setting the basis for some developmental ideas about adolescents, one needs to examine religious conversion in general before focusing on youth/adolescent conversion.

Biblical Conversion in General

Lewis R. Rambo (1993) states "in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, the Hebrew and Greek words generally equated with *conversion* are words that literally mean *to turn or return*" (p. 2). This idea of "turning" is the concept of turning toward God or accepting the "work of Christ as bringing 'new birth,' as a passing from death to life and from darkness to light" (Malony, 1992, p. 95). There is a personal God who is concerned about the individual and desires a relationship with that person (Malony, 1992). The idea of biblical conversion is furthered by Malony (1992) stating that:

While celebrating God's work through human beings, biblical theology is clear about the source of creative action. God is the creator . . . Conversion is, among other things, a creative event. It is a matter of life and death . . . Therefore, like all matters of life and death, conversion is, first and foremost God's business. (p. 96)

Before the conversion is death but after the conversion (through saving faith) there is life and a reconciled relationship with the Creator (Rice, 1974). This saving faith is associated with conversion or as Paloutzian (1996) says "the acquiring of faith is conversion" (p. 165).

There are some psychological considerations to conversion. Conversion or the acquisition of faith has three aspects to it: "a cognitive element (certain knowledge about what is believed), an affective element (positive evaluation and attitude of the heart), and a behavioral element

(commitment and expected behavioral outcomes)" (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 165). Along with the idea of the affective element are some ideas on emotions. Religious conversion may intensify the emotions in a person or it may suppress them along with any combination of mixing emotions with contradictory body language (Pruyser, 1969). After conversion and its associated emotions, there are two marks of religious behavior pointed out by Wieman and Westcott-Wieman (1935) as "devotion and supreme value" (p. 65). The convert may or may not be in a healthy religion but it is true religious behavior, according to Wieman and Westcott-Wieman (1935), if they exhibit "devotion and supreme value" (p. 65). Finally, "conversion may be sudden (happening all at once) or gradual (over an extended period of time--days, months, or years)" (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 146-7). After discussing biblical conversion in general along with some psychological insights, a look at adolescent conversion is in order.

Youth/Adolescent Conversion

During adolescence it was mentioned earlier that youth are developing ideas of their own and starting to move away from the group at large (Heaney, 1984). Paloutzian (1996) says;

Adolescents begin to develop a sense of separateness and responsibility. They come to realize, perhaps only intuitively or unconsciously, that they are separate people subject to the same fundamental existential aloneness as every other person is. Along with this, however, come the sense of individual responsibility for facing life and the dilemmas it poses. (p. 127)

The developing mental capacities enable the adolescent to contemplate their spiritual condition. Can an adolescent undergo conversion? If the same question is asked about children and conversion the answer is that it "depends on the child, his ability, his age, maturation, and capacity to grasp thoughts and make decisions" (Ingle, 1970, p. 145). As laid out earlier, all of these criteria have been met or are in the process of being met with the adolescent. The youth is not yet an adult and is no longer a child. It has been alluded to the idea that progression through certain stages of development may facilitate a conversion (Rambo, 1993). It can also be the other way around. Rambo (1993) suggests the idea that religious conversion may in fact advance the adolescent into another developmental stage. The religious ideas taught to a child no longer hold as much meaning to the adolescent (Paloutzian, 1996). There are three alternatives Paloutzian sees the adolescent doing in order to cope with their rising questions about their early religious training: (1) rejection of earlier teachings, (2) blind following without questioning, or (3) explore, examine, and think about possible alternatives to their questions or problems (Paloutzian, 1996). Some of the doubt and questioning may be caused by the division of what people preach and what they actually do (Strunk, 1959). What does conversion actually look like in adolescents? It can be quite similar to adult conversion or the biblical conversion in general that was described earlier. One youth describes her faith as:

For religion ties one closer to those he loves through a common understanding of God and the life He meant us to live . . . The closer you get to the Lord the closer you become to your family. Well, I've finally gotten it out of my system, as I have never written about it before, but I don't want you to think I'm a fanatic or something like that. I'm a pretty normal kid. (Strunk, 1959, p. 164-5)

This young lady showed an example that there are youth concerned about God and eternal questions. Adolescence is a crucial point in time of a person's life and many believe this is why conversion is more likely to occur in adolescence (Paloutzian, 1996). But conversely, "adolescents are also developing their own capacity for making independent decisions about life. Increased convertibility can therefore occur due to youth realistically evaluating alternatives and making their own choices" (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 164). This leads to an important question about youth and their identity search.

Youth/Adolescent Identity Search

What are factors in the youth/adolescent identity search? James Marcia did research and found that with identity resolution, there were two main factors: experience of an identity crisis and whether or not a commitment was made (Yount, 1996). Marcia has four realms of identity descriptions. "Identity *achievement*" is where adolescents "have experienced a crisis of identity, explored options, and chosen, for themselves, who they are and what they'll do" (Yount, 1996, p. 52). This may include a conversion experience or a resolution to a search for an adequate answer to their theological questions. Marcia's second state is called "identity *moratorium*" (Yount, 1996, p. 53). This is where the youth is still in the crisis stage and no definite decision has been made about their identity (Yount, 1996). This may be where an examination of religious questions begins along with other life questions about whom they are and what they will do. Marcia's third identity state is called "identity *foreclosure*" (Yount, 1996, p. 53). The young person has not undergone a crisis and "their commitments are based on the expectations of others: parents, teachers, significant friends" (Yount, 1996, p. 53). This leads to the implication that a conversion experience may be because of pressure from these significant others. Finally, the last status is called "identity *diffusion* . . . adolescents in identity diffusion have not experienced an identity crisis, nor have they any firm commitment or direction for their lives" (Yount, 1996, p. 53). When relating these identity states back to conversion, several conclusions can be drawn. Identity achievement is the ideal for the adolescent. They are closer to being a healthy adult in that they are able to be more assertive and less self-conscious (Yount, 1996). The youth in crisis, "identity moratorium" (Yount, 1996, p. 53) are at a critical juncture in their life. They are in a quest to solve the answer to the question "who am I?" (Yount, 1996, p. 53). Youth in "identity foreclosure" (Yount, 1996, p. 53) are susceptible to influences of significant others and youth in "identity diffusion" (Yount, 1996, p. 53) have no firm commitment anywhere. This examination on youth and their identity search is important to remember when studying youth cult conversion. A closer look at youth cult conversion is now in order.

Youth/Adolescent Cult Conversion

In this paper, a cult will describe "any religion whose teachings deviate from the doctrines of orthodox Christian beliefs" (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 166). Galanter (1989) begins discussing cults by stating the attractiveness of a cult is that it entices people to join. This attractiveness is a charismatic group which is defined by:

- (1) having a *shared belief system*,
- (2) sustain a high level of *social cohesiveness*,
- (3) are strongly influenced by the group's *behavioral norms*, and
- (4) impute *charismatic (or sometimes divine) power* to the group or its leadership. (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 166)

Paloutzian (1996) makes a distinction between cults and "destructive cults" in that the "destructive cults . . . seek to control and radically alter the personalities of their members" (p. 166). An important aspect to cult conversion is the first encounter. Galanter (1989) describes his experience of meeting the Divine Light Mission. He describes the first encounter as "I was greeted in a friendly, even intimate fashion by people who were complete strangers" (Galanter, 1989, p. 25). This close association and group cohesiveness was apparent to him throughout his first day. A member of the group queried about some of the questions Galanter (1989) was asking and when a satisfactory response was not made quick enough, Galanter (1989) reports:

The members I had met quickly withdrew their offers of friendship, providing an object lesson on exclusion from a cohesive group. I soon felt myself to be a nonperson, treated civilly but coolly, having become an outsider as rapidly as I had been made an insider. (p. 28)

This shows the power that a group has on an individual. Relating this experience back to youth in identity crisis, the youth or older adolescent would possibly do all that he could do in order to be accepted in the group again. Galanter's (1989) response as a psychiatrist would be quite different from an older adolescent who has not quite resolved the identity versus role confusion crisis. This leads to the next item of cult conversion. Are the converts willingly participating? Rambo (1993) quotes Margaret Singer who believes that most converts to cults are not true seekers but victims that are preyed upon. Rambo (1993) charges cults with "manipulative and deceptive strategies to seduce people into involvement" (p. 58). This is also accounted by Paloutzian (1996) when he includes a report of a participant observation study done by a college student. The student notes that when he asked about the group's ties with the Unification Church, the group denied the connection (an outright lie) (Paloutzian, 1996). Also, when the student disagreed with one of the guest speakers, he reported being told to "suspend your views like we all did . . . they were formed in the evil of the outer world" (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 171). This leads to another important aspect of a cult and that is to monitor information coming into and going out of a group (Galanter, 1989). During the initial encounter, it is usually at an isolated place with a schedule full of activities (Malony, 1991). Conversion becomes easier for the cult to do when the person's brain functioning "is suspended or distorted through fatigue, confusion, or emotional arousal" (Paloutzian, 1996, p. 168). All of these factors played into the earlier report of the student doing the participant observation study of the Unification Church but yet the student was able to resist the coercion (Paloutzian, 1996). How was this young man able to resist the conversion attempts into the Unification Church? Paloutzian (1996) proposes three factors:

The principles of social psychology highlight three factors contributing to his response (1) he was aware of his lack of immunity; he knew the power of social influence and was on guard against it; (2) he had prior information about the doctrine of the group; (3) he was able to retain a type of perceptual detachment, a capacity for self-observation which kept his own power to choose salient in his mind. (p. 172)

This has important implications for the older adolescent when confronted with possible cult conversion. As mentioned earlier, adolescents may tend to test truth with their emotions (Heaney, 1984). In a heightened emotional encounter, such as a cult's first encounter, that adolescent may see the cult as good because the adolescent feels good. A positive resolution of the identity crisis

is essential. It took a person with a strong sense of self to resist the intense pressure put on him to join the Unification Church (Heaney, 1984). In conclusion to the section on youth and cult conversion, the older adolescents (those out of high school and beginning college) are the ones being targeted for conversion (Galanter, 1989).

Implications for Counseling

After examining some developmental aspects of youth, biblical conversion in general, adolescent identity search, and cult conversion, a few conclusions can be drawn. Adolescents are in a critical period of their life when they are finding out new dimensions to their selves and thinking ability. They are in search of answers. Parents need to be taught that this is not necessarily rebellion but honest questioning. As mentioned earlier, Strunk (1959) states "honest doubt often leads to faith" (p. 163). Religious conversion can provide the answers to their search to the questions of 'who am I? And why am I here?' Destructive cult conversion, on the other hand, can be a deleterious force in that it robs the adolescent or person of their identity and replaces it with the group's identity (Strunk, 1959). This can also lead to fanaticism (Yount, 1996). While group interrelatedness is important in any community, it should not be at the expense of the individual's personal identity. As well, zealotry for an ideal or ideology is acceptable and can be encouraged, but fanaticism or forgoing one's identity should be avoided. Counselors should be reminded of the powerful nature of groups and adolescents' desire to belong. Adolescents should be able to develop a sense of identity and make informed decisions about their life along with their religious practices. Religiosity is an important part of many youth's lives. Counseling should include the entire person; body, will, intellect, emotional, and spiritual (Nee, 1927/1968).

References

- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Youth: Change and challenge*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Erikson, E. H. (1965). *Challenge of youth*. Garden City: Anchor Books.
- Galanter, M. (1989). *Cults: Faith, healing, and coercion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heaney, J. J. (1984). *Psyche and spirit*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Ingle, C. (1970). *Children and conversion*. Nashville: Broadman Press.
- Malony, N. H. (1991). *Psychology of religion*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.
- Malony, N. H., & Southard, S. (1992). *Handbook of religious conversion*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press.
- Nee, W. (1968). *The spiritual man*. (Anonymous, Trans.). New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc. (Original work published 1927)
- Paloutzian, R. F. (1996). *Invitation to the psychology of religion*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Pruyser, P. W. (1969). *A dynamic psychology of religion*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Rambo, L. R. (1993). *Understanding religious conversion*. New Haven: Yale

University Press.

Rice, J. R. (1974). *Come out or stay in*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Santrock, J. W. (1996). *Adolescence*. Dubuque: Brown & Benchmark.

Strunk, O. (1959). *Readings in the psychology of religion*. New York: Abingdon Press.

Wieman, H. N., & Westcott-Wieman, R. (1935). *Normative psychology of religion*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1935.

Yount, W. R. (1996). *Created to learn*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Author Note

Amanda K. Grein, School of Educational Ministries, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Amanda K. Grein is a licensed professional counselor and is now working with the counseling department at Jersey Village Baptist Church. She also serves on the Board of Directors for Union Baptist Association's Center for Counseling. She has a Master of Arts in Psychology - Clinical Psychology from Sam Houston State University and a Master of Arts in Christian Education from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amanda K. Grein, Jersey Village Baptist Church, 16518 Jersey Drive, Jersey Village, Texas 77040.

E-mail: AmandaKay@compuserve.com