

2. JOHN WESTERHOFF

Westerhoff presented two separate theories of faith development in his writings. The first, a four-stage theory, was printed in his exceptional volume entitled *Will our Children Have Faith?* (1976) and was later reduced to three stages in *A Faithful Church* (1981). The following is his original four-stage theory. According to Westerhoff: Faith grows like the rings of a tree, with each ring adding to and changing the tree somewhat, yet building on that which has grown before. Therefore Westerhoff offers a tree analogy and proposes four rings which are involved in the growth process.

1. Experienced Faith

At the core is the faith which we experience from our earliest years either in life or, if one has a major reorientation in his or her beliefs, in a new faith system. We receive the faith that is important to those who nurture us. The way it molds and influences their lives makes an indelible impression on us, creating the core of our faith . . . This level of faith is usually associated with the impressionable periods of life when a person is dependent on others, such as during early childhood.

2. Affiliative Faith

As one person gradually displays the beliefs, values, and practices of one's family, group, or church, there is another ring formed. The individual takes on the characteristics of the nurturing persons and becomes identified as an accepted partner, one who is part of the faith tradition. Such participation may be formalized as in membership, a rite of baptism or confirmation, or may simply be understood, as might be the case with regular participants who do not join a church. This phase of a person's growth is recognized as a time of testing. It is a matching of the person with peer expectations. Where traditions, values, and practices are similar, there usually is a good match and the individual merges his or her identity with that of the body. There is little room for personal differences due to a strong emphasis on unity and conformity in belief and practice . . . The concerns for belonging, for security, and for a sense of power (and identity) that come from group membership are the key drives in forming one's faith concept during this period. This level of faith is expressed, at the earliest, during adolescent years.

3. Searching Faith

Faith development reaches a crucial junction when one becomes aware that personal beliefs or experience may no longer be exactly the same as those of the group, or when a person begins to question some of the commonly held beliefs or practices. This occurs as one naturally recognizes that his or her faith is formed more by others (parents, peers, congregation, etc.) than by personal conviction. The decision must be faced whether or not to develop, express, and accept responsibility for a personal interpretation of one's religion as over against accepting that which may be viewed as a group's interpretation. Often there is experimentation in which persons try out alternatives or commit themselves to persons or causes which promise help in establishing personal conviction and active practice of one's faith.

4. Owned Faith

The culmination of the faith development process finds expression in a personal, owned faith. This best could be described as a conversion experience, in which a person has reoriented his or her life and now claims personal ownership of and responsibility for beliefs and practices . . . Characteristics of this phase include close attention to practicing one's faith as well as believing it . . . This level of faith, according to Westerhoff, is God's intention for everyone; we all are called to reach our highest potential.

Source: Westerhoff, John H. III. *Will our Children Have Faith?* New York: Seabury Press, 1976.

JOHN WESTERHOFF (REVISED)

Our lives as people of faith can best be understood as a pilgrimage that moves slowly and gradually through ever-expanding expressions.

1. Affiliative Faith

The beginning, typical of children through the high-school years, I have characterized as *affiliative faith* . . . it comes through feelings or sensory experiences in the form of interactions with others and our world. The foundations of faith are found in experiences in which we learn to trust other people, ourselves, and our world, not because we are told we are of worth and the world is trustworthy, but because we experience it as such . . . our actions with our children influence their perceptions and hence their faith much more than the words we speak. Our actions frame what our children will experience . . . Affiliative faith looks to the community and its tradition as its source for authority. We depend on significant others for the stories that explain our lives and how our people live. Belonging to a community is very important in order to fulfill our need to be wanted and accepted.

2. Searching Faith

Begins during high-school years and extends through early adulthood. It is characterized by questioning, critical judgement, and experimentation. It comes in the form of doubt and the struggle to frame philosophical formulations. Through a personal search for truth, we move from dependence on others' understandings to autonomy and independence. To find a faith of our own, we need to doubt, question, and test what has been handed down to us.

3. Mature Faith

. . . which integrates the seeming contradiction of affiliative and searching faith. Possible for adults who have passed through the earlier stages, mature faith begins in middle adulthood and develops until death. In this final stage we are governed by neither the authority of the community nor our own intellectual authority, but by personal union with God through free acts of the will. Interdependence integrates the dependence of affiliative faith and the independence of searching faith. Belonging is still important, but people with mature faith are secure enough in their convictions to challenge the community when conscience dictates . . . We all grow by being with others, who affirm where we are and share with us lives of more expanded faith. So it is that we adults need to be concerned first of all about our own growth, and we need always to remember that even mature faith has at its core a childlike faith.

Source: The chapter entitled "A Journey Together in Faith" in John H. Westerhoff's *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*. Minneapolis: Winston Press, Inc., 1980.