

Heinz Streib, his Religious Styles Perspective, and Deconversion Studies

Heinz Streib is a Professor for Religious Education and Ecumenical Theology at the Universität Bielefeld in Germany. His PhD is from Emory University in Atlanta, where James Fowler did his research. His work builds on the contributions of Dr. Fowler, but differs from it in several respects.

A main difference seems to be that, where Fowler delineated six stages of faith development based mainly on increased cognitive skills, Heinz Streib calls them religious styles. (I suspect this use of the word "styles" is just an attempt to be more politically correct. People generally do not like the idea that the way they believe now may not be the most mature way and that they have more growing to do. So calling them styles just makes it sound less judgmental, which may be a good idea.)

Streib further claims that there are many other factors that determine a person's religious style such as family of origin, significant life events and the culture in which the person lives. Moreover, while Fowler claims that his stages are hierarchical, Streib says the styles are more like geological layers.

They do occur sequentially but under the top layer (or current stage) there lie all the prior styles (and stages) so that a person could revert (regress) to a prior style if provoked by perhaps the stresses of life.

Subjective Religious Style

This is a religious style (or stage) typical of the child, corresponds to Fowler's Intuitive-Projective Faith stage, and is similar to the Lawless Stage as described on this site. In this stage the person is egocentric, i.e. sees himself as the center of the world. What it takes to get past this stage is the development of basic trust. It is, of course, normal for a child, but represents inhibited development when present in an adult.

Instrumental-Reciprocal or Do-ut-des Religious Style.

Heinz Streib's second religious style corresponds time-wise with Fowler's Mythic Literal Stage, but focuses on a different aspect. Do-Ut-Des means: "I give that you may give." It means the person is very tuned in to the idea that if he follows all the rules of his religion, then the reward necessarily is "salvation," for example. Doing "good" means following rules set out by the authorities. The God representation is related to the person's parental images.

This is the stage or style that is typical of fundamentalists. One thing that Heinz Streib goes on to muse about is how it can be that on the one hand, we have people who may be university graduates, may be perfectly capable of "design (ing) and control (ing) technological machines of high complexity" and yet "in matters of meaning, in matters of religion, resort to the most simple answers" and will take

"every word of a guru or fundamentalist leader as the revelation of truth?" Streib goes on to explain that perhaps the fundamentalist may harbor more mature styles of dealing with other aspects of his everyday life. But in religion, the anxiety toward a taskmaster deity, the do-ut-des view of justice and the literal interpretations common in this group, keep the person from applying the more advanced styles he uses in other aspects of his life to religion.

Mutual Religious Style

The next religious style a person goes through according to Heinz Streib is the Mutual Religious Style, corresponding to Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional Stage. Here the person is very attached to their own group, usually meant to refer to their religious group. Because they are so identified with their group, the person may find it difficult to break out if they were to find something they disagree with. Thus people manifesting this style (or stage) tend to unquestioningly adopt the mindset of their group (church, e.g.) and ascribe to its leaders an unquestioned authority. Both the Mutual Religious Style and the Instrumental-Reciprocal Style correspond roughly to the "Faithful" style described on this website.

Individuative-Systemic Religious Style

Heinz Streib's Individuative-Systemic Religious Style corresponds roughly to James Fowler's Individuative-Reflective Stage and even more roughly to the "Rational" stage described on this site. Unlike the prior style where a person is so identified with their group that they fail to question beliefs handed to them by others, the person who has reached this style feels a personal responsibility to reflect on religious matters freely and to be able to give reasons for their beliefs. Hence there is always the possibility that a person at this style/stage will reason themselves right out of religious belief altogether. A problem with people in this group is that they approach religious texts such as the Bible and also religious concepts literally. But, unlike the prior stage, who accepts without questioning, this group may feel free to reject belief altogether based on these literal meanings alone and thus throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. (they may reject God and religion because they cannot see that there could be any meaning to these terms and concepts outside of the literal ones they are now able to reason about and perhaps reject.)

Dialogical Religious Style

Heinz Streib's Dialogical Religious Style is roughly analogous to Fowler's Conjunctive Faith Stage and to the "Mystic" stage described on this site. (Fowler also has a sixth stage, called the Universalizing Stage, which probably also fits in with this Dialogical Religious Style and our Mystic stage but people attaining this level are so rare that there is hardly a way to describe them.) The Dialogical Religious Style is one where the person begins to open up to the idea of the "Other." This means the person is no longer predominantly concerned with "finding and defending" their own religious identity so they no longer feel a threat from people who believe differently from them. They no longer have reason to try and exclude people and ideas that may contradict and differ from their own. (This is a way of saying they are "more inclusive!")

Also, people at this level may begin to see some truth in religious texts and concepts, not in the literal sense, but as symbol. Thus, "god" is not "known" as the bearded, judgmental guy in the sky but may be a concept of the Unknown that defies definition. Heaven and hell are not literal places but rather states of existence. Heaven and hell may be states that are prevalent in people's lives here on earth, without reference to what happens after we die. Another trait common at this level is the letting go of self or the ego. An interesting point that Streib brings out is that the person at this level displays a whole different idea about trust. They may not be able to define the symbolic "god" they hold to, but whatever it is, they trust in its goodness.

Heinz Streib and Deconversion

Heinz Streib and his team recently (January, 2009) published a book called "Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America." Here they report results of an extensive study of people who have "deconverted" out of an organized religion.

While they describe several types of deconversion, they (sort of) describe deconversion as "a disengagement from a religious tradition which, in retrospect, is considered absolutist and authoritarian. It is an engagement in exploration of spiritual or secular alternatives, and is a change that is likely to be associated with transformation* in terms of faith development. (p. 218) There is a very useful chart (p.102) that shows that people deconverting tend to show a higher level (style or stage) of faith development (more in Fowler's Individuative-Reflective stage) than those in the religious communities (more in Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional Stage) from which they deconverted.

Later Heinz Streib and his team also state that, while there are gains and losses to be had when going through deconversion, in general, the "balance of gains and losses in deconversion appears to have clearly tip (sic - the text has several non-standard uses of the English language, but they do not detract from the intended meaning) to the side of the gains." (p. 231.) This should in no way be taken to mean that deconverts have found a "better answer" about religion. But it does seem to mean that they have made advances in terms of personal development that make them less prey to the authoritarian and absolutist aspects of institutional religion.

*the term "transformation" here is meant to imply movement UP the faith development or religious styles ladder.

References:

- Streib, Heinz. Faith Development Theory Revisited: The Religious Styles Perspective. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* (2001) 11, 143-158.
- Streib, Heinz/Hood, R./Keller, B./Csoff, R./Silver, C. *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*. Göttingen:Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009.

