CHAPTER 2

The Naming of Parts: Faith, Formation, Development and Education

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Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the meaning of certain key concepts that are employed across a wide variety of contexts where adults (including clergy), young people and children are educated into Christianity.

Why Bother?

Readers may wonder why they should bother with what many now regard as a narrow, out-of-date concern for the meaning of terms. Haven't we left behind those spurious claims for an impartial analysis of meaning, to relax among the rich and ever-elusive range of human language with its variety of connotations?

Well, yes, of course. But also no. We certainly have not progressed to the point where we can ignore what readers and listeners understand by the terms that an author or speaker uses, or what either group intends by using that language. Surely only charlatans would wish to hinder a careful analysis of what people mean by what they say and write. Analysis and definition will not take us all the way along the road we need to travel, but

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they offer a better place to start from than some other departure points. And they also provide us with resources that will be of great assistance during our intellectual journeys of exploration. Further, my experience over many years of reflecting, speaking and writing about the topics listed in my title has shown that the result of *not* bothering with the meaning of terms is frequently mutual confusion, bogus agreement or the premature closure of sensible and worthwhile discussion.

I do not believe, however, that such outcomes have been engineered. Rather, they represent the unintended consequences of an emphasis on practice that regards all theoretical concerns as irrelevant to those practical men and women who are so keen to 'get things done' that they are unwilling to put much effort into thinking through what it is they are thinking of doing.

I recently supervised a professional doctorate that explored, among other things, the official Church of England reports on ministerial education, in order to seek to 'understand what might be meant by the word "formation" in this context'. The author concluded that even within the more important reports there was often 'no clear definition of the meaning of "formation" in the context of training for ordination'. Indeed, the term was on one occasion acknowledged to be at best 'a convenient shorthand', alluding to 'elements of transformation' into the likeness of Christ. But Sue Groom's research among these documents uncovered 'various other, related and overlapping' understandings of formation, including 'formation as integration, as induction into a tradition, and [simply] as preparation for ministry' (Groom 2016, pp.184–186). This term is used not only here, but also in many other educational contexts and across the denominations. And more often than not it is put to use without any explanation, comment or definition about what it means.

For over three decades I ran an institution that had the phrase 'Christian education' in its title (the North of England Institute for Christian Education[1]). At its inauguration, I lamented that everyone else seemed clear about the meaning of the expression, but I was still pondering it. By the time the institute closed, I was at least sure that Christian education was a systematically ambiguous—and therefore potentially misleading—expression, which may be used to label:

(1) non-confessional[2] teaching and learning about Christianity ('Christian studies');
(2) general education of some Christian kind, mainly in Christian schools, colleges or universities; or
(3) educational processes that not only lead people to learn about Christianity, but also intend that they become more Christian, in the sense that they come to hold for themselves (or hold more firmly or strongly) Christian beliefs, attitudes, emotions and values, and the disposition to act and experience in Christian ways (Astley 2016).

A range of applications of this term may be found within the three-volume *Encyclopedia of Christian Education* (Kurian and Lamport 2015). Its editors advise that Christian education exists in two contexts: in formal faith schools and seminaries, and in informal faith community settings. Its focus, they write, mainly reflecting understanding (3) above, is 'to nurture faith in the context of shared values, beliefs, and attitudes' (vol.1, pp.xxiii–xxiv).

It is worth remarking that we are here immediately plunged into the domain of figurative language. Later the editors not only use this language of 'nurture' (derived from the Latin for 'to suckle'), but also adopt other biological, even agricultural, metaphors when they argue more broadly that Christian education is 'the cultivation of wisdom and virtue by nourishing the soul on truth, goodness, and beauty, so that, in Christ, the learner is enabled to better know, glorify, and enjoy God' (vol.1, p.xxxiii). Other contributors extend this vocabulary of tropes, writing of Christian education in what I do not think are entirely dead metaphors as 'forming' and 'transforming' (e.g. Westerhoff, in Kurian and Lamport 2015, vol.2, p.886 and vol.3, p.1427; Groome, vol.3, p.1465), 'crafting' (Groome, vol.3, pp.1464–1466), 'shaping' or 'moulding' (Berryman, vol.1, pp.258–259; Kay, vol.1, pp.259–260; see also Astley, vol.2, pp.887–888).

While these and other entries sometimes also mention critical thinking, reflection, evaluation or openness, those references occasionally appear to be an afterthought; and Kurian and Lamport admit that 'critical thinking seems undervalued in educating Christians', even though 'the nature of the Church is collectively a discerning community who together reason

with godliness' (vol.1, p.xxxv). The underestimation of criticism—which is a neutral rather than a negative term, synonymous with appraisal, assessment and evaluation—is a fundamental issue in many areas of Christian education. This is particularly the case when it leads to a depreciation of the status of the learner and her contributions to her own learning.

Despite the real cognitive value of metaphors in education, as in other subject areas and disciplines, they can mislead unless we work at sharpening, qualifying and specifying them so that their conceptual power is no longer limited by the imagery that makes them such creative resources. As another entry in the *Encyclopedia* argues, metaphors for learning are reductive when they 'reduce learners to objects to be controlled or learning to an economic transaction' (Smith, vol.2, p.799).[3]

There is still some conceptual clarification for us to do.

Focusing on Faith

A focus on faith is increasingly common in Christian education discourse. This can be very helpful, but only if the component elements of the word and their applications are identified and understood, and faith is envisioned in its entirety. Traditionally, a basic distinction has been made between:

(1) the content or (grammatical) 'object' of faith—'The Faith', 'that which is believed'; and
(2) the human process or activity that is sometimes referred to as 'faithing'—'the faith by which this is believed'.

This way of naming the parts of faith seems to sit most easily with accounts of faith's object as a set of beliefs about God (which are *human* beliefs as it is humans that hold them, even if they are thought to be divinely revealed, otherwise authorized, or infallible).

However, theologians have cautioned against limiting faith to its cognitive component. We may respond to this advice by adopting a more holistic account of faith, construing it as an activity 'that engages people's heads, hearts and hands—their entire way of being in the world', in Thomas Groome's phraseology (Groome 2011, p.26). Practical theologian James Fowler's understanding of human faith, as a generic form of meaning-making, is described in similar inclusive terms. He argues that faith is almost universal because everyone believes in something, while

religious faith is the species of human faith in which people believe in religious things.

For Fowler, all faith is our way of knowing, valuing and 'being in relation' to whatever we take to be our 'ultimate environment'. He contends that whatever we believe in, our faith is of great practical importance because it shapes the 'responses a person will make in and against the force field of his or her life' (Fowler in Astley and Francis 1992, p.5; Fowler 1996, p.56; Fowler and Keen 1978, p.25). Faith possesses a 'logic of conviction' that includes but goes beyond any mere 'logic of rational certainty', in a manner that incorporates our spiritual and affective natures (attitudes, feelings and emotions) and our wills. (For a critical overview, see Astley 1991; Astley and Francis 1992, sections 1–4.)

Viewed in this way, faith as *process* certainly consists in (a) an intellectual assent (sometimes labelled *assensus*) or 'belief that' some proposition or claim is true. But it may incorporate in addition (b) positive evaluation, (c) trust (*fiducia*) and (d) a disposition to express this faith by (e) acting upon it in (f) commitment and allegiance (in loyalty or 'faithfulness', *fidelitas*). Besides all this, faith is sometimes said to include (g) faith as *visio*, a way of seeing. This is a matter of how we view and interpret the whole of reality, and 'look on' and 'see it as' related to God—as God's world, God's children, God's gift (Borg 2003, ch.2). Hence the philosopher John Cottingham describes religious conversion as 'a characteristically emotional shift' that permits the world 'to be seen differently' and in its true meaning (Cottingham 2009, p.123).

This idea of Christian faith relates closely to, and perhaps may be said to absorb, notions such as the Christian way, the Christian life and a form of Christian experience, thereby giving us a much broader understanding of what it means to *have* a religious faith and to *be* religious, compared with merely espousing certain doctrines. As Cottingham puts it, 'it is to follow a certain way of life and to take up certain commitments'. And that, he insists (significantly for our concerns), is in part 'a project of *formation*, of forming and reforming the self, a process of *askēsis* (training) and *mathēsis* (learning), to use the ancient Greek terms' (2014, p.148).

But what is the *content* of this faithing, the *object* or target of the activity or process of human faith? If we continue to say that it is only a set of beliefs (and perhaps of values, virtues and practices, too), faith would largely be restricted to believing *that* Christianity is true (and good, worthy and a way to be followed). Alternatively, the broad view of the process of faith that has been outlined above suggests that faith should be understood

as 'belief *in God*', even as a relationship with God. This inevitably involves more than merely believing impersonal truths about God; just as our relationship with other people is more than simply our knowledge about them, particularly if that knowledge leads us to highly value and trust them, and seek to come close to, imitate or relate to them (and/or leads *from* such respect, affection, reliance, love and commitment).

Catholics who follow Aquinas may adopt the former position (faith as belief-that or belief-about truths; faith as an intellectual conviction), whereas Protestants (like Luther) seem to prefer the second (faith as a belief-in that comprises belief-that and trust, approval, commitment, and so on). But that distinction is not at all clear in practice. And if we accept Fowler's view that *everyone* has faith, including atheists, agnostics and adherents of religions that take ultimate reality to be an impersonal Absolute rather than a personal God, then defining faith as a personal relationship with God will seem far too narrow.

The Catholic theologian Terrence Tilley has defined faith as our relationship with 'the irreducible energizing source of meaning and center of value in one's life', something that is best understood by analogy with love. He adds that 'the appropriate designator for the object of the faith relationship is a *god*'.

> What makes them *our* gods is the relationship we have with them. Whatever is (are) the irreducible, energizing center(s) of value and source(s) of meaning in our lives is (are) our gods. Our gods are not just our ideals—they are what makes our ideals ideal. Our gods are not just our goals—they are what makes our goals worth pursuing.
>
> What makes something our *god* is that it is the *source* of what is meaningful and valuable in our lives. (Tilley 2010, pp.26, 32, 34)

This interpretation has parallels. According to Luther,

> To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in one with our whole heart … the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol … Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God. (*Large Catechism*, first part, first commandment; Luther 1908 [1529], p.44)

And Fowler defines the content of all human faithing as constituted by whatever are the 'centres of value' and 'images of power' in which we believe, and which constrain and direct our striving, together with

whatever the 'master stories' are by which we live our lives (Fowler 1981, pp.276–277). These objects of our faith may range (for good or ill) across the 'gods' of our status, wealth, possessions, career, achievements, pride, honour or health; and our parents, family, exemplars or friends. They may extend to elements of Nature, strangers, even the entire natural and human creation; or to historical or mythological narratives, and moral or spiritual ideals. But we may also go beyond these 'penultimate' objects of faith—especially if we come to see any of them as 'false gods'—and give our minds, hearts, allegiance and life to what Christians would regard as the only true god, who is alone worthy of worship: the one God and Father of the Lord Jesus, our Christ.[4]

Tilley's view permits us to think of faith as a relationship to God that is channelled *through* our beliefs about God's nature, character and activity, in the same way that our relationships with other people are mediated through and clothed in the ideas we hold about them. Our faith in others is never separate from what we take to be truths about them—and particularly from the values we find in them. So theists do have faith in God, but this faith is not a belief-less, content-less, 'theology-less' faith. *Belief in* God is a species of believing because it always incorporates this *belief-that*.

Focusing on Learning

Faith, then, is a multifaceted, multidimensional whole, as is religion. Inevitably, therefore, 'learning a faith', 'faith learning' also has many dimensions, when construed as learning by which the learner enters into and grows in a particular faith relationship, as well as learning about the object or content of this faith—in Christian terms, 'learning Christ' and not just learning about him (Astley 1994, pp.119–123, 2002, pp.25–34). This confessional religious learning inevitably encompasses cognitive, affective and 'lifestyle' (way-of-life) learning. It is an education *into* Christian faith that subsumes learning *of* and *for*:

(1) Christian knowledge and understanding;
(2) Christian valuing, feeling and experiencing; and
(3) Christian 'performance', in the sense of 'living and serving in a Christian manner' (Sullivan, in Kurian and Lamport 2015, vol.3, p.1098).

It seems to me that 'learning' is a more helpful term than the word 'education' here, because it is more holistic, learner-focused (rather than teacher- or tradition-focused), and wider in application (Berryman, in Kurian and Lamport 2015, vol.1, p.258). The idea of faith education has frequently fallen foul of certain normative understandings of what constitutes 'real education', especially those that restrict it to cognitive (and sometimes solely to critical) learning outcomes, or limit it to formal settings like schooling (Astley 1994, ch.3; Astley and Francis 1994; Kurian and Lamport 2015, vol.3, pp.1472–1473). It is usually an advantage in this area of debate to keep our educational concepts as inclusive as possible.

Cottingham's appeal above to the Greek word *mathēsis* suggests that word's Latin equivalent, *disciplina*, which underlies our English word 'discipline' and derives from *discipulus* ('learner'), from which we get 'disciple'. Such reflections move us towards what I call 'discipleship learning', learning to become and become more of a Christian disciple (see Astley 2007, ch.1, 2015). This entails a type of journey or apprenticeship that may include the broader notions of transformative learning-for-practice required in spiritual, religious and moral disciplines (compare Foster 1989; Astley et al. 1996, sections 3, 7, 8; Dykstra 2005). Attempts to prune the discussion by applying restrictive (and sometimes implicitly anti-religious) criteria to the definition of educational terms may result in cutting away some of the most fruitful branches of Christian learning.

Focusing on Development

I think that Christian educators and educationalists need to be more careful in their use of the language of development. The etymology of the verb 'to develop' relates it to unfolding, 'un-enveloping'; and dictionaries usually define it in terms of *growth* in complexity and maturity, becoming 'larger and more advanced' (COED 2004).

Schools and Church bodies, however, frequently use the language of development to refer to *learning*, and particularly to its intentional facilitation through teaching. Examples include *Developing Discipleship* (Archbishops' Council 2015), and any publications that talk about the tasks of 'developing' the students' knowledge and understanding of some topic, or their skills and attitudes (including character virtues), through learning strategies and experiences.

This usage is not wrong. It assumes the transitive form of the verb, in which to develop is 'to cause to grow', 'to make active or promote the growth of' some entity (COED 2004; Merriam-Webster 2017), recalling the metaphors of cultivation and nurture we noted earlier. But, as we have seen, the verb is used in an *intransitive* form too, without a direct object, simply to refer to a change in something, especially its progress through a sequence. In this sense, 'developing' labels the gradual coming into being of something, or its becoming bigger, stronger or more advanced, through 'a process of natural growth, differentiation, … or evolution by successive changes' (Merriam-Webster 2017). This usage is widespread not only in biology but also in human psychology, including the psychology of education. Here the term denotes the natural growing up or developing of our cognitive, affective or volitional capacities through a largely *internal* or internally driven process of growth and maturation, rather than primarily as a result of learning experiences contributed by the *external* world of the learner's environment.

Naturally, we should recognize that nature and nurture can never be isolated and that they should not be opposed in a facile manner. Human development is never a matter of one set of causes (internal genes, or the outside environment) working entirely independently of the other. The phoney war of nature *versus* nurture, insisted on by some sociologists, must yield before a proper biological insistence that nature operates only *via* nurture (Ridley 1993, ch.10, 2003).

Nevertheless, Fowler's 'faith development theory' sits within a research tradition in developmental psychology that patently refers to such internal changes. While this idea of faith development may be less well known than it once was, it remains illuminating and is supported by many current researchers, although often now understood as a sequence of several overlapping faith styles rather than a movement through discrete stages of the form of faith (Streib 2001, 2003).

To avoid any possible confusion, I recommend that educators avoid using the phrase 'faith development' in a transitive way to refer to changes brought about by religious learning experiences. Those changes are less ambiguously described as 'learning faith', 'faith formation' (e.g. Barnes 2012, pp.24, 26), 'faith education' or 'education in/into faith' (Groome 2011, pp.94–103).

Focusing on Formation

Finally, I return to the word 'formation'. One concern here is whether we should use this as a generic term. In this broader usage, it would denote *all* the processes of teaching and/or learning that help to shape a learner in a tradition and its beliefs, experiences and practices, in a way that leads to the learner's acceptance of that tradition in her thinking, valuing, feeling and perceiving, and her dispositions to act and experience, *together with her appraisal of the tradition's merits and faults*. For Christian educators, such formation intends not only to create a person who thinks, values, feels and so on in a more Christian manner, as (more of) a disciple of Jesus and member of the body of Christ, but also someone who 'thinks for herself' about her faith.

This is how the concept is chiefly used, akin to John Hull's understanding of religious nurture as inclusive of what he called 'critical openness' (Astley and Francis 1994, pp.251–275). Thus construed, Christian formation is not entirely a one-way process of transmitting a tradition, but encompasses the learners' assessing for themselves what they have inherited.

I would argue, however, for a more specific—and, in *this* case, limited!—employment of the term formation. In doing so I build on the distinction that the adult Christian educationalist Leon McKenzie adopted between two types of facilitated learning that represent 'points on a continuum'. These elements complement each other and often appear together (to different degrees) within specific, concrete examples of learning and teaching:

(1) a *dimension of formative education* that aims 'principally at the formation of the learners' and their acceptance of 'educational "givens"'—especially, perhaps, (Christian) beliefs, but also appropriate attitudes, values, dispositions, skills and so on; and
(2) a *dimension of critical education* that maximizes the learners' evaluative thinking and powers of judgement, and is 'ordinated toward the examination of [these] educational "givens"'—as the learner 'critically assesses that which is taught in the light of his own experiences' (McKenzie 1982, pp.36–37, 64–66, 1991, pp.29–32).[5]

On this analysis, the emphasis in formative education is on the tradition, 'the Faith', as it is understood, spelled out and passed on *in its own*

terms (although in its great variety as well); whereas critical education enables the learner to analyse and evaluate, take apart and reconstruct these traditions rather more from the learner's own perspective and in *the learner's own terms* (and those of the learner's culture).[6]

This feature of critical education should make it fundamental to what Catholic theology calls *reception*: that is, receiving the teachings and other traditions of the Church, appropriating them and responding to them. This is how individuals comes to possess the 'Christian thing' (the Christian tradition, the Christian Faith) *for themselves*, and often in their own specific and idiosyncratic ways, through an act of interpretation that arises in an implicit dialogue or 'conversation' in which the Church and its leaders speak, the Scriptures speak and Christian history and liturgy, prophecy and moral authorities all speak; but in which the learners of Christianity also have their say. Those who learn any tradition must be permitted in this way to respond, to 'answer back', or they will never really learn—and never really hear those other, traditional voices either (compare Astley 2007, pp.106–111, 117). In religion, we only actually learn a belief, value or practice when we truly receive it. And reception is 'not merely passive acceptance' but 'a genuine test of a teaching's truthfulness; its liveability, as it were' (Healy 2013, p.19). Will it 'work' for us? Will it 'do' for us?

It is this critical (evaluative, testing, discerning) feature of Christian education that allows learners to *embrace* the Christian Faith honestly (see Astley 2002, pp.27–33, 2012). Reception involves an evaluation, a valid discriminating movement, as does any true and wise embrace. Both are dependent on our discernment, recognition and acceptance of that which is embraced as true, good or right. Through this embrace, Christians testify that their questions are addressed, and their desires and needs are fulfilled—as *The* Way, Truth and Life becomes *their* way, truth and life as well.

Although this critical process essentially requires cognitive skills in the learner, it may engage certain imaginative skills and affective dispositions too (Astley 1994, pp.84–87, 2002, pp.140–145; Green 1990, pp.80–83, 91–96; Groome 1980, pp.186–188), like 'attention' and 'imaginative grasp' (Wood in Astley et al. 1996, pp.350, 355). But its consequences are more significant than its composition, for 'Christian self-criticism' ultimately determines whether any particular practice of love or worship, or any other aspect of being or behaving, is to be judged to be 'Christian' or not. This critical reflection on their own faithfulness to the central Christian norm of meeting, worshipping, living and believing 'in Jesus' name' is

crucial to Christian self-identity, and it even requires some 'critical examination of whether and why [they] should engage … in the Christian thing at all' (Kelsey 1992, pp.139–141, 187, 206–207). Critical Christian education is *that* important.

I would argue, therefore, that 'something is lost … if the language of formation, with its powerful metaphorical connotations' (of shaping and moulding people into a pre-conceived pattern or form) is 'not balanced by this second, critical dimension' (Astley 2015, p.6).

Conclusion

While I do not doubt that some will regard this sort of clarification and critical analysis of concepts as 'mere semantics', or even as philosophical and theological 'nit-picking', I hope that others will be more willing to acknowledge that, while it is not everything, clarity is a friend rather than an enemy of our reflections—even in matters of faith and education.

Notes

1. For details, see http://community.dur.ac.uk/neice/.
2. In the United Kingdom this adjective is generally understood to mean 'the attempt to impart religious understanding without also imparting religious beliefs' (Hand 2006, p.1), although arguably 'beliefs' should be widened to 'faith'.
3. Hence Nicholas Wolterstorff's preference for the term 'nurture', and its connections with growth and maturation, as permissive rather than imposing—allowing for the learner's self-governed appropriation—by contrast with any formation and moulding that involves socializing people into society-determined shapes (see Wolterstorff 2002, ch.7).
4. Thus Christians often distinguish Christianity as 'the only true faith'—or the one that is closer to the truth, or more complete in other ways—by comparison with all other faiths.
5. These cognitive skills and other learned critical attitudes, dispositions and perspectives are themselves partly *formed* in the learner. Further, critical self-reflection requires that a person have some beliefs, values and a 'position' of their own to evaluate, and we may argue that much of that will have been inherited through some sort of formation rather than created by the learners themselves. Thus there can be no 'pure' critical education that is wholly independent of formation.

6. However, many of the key moral, spiritual and theological criteria for the self-critical appraisal of other parts of a religious tradition are themselves embedded in that tradition and therefore passed on in religious formation. This is how religious traditions change from within, as their adherents question some aspects of what they receive (e.g. slavery or the status of women) from a perspective grounded in other received elements that they have come to regard as more normative for that faith (e.g. elements of Jesus' teaching and life). Those elements develop this status because people have come to embrace them; and that is the result of an internal dialogue between such elements and people's original criteria of meaning, value and truth, whose origins partly lie within the culture that they have also inherited (Astley 1994, pp.92–94).

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