



The movement within faith towards adulthood in children who have been nurtured in a Christian context: a longitudinal account of how children develop perspective in interpreting the biblical creation narrative

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Abstract

In 2006 and then, seven years later in 2013, a small scaled research project was carried out into Christian children's developing perspectives as they encounter sacred text from the context of their home lives (Worsley in *Br J Relig Educ* 28(3):247-257, 2006, *Br J Relig Educ* 35(1):55–71, 2013). Fourteen years on in 2020, these same children and young people were contacted with a similar interview and the results are offered, giving a rare longitudinal insight into the process of meaning making. In order to comment on the meaning-making interpretative processes that children employ at different key stages of development, the insights of hermeneutic phenomenology and of developmental psychology have been used, detailing their former stage in 2006, the seven years later in 2013 and finally their current stage. This article offers qualitative insights into children's and young people's perspectives from within their developing world views. The scriptural understanding of these children is given alongside an hermeneutical commentary.

Keywords Creation narrative · Hermeneutic phenomenology · Developmental psychology · Faith development in children and young people

1 Introduction

In 2006 and 2013, research was published in the *British Journal of Religious Education* (BJRE) (Worsley 2006, 2013) offering qualitative insights into how six children encountered the creation narratives of Genesis 1–3. At that time, there was a growing sense of the difficulties of interpreting the Bible with children (Copley et al. 2004, p. 15; Lipman 1998), owing to both textual complexity and the hidden implicit hermeneutic of the child's home or church environment.

This more recent research in 2020, draws on the same cohort of children, who all initially came from the nurturing background of active church families in 2005. (The children

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contacted in 2005 were those written about in the 2006 article.) They had all initially been invited to participate in the research after the researcher had made contact with youth leaders from several church youth groups in a Midlands City in the UK. These youth leaders became the gatekeepers to the young people, helping identify children from a range of key stages and genders for the researcher to develop contact. Following the ethical research procedures necessary for contacting minors in 2005, a boy and a girl were selected from each of Key Stages 2, 3 and 4, (the key stages being the British educational stages, stage 2 spanning ages 7 to 11, stage 3 spanning ages 11 to 14 and stage 4 spanning ages 14 to 16). In 2020, these children have now become young adults.

As in 2005 and 2013, the research of 2020 clarified that it would require one interview of an hour and that prior to the interview, each person would be asked to sketch a picture of God, a picture of the church and a picture of their family. These would form the basis for a preliminary discussion that would identify the child's worldview and form a backcloth to the ensuing conversation. The interview itself was informal, starting with a discussion about the pictures that had been drawn and then continuing with a conversation about the story of the creation narrative in the Bible. The interviewer discussed the pictures, listening to the child's personal view of God, the church and their family and then took the conversation onto the creation narrative, asking how they understood the Genesis account.

This longitudinal study is very unusual in the arena of children's spirituality or even in their religious or identity formation. In wider research, longitudinal studies are sometimes funded to provide insights into the wellbeing of high-risk children, particularly immigrant children (Van Hook et al. 2007) or children in trauma (Tyler et al. 2007) but it is rarely used for charting faith development. One historic exception was that four-year study by Leak (2003) looking at the validation of faith developmental change in college students.

There are far broader studies, such as the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study in New Zealand or the Cardus Education Survey in the USA, Canada and Australia looking at children's development but the Dunedin study does not look at faith development as a lens through which to look at young people and Cardus is a single snap shot study. The Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study was launched in 1972 and is still ongoing, tracking 1038 children from birth, but it has thus far not focused on faith as a motivating influence, the closest being an article by Paul et al. (2000) on 'Sexual abstinence at age 21 in New Zealand: the importance of religion'. Similarly Cardus in Australia looks at a much larger data set of young people who are now adults, exploring their religious views, and characteristic behaviours but does not look at personal faith nor use qualitative data (see <https://carduseducationsurvey.com.au/>). This survey used a nationally representative sample of 4913 adults aged 25 to 39 who graduated secondary school in Australia (Cheng and Iselin 2020), considering their attitudes to faith and life.

Nearly all other studies have been attempts to remedy the decline in church attendance by looking at faith as a key focus by which churches should engage with young people (Creasy 2006; Powell et al. 2016) & 'Rooted in the Church' The Church of England Education Summary Report Office (2016).

This current research offers the unique insights of a long-term (fourteen years) longitudinal perspective of faith being developed within the same people, allowing for faith to be observed in the developing adult alongside the influences of family, church peer group and lived experience.

Commentary draws on a development in the use of Fowler's Faith Stage theory (Fowler 1981, 1986) by accounting for life-history and life-world relatedness of religion. Although Fowler has been critiqued for having a patriarchal bias (Slee 2004) or a structuralist emphasis (Heywood 2008), this research contextualises his insights by giving attention to real life

context (Erricker 1997) and the related work of Heinz Streib, a German professor of religious education and ecumenical theology, who built on Fowler's 'faith stages' by calling them 'faith styles'. Streib (2001) viewed the development of faith visually as geological layers rather than as hierarchical faith stages.

Fowler's theory has been less used over the last decade, after his theoretical framework was reviewed comprehensively by Parker (2010) who concluded that it is 'only the broad contours of his theory that have empiric support'. Therefore, this research uses Fowler merely to provide a broad backdrop that positions a child's changing perspective. It does so because it is contested that this developmental theory can make room for a wide angled look at the life cycle without attributing merit to the negotiation of structural stages of thinking.

This form of research owes much to the 'The children and worldviews project', detailed in the seminal book *The Education of the Whole Child* (Erricker et al. 1997). In which the research team detailed a methodology that enabled adults to listen to children's voices. The first phase of this project (1993–1996) went on to analyse the resultant data and concluded that narrative with eight key motifs in the way children perceive reality. The project continued into a subsequent phase (1996–1999) in which the research team worked collaboratively with teachers in a longitudinal study with small groups of children. In many ways this project sees itself continuing such initial research efforts within the untested field of children's perceptions of faith over time.

1.1 Fourteen years later and development in listening to children's perspective

The same children and young people have been interviewed every seven years with their anonymised research data published as articles in the British Journal of Religious Education (BJRE) (Worsley 2006, 2013). That data has generally agreed with Fowler's own assertion to the BJRE (2004) that children and young people needed to be 'enabled' in order to engage with the sacred text of the community of faith to "become meaningful and sustaining resources to their imaginations, will, knowledge and moral development." Indeed, Fowler specified in that article ('Naming the Challenges of Faith in a New Millennium'), that his theory was helpful for religious educators as they taught young people at different ages and faith stages, though the goal of religious education should "never be simply to precipitate and encourage stage advancement".

These insights were available to the research published in 2004 but their implications to religious education had not been fully understood nor their consequences utilised at that time. Little work has been added since then to how children develop religious faith constructs.

Drawing on these insights, the purposes of this research with children-becoming-adults, Fowler's theory is deemed to be of value in identifying the meaning-making process rather than as a detailed observation of structural cognitive development.

Since 2004, and the original enquiry as to how children engage with text, there have been others who have worked with Gadamer's dialogical method to better understand children's voices (Gadamer 1960). The seminal work, 'Children Philosophise Worldwide', (2009, Weber, Marsal & Dobashi), details a good example in an article by one of the editors, Barbara Weber entitled, 'Gadamer and the art of understanding', in which Gadamer's notion of 'conversation' is applied as a method for hearing children and learning from them. This is similar to the rise of Philosophy for Children (P4T) which follows a similar

method of developing children's learning through conversation—a method which often influences the adult educator as well, allowing for fresh insight.

Beyond the academy, the Church of England has begun to pay particular attention to the voice of the child expressing faith. Noting the decline of religious faith in children, the General Synod Report 'Growing Faith' (Clinton et al. 2019) cast a vision for children, young people and households coming to faith, growing in discipleship and contributing confidently to the Kingdom of God through the community of faith. The Growing Faith report is based on quantitative data records of children detailing for example, the ages at which children and young people come to (and leave) faith. Based on the survey conducted by Com Res, when practising Christians were asked at what age they came to faith, the results showed: 40% before the age of 5, 16% between the ages of 5 & 10 and 20% between the ages of 11 & 18 (Com Res 2019). By contrast this small longitudinal research offers a qualitative insight to add depth to the measurements used by the Growing Faith Report.

1.2 Results described

In the ensuing section the field research is shown building on the research from seven years previously (in 2013) which in turn builds on the initial data gathered in 2006.

2 Initial key stage 2 respondents

2.1 Male respondent Kai, initially at key stage 2

2.1.1 A story of reluctant religious faith that is informed by science.

In the initial 2006 research article, the male respondent for key stage two was code named Kai and he was aged seven. At the time he was clearly identifiable to be at Fowler's faith stage two, having a structure of thought that showed a mythical literal worldview. This is a period when the child brings order to a previously unordered faith viewpoint where reality and fantasy have been linked in the child's understanding of life.

He found his picture of God very hard to depict and eventually drew a picture of the globe with stars and the sun, because, "that is what God made." This struggle to clarify what was actual and physical from that which was more abstract, was typical of the 'young scientist' of this age group who typically endeavours to separate the mythic from the literal.

Kai offered a version of the creation narrative that was highly accurate to the account in Genesis (chapters one to four). What was of particular interest was his need to offer explanations throughout. He said, "If he (Adam) hadn't ate the fruit, we'd still be alive. That was the first sin."

When asked what this meant, he was confused and returned to assertions as to the correctness of what he was saying. This was understandable given his frame of reference and nurturing background that encouraged acceptance more than it encouraged wonder. On one occasion, a mischievous grin spread across Kai's face as he explained that snakes could not actually speak. When questioned further he said that the snake beckoned the woman with his tail and that was how he indicated that she should eat the apple. Beyond this excursion into what seemed to be the forbidden territory of his own imagination, Kai would not be drawn.

In this initial research interview, seven year old Kai was clearly identifiable as having a structure of thought that showed a mythical literal worldview that was very religious and reflected the faith of his nuclear family.

Seven years later, in 2013, Kai could be observed to be at Fowler's faith stage three and no longer owning a religious faith. For his picture of God, he drew a ball of light. Although he was not able to remember the research conversation as a younger child, this was a similar depiction. He said, 'I have drawn light because I have no clear image of God as a person'. His depiction of the church was a fairly accurate line drawing of the church he currently attended with his family, complete with a bell tower, grave stones and a church yard. He said, 'I don't relate as well to church as I once did...in fact I'm not entirely sure about it, so I've drawn it as a building not as people.' His picture of his family was the most detailed of all, showing him in the centre of his family of five (two sisters and parents), each person being carefully coloured and with him being revealed as the tallest by three inches. It was apparent that Kai greatly valued his family which was 'not perfect but good' and one that did 'not fall out often'. He had continued to attend church with them since the previous interview at the age of seven and in so doing he was able to hold a more open belief. Subsequent conversation showed this family to be a safe place for wider discussion about life, the universe and God, and one in which it was possible to hold different perspectives. Indeed, Kai felt able to accept the more literal understandings of God expressed by his younger sisters, because they were 'growing up'.

The discussion about the creation narrative showed Kai to have followed his early tendency to seek out more rational perspectives. He was now confidently agnostic and secure in the factual basis for evolution and therefore quick to comment that the idea of a literal six day creation was inaccurate and that 'literalists are irritating'. Rather than detail the story of creation, Kai wanted to say that it was a metaphor of how the world had come into being. This was evidenced, he said, by the fact that the lineage from Adam and Eve could not have populated the world. He had a lot of questions to ask about the text. For example, did literalists believe that Cain and Able mated with their sisters or their mother or was it possible to believe that souls developed from humans as they evolved? Maybe his greatest query was to reflect on the status of the Bible as having a privileged place in cultural history but one that could be abused by people who were certain as to its meaning. As he said, 'The church has many differing viewpoints so how can one person know the truth?' In this conversation it seemed that the fourteen year old Kai was initially reluctant to hear his views as a seven year old and pre-empted the conversation by saying, 'In those days I guess I'd have had literalist views but a child will only be reflecting the views of his parents.' This heralded a fascinating discussion when he was asked if his parents were in fact literalists and he realised that they were not and had in fact encouraged his wider critical reflection of the text. He then reflected that 'it is part of being a child to go through a more literal phase which is quite natural' and one in which his younger sisters were currently placed.

Asked how he would advise this younger version of himself, were he to meet him, Kai said, 'I'd tell him to question things and to think before making a definite life decision.' 'I'd also tell him that parents can't always say things exactly as they are because they are learning or because you are not yet able to hear it.'

From Fowler's faith developmental perspective, Kai was showing the synthetic conventional confidence of a stage three thinker, reflecting the radical assertions of a peer group that wishes to see itself as separate from other groups. He had moved on from the mythic literal phase of Fowler's stage two by employing the rational scientific mindset to his earlier faith but had still kept space for a more imaginary and reflective point of view. His cognitive development was matched by a healthy faith development that wished to find

his own voice and that was not hampered by childish myth. The security of his position was revealed in the respect he had for his father with whom he was able to discuss most of these questions without fear of rejection and who 'normally had better answers' than Kai had found elsewhere. At this stage in life, Kai seemed to think that he would likely remain agnostic because of the absence of evidence for definite faith but he was able to accommodate differing perspectives to his own. His was a faith position that was open to learning new things and which drew from both scientific and religious sources.

When interviewed in 2020, Kai had left university and was beginning to practice as a junior doctor working with patients suffering with Covid-19. Again it was evident that his locus of authority in making sense of life, was undergoing change. He was now a highly rational young medical practitioner but one who although he was too busy to be highly involved, was still familiar with church. He seemed to be at Fowler's faith stage four named as 'individuating reflective', so termed because it details the individual looking to their own resources to determine their epistemology and yet with a humility that recognises the differing insights of others. In Kai's instance, his earlier assured atheism has been tempered by an 'interesting conversation with a tutor' who caused him to think carefully about some of his certainties. He felt that life had thus far not allowed him sufficient time to adequately reflect on the existence of God but he needed to invest his time into what he could evidence, namely medical science.

When given the option to draw or describe his image of God, his family and the church, he chose to describe them. He was very reticent to offer any image of God other than to suggest that God might be a 'sort of influence that offers some control' that was a form of 'external pressure in the randomness of life.' Kai was keen to distance himself from what he felt was a 'former and more reductionist stage of self' by saying that he was now more interested to know the impact of free will, which, if it existed, would add greater complexity to life. As a junior doctor he felt himself doubting whether humans had much free will because in many ways he perceived them to be merely creatures responding to their physical natures and structures. His depiction of family was much the same as previously, namely a nuclear family of himself with his parents and two sisters. He ruminated as to whether he would extend family to include grandparents or a wider circle of intimates but he seemed content with the same notion of family as being those with whom he had been nurtured. His understanding of church was of a body of people who had useful values and for whom he was thankful as being a nurturing influence. However, Kai felt that churchgoers did not seem to pose the same critical questions that he had, as they were 'generally less academic'. When asked if he thought that Christians tended to be innocent or naive he said, 'No, I am not that big-headed but I have been trained to be more scientifically objective.'

Kai's discussion of the Genesis account of creation was philosophic. He said,

'The Bible does not need to be read as a literal account. It is painting a picture of an earth coming into being over 30 billion years ago. What is of interest is why existence exists.'

When asked to comment more precisely about the actual text, he said that he fundamentally disagreed with fundamentalists who insisted that Adam and Eve were real people. In fact any creation narrative that had a woman being formed from a man did not help a progressive society that was looking to see mutuality between the sexes and to redress those cultural contexts where men had more power. He qualified that, 'The Bible is not without flaws' and that 'The story is interesting in detailing the origins of sin which in turn links to the possibility of free will.'

3 Female respondent Alison, initially at key stage 2

3.1 A story of unresolved religious faith as it becomes 'scientific'

In the initial 2006 research article, the female respondent for key stage two was code named Alison and she was aged nine. She was at Fowler's faith stage two but had developed a particularly rich vein of imagination whereby she could enter totally into a different space, time and wonder paradigm in which to encounter narrative.

She had drawn several pictures of God, two of which came from her own archives from when she was five years old. One of these was a multicoloured jester, complete with a jingling hat, who was juggling the two balls of Earth and Saturn. The other historic picture was of a graceful golden eagle with a multitude of eyes—all set on stems at the end of the bird's wings. Her two sketches of a picture of God 'now' (in 2006) were similarly imaginative if more knowingly reflected. They were a ball of light (blue, green, gold and black) that the researcher was instructed to hold up to the light so that he could see it 'radiate' some swirling patterns that had been superimposed around a four-pointed star. He was told that this was 'the ball of love'. Her other picture of God was of a swan, 'a beautiful creature, gliding through the universe'. She felt that she could 'hide under the shadow of his wings' and had shaded in that shadowy place at the base of the swan's wings. Commenting on the movement in perception from ages five to nine, she said that her 'understanding had improved' and although God was still 'an entertainer and guardian' he was more a source of love now.

Alison's version of the creation narrative showed more of this interface between the mythic and the literal that offered further insights. She was able to detail the six days of creation accurately (in the order accounted in Genesis 1) and then described the incident of the eating of the fruit. Although initially uncertain as to whether the story had a meaning, she concluded that it did, namely that, "If you listen to God, you'll find it worthwhile."

When she reflected on the story, she liked the strange (if 'creepy') plant, by which she was referring to the tree of knowledge of good and evil. She presumed that this plant grew in heaven and not on earth. She wondered if God had made a mistake in testing to see if humans might want to eat the wonderful fruit of this dangerous tree.

Seven years later, in 2013, Alison had undergone some complex thought changes as she had become a teenager aged 16, transitioning into stage three of Fowler's faith development, a movement which still allowed her to retain her sense of owning a personal religious faith. Her exuberance and childish confidence were greatly diminished from the younger nine year old self, but she remained strongly creative and imaginative in her approach to life. In developmental terms, this period had been turbulent for Alison in that she had been through a period when she had reacted against her childhood faith and then embraced it again in a more cautious fashion.

Her pictures were also more subdued. In fact, despite strong prompting, she was unable to bring herself to draw pictures of God, the church or her family but she did agree to describe them as word pictures. She had depicted God as a wedding ring 'an eternal circle of love that is hard to describe but is full of goodness, kindness and generosity.' She wished to draw the church not as a building but as people, 'people standing on the shoulders of others as a human pyramid', because the church was about 'supporting the ideas people had, of worship and of meeting.' She also felt that church could be a place where people went if they had no faith or if they were rebelling against faith. Her concept of family was a series of concentric circles, like a dart board, in which the bulls-eye space was

occupied by her parents and sister, the next ring by her friends, the next by her extended family and so on to include society. These reluctant word pictures were in sharp contrast to the extravagant, colourful and imaginative offerings from young childhood and were carefully thought out and logical, removing the possibility of artistic failure by using language rather than art.

Some of Alison's caution was apparent in her discussion of the creation narrative. Her first comment was that there was 'no conflict in believing in both creation and the big bang' because the Genesis account was largely metaphorical. Christians who believed the six day creation story in a literal way did so because they wanted to be comforted by believing in a simple way and did not like the challenge of engaging their studies with their personal faith. The key message that she drew from these early biblical passages was about stewardship. She said that humans were asked to name the animals and were put in charge of their welfare and of the care of the environment and that if we wished to consider the story today, this was the principal meaning on which to reflect.

At the age of 16, Alison felt herself to be very different person from her younger self. Looking back, she felt that her faith had not been developed when she was aged nine but was the result of her own imagination and what she thought her parents wanted her to believe. In the intervening years, she had gone through a phase of losing her faith in God and becoming an atheist and then become more agnostic and was now able to feel she had her own faith but in a different way to what it was previously. If she were to encounter that younger version of herself, she would say to her, 'At no point think you know it all and at no point give up because things change.'

Having very definitely moved out of the mythic-literal stage two of Fowler's faith stages, she was evidently mourning the loss of her former freedom of expression. The tumultuous journey of the last seven years was remembered as a series of peaks and troughs, showing something of her creative personality that was essentially enthusiastic, intuitive and able to make broad connections. On this journey she felt that her relationship with her mother was important because she had discovered that her mother's faith was one which could be questioned, even though she was a priest. As a younger child, she had been proud of her mother's journey into the ordained priesthood but as she had grown older it had frightened her to find out that her mother was unsure about certain aspects of faith. As she had become reconciled to this, she found her own faith again.

When interviewed in 2020, Alison declined to be interviewed. She did however communicate by e-mail that she had had a turbulent few years with mental health issues that were most acutely manifest in what she described as 'extreme exam phobia'. This meant that she had left University with only a diploma in a science subject having spent six years trying to complete her degree. At the time of writing she had been reinventing herself in a new job. She was now very unsure as to the nature of this research, understanding the importance of longitudinal study and not therefore wanting to 'let the project down' but 'as a scientist she was not a person of faith' and had no current wish to engage in a faith survey.

4 Initial key stage 3 respondents

4.1 Male respondent Joe, initially at key stage 3

4.1.1 A story of continuing religious faith that is resourceful and secularising

The male respondent for key stage three, code named Joe (aged 11), was identifiable as this someone newly entering Fowler's faith stage three. This stage is brought on by a new capacity to think and is a period of conforming to an identifiable and tribal world-view. He showed the synthetic conventional attributes that are the hallmarks of one who is strongly nurtured (he was the youngest boy in a family of three sons, all of whom were emerging with a personal Christian faith). His picture of God was of a shepherd boy, holding a crook and chewing a straw. He said, "God is relaxed, not stressed..... He's a child at heart. He is learning from us."

This wondrous view was evidenced in his story of creation that was patchy as to detail but punctuated with reflective asides. He said, "God has huge imagination. He made loads of fish and we've only discovered 10% of them." Later he said, "God makes good things and bad things.... like snakes." Hard on the heels of this came the contradictory statement, "He did not create evil. We created evil by doing sin. Humans are sinful."

His own conclusions as to the mechanics of creation were undergoing development and he was more agnostic than he wished when he said, "The story of Adam and Eve is hard to believe. Probably God got the animals evolved but Adam didn't evolve from an ape.... but he might have."

Seven years later, in 2013, the eighteen year old Joe had retained that imaginative yet personal understanding of God but did so as a conventional stage three thinker but in a more critical manner that foreshadowed an imminent stage transition to a place of greater criticality. He had retained his confidence in his artistic expression and was studying art for 'A' level. Not content with one depiction of God he had drawn two, the common feature being the face of God smiling from within the image of a leaf. The first of these was the actual green impression he had made by imprinting a large tree leaf onto a white cloth and then adding the facial features. The second was motivated by a cartoon series he had seen of the book, 'Watership Down' by Douglas Adams, which detailed the lives of a family of talking rabbits whose god object was called Lord Frith. In this picture, Joe had placed three leaves together up in the sky, like a sun shining down on the rabbit world. Joe commented that he wanted to create God to be 'more of a concept than a form', one who 'is natural and wild like Aslan'. This reference was to the divinely inspired lion seen in CS Lewis's, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* where the lion character is modelled consciously on a Christ-like image.

The drawing of his family detailed five figures all differentiated by their varying length of hair and by their hands, the parent figures holding hands, the three boys, (of whom Joe is the youngest and yet the tallest) holding different objects. A family dog was also in the picture. The drawing of the church was of a traditional building, complete with a cross on a bell tower but with three distinct figures in the building below. One was of a vicar with headphones on, saying 'blah, blah', one of a figure in an electronic wheelchair speeding up the aisle and one of a man with a hatchet in his head. Commenting on these figures, Joe explained that they were representative of your average church, the vicar with his ears covered yet speaking all the time, the figure in the

wheelchair as a sign of the church's inclusivity and the man with a hatchet in his head as a symbol of the strange people who tend to frequent the church.

Commenting on the creation narrative, Joe said it was a metaphorical story that attempted to explain the origins of sin. The Bible was written by people attempting to understand God and this story was just the beginning. To understand the developing concept of God you would need to look at the whole Bible. In the creation story, Eve was not the evil one just because she agreed to give the fruit to Adam, Joe said, 'I'd have probably eaten the apple myself'. Then, more reflectively, he commented, 'If God made man in his own image, he was acting like God when he ate the apple. God is inquisitive too.' He qualified this provocative thought with, 'Some people take all this very literally and see it very differently.' Overall Joe considered the creation story to be a nice story, moderately cool but one in which God can be a bit 'dickish for casting Adam out, causing pain at birth and making it hard to grow crops.' This showed Joe to be moving on from Fowler's faith stage three by pushing at the edges of the conformist thinking of this phase as he looked for his own locus of authority.

Looking back at what he had said when he was aged eleven years, Joe was pleased by his early insights, although he now believed in evolution and did believe that humans were descended from primates. However, despite being happy with his progression since then, Joe felt he had become more cynical about other Christians. Looking on to the future, Joe guessed that if he were to have yet another research interview in seven years time, he would probably still go to church, would be more biblically learned but, he said, looking mischievously, 'maybe God would have learnt some more by then too.'

When interviewed in 2020, the twenty-five year old Joe was now married and living on a barge on the river Thames and was a teacher in a Pupil Referral Unit. He seemed to be content and to be enjoying life and he had retained his religious faith. As he had predicted, he still attended church, although this had been a struggle since he had found it difficult to find a church where he was welcome. Also, in line with his predictions, he perceived God to be learning.

Joe's picture of God (Fig. 1) was of a snake eating itself. It was a deliberately mischievous depiction, offering a serious reflection on what he perceived God to be. His design was in fact an *orebus*, the perfect symbol of eternity drawn as the endless cycle of a snake endlessly eating itself. The complexity of the design was in the way he had then drawn a severance in the perfect cycle by cutting the snake in half, saying he did so because 'true perfection has to show imperfection'. This design was intended to show both order and chaos and to make the claim that 'chaos was as important as life'. In saying this, Joe wanted to distance himself from the 'all knowing, all powerful God that so many Christians seem to believe in'. For him, God was endless but wounded in his engagement with time and space.

Joe's depiction of church (Fig. 2) was similarly reflective.

His picture showed the outline of a church building as a symbol drawn with both firm lines and dotted lines. The firm line detailed historic importance and order seen in the way the Church allows people to connect with each other and to find purpose. The dotted lines expressed the frequent irrelevance of Church as an institution and its need to develop into something new. Joe reflected, 'My experiences of Church are mainly of the Church of England and I don't fit in with the sort of Anglican churches like HTB (Holy Trinity Brompton) that so many young people of my age seem to like but I feel church could be so much more if it can get different people from different cultures and ages to talk to each other.'

His picture of family (Fig. 3) was a departure from his former nuclear family as it now showed a simple Purple Ronnie cartoon of him and his wife (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1 Twenty-five year old Joe's depiction of God

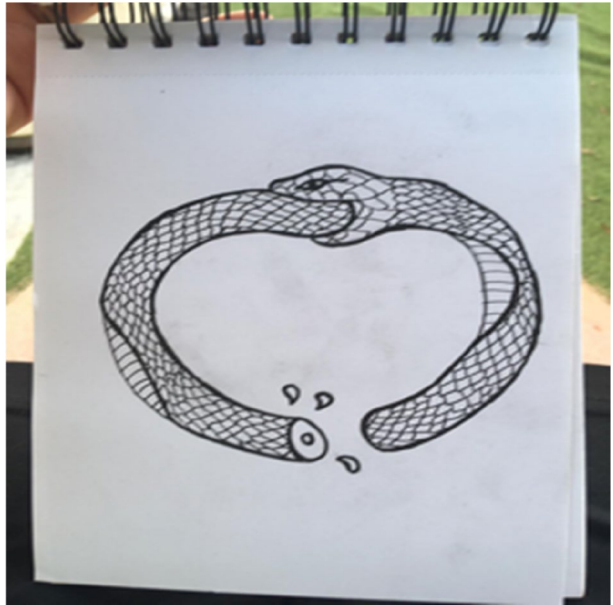
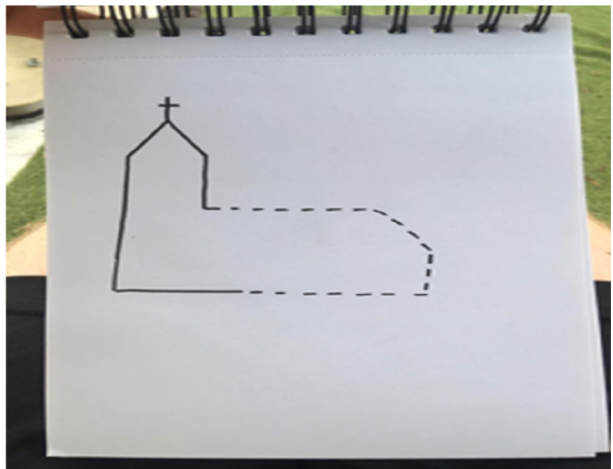


Fig. 2 Twenty-five year old Joe's depiction of church



Commenting on the creation narrative, Joe said that the first account (Genesis 1) was 'a bit boring but poetic'. He valued the constant refrain, 'And God saw that it was good'. By contrast he was less impressed with the second narrative detailed in chapters two and three as they have become the focus of much speculation such as interpreting the serpent to be the devil and the eating of the apple to be the fall of the whole human race. By contrast he offered a different interpretation that he felt to be true to the account. He felt that the story....

'.....detailed that humans are a bit chaotic. Without knowledge Adam and Eve were as happy as pigs in poo...but that knowledge when it came, was painful for them. It

Fig. 3 Twenty-five year old Joe's depiction of family



was inevitable and necessary for humans to acquire knowledge but this came at the cost of walking with God and often still does.'

5 Female respondent Kate, initially at key stage 3

5.1 A story of open-ended religious faith

5.1.1 Female respondent Kate, initially at key stage 3

The female respondent from key stage three was code named Kate (aged 12). She showed more aspects of Fowler's faith stage two (mythic literal) than of Fowler's faith stage three (synthetic conventional), identifiable in her picture of God depicted as the human Jesus, complete with beard and the crown of thorns, floating as a cloud amongst other clouds. She said of him, "He is neither happy nor sad. But he is a bit sad about pollution."

This projection of her feelings onto God was also evident in her account of the story of creation when she emphasised Adam and Eve's nakedness and resultant embarrassment. She was very aware that the result of eating the apple was not only to draw attention to their nakedness but was to be the reason for Eve hurting when she became pregnant. Kate developed the story to talk about Cain and Able. In this accurate but personalised account of creation, it became evident that Kate had two older sisters who were present in her thinking when she said, "The meaning of the story is 'Don't get jealous! I get jealous

of my sisters.’ (She was referring to Cain’s murder of Able.) As she paused to reflect, she wondered why it was that a woman ate the first apple and ‘let us women down’. She further reflected on whether God was a man or a woman in making Adam and Eve in his image.

Seven years later, in 2013, the nineteen year old remained a young woman who engaged with faith and church via her own experience of life which for her was a cheerful reality. In this she seemed to have a sense that her outgoing and happy demeanour would be considered to be superficial or immature as she kept apologising saying, ‘I feel like I am expressing myself like a five year old’. Her faith stage though was now more clearly at stage three.

Her drawing of God was of a large smiley-faced sun, up in the sky. She said, ‘He is a spiritual figure, not human, symbolised by sun and fire.’ This was similar to the face of God in the clouds drawn when she was eleven years old but was indeed a happier if maybe a less reflected figure. The picture of church was also a building filled with smiley faces. When I asked her if there were any grumpy faces in church she said that there were a few but she had not drawn them. Her picture of her family showed two parents hugging four children, of whom she was one. Having been told that one of her sisters had got married that year, I asked where her sister’s husband was in the picture and was told that he was ‘outside’ the snapshot of her reality.

When the creation story was discussed, Kate admitted that it was confusing and hoped that there was a way whereby a scientific and a religious view of evolution could be synchronised. She felt that ‘the middle way was by seeing the story to be a montage peopled by cartoon figures’. In other words, Kate was saying that her way of understanding the Genesis narrative was by interpreting it as an allegory. Her light hearted approach was a means of finding this compromise. When asked if this ‘via-media’ was accepted by most Christians she said, ‘Not by our new vicar. He even hates ‘yoga’ and thinks it comes from the devil.’

Looking back from her current eighteen years of life to when she was first interviewed as an eleven year old, an event she still remembered, Kate said she would like to give her younger self some advice on the future. First she would offer some insider knowledge on winning lottery numbers, then it would be to be more open about her faith, then it would be to work harder at her GCSEs and lastly it would be to be happier. This combination of cheerfulness and light touch reflection on life and faith was allowing Kate to be resourced to engage with both church and the world. Her current phase was Fowler stage three, a faith that conformed to her peer group and family but without huge reflection in that she still held several faith stage two features of believing.

When contacted at the age of twenty-seven in 2020, Kate came across as that same cheerful character who wanted to think the best in others. She was working as a library assistant as Covid-19 restrictions were being lifted and she showed strong empathy to her customers whom she sensed to be experiencing anxiety. Her picture of God was still described as being the sun because her sense was that God was ‘a warm and positive presence’ but also that he was ‘incomprehensible and unreachable’. Her depiction of the church was still ‘just a building and not an idea’ because she perceived that the church to be an organisation with ‘so many views’. Her picture of family was now more complex as she wished to depict it as an ivy that was ‘strong and supportive with many strands’. She understood family to now include her boyfriend (with whom she had lived for seven years), her nuclear family and a wider construct of a system that ‘sometimes messes up but is there as a support’.

Kate’s comments on the Genesis creation story understood it to be ‘like other creation stories’. She said that the ‘talking snake’ in the Bible ranked alongside the story of ‘the wolf that swallowed the moon’. She was keen to say that the Genesis story was ‘lovely but

not factually accurate.’ She saw the account as being that of someone who was trying to comprehend origins and the passing it on as a comforting story. She considered the writer of Genesis be similar to ‘a grandma tucking up her child with a comforting story.’

6 Initial key stage 4 respondents

6.1 Male respondent Daniel, initially at key stage 4

6.1.1 A story of continuing religious faith that is resourceful and churched

The male respondent for key stage four, code named Daniel (aged 17), was identifiable as someone well embedded in the Fowler’s faith stage three, having embraced a faith that was personally owned and nurtured within a flourishing Christian youth network. He showed the synthetic conventionality of a secure tribal formation but also the willingness to reflect on his current beliefs.

He recalled reassuring memories of sitting on his father’s shoulders as they contemplated the wonder of a created universe walking out one clear and frosty night. It was a “perfect image” in which “I was enfolded” he said. Dan’s picture of God was a silhouette of himself. He said that God was very personal, more so than a father and a son, in fact more similar to his inner self.

This picture of secure personal faith was present as Dan detailed his account of the creation narrative. He was able to offer a full and accurate version of the Biblical accounts, even in identifying their different sources. His notion offered a continuous reflection that noted Adam’s active part in creation, God’s early absence and then the residual philosophic questions, ‘Why did God forbid eating the fruit when the forbidden fruit is sweetest? Does this show God’s folly or is God playing the double bluff? Maybe the story is a discussion on the origin of evil and shows the dualism at the heart of God.’

Seven years on, a twenty-four year old Dan reflected on life with a faith that was now less comfortable and more open to critique (as is often the case in Fowler stage four thinkers). He had attended university to study English for four years but had abandoned his studies due to a combination of illness and poor motivation. For his depiction of God, he had drawn two circles, which represented the two sides of a coin, the one side depicting a human figure, the other remaining blank. He was at pains to say that his drawing was meant ‘to reveal mystery rather than revelation’. This is ‘because God cannot be seen in one dimension and because the visible aspect of God is the other side of invisibility and mystery.’ To reinforce this point he drew a third circle with dotted lines, saying ‘This is what maintains my energy for God as well as friends and relationships, the sense that there is more than I know’. I observed that he had just depicted the Trinitarian formula in a way that preserved mystery and defied reduction and which could easily link to Christ (the figure), to the Father (the transcendent mystery) and to the Holy Spirit (the dotted line connecting what is material to what is spiritual). In response to this he commented that the three circles might be interpreted in a Trinitarian framework but this was not intentional, more a ‘happy accident.’

His diagram of his family showed his nuclear family on strings, attached to a handle on a house, some figures being further away from home base than others. The parents were nearest and the various siblings at different lengths from home. He described the picture as comforting, unlike his picture of church. His church diagram showed a huge

spiralling vortex pulling people in with centrifugal effect. He commented that 'people come to church for different reasons'. Noting the trauma of the picture he commented, 'the spiral might at times be an orbit, with people circling around the centre rather than being pulled in.'

Dan's understanding of the creation narrative remained free of anxiety about the literalism of the story and he was easily able to engage with it as a mythical version of truth. He continued to distinguish between the two narratives (Genesis 1 and Genesis 2–3) commenting that "'In the beginning' ... is a brilliant way to start a story". This first account (Genesis 1) was more interesting to Dan than the second (Genesis 2–3) because it appeared 'more original' and said a lot in a few words. By contrast he felt that the second account focussed too much on Adam and Eve and used more words to describe why bad things happened to humans.

When asked specifically about the purpose of the creation narratives, he said they were more like pieces of poetry or music. In them ran 'symbolic themes one of which was water, originally a symbol of fear from which comforting land masses appeared (Genesis 1) and latterly as a symbol of joy, being the stream running through Eden (Genesis 2)'. He commented that, 'The whole is more than the sum of all the parts. It is a mystical truth.' Asked how sure he was as to the accuracy of what he was saying, Dan said his comments were his own, based on his own world view and had no authority outside himself. This humble statement suggested that he had moved on from the certainties of Fowler's faith stage three to a different individually-reflected authority found at stage four. Indeed his interest in mystery and symbol showed him to be moving on again to a wider faith position.

Looking back to his former insights as a seventeen year old, the twenty-four year old Dan could still identify with his younger self but felt that since leaving home he was more independent, confident and comfortable in his own skin. If he was to meet his former self, he would not want to be too authoritative but would like to encourage him to be true to himself and to let nothing get in the way of integrity. Looking forward to the next period of life, he felt like the figure in Plato's cave that was moving from the shadows into the sunlight, from the false images to the true. On this journey, he expected to be connected to the church (with which he had recently found a reconnection) as long as it was 'a learning and a listening body'. He said, 'The way forward is to learn stillness alone or with others.'

In 2020, when Dan was aged thirty-one, he presented himself as an increasingly confident and yet complex thinker. He was now married and about to become a father and he had returned to College to study theology. He was training for the priesthood in the Church of England and enjoying his study but struggling with the rather more conservative worldviews of those with whom he trained.

As is sometimes the case in those growing up into adulthood, Dan had abandoned the practice of drawing and was not confident in his ability to communicate his ideas pictorially. However he was able to recall his previous diagram of God 'depicted as a Venn diagram in three circles'. He said that he was not able to draw a better picture than his attempt seven years previously but that he could comment that whilst his pictorial presentation 'was good, it was inadequate.' Interestingly he further qualified that he was now...

'... more frightened of God. My younger self would recognise that God was a mystery and I would tussle with this but now I feel I can only accept the mystery and not tussle. In the past I remember thinking I was quite clever but now I feel more stupid and a lot smaller.... maybe in the past my ego needed to assert itself when talking of God.'

He detailed that if he were to draw a picture of his family it would now include his wife and the partners of his siblings. He reflected that if family is defined as being nuclear, it is a limiting way of understanding widening relationships.

Dan's picture of the church would depict 'lots of broken people telling themselves stories that they cannot tell themselves.' He qualified that these stories were stories of truth such as 'you are valuable' or 'you are loved'. Dan was keen to qualify that he was one of those broken people going to church and he went because he needed to hear a true story. This was why he was getting ordained.

His interpretation of the creation narrative was similarly nuanced and reflective. He felt that these stories are 'very human', detailing a human understanding of how we find ourselves in the universe.' In Genesis one, the first creation narrative, Dan noted the orderliness of creation, the implicit hierarchy and the key feature being that humans are made in the image of God. In the second creation narrative, Dan perceived that the biblical writer was offering a 'psychology for order', an explanation as to why shame, inadequacy and death exist', and the overarching theme was to detail why humans needed Christ. In this early narrative (Genesis 2–3), Dan saw that the absence of Christ in the separating of man from God and man from woman, foreshadowed the need for Christ to appear and to heal this division.

7 Female respondent Hannah, initially at key stage 4

7.1 A story of uncertain and unresolved religious faith

The female respondent for key stage three, code named Hannah (aged eighteen), was identifiable as being a synthetic conventional thinker (Fowler's faith stage three) who was showing some critique of religious faith, and therefore potentially in a transitional phase. Hannah's picture of God was of an oak tree, in the branches of which were both the solid images of her current life and the fleeting images of a more mystical world. She offered a sense of having a poetic imagination and a rich inner world.

When she discussed the creation narrative, she gave a graphic account of the story emerging from the darkness of nothingness in the formation of what was good. She explained the story as a parable with a meaning, noting that the various trees were metaphorical and not literal. She made links to the notion of God as an elemental, having much in common with Nordic or Greek mythology. At one point she noted that normally she did not explain the meaning of stories as this was a means of destroying them but she was happy to do so on this occasion, as it was not one of her own personal stories and was one upon which she had been asked to comment.

Seven years on in 2013, a twenty-five year old Hannah was identifiable as a synthetic conventional thinker (Fowler's faith stage three) but she showed a stronger critique of religious faith, probably because of identification with her father's intellectual faith position. She recalled strong memories of childhood faith in which she perceived God to be a strong but gentle father. The God-object was clearly linked to an earlier relationship with her father that was still very much in evidence. She had not only completed university but was married. However, despite having undergone significant life changes, her faith stage remained at stage three because she had not invested much time in reflecting on it.

Her picture of God was of a vague figure shrouded by mist. She commented that, 'He is almost invisible and distant but his arms are out....He is friendly.' Hannah's

picture of her family was of a large and growing tree in the midst of which was her husband and on either side were branches of her nuclear family and her husband's nuclear family. Most dominant of all was a branch leading to a large space which she said was for her 'possible children'. The diagram of the church showed a collection of church symbols (crosses and christingles) and a series of people, 'some of whom had their backs to you'.

Hannah did not seem very interested to discuss the creation narrative saying she had not read it properly for a long time but that it was a grand story passed down in literature. She felt it was a story that caused confusion and that she had to be vague about it because it was no longer a dominant narrative for her.

Looking back at her insights from seven years previously, Hannah could connect with her comments. Were she to meet that same eighteen year old, she would want to encourage her to explore, to travel and to meet different people. Looking ahead for the next seven years (when she would be reaching the grand old age of thirty-two), she felt that the same encouragement would be needed for her to be effective as a teacher, a mother and a rooted person who was 'there for people'. Life was definitely exciting as she looked ahead, though the resources of faith from childhood were less apparent.

In terms of faith development, Hannah had not moved on. She had become busier with life and relationships and more distant from the church and had effectively put her faith reflections on hold at stage three, though there was a sense that she was no longer comfortable with such faith conformity.

When contacted at the age of thirty-two in 2020, Hannah had become a mother to two children, a boy aged seven and a girl aged five. She was living overseas in Africa with her husband and the children. At the point of the interview, Hannah and her family were in the process of moving from one African country to another, as Covid-19 had interfered with their NGO work and they were about to reinvent themselves as teachers in an international school.

For Hannah, God was 'a blurred and shapeless figure'. She was keen to say that by this she implied that God was not a negative construct, just a distant one. Similarly her picture of the Church was of her with a few distant figures satelliting around her. She intimated that she could 'talk to them and it would be nice but maybe I should be nearer.' Her comments had more wistfulness than guilt in them. Hannah's image of her family was a pillow representing her husband and children. She detailed that they were her constant in the movement of life, people who were very important to her as she moved to different places and whose presence gave her both comfort and security.

In preparation for this interview Hannah had re-read the creation narrative and she commented that it was interesting but it made her angry at the thought that God had placed his created children into a garden and allowed them to fail. She felt that leaving Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden with instructions not to eat from the tree of knowledge was like her leaving her children alone in a room with a cake and telling them not to eat it. In fact she also felt angry from a feminist point of view at the way the story seemed to blame the woman for the early failure of the human race. The more she engaged with the text the more complicated it became to her. Her comments were those of a young mother interpreting the story through the lens of parenthood. 'Are we put on earth and left as children to be tested?' 'Are humans created with weaknesses or do they mirror the failings of a father God?'

8 Results discussed

This long term research project offers tantalising glimpses into Christian faith as it is construed within the lives of a small cohort, alongside the emerging interpretation of their creation narrative. It would take a more detailed report to offer further insight though the reader is able to make certain deductions of their own.

However several themes present themselves as being worthy of note. From this small cohort, it seems that there are some things that have encouraged these children to engage with a religious construction of faith whilst there are other things that have prevented them from doing so. Some of those themes seem to be;

- *The role of the parent (namely their ability to accept the child's questioning of the Bible (positive factor) or their need to control a conversation about faith (negative factor)*
- *The presence of external people who have religious faith outside the sphere of the family home (respected and reflective people are likely to be a positive factor, whilst less sympathetic and judging people are likely to be a negative factor).*
- *The child's personal freedom to reflect and 'theologise' on what is spiritual (a positive factor) or the child's lack of interest in reflecting on faith or examining it (a negative factor).*
- *The child's ability to engage with allegory (a positive factor) or a tendency to literalism (a negative factor).*

Of course, without needing to discuss the existence of a religious gene (Hamer 2005), there will be many other reasons why some people have faith including temperament, life experience, the nurture of the home, church or school or other external factors.

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