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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to engage the question of faith development among emerging adults from a descriptive practical theological perspective. This involves an engagement with the question of how human and faith development interact and culminates in a robust theological account of both the “ordinary” of human development and the “extraordinary” of Christian transformation. These questions are engaged with the Canadian Mennonite Brethren context in view.

The starting point is the much-discussed “delayed adulthood” thesis and the adverse effect many believe it is having on faith retention in many Western contexts. This thesis is best-conceptualized by Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood which I offer as a useful articulation of the coming-of-age experience in many Western contexts. I then offer a summary and critique of the now-standardized assessment of religious decline within this demographic.

The discussion of faith retention among emerging adults raises the question of how to account for the way faith changes over time. Fowler’s Faith Development Theory is engaged as the still-dominant structural account of this phenomenon, particularly as a way of understanding the relationship between faith development and developmental psychology. Fowler’s theory, while illuminating, identifies faith as a species of human meaning-making and this is problematic for any understanding of faith that takes its object (i.e. God) as ultimately significant.

I introduce James Loder’s theology of transformation as a way of accounting for the gaps in Fowler’s theory as well as situating faith development within a larger theological context. Loder’s theological perspective offers a vision that is not restricted to human meaning-making within a socially constructed environment. Rather, all human change demonstrates a pattern of death and resurrection as individuals and communities encounter both the threat of ultimate futility and despair as well as the gracious promise of new life through the Spirit of God.

This understanding of transformation is “thick” enough to include both gradual incremental change as well as decisive convictional experience and offers promise for articulating a theology for all aspects of the Christian journey. This is especially important for ecclesial contexts that are characterized by a “conversionism” that struggles to account for the “ordinary” alongside of the “extraordinary” movements of God’s Spirit in the context of a human life.