How Society Matures

By Sean McClennan

Without going into definitions, I think that we would all agree that there is something called *maturity* and that generally as they grow up, human beings go through different levels of it. I also think that it's fairly uncontroversial to suggest that how mature an individual is, is largely defined by their behaviour—how they react in different situations. And I think that we've all run across people whose chronological age just doesn't seem to be in line with how we think they should behave. *"Grow up!" "Act your age!" "Wise beyond your years."* You only have to look at the language to understand how true it is that the perception at least is there.

Applying definitions and measures to try to quantify maturity—well that's another question and likely to be much more controversial. But for the sake of argument, let's take the work of one psychologist, José Stevens; he outlines some fundamental principles of maturation and defines five levels of maturity between Infant and Adult in his book, Transforming your Dragons.

According to Dr. Stevens, as we mature, there is a general tendency towards wider experience and a greater capacity to digest the situations encountered in life. As people mature, they show a greater capacity to find peaceful solutions to conflicts; they demonstrate a greater independence of thought; they develop greater compassion and self-confidence; they become more respectful of the rights of others and they grow less fearful of the unknown.

Of course, youth does not always equate to lower stages of maturity, any more than age guarantees *Adult* behaviour. Life experience and education can accelerate maturation, and anyone can get *fixated* in their development. The following belief statements might characterize adults fixated at lower stages of maturity:

I Infant

- My tribe, clan, or gang is everything to me. I couldn't exist without them.
- I feel lost without direction and people telling me what to do.
- As far as I am concerned, no behaviour is out of bounds for me.
- People that play fair are suckers.
- I seem to be scared all the time.

2 Toddler

- Strangers and foreigners make me uncomfortable.
- What this country needs is more law and order.
- You have to watch out for germs and viruses. They are everywhere.
- People should know their place.
- I usually do what I'm told.
- Spare the rod and spoil the child, I always say.

3 Child

- Life is about competition. You have to be better than the next guy.
- A fool and his money are soon parted. They deserve what they get.
- Free enterprise is good. Nothing should interfere with it.
- I believe my ideas are best for the world. People should be more like me.
- Clothes make the man/woman.
- Life is survival of the fittest. The strong win. The weak lose.

Adolescent

- I want to understand myself more. I like to understand people and why they do things.
- I have not completely made up my mind about the meaning of life.
- My emotional relationships are intensely involving.
- I believe that the environment has to be protected from ruthless plundering.
- I will gladly march in protest for what I feel is right.
- I believe there is much unfairness in the world and that I should work to correct it.

5 Adult

- You do your thing and I'll do mine.
- I cannot harm others without harming myself.
- I believe in the spirit of the law rather than the letter of it.
- I feel a deep spirituality that is not necessarily related to religion.
- Appearance is not so important. Internal qualities are what count in life.
- I seem to be able to move among social classes with relative ease.
- I do not believe in arms for peace.
- I like to work hard and then relax with my family and friends.
- There is much more to life than getting ahead.
- I would give up a fortune to preserve the forests, lakes and animals.

Probably reading these you'll recognize people that you know and even aspects of yourself now or at other points in your life. Possibly, these classifications might make you uncomfortable or even angry—there is certainly an unapologetic attachment of political beliefs attached the stages of maturity and naturally there is an association of *more mature* with *better*. So be it—it's a discussion after all and as Aristotle says: "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." For the time being, let's entertain that idea.

The fact that we can so easily connect the stages of maturity to politics just begs us to apply these stages to societal phenomena. After all, societies and their beliefs and actions are the result of the beliefs and actions of individuals. It's a valid exercise—we just need to remember that you can't work backwards and generalize that all the members of society X are at that maturity level.

Religion is where I'm taking all this; the impact of religion on all levels of our individual and global lives (positive or negative) cannot be understated. From the level on which we draw comfort and strength in times of strife, to the social reaction to the struggle for GLBT rights, to the impact of terrorism on the world community, framing religious belief in terms of "maturity" might provide really interesting insights into how to think and cope when beliefs come into conflict.

Some (like Karl Marx) would be inclined to immediately classify all religion as *immature*. That would be naive—sociologically and psychologically it is clear that religion plays a role in all human life. Even individuals and societies who claim to have transcended *religion* have nearly comparable belief systems. Science, communism and any number of other systems have supplanted religion in various

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communities, but sociologically fulfill the same needs (and are as susceptible to the same stages of maturity). The difference (and not an insignificant one) lies in the fact that such systems don't call on the supernatural to understand the world whereas religion invariably does on some level.

No, it is clear that religion (or its surrogate) serves a functional role in all our lives—it is as much a part of the human experience as eating and breathing—and growing up. That being said, religion has as much potential for dysfunction—Marx was largely right when he said, "in society, the dominant religion supports the status quo and diverts the attention of the oppressed from their real problems." It's hard to plausibly counter this. Take Louisiana Senator David Vitter's recent comments about gay marriage in the US: "I don't believe there's any issue more important than this one." I'm as passionate as the next fag about gay rights, but by no means am I willing to claim that compared to war, genocide, hurricanes, and environmental devastation, that gay marriage is the single most important issue facing human civilization at this point in time!

It is a valid question, though, to ask whether the dominant religion is the problem, or whether it's simply the case that generally the dominant religions are not well matured. It would be shortsighted to try to take, say the Qur'an and the Bible, assign them to a stage of maturity and then argue in favour of one or the other. Any religion has the capacity to mature, just as any human does—the question is how the religion is approached. Fundamentalist Christians take the Bible to be literal word of God—that is not just immature but irrational, because it is demonstrably false (the Bible wasn't written in English for one thing, but moreover, the content has changed over the last couple thousand years: "Misquoting Jesus" by Bart Ehrman is a good discussion of that fact). It is not irrational or immature to speculate that the bible was inspired by divinity and try to find the truth in it, or to look to the bible to find comfort or guidelines for how to bring meaning into one's life. And there is no lack of Christians or sects of Christianity that take that perspective.

Fundamentalism, applied to Christianity, or Islam, or science, or even the gay rights movement, can probably be equated with immaturity and it's consequently unsurprising the amount of conflict that the various incarnations of fundamentalism give rise to in the world. The big question is what to do about it? Pushing the analogy further: how do mature adults deal with children? Do we try to stamp them out of existence? No, we try to nurture them into individuals with compassion, understanding, education, freedom to experience and grow, but with a watchful, protective eye (Note where spare the rod, spoil the child falls on the scale above). Where the analogy breaks down is that while children are raised by and will generally acknowledge the authority of more mature parents and teachers, communities have a much harder time doing that. In a sense, when modern fundamentalism arises out of a millennia-old religion, it is because they have lost the continuity of the more mature guiding and teaching the less. One challenge our civilization faces as our population grows into the global village is how to recognize (and defer to) greater social maturity.

That's when we have to return to the individual: it will ultimately be true that the society has to follow along with the individuals who comprise it. Do something to further the cause of your own maturity—and the maturity of the people around you. $\mathbf{\nabla}$

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