

**THE ART OF CHRISTIAN LIVING:
ADRIAN VAN KAAM'S (1920-2007) FORMATIVE THEORY**

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ABSTRACT

Adrian van Kaam's formative theory relates to the practical task of becoming a Christian in the fullest sense today. He favours formative over informative thinking, the latter over-given to conceptual knowledge, issues and analyses which have little bearing on the art of living itself. Formative spirituality aims at teaching the art of graced unfolding of the human self in Christ. Van Kaam's comprehensive spiritual anthropology, a blend of psychological and spiritual insight underpins his multi-dimensional self set in a formation field of relational and interactive energies. The five poles of energy that constitute each one's formation field emerge from a central preformation pole, the Divine forming mystery and eternal Trinitarian dimension that undergirds life and world. van Kaam's understanding of human formation is that human life unfolds towards a goal, which is life fulfilment. Its ultimate outcome and ideal is 'consonance' when all our energies strive to resound together in harmony with the Divine forming Mystery, the Origin of our originality.

Introduction

The science of formative spirituality was pioneered by Adrian Van Kaam CSSp (1920-2007) and developed over a period of more than fifty years, from the 1950 onwards until his death. His seminal work *Religion and Personality* was first published in 1968 and re-

edited in 1980. The later edition included an updating of his early formulated theory as well as a self critique of his work. It is not often, in a lifetime, that an author gets the opportunity to test and critique his own work in the light of experience and in dialogue with other scholars. As an outcome to his dialogue with Abraham Maslow, van Kaam showed that the agenda of formative spirituality differed intrinsically from Maslow's humanistic psychological theory aimed at a full realisation of a person's potential (van Kaam 1980). Maslow envisaged a process by which a person ascended a pyramid-like structure answering progressively many levels of human needs, psychological and physical. These began with the realization of the most basic needs first. When a human being has successfully climbed the steps of the Maslow pyramid he/she reaches self actualization. VanKaam also believed that a full emergence of the self was possible and even desirable as a God-given potential, arriving ultimately at the fullness of humanity coinciding with spiritual maturity. By contrast, however, van Kaam looked beyond the admirable programme of endeavour to reach self-actualisation, to the intervention of divine grace which facilitated 'the graced unfolding of the human self'.

With the life-long help of Susan Muto whose editorial and interpretive skills enhanced and clarified the author's work over decades, van Kaam went on to produce his *magnum opus*, his Formative Spirituality Series in seven volumes between 1989 and 1995. He published two further volumes of Formation Theology in 2004 and 2005 until illness overtook him and he died in 2007.

Informative and Formative Thinking

In outlining his formative theory, van Kaam makes an important distinction between *formative* and *informative* thinking (van Kaam 2003). Informative thinking is concerned mostly with accruing informational knowledge, and in offering interpretations and analysis of such information. Its aim is to become more knowledgeable and competent in a host of sciences. Information knowledge tends to be problem centred and issue oriented, to engage with measurable outcomes in the interest of delivering logical and provable conclusions. Even theologians can engage in this exciting field of activity, where more and more philosophical,

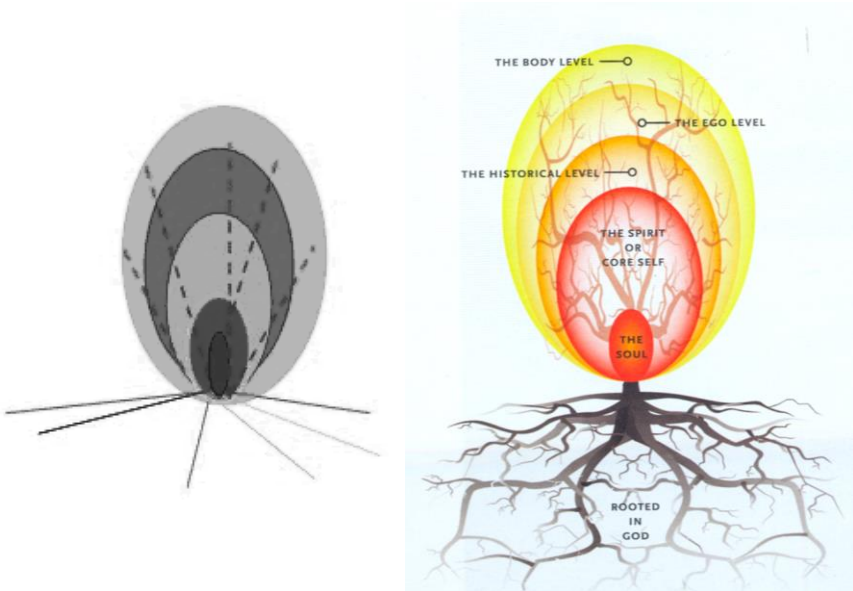
anthropological and sociological knowledge is used in an effort to interpret the God question satisfactorily for others. One can become thoroughly knowledgeable *about* God without entering fully into dialogue with the divine forming mystery at the centre of one's life.

ormative thinking has a very different agenda. This kind of thinking he has in mind is crucial to the personal and communal life-formation process. It concerns itself directly with studying what van Kaam calls 'means, conditions and structures' that facilitate, foster and deepen the process of living life to the full in tune with the Divine forming mystery at the centre of our lives (Jn10:10). Some of the formative means van Kaam goes on to explore are of the how-to-live-a-spiritual-life category, rather than the dogmatic truths that must be explored and that must mysteries of faith that must be understood. It is not to be inferred that van Kaam disregards sound theological study as part of the faith formation process, indeed his concern is that sound theology would underpin and form a healthy infrastructure on which spirituality would build. The concern he raises is that academic theology would become the sole and favoured discipline of the religious formation process and ultimately replace or supersede formative spirituality. On a day to day level van Kaam's distinctions between informative and formative knowledge have often been vindicated, non-academically, by the critique of ordinary well-educated people who complain that while they know all about computers, have an understanding of nuclear physics and even the composition of the stars, yet still no one teaches them how to live. This is one reason why van Kaam's formative theory is worthy of study.

Van Kaam's Self-theory

Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? These are the burning questions that lie at the core of all great philosophies and religions. In his teaching about how to live in harmony with the Divine forming Mystery at the core of life, van Kaam postulates a comprehensive spiritual anthropology. In a cohesive manner, he presents an understanding who I am and what I am to become in my various articulations. This Christian anthropology offers a map of the multidimensional self with possibilities for self-

understanding and initiation into a holistic Christian spirituality which embraces the personal, the communal and the cosmic. While I am somewhat reluctant to present this anthropology as a separate part of van Kaam's thinking, nevertheless it is possible, having had first hand opportunity to study with and be directed in research by this master of spirituality (1971-74), to offer a diagram of his multi-dimensional self (agnew 2008) based on my own interpretation of his theory but using his precise terminology:



Each level or dimension of the self requires a brief explanation:

The *body level* or vital self dimension constitutes the bio-psychological level of the self and denotes the level of immediacy. Because of the foundational nature of each genetic blueprint, there are elements of the self that cannot be changed, which van Kaam recognizes as preformative and impervious to change. Encountering a person merely on the body level often engages with surface realities only.

The *ego level* or managing self dimension is the second level, the dimension developed over a lifetime. The ego is often seen as the sum total of capabilities, competences, expertise and qualifications. Society tends to measure a person's status or lack of status in the self on the ego hence ego-accomplishments include position,

degrees, diplomas, experience, connections, property, possessions etc: all speak loudly of who a person is and what one is fitted to do.

The *historical cultural level* of the self is the dimension of self pertaining to personal history and culture. Born at a particular time, in a particular location, into a culture, tribe, language, story. The sum total of a person's historical cultural dimension runs deeply in each person and can prejudice an encounter with the other positively or negatively.

Beyond the outer layers of the self is the mystery that each one is. This inner sanctuary can be called the *inner core or spirit level* dimension. Herein lies the mystery that each one is: original, unique and irrepeatable...

The *soul* dimension of the self, not at first named by van Kaam in his multi-dimensional self structure, or in the earliest articulations of his theory, belongs to the realm of the ineffable or divine forming mystery at the heart of the self. It is here that the self longs for union for completion, for wholeness, for communion with its ultimate Source and Origin.

Van Kaam's multi-dimensional anthropology is not widely recognised in the field of spirituality. It is derived from a judicious combination of psychological and spirituality terms but is not fully accepted in either field of study. From years of research, van Kaam has understood that psychology does not provide fully the answers to the desire for human fulfilment although he studied Freud, Maslow and Rogers extensively. Spirituality, he believed, has an inalienable role to play in the human search for meaning and deserves the status of a science in its own right. Many religious purists reject the possibility that this science with its integrative dialogue with human sciences could work for spirituality; they do not realise that van Kaam's aim is to integrate insights from psychology and the human sciences in the formulation of his new science of spirituality. Similarly psychologists tend to reject van Kaam's understanding of spirituality on the grounds of naivety and that it deals with matters of faith extraneous to the science of psychology. Having pondered these objections, van Kaam notes that over decades, the complexity of a person's inner world has been neglected by

Christian spirituality to the point that well-worn recipes of traditional piety no longer responded satisfactorily to the complexities of the inner life and the struggle for integrity in a new world context. Interior problems could no longer be solved by ritual repetition of prayer formulas which ignored underlying disorder within the self. Van Kaam saw the need for psychology and psychology to work together in such a way that neither would be compromised yet each would be aware of its intrinsic parameters and limitations.

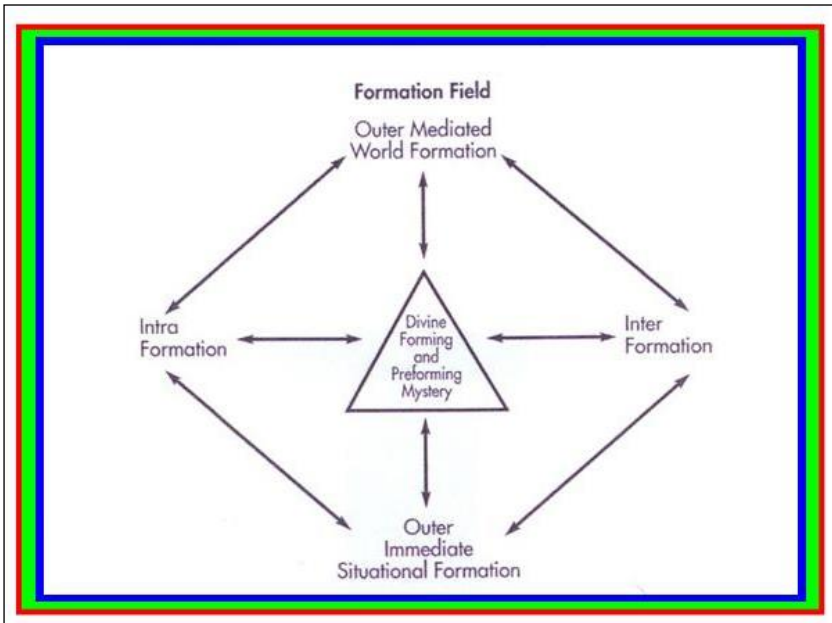
Van Kaam is clear that all levels of the self inherent in his anthropology are interdynamically related within the totality of the self, so that all dimensions interpenetrate one another. The soul is in the body and the history is in the soul. One can make similar equation about all dimensions. All levels have the capacity to radiate the Divine forming mystery at its core. Similarly, all levels are capable of being graced and transformed by the Divine forming mystery. Indeed, the implications of this theory are many: it postulates that all levels of the self are permeable by spirit and innately formable. Just as the body is nourished by wholesome food, so the spirit can be strengthened in myriad ways by sound spiritual practice. Development of good ego strength not only enhances the self but imbued by the power of the divine forming mystery, can effects radical changes for the betterment of society. Good spiritual guidance can shed light on those obstacles that block the access of grace in our lives. It is also true that deforming influences in self, society and cosmos, given access, can militate against wholeness and the graced unfolding of the self in Christ. To live with a conscious understanding of the multi-levelled self can evoke sentiments of prayerful gratitude as is voiced in Psalm 139: 14 "I thank you for the wonder of my being".

Transcendent reflection is the process by which the Divine orchestra of the self is released so as to increase awareness of the riches and liabilities inherent the multi-dimensional self. Once initiated into the graced unfolding of the divine forming energy, the self becomes aware of the resonating harmonies within and throughout the self, as the life of the Trinity is invited to pulsate throughout one's life and world. Consonance is the word van Kaam uses to denote a state of harmonious resonance with God who is the centre of the divine forming myself. Obstacles to

consonance can be removed through corrective self reflection and the healing power of right relationship with God, self and others. The self, van Kaam holds is essentially formable, a process which is ongoing throughout the various stages of life. It is never static but proceeding to ever greater consonance or dissonance with the divine.

Van Kaam's Formation Field

In formulating his formative theory, it is ironic that Van Kaam has compiled a sizeable body of informational knowledge to present his formative theory in an intelligible and scientific way. However its formative implications are enormous and require practical application (Tilisho 2011). Van Kaam's formation field of interactive energies gives direction and provides context for our communal and unique form of life (van Kaam 1983). He identifies five poles or spheres of relational interaction that together comprise each formation field (Graham & McCormack 2001).



The *preformation* pole is at the centre of life and indicates that our lives have originated and continue to originate daily in the Divine Forming Mystery. God's image is preformatively expressed

through our own DNA. This is where our uniqueness meets the Eternal Trinitarian dimension. When we listen to Isaiah in Scripture (Is 43:1) and attribute the words spoken of Israel to ourselves, it is clear that each person is called by name from all eternity.

The *intraformation* pole is where inner work is done and where the vital, functional, sociohistoric and transcendent dimension of life is explored and integrated. Some spiritualities are mainly intraformation oriented which has led many to shirk this aspect of foundational formation by arguing that it is introspective and non relational. In van Kaam's foundational formation only one pole is intraformation oriented. This is the '*within*' pole of energy where a person consciously reflects on and integrates the pulsations accruing from life at whatever stage of life he or she is.

The *interformative* pole denotes relationality of and by "significant form traditions, persons and communities" (van Kaam 1980). This is the horizon where the influence of significant persons and communities becomes crucial to our spiritual emergence. Emphasis on how we are engaged in forming others while resisting perhaps the influence of others in our lives. Relationality has further influence on how we are find ourselves inserted within and influenced by the Trinity, that model of relationality.

Beyond or concordant with the interformative pole we find our *immediate world situation*, the quotidian commonplace locus of my life. There is no spirituality without a context so my here-and-now situation forms me daily and is formed by me in return. Moreover there are the political and social aspects of my life just now, my immediate family situation and the cares and worries that may at time threaten to engulf us. All the while the divine forming mystery is watching over my current life situation.

Finally, there is *the outer world pole*, the cosmos which asserts its own sphere of influence. I am a child of my era, of a continent of a particular race. It seems accidental the point at which one enters the universe, but all is in the cosmic plan of God... The world's religious, social and ethnic beliefs and philosophies filter through to my life. Similarly, the bio sphere 'speaks' to me of global realities, of the earth languishing in danger of destruction, the mindless greed and ambition of myself and others, of which I am

only slightly aware. All the while, I am being formed by the Divine forming mystery at the heart and time and eternity.

It can be an overwhelming experience to contemplate the vast inner and outer poles of energy that constitute each unique formation field. This is the challenge that confronts each person that undertakes the sacred work of formation with religious or lay people. God is and has been at work, albeit hidden as each life story unfolds. Transformative reflection is at the heart of formative learning since it teaches us how to live in tune with our divine calling. Formative work hinges on reflection. This reflective living is experienced as we become open to our formation field of energies with the Divine forming Mystery at its centre. Personal soul work, the practice of mindfulness, growth in relationality and awareness of how the world impacts on our lives, all resound together in the graced activity of our formation field. In graced activity we strive towards the disposition of consonance which brings us into harmony and allows all aspects of our lives and work resonate in harmony with the Divine. When formative thinking is pursued under the guidance of a holistic anthropology, open to the multiple energies present in the formation field, it will lead, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to a personal formation that unlocks and liberates the Christ-form within us. And so we become our authentic self (van Kaam 1972).

Unfolding the Christ-form Within Us

A transcendent mystery lies dormant at the heart of every human being begging to be born and come to maturity. Psychology has long since shown that as we grow up we are influenced both by our genetic make-up and also by our environment and the events that shape our lives. Nature and nurture are the twin influences that shape our lives. Van Kaam emphasizes the essential formability of the human self in tune with the Divine forming mystery. We become who we are, not just physically, but spiritually also. Our personality unfolding may be dependent on certain circumstances and how we respond to these circumstances. So too our spirit, the very font or who we are comes to grips with our physical and personal unfolding. Physically we are born with a full genetic blueprint of unfolding; we have no choice in the colour of our eyes, or hair or how tall we grow. We have many

innate qualities, characteristics and leanings that we are free to develop. Our soul too has longings for transcendence that crave to be given the freedom to grow. There is a desire at the heart of the self to actualise what is original and innate in the mystery of who I am. 'Who am I?' is the intriguing mystical question written into the script of each one's life. This script may never come to light. It is the bright-darkness of our spiritual identity. We long to discover who we are so that we may become more fully ourselves, from our external appearance interiorly, to the very core of our being. There is nothing more original than a person who is intrinsically oneself.

The aim of formative spirituality is the full transcendent unfolding of the human person in Christ (van Kaam 1980). Day by day we give form to our lives as Christian since we are not static or fixed at any particular stage of development. Spiritually we grow in tune our physical and mental growth. This explains how the Christ-ening process, initiated in baptism, extends throughout each lifetime, permeating our personality from birth to death. There are many sciences which attempt to explain aspects of human growth, psychological, neurological with greater accuracy as scientific experiments develop. There are few sciences which deal with the art of living a Christian spiritual life. Life science tends to belong primarily to ancient primitive societies whose elders preserve lessons in the art of living to be transmitted to the next generation. Unfortunately the language of transmission has broken down and while many 'walk the walk' few are able to 'talk the walk' in a manner that touches the next generation of Christians.

Adrian van Kaam's proposes a formative science as a means of liberating Christian character and personhood and allowing all facets of the personality, even what is wounded and limited, 'to sound together in harmony' with the Trinitarian Mystery present at the deepest centre of each human person (van Kaam 2003). *Consonance* is the term used for the goal of growing in harmony with one's inner form. Transformation in Christ is at the core of this science.

Summary and Conclusion

This Ongoing formation in Christ presupposes the provision of certain conditions, means, structures and dynamics (van Kaam

1980) which have, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the capacity “to facilitate the graced disclosure and unfolding of our Divine destiny” (van Kaam 1980). God’s gift of transformation can move like a ray of light into the receptive heart healing what has been hurt and deformed by life situations. Formative Spirituality aims at facilitating the person’s journey to “find his or her life form in this unsteady age” (van Kaam 1980). “When the words of Scripture, the teaching of the Church and its spiritual masters” (van Kaam 1980), are pondered and ruminated, these help to clarify and illuminate the purpose whereby a person seeks to realize his or her innate “life form” (van Kaam 1980, 1983). The rich heritage of the Christian tradition, properly understood, communicated and practiced, “inspire attitudes and formative dispositions enabling us to be more open to the Christ-form within us”. It is through the influence of grace and not merely by human efforts alone that we grow into the fullness of being which many writers call holiness. This, in bare outline, is the theoretical formulation of van Kaam’s formation theology. It is based on a few tenets:

- Van Kaam’s foundational formation theory is person-centred and field centred which is God centred.
- It aims at facilitating the graced disclosure and unfolding of our Divine destiny.
- It wants to establish the necessary and sufficient conditions for our spiritual formation and give practical guidance in spiritual practice.
- It examines special and personal ways of formation, experiences, devotions and exercises, abstracting the essentials from them.
- It assists in finding practical solutions to the formation questions one will have to face throughout the course of one’s life.
- This approach also takes into account the psychological, social and physiological obstacles that may interfere with the disclosure of our human and graced life direction.

Formative Spirituality is profoundly practical. It is concerned with change and how to negotiate and deal with change within oneself. Van Kaam’s understanding of Spirituality builds on a theory of the development of human life in relation to the invitation of grace. The aim of this new field is not the teaching of abstract conceptual

theology; it aims rather to assist all Christians in the disclosure and unfolding of an empirical communal and unique life-form rooted in human make-up and in the direction that the Christ-form gives to their lives. The ultimate goal of Formative Christian Spirituality is the communal and unique transformation of persons and communities into Christ.

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