

Stages of Faith Development According to James Fowler

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Background

- Freud's model of psycho-sexual development;
 - Erik Erikson's model of psycho-social development;
 - Piaget's cognitive development;
 - Kohlberg's moral development.
- The last two have played an important role in the development of Fowler's model.

Fowler's cry:



"I was determined to avoid the mistakes I felt I'd been a victim of in my own theological education. One was that I was taught theology as though I'd never been a child. I had to ignore the fact that some very powerful images of God and experiences of the holy occurred before I was five years of age. The other mistake was that I was taught theology as though my body began with my neck and went up. But I knew that I thought with my glands" (James Fowler, interview by Harold Kent Straughn).

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#topic/all.christnet.christianlife/EviOs2eQlcM>

Stage 0: Undifferentiated Faith

- Infancy: the time from birth to two years;
- It's a time before language and conceptual thought are possible. The infant is forming a basic sense of trust, of being at home in the world.
- The infant is also forming pre-images of God or the Holy, and of the kind of world we live in. On this foundation of basic trust or mistrust is built all that comes later in terms of faith.
- Future religious experience will either have to confirm or reground that basic trust.

Stage 1: Intuitive/Projective Faith

- It characterizes the child of two to six or seven.
- It's a changing and growing and dynamic faith. It's marked by the **rise of imagination**.
- The child doesn't have the kind of logic that makes possible or necessary the questioning of perceptions or fantasies. Therefore the child's mind is "religiously pregnant."

Stage 1: Intuitive/Projective Faith

- The experiences and images that occur and take form before the child is six have powerful and long-lasting effects on the life of faith both positive and negative.
- The dangers in this stage arise from the possible "possession" of the child's imagination by unrestrained images of terror and destructiveness...
- Religion is learned mainly through experiences, stories, images, and the people that one comes in contact with.

Stage 2: Mythic/Literal Faith

- Age: 7 to 12 years;
- The child develops a way of dealing with the world and making meaning that now criticizes and evaluates the previous stage of imagination and fantasy.
- The gift of this stage is narrative. The child now can really form and re-tell powerful stories that grasp his or her experiences of meaning. There is a quality of **literalness about this**. The child is not yet ready to step outside the stories and reflect upon their meanings.
- The child takes symbols and myths at pretty much face value, though they may touch or move him or her at a deeper level.

Stage 2: Mythic/Literal Faith

- The deities are almost anthropomorphic.
- A factor initiating transition to Stage 3 is the implicit clash or contradictions in stories that leads to reflection on meanings. The transition to formal operational thought makes such reflection possible and necessary. Previous literalism breaks down; new "cognitive conceit" (Elkind) leads to disillusionment with previous teachers and teachings. Conflicts between authoritative stories (Genesis on creation versus evolutionary theory) must be faced.

Stage 3: Synthetic/Conventional Faith/1

- Beginning around age 12 or 13.
- It's marked by the beginning of what Piaget calls formal operational thinking. That is: thinking about our own thinking.
- It's a time when a person is typically concerned about forming an identity- based also on evaluations and feedback from significant other people in his or her life.
- This stage is synthetic: it's a pulling together of one's valued images and values, the pulling together of a sense of self or identity.

Stage 3: Synthetic/Conventional Faith/2

- And conventional: faith is based on others. Tendency to compose its images of God as extensions of interpersonal relationships. God is often experienced as Friend, Companion, and and Personal Reality, in relationship to which I'm known deeply and valued.
- The true religious hunger of adolescence is to have a God who knows me and values me deeply, and can be a kind of guarantor of my identity and worth in a world where I'm struggling to find who I can be.
- This can be an adult stage. Many persons, in churches and out, who are best described by faith that essentially took form when they were adolescents.

Stage 4: Individuative/Projective Faith/1

- The transition to Stage Four can begin as early as 17, but it's usually not completed until the mid-20s, and often doesn't even begin until around 20.
- It comes most naturally in young adulthood. Some people, however, don't make the transition until their late 30s.
- Stage Four is concerned about **boundaries**: where I stop and you begin; where the group that I can belong to with conviction and authenticity ends and other groups begin.

Stage 4: Individuative/Projective Faith/2

- **Authenticity**: a fit between the self I feel myself to be in a group and the ideological commitments that I'm attached to.
- This is achieved through a process of de-mythologising...
- Unhealthy outcome: throwing away of all symbolic expressions (secularism) or taking all symbols literally (fundamentalism).

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith/1

- Sometime around 35 or 40 ... a kind of midlife way of being in faith.
- What Stage 4 works so hard to get clear and clean in terms of boundaries and identity, Stage Five makes more permeable and more porous.
- We are ready for allegiances beyond our tribal gods and our tribal taboos.
- From either/or position to both/and!

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith/2

- There is a need for **intimacy** in relationships...
- There is a deepened readiness for a relationship to God that includes God's mystery and unavailability and strangeness as well as God's closeness and clarity.
- Stage 5 is a period when one is alive to **paradox**. One understands that truth has many dimensions which have to be held together in paradoxical tension.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith/1

- These people experience a shift from the self as the centre of experience. Now their centre becomes a participation in God or ultimate reality.
- No concern for self-preservation but instead a vivid taste and feeling for the transcendent.
- Beyond parochial perceptions of justice and love, and on to the universal community.
- Religion of Martin Luther King, Jr. , Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Dag Hammarskjöld and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith/2

- Empirically rare;
- It is described as a deepening of the particulars of one's faith until it becomes inclusive of all being.
- Often they people are transformers of culture, and could be even subversive.

Stage model of Human Development A Caveat!

- Not to be understood as metamorphosis of a butterfly or a frog.
- Human development is not strictly linear; could have a spiral dimension to it – there could be an element of repetition.
- Human development is also dynamic; human beings are capable of making up for something lost in an earlier stage.

A critique of Fowler's model of Faith Development

- **Content:** insightful contribution on faith as having cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions
- **Methodology:** Method used for data collection was 'Faith Development interview' (1981).
- His model is originally based on data gathered from American, middle-class, Caucasian population; interpreted from a protestant theological background.
- **Validity:** Has enjoyed some standing among scholars (of developmental psychology and religious education). But Needs to be replicated (empirical validation beyond the original sample) among other ethnic and religious populations.

Implication for Counselling

- Say, a client draws a lot of significance from their religion; you notice that the influence of religion on their functioning and wellbeing seems negative... (“my son is not going to be saved because he has married a Hindu.”) Is it because they are in earlier stages of faith development?

Discuss Case:

80 year old Catholic Priest

- Most of the Psalms don't mean anything to me. The Bible is full of scientific errors. It is all just stories told by the Jews to explain some unexplainable mysteries.