

The Development of Faith

(James Fowler)

Although James Fowler is a theologian, he studied developmental psychology at Harvard University. His theory is strongly influenced by the theories of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg.

Faith becomes almost synonymous with meaning-making. It is a way to see oneself in relation to others in a background of shared meaning and purpose. The faith orientation of individuals is influenced by their master story, their center of values, and their images of power. People use the master story to interpret events in their lives. The master story contains an individual's answer to fundamental questions: "What is life all about? Who is in charge over my life? How do I make life worthwhile? What goals do I pursue to give meaning to my life?" According to Flower, we form and shape our lives in relation to master stories. It also helps the individual to comprehend and interpret traumatic events in life.

According to Fowler, faith, like other aspects of cognition, may progress from a quite simple, self-centered one-sided perspective to a more complex, altruistic, and multisided view. Faith is a developmental process; as a person has more experience trying to reconcile religion with daily life, the person's faith may reach higher levels. Faith gives humans a reason for living their daily lives, a way of understanding the past, and a hope for the future (e.g., a Biblical world view).

Fowler's 7 Stages of Faith

Stage 0 – Primal or Undifferentiated Faith

- Builds on Erikson's trust vs. mistrust concept
- A trusting attachment to caretakers essentially constitutes faith in another person
- Our first pre-images of God have their origins here
- Gesell and others have found that often a child's image of God is similar to the image they have of their parents (i.e., loving, forgiving, punitive, etc.)
- Typical of infants and toddlers

Stage 1 – Intuitive-Projective Faith

- Magical, illogical, imaginative
- Fantasies, especially about the power of God
- Typical of children ages 3 to 7

Stage 2 – Mythical-Literal Faith

- Individual takes stories of religion literally
- Believes simplistically in power of symbols
- Involves reciprocity – God sees to it that those who follow his laws are rewarded and those who do not are punished
- Typical of middle childhood and adulthood

Stage 3 – Synthetic-Conventional Faith

- Nonintellectual acceptance of religious values in context of interpersonal relationships
- Coordinates an individual's involvements in a complex social world
- Provides a sense of identity and adds significance to life
- "Conformist" stage of faith – concerned about other people and "what feels right" more than what makes intellectual sense

Stage 4 – Individual-Reflective Faith

- Intellectual detachment from values of culture and from approval of significant other people
- Could perhaps be best characterized as "having your faith tested"
- Often involves an unexpected experience in adulthood (e.g., divorce, loss of job, death of a child)
- Active commitment to life goal and lifestyle that differs from that of many other people

Stage 5 – Conjunctive Faith

- Incorporates both powerful unconscious ideas (e.g. power of prayer) and rational, conscious values (e.g., the worth of life compared with that of property)
- Characterized by a willingness to accept contradictions

Stage 6 – Universalizing Faith

- Put own personal welfare aside and be willing to sacrifice own life in order to enunciate universal values
- Very few people ever reach this stage (text gave Moses as an example)