

Stages in Faith Development

These “stages” were developed in a Western context. They are provided as a conversation partner for consideration and/or comparison for other Majority World contexts.

The Christian tradition has recognized for a long time that there are different types or levels of spiritual awareness...

In 1981 James Fowler, a professor of theology and human development at Emory University, identified seven “stages” or types of faith which tend, as a general rule, to emerge as individuals grow and mature. Fowler explained his stages of faith in two books, *Stages of Faith* (1981) and *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (1984). Other observers have also identified stages or types of faith, although most tend to explain faith development in broader categories or more generalized stages than Fowler. Paul Dinter, in his book *Beyond Naive Belief*, describes three general stages: naive belief, critical belief, and post-critical belief.

It is important to remember that such developmental “stages” or types are descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, they attempt to describe the way faith generally develops, but do not prescribe how faith must or should develop in any individual. The descriptions do not suggest that one stage or kind of faith is better than another, only that how individuals or communities understand faith may differ from each other.

Fowler’s seven “stages” are not as distinct or self-contained as they appear. The transition from one to another often takes place gradually, and usually depends upon a variety of personal and social circumstances in addition to chronological age. It is possible—in fact, likely—that individuals may incorporate aspects of more than one stage, particularly during periods when they are growing gradually from one stage to the next. As a general rule, Fowler’s stages are sequential and individuals move from one to the next along the continuum which he outlined. However, in any given stage, circumstances may cause individuals to return to elements of previous stages. Personal images of God, which may seem to be quite distinct in each stage, in reality usually contain aspects or characteristics of two or more different types.

Despite these cautions, the concept of faith development remains useful. It tends to confirm the impression individuals have that their faith has grown and changed, that it continues to change, often in response to particular circumstances in their lives. The information presented here is a composite of key characteristics of the stages in faith development identified by Fowler and others. -- *Dave Cushing*

1. Primal Faith

Dominant in Infants from Birth to Age 3

This stage in a young child’s faith formation sets the foundation for what will later develop as a conscious, intentional and personal faith. A very young child cannot be said to have any conscious faith at all, but he or she is unconsciously developing a basic attitude about reality—a perception about whether the world and the people in it are basically friendly or dangerous, pleasant or painful, trustworthy or capricious.

► This stage establishes a fundamental but pre-conscious disposition which will eventually enable the child to believe that there is a God who loves and cares for them.

• • •

2. Imaginative Faith

Dominant in Children Ages 4 to 8

At this stage faith has a magical or imaginary quality, marked by the child’s ability to believe almost anything. It is essentially intuitive, non-rational and non-conceptual. It is based on what the child feels rather than on what the child thinks or “knows.” It is, in a sense, “borrowed” from adults whom the child trusts to be knowing and truthful. This stage sets the foundation for the child’s eventual ability to believe in non-material realities and sacred mysteries which cannot be seen or “proven.” Imaginative faith is almost entirely non-critical or naive, in the sense that children for the most part lack the knowledge, experience and insight to evaluate or judge the content of faith against objective criteria or concrete experience.

► In this stage the child’s image of God depends primarily on what parents do and say. If parents are loving, kind and forgiving, the child assumes that God, who is like a cosmic parent or grandparent, is also loving, kind and forgiving.

• • •

3. Literal Faith

Dominant in Children Ages 6 to 12

During this stage the child is gradually developing the ability to think for her or him self and beginning to ask questions about things which earlier they took for granted, including their parents’ faith. At this stage, children develop an intense desire and need to know how things really are. They are fascinated by stories, rituals and traditions which show real people living out their faith in concrete ways. They depend on authority figures, rules and structure to assure them that reality is ordered and safe. Literal faith is the first step toward a less naive and more critical attitude toward faith, although the older child’s

ability to subject the content of faith to critical standards is still limited.

► In this stage, the child is likely to imagine God as someone like a divine superhero who uses divine power and authority to create order and justice by rewarding good and punishing evil. God's role is similar to that of a parent, on whom a child relies for safety and protection.

• • •

4. Conventional Faith

Dominant in Young Adults and Adults Age 13 and Older

During this stage faith is shaped by the individual's growing ability and desire to participate in the wider world beyond parents and family. There is developing need to belong and be accepted by peers and friends who share the individual's interests and values. Faith is highly interpersonal, institutional, and communal; like the faith of the older child, it is rooted in the group and is shaped by the conventions, traditions, rules and habits of the group or faith community to which he or she belongs. Conventional faith may incorporate critical and non-critical attitudes toward faith. Young and early adults develop the ability to evaluate faith-claims by more objective standards, but may suppress critical questions out of fear, or for the sake of the security and acceptance provided by the group.

► In this stage the older child, young adults and many adults image God as an authority figure who holds the group—and the world—together by enforcing order—a kind of cosmic "Godfather" with whom one exchanges "favors," who rewards loyalty and punishes disloyalty. In this sense, God may be loving and merciful, but never at the expense of justice.

• • •

5. Personal Faith

Dominant in Adults Age 20 and Older

This stage is sometimes characterized as a period of rebellion or withdrawal, a kind of spiritual adolescence. In this stage individuals are rethinking the conventions and convictions of the group as they search for a personal faith, independent of the individuals and groups they relied upon as children and young adults. This stage may be marked by a certain amount of ambivalence and confusion—both a desire to belong and a need to be independent. Personal faith represents the individual's transition from a primarily pre-critical to a post-critical faith. It is a highly critical stage in which individuals evaluate faith-claims against personal experience, "common sense," rational and scientific criteria.

► In this stage an individual's relationship to God may be very personal and private, disconnected from the faith community, but nonetheless real and intense. Some

individuals in this stage express a desire to be "spiritual but not religious."

• • •

6. Conjunctive or Mystical Faith

*Possible in Adults in Their 30s or Older;
Rarely Before Middle Age*

In this stage an individual adult becomes more aware of the presence of the Divine Mystery in all of life. This awareness produces a deep sense of sufficiency, wholeness and peace, which enables the individual to accept and believe what cannot be fully understood or explained. Faith now includes a sense of solidarity and compassion, which allows the individual to reconnect with the faith community and to live comfortably with doubts, contradictions and shortcomings within the self and the faith community. Mystical Faith is the first stage in a post-critical attitude about faith. Adults in this stage reject the literalism of early stages not because it is untrue, but because it is not true enough; they have discovered that there are truths (or mysteries) embedded in reality which do not conflict with, and can not be judged by, entirely rational or scientific standards.

► In this stage an individual experiences God's presence in the deepest levels of oneself, others and creation, transcending superficial differences. The human analogy would be the deep interpersonal connection which spouses sometimes feel. This awareness of God as the Holy Spirit leads to an abiding conviction that all will be well because God wills it.

• • •

7. Universal Faith

Rare in a Few Adults During or After Middle Age

In this stage an individual's faith is shaped by an intense awareness of the unity of all living things and the oneness of God's creation. A vision of the Kingdom of God breaking into everyday reality frees the individual to be both radically detached from self and passionately committed to living a life of self-sacrificing love marked by transcendent values like truth, justice and love and devoted to overcoming division, oppression and violence of every kind. Universal faith is the ultimate stage in the development of a post-critical attitude toward faith. Adults in this stage realize that the truths embedded in faith are ultimately more important and helpful than those which emerge from rational or scientific inquiry.

► In this stage an individual's image of God defies words or images. The individual's life and faith center on an awareness of God's transforming presence. The rare individuals who reach this level live lives of totally self-less love, uncompromised by concerns for personal status, comfort or security.