

Summary of the Stages of Faith

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1. Fowler distinguished between Faith, Religion, and Belief

- a. Religion is an understanding of "cumulative tradition"
- b. Belief is the "holding certain ideas"
- c. Faith is an "orientation (of one's life) to commitment and trust. Faith involves interplay of relationships and is intentionally community-oriented. Fowler believed that human Commitments shape human identity and relate to a person's ultimate values. It is a reality that is closely related to character development and the shaping of life's purpose and meaning, loyalties, and grasping of the ultimate conditions of human existence
- d. It should be noted that according to these definitions, idolatry is not being *faith-less*, but betting one's life on what is not God

2. Preliminary "Stage" - *Undifferentiated Faith*

* When this occurs in human life - *Infancy*

- Characteristics of this stage: Seeds of trust sown in an environment of love and care; Origins of earliest God-images
- Dangers of this stage: continued narcissism (self-centered) and/or becoming relationally inept
- Transition from this stage: beginnings of language and thought; use of symbols in speech and play

3. Stage I: *Intuitive-Projective Faith*

* When this occurs in human life - *Ages 2-6 or 7*

- Characteristics: new tools of language acquired (the formulation of "what?" and "why?" inquisitive); Cognitive egocentrism (assume their view is the "only" view); Imaginative, not logical; First steps in self-awareness
- Strength: imagination
- Danger: images of terror or destruction "possess" child's imagination
- Transition: beginnings of concrete operational thinking; concern to know what is real and how things are/work; Oedipus complex resolved (identification with same sex, desire for opposite sex resolved in a healthy manner)

4. Stage II: *Mythic-Literal Faith*

* When this occurs in human life - *Age 8- Adolescence*

- Characteristics: Ability to "tell stories" which connect experiences and broader meaning; Attention to stories of the community; Literal interpretation of symbols, rules and attitudes (concrete operational thinking); Able to take others' perspectives; seek relational fairness; Not reflective or conceptual in thought
- Strength: story, narrative, drama as meaning-makers
- Danger: seeking control, falling into perfectionism and/or legalism
- Transition: contradictions in stories lead to reflection; developing ability for interpersonal perspective

5. Stage III: *Synthetic-Conventional Faith*

*** When this occurs in human life - Adolescence- Early Adulthood**

• Important to Note - Many people stop here

- Characteristics: Extension beyond the family; Synthesize faith into real life; "Conformist"-- sensitive to expectations and judgments of significant others; Deeply held beliefs justified by authority figures or group consensus
- Strength: forming of personal narrative of faith
- Danger: others' judgments can be internalized so as to prevent autonomy; can be easily manipulated in a group setting; interpersonal betrayal can lead to despair about God
- Transition: Serious clashes or contradictions between valued authorities; Marked changes, by official authorities, in things once held as sacred and unchangeable; Experiences and perspectives that call for critical reflection on one's own faith and how it has been formed in a particular context; "Leaving home"-- physically or emotionally; taking responsibility for personal commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes

6. Stage IV: Individuative-Reflective Faith

*** When this occurs in human life - Young Adulthood or into mid-thirties or forties**

- Characteristics: Identity not defined by roles or meaning to significant others; Self-aware and owned "world view" that is distinctive and easily communicated; know how to "Demythologize" (translates symbols into concepts)
- Strength: capacity for critical reflection on self (identity) and outlook (ideology)
- Danger: excessive confidence in conscious mind and critical thought; "second narcissism": over-assimilating "reality" into one's own perspective
- Transition: Restlessness with identity, self-images and outlook; New attention to inner "voice"; paradoxes owned and break in on neatness of faith; Disillusion with compromises and recognition of deeper complexity of life

7. Stage V: Conjunctive Faith

"I have not found or fabricated a simple way to describe Conjunctive faith. This frustrates me. I somehow feel that if I cannot communicate the features of this stage clearly, it means that I don't understand them. Or worse, I fear that what I call "Stage 5" really does not exist." ([Fowler, 1981](#), p. 184)

*** When this occurs in human life - Adulthood (unusual before midlife)**

- Characteristics: Integration of previously suppressed or unconscious material
- A "second naiveté"; restoration of symbols to concepts; Reclaiming and reworking one's past; Critical recognition of the narratives, ideal images, prejudices "built into" social structures; Boundaries between self and world become more "porous"; new openness to strange and "other"
- Appreciates symbols, narratives and rituals (own and others'); having experienced a depth of reality
- Strength: "ironic imagination"-- the capacity to see the powerful meanings of self or group while recognizing they are relative, partial and limiting
- Danger: paralyzing passivity or inaction; cynicism or withdrawal
- Transition: tension between the untransformed world and a transforming vision

8. Stage VI: Universalizing Faith

*** When this occurs in human life – VERY rarely**

- Characteristics: Movement beyond the ambiguity of Stage V by actualization of the universal; Inclusiveness of community, radical commitment to justice and love, selfless passion for

transformed world; subversive influence over existing order

- Danger: followers will focus on charisma, authority and even ruthlessness of leader and forget universalizing vision
- This Stage is Not "perfection" or "self-actualization"; does NOT occur by choice or intent, but by call of God (grace) and demands of history; is a distinctive of the reality of living the Kingdom of God; Not normative for all human beings