

FAITH DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

The word 'faith' is used in a great variety of different ways, by non-religious as well as religious people.

Talking about faith

'I really hope that my children will grow up to have a faith of their own.'

'He still has a very strong faith in justice.'

'I lost my faith when I was about seventeen.'

'I came to faith when I was in hospital after having Sarah.'

'Keep faith with your convictions, son.'

'It is difficult to believe all the tenets of the Faith.'

According to the American Methodist theologian and psychologist of religion James Fowler, 'faith' is a very general term indeed. It labels the almost universal human activity of:

- creating or finding meaning in life;
- knowing, valuing and relating to that which we take to be meaningful, in commitment and trust.

Human and religious faith

This is a very broad understanding of what might be termed 'human faith'. Human faith is not necessarily religious. We all 'believe in' something or someone: especially people, objects, ideas or values. We all have an image of what we take to be of ultimate concern. This constitutes our world-view, which is what Fowler calls our 'ultimate environment'.

For Fowler, religious faith differs from other forms of faith primarily in having specifically religious objects or *faith contents*. These are religious 'centres of value' and 'images of power', such as God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, and religious 'master stories' of the sort

that underlie the doctrines of creation, incarnation and redemption. Other religious traditions have different objects for their faith, insofar as they believe in different truths and realities.

Most religious, and indeed most non-religious, people are interested in *what* people believe and what they believe in. They are interested in the content of faith. Thus Christians talk about 'The Faith' and its tenets, principles or doctrines. Fowler, on the other hand, wants to draw our attention to the *form of faith*: the ways in which we have faith, or the 'how' of faith.

Fowler on faith

Faith is an active or dynamic phenomenon. A verb, not a noun, faith is a way-of-being-in-relation – a stance, a way of moving into and giving form and coherence to life.

Fowler and Keen, 1978, p. 24

The focus of Fowler's work is therefore on *faith-as-a-process*. It is difficult to talk about the form of faith without talking about its content, but perhaps you can see the point of the distinction - and the value of this more general (and not specifically religious) interpretation of faith.

Faith of mind and heart

Faith is not merely assent to the truth of propositions but is the surrendering of the heart to a transcendent center of value and power.

Rodney M. Moseley and Ken Brockenbrough, 1988, pp. 105-106

Faith aspects

What do children *do* that might be described as part and parcel of faith? Faith is a dynamic process, best described in terms of verbs rather than nouns. It is about trusting, committing yourself, relating to others and to God, valuing them, feeling positively about them. It is about making and finding meaning, thinking things through, getting them into perspective, forming a judgement and adopting a system of beliefs.

Fowler argues that the form of faith can be viewed under a number of interrelated aspects, listed below. These aspects are sometimes described as ‘windows into faith’. This is a useful metaphor, for different windows give us different, partial views into a building, while much of it may remain forever out of sight of the observers.

According to Fowler, there are seven aspects or elements within our human faith:

- our *reasoning*: the way we think;
- our *perspective-taking*: our ability to adopt another person’s perspective;
- our *moral judging*: the way we make moral judgements;
- our *social awareness*: how and where we set the limits to our ‘community of faith’;
- our *relation to authority*: how and where we find authorities on which to rely;
- our *forming a world-view*: our way of ‘holding it all together’;
- our *relation to symbols*: our understanding of, and response to, symbols.

Stages of faith

Children, young people and adults can show a number of different stages or styles of faith. As we develop, our way of being in faith changes.

A family of three children in church with their mother

Sarah is nearly four years old. She fidgets a lot during the readings and the sermon, but likes to stand and pretend to follow the hymns in the hymn book. She particularly enjoys the candles and the little processions, and is fascinated by the statues and the pictures in the

windows. She is giggling to herself now, because her Mummy has reported to her that Mrs Jones has died, and has explained that she is 'in paradise, alive but without a body'. Sarah is imagining her with her legs sticking out of her head.

Ben is eight. He is listening intently to the story the vicar is telling. He wants to know from his Mum if it is a made-up story. (He doesn't seem to mind that it is.) But when the vicar has finished the story proper and goes on to discuss its 'moral', Ben's interest wanders back to his book.

Stephen is twelve. He was embarrassed walking to church in case he was seen by his friends. He likes to listen to the arguments in the sermon though, when there are any, although he is now more influenced by his history teacher who is very dismissive of religion. Stephen isn't quite sure when he will be grown-up. He wonders about it, and at the diversity of views grown-ups have about church. Soon he will be a prickly adolescent, difficult to talk to, having a world-view that he doesn't yet recognise that he has, and being influenced in his faith in ways he can hardly acknowledge.

The children's mother has been through all these stages. She knows at least this about the faith of her children: that it will change, as they change. It does not yet appear what they shall be. The same claim, she muses, can be made about her own faith. She is nearly forty, and although she believes in many of the same things that she did when she came to faith at the age of sixteen, she seems to believe in them now in a very different way.

Fowler argues that the way we hold our faith can pass through up to seven stages (0-6). At each stage we 'faith' differently. As we move from one stage to another we suffer the trauma of losing one familiar way of being in faith before we can take up a new style of faith. As we develop, the faith contents (beliefs) from each earlier stage are carried over and reworked by the different structures of thinking and relating of the new stage of our faith.

At each developmental stage, a person's faith will exemplify a particular form of reasoning, of perspective-taking, of moral decision-making, etc. The *transition* from one faith stage to another is marked by a change in one or more of these aspects of faith, as this dimension of faith changes to the form that is more characteristic of a later stage. It is only when the

other faith aspects have changed in a similar way that the person can be said fully to have moved to the next stage.

According to Fowler, we pass through these stages in sequence, without omitting a stage or regressing (except in illness or old age, perhaps, when it is possible that we may revert to using the structures of an earlier stage). Most of those who embrace faith development theory assume that this pattern of change is the same for everyone, although Fowler himself does not go so far as to claim this. But many of us do not get very far in our faith development. And note that hardly anyone is at Stage 6!

Fowler's theory is contentious, and many researchers prefer to think of different *styles* or *patterns* of faith rather than a developmental sequence of *stages*, an account that better fits the influence of a person's life history and social context on her way of being in faith. Other criticisms include the following (cf. Dykstra and Parks, 1986; Astley and Francis, 1992; Astley and Kay, 1998).

- The cognitive developmental psychology on which Fowler relies underestimates the cognitive (thinking) capacities of younger children.
- Data from research interviews is not specific enough to test his wide-ranging hypothesis.
- The form and content of faith cannot be so easily distinguished, and what makes faith religious is more than a difference in content.

Researching faith development

Fowler claims that this scheme of faith development is supported by several hundred in-depth interviews that he and others have done with children, young people and adults. Each semi-structured interview lasts from 2½ to 3 hours and tries to find answers to a range of questions (appropriately worded), such as:

- 'What makes an action right?'
- 'What does death mean to you?'
- 'Are there any beliefs, values or commitments that are important in your life right now?'
- 'If you have a question which you cannot decide, to whom or what would

you look for guidance?’

These interviews are recorded and typed up, and the responses coded by trained coders who identify the stage of development they reveal.

Faith stages in childhood and adolescence

Stage 0: Faith as nursed and foundational

Fowler’s ‘Primal Faith’

Age: 0-4 approximately

Obviously, this is not a period that is open to study by interview techniques. The foundations for faith are laid down in our early experiences of being picked up and nursed, when trust is first formed. Fowler writes of the way we are nursed into ‘our first *pre-images* of God’, which are mediated through ‘recognising eyes and confirming smiles’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 121). Dependable parenting is crucial during this period and the next stage.

Stage 1: Faith as chaotic, unordered and impressionistic

Fowler’s ‘Intuitive-Projective Faith’

Age: 3/4-7/8 approximately

Thinking is intuitive rather than logical at this stage, so the child’s relatively uninhibited imagination and his own experience result in a chaos of powerful images. Reality is perceived more like a disorderly bundle of film cuttings from the floor of the editing suite than a completed reel of the movie. Symbols are viewed magically and are treated as being what they represent. Since the powerful symbols of Christian experience, ritual and sacrament can provide the child with deep and lasting images at this stage of her faith, some would argue that we should not exclude these young children from ‘adult’ forms of worship.

Stage 2: Faith as ordering

At this stage the child (or adult) can order her experience because of her developing

cognitive skills, especially her ability to trace patterns of cause and effect. Story-telling is her primary way of doing this, which explains the importance at this stage of the child telling her own story – and the story of the Christian community to which she belongs. ‘Belonging’ is itself of considerable significance for self-image at this stage; junior school aged children are particularly keen to belong to some club or group. This communal belonging expresses the child’s new skills in simple, concrete perspective-taking, abilities that make her unlike her egocentric younger siblings. She is now beginning properly to enter into the world of the other person.

Fowler’s ‘Mythic - Literal Faith’

*Age: 6/7-11/12 approximately,
and some adults*

Stage 3: Faith as conforming

Many view the ability to think abstractly as the most significant development in thinking and religious judgement (see chapter xxx).

By Stage 3, this skill has fully developed,

along with a new capacity for adopting the perspective of others. The adolescent or adult can now see herself as others see her. Interpersonal relationships and what other people think, particularly others in her peer group, are of considerable significance at this stage. This is a time of going with a particular ‘faith-current’ or ‘faith-crowd’, and submitting yourself to what Sharon Parks has called ‘the tyranny of the “they”’ (1986, p. 76). At this stage, Christian educators can engage their students in more abstract teaching and discussion. However, the learners are not yet ‘thinking for themselves’, but rather unconsciously adopting the beliefs and values of others. Faith or meaning-making is thus largely ‘second-hand’, and adolescents are not yet able properly to reflect either on their beliefs and values or on the way in which these are held.

Fowler’s ‘Synthetic - Conventional Faith’

*Age: 11/12-17/18 approximately,
and many adults*

Imagining God at different stages

At *Stage 1* children tend to image God in terms of the 'air' or the 'sun'. At *Stage 2* they are most likely to adopt 'anthropomorphic' imagery, seeing God in human form, as a Big-Daddy-in-the-Sky. But at *Stage 3* this has been exchanged for a more sophisticated notion of the personal qualities of a transcendent deity, as friend, comforter or guide.

Adult faith stages

Beyond childhood and adolescence lies a continuing journey of faith development. At *Stage 4* ('Individuative-Reflective Faith') we come to choose our own faith and fully acknowledge and evaluate our own beliefs and relationships for the first time. At this stage, 'I can now no longer tolerate having my faith at second-hand; I must know who I am for myself, when I am not being defined by other people' (Astley *et al.*, 1991, p. 27).

Where Stage 4 faith is very concerned with definition and conceptual clarity, collapsing tensions and ambiguities to ensure these ends, *Stage 5* ('Conjunctive Faith') allows for a new style of faith which is rather less tidy, and is more willing to live with paradox and ambiguity. The stage may emerge particularly through coping with failure and living with the consequences of our earlier decisions. Adults at this stage may be more tolerant of the differing beliefs and value perspectives of children and young people than they were in early adulthood, which is perhaps one reason why some grandparents are more open-minded than parents.

The transition to Stage 4 takes place from about 17/18 years onwards, or from the 30s and 40s; Stage 5 is rare before age 30. However, nearly a quarter of the adults that Fowler interviewed were still at Stage 3, and nearly 1% at Stage 2.

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