

# Stages of Faith

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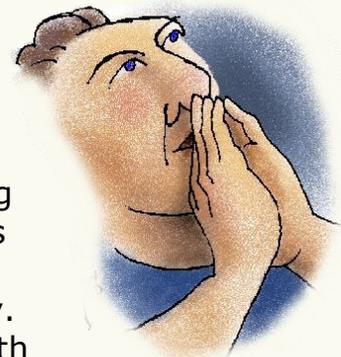
## *What is Religious Faith?*

Until recently, Catholics generally regarded faith as beliefs, while Protestants regarded faith as trust in God. Among the beliefs are teachings about God from the creeds and teachings about morality from the Ten Commandments, the creeds. Among the acts of **trust** in God are personal commitments to make God the center of one's life and a trust that God will never let evil overcome good. Yet both views expect that people of faith do not only believe and trust. They also **act** on that faith.

## *Faith Develops*

Recently, researchers published studies of how religious faith changes over time in the life of an individual. Their focus is neither on what people believe nor on how they trust God. Rather they analyze one's beliefs and trusts develop over a lifetime. They take their cues from stage-based studies in other disciplines. They propose that just as our psychological, moral, and intellectual growth moves through certain recognizable stages, so does our spiritual growth. Just as our psyches, consciences and minds today work quite differently they did when we were six years old, so our religious faith works quite differently today.

As it happens, some people show remarkable growth in psychological make-up, moral health and intellectual ability, but little growth in understanding the significance of faith in their lives. Their faith has simply not kept up with what they have learned about the ways of the heart and the ways of history. Many preachers proclaim a simple answer about faith to adults who no longer have the simple question. At the same time, many adults let faith drop away because they discover that their faith belongs to a child's world, and no one has preached to them a faith for their now more complex and critical-minded world.



## ***Stages of Faith Development***

In 1981, James Fowler published *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*.<sup>1</sup> There he proposed a theory that religious faith develops through six stages from infancy through old age. Here is a brief overview of these stages, grouped under three main headings.

I. Children spend most of their attention to learning how to trust their environments. They learn that there are people too distant to see, far away in China. They easily accept the idea from parents that God is someone far away too, up there in heaven. So they easily speak about God. Mainly their faith is carried by **Images and Stories**. They have not yet developed the intellectual capacity to distinguish between what they grasp by imagination and what they grasp by understanding and verification.

1. For children ages 3-7, faith is based on imagination and fantasy regarding God and religion. They see God's face in a cloud; hear God's voice in distant conversation.
2. Youngsters 5-12 typically focus on the entire set of religious stories—about creation, God's working in the world, and a next life of Heaven and Hell. Biblical stories blend with pious traditions and pious imaginings of preachers.

During these years, children's view of God is tied to the normal reward-punishment stage of moral development. Their view is also focused on "God's Loving Care." Both of these are patterned, sometimes for better sometimes for worse, on their perceptions of their parents.

II. As youngsters enter teen years, their faith is carried mainly by **Beliefs and Belonging**.

3. Moving into adolescence, the young teen's faith identifies with a specific religion to which they belong, accepting its "total world" of teachings, beliefs, rituals and practices.
4. Older teens begin to struggle with conflicts between the official beliefs of the religion they belong to and their emerging intelligence and personally acquired beliefs. They feel a loss of a comforting certainties about life in God.

Here is where parents begin to worry. Their children are raising questions about their religion, and particularly about whether or not to attend

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<sup>1</sup> Published by Harper & Row, 1981. The material summarized here is taken from JoAnn Wolski Conn's article at <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/html/fowler.htm>

religious services and to accept religious teachings on sexual morality. Those who remain committed to a religion tend to focus on God's will as their guide in life while those who withdraw from a religion tend to do so because of the difficulty of being certain about God's will.

III. Moving into adulthood, many men and women integrate their faith with what they are learning about life. Specifically, their faith is a matter of both their personal **Autonomy** and a feeling of **Connectedness** with God, other people, and the universe.

5. As adults, many believers realize they can abandon a search for certainties in favor of a development of autonomous, inner convictions. They learn that must live with the contradictions between religious teachings and actual reality. Familiar with this inner struggle, they tend to regard engage themselves with others with compassion, charity and forgiveness.

6. Older adults experience a growing awareness that living in the mystery of life is more important than living for a mastery of life. Despite the winters where love fades and passing hopes are dashed, they believe an ultimate meaning to everything. They live in more simplicity and ultimate hope.

Here the mature adult no longer asks what God's will is. The question of serving God has receded, and the question of living in God takes over. Now the question is, "What does God's love in me prompt now?"

### ***The Significance of Stages***

These stages represent a model for understanding. As just a model, it is simply a schema to have in mind when trying to understand your own or anyone else's faith development. In actuality, people's growth in faith varies more or less from this model and often for good reason.

But these stages are not a prescription. True, growth in faith is an ideal, but these stages do not represent an ideal growth pattern. It would be a mistake to work at living in any later stage if you have not yet undergone the real and often agonizing crises to be met at earlier stages. It may well be impossible. Moreover, the crises seemingly overcome in earlier stages can come back to bite you. That is, aspects of earlier crises can linger. They will pop into consciousness when you least expect. Conversely, aspects of later crises can be vaguely anticipated; they too pop up in the same way.

## Faith and Learning

This brings us to a personal question: What has my growth in faith got to do with learning—in college and, indeed, in all of my life?

Fowler believed that most religious people are stuck between stages 4 and 5—new questions about life and new disappointments about old religious answers. Their faith has not given them unambiguous answers to life's questions, such as why their marriage is on the rocks, what

motivates terrorists to become suicide bombers, whether an abortion after rape is wrong, why God seems so silent in one's prayer, whether to challenge religious leaders who lead badly, how to respond to a daughter who announces she's moving in with her boyfriend. There are far more questions, perhaps as many more unique questions as there are unique people.



Here, the difference between memorizing and understanding is important. We can learn facts, and we can learn to *understand* those facts. One reason people get stuck between stages 4 and 5 is that they want to hang on to the certainty that comes with factual learning, but they're disturbed that their faith doesn't give clear answers to the questions for *understanding* those facts. Nor is this a problem only for those who take faith to refer to the content of their beliefs. Those for whom faith is essentially trust in God likewise feel the impulse to give up trying to understand and resort to trust alone.

What is common to both the beliefs-view and the trust-view of faith is that both regard faith as a gift from God. And practically all religions teach that this gift is not a fixed possession. It is meant to develop along with one's growth in psychological maturity, intelligence, and responsibility. The experience of faith, then, is an ongoing drama that includes struggling with difficult questions. So even though believers do not have clear answers to all their questions, the very fact that they can ask them is a reason to be grateful to God.

Let me put this succinctly:

Religious faith demands that believers  
use their minds intelligently and  
use their hearts responsibly  
in loving gratitude.

Using one's mind intelligently means not so much finding certain answers. Rather it means living with only partial answers, while keeping the questions alive. It means realizing that most explanations are provisional

and therefore staying open to finding better explanations. Likewise, many seemingly firm moral standards turn out to be provisional as new technologies and new insights into the workings of the mind and heart emerge. There are four areas in particular where intelligent learning helps mature and refine the faith of adults who understand life's complexity:

**Hermeneutics.** This is the science of interpreting texts. Using one's mind intelligently means understanding what the authors of Holy Scriptures really meant, rather than what we wish or assume they meant.

**Historical-Critical Awareness.** This refers to an awareness of what historical studies can tell us and what they cannot. It means that believers use their minds mind to understand their actual religious history, not just the stories where their religion always wins.

**Dialectical Ethics.** This method in ethics responds to the problem that highly-regarded moral principles give little guidance in ordinary situations. A dialectical ethics creates a forum where different parties seek consensus by exposing their basic intellectual, moral, and religious horizons. The assumption is that good people are open to being more fully converted within these horizons.

**Care of Authority.** This refers to two obligations people of faith have regarding their leaders. First, it means ensuring for their well-being. Second, it requires that believers use their minds to identify exactly where their religious leaders go wrong, and raising the question about making things right.

Likewise, using one's heart responsibly means not so much doing one's duty but rather letting love guide one's actions. For college students, it means keeping one eye on the intelligent care they plan to extend to others while the other eye is reading lectures like this one.

Using the mind and heart in loving gratitude means letting love show the way. Pascal said, "The heart has reasons unknown to reason." We all know the truth of this. Being in love gives us an eye for what is truly better. Believers recognize that being in love with God gives an eye that sees, at least at times, what God sees is truly better.

For people of faith, the point of learning is not ultimately defensive (though the defense of faith is important). It is not even to preach the faith (though without preaching, whose nascent faith will grow?). The point of learning is to exercise faith effectively. This means acting with a love that evokes intelligent, responsible, and loving choices in others.