

## Stages of Faith Development

In a book entitled *Stages of Faith* (1981), James W. Fowler describes a theory of seven stages that people go through as their faith develops.

The insights in this theory can be applied both to those in traditional faiths, and also to those who follow other spiritualities or hold secular worldviews.

(In another book, *A Different Drum* (1987), M. Scott Peck presents a simplified version that focuses only on the four most common stages.)

Through an understanding of the stages of faith development, one can become more inclusive of others, rather than maintaining a non-acceptance of others' beliefs.

Important to realize is that a person categorized in one of the less developed stages is not, in any way, less of a person than one characterized by a more developed stage.

A description of the stages follows:

- **Undifferentiated Faith** (0-2 years)

Stage 0 – "*Primal or Undifferentiated*" faith (birth to 2 years), is characterized by an early learning of the safety of their environment (i.e. warm, safe and secure vs. hurt, neglect and abuse). If consistent nurture is experienced, one will develop a sense of trust and safety about the universe and the divine. Conversely, negative experiences will cause one to develop distrust with the universe and the divine. Transition to the next stage begins with integration of thought and language which facilitates the use of symbols in speech and play.

- **Intuitive-Projective Faith** (3-7 years)

Stage 1 – "*Intuitive-Projective*" faith (ages of three to seven), is characterized by the psyche's unprotected exposure to the Unconscious, and marked by a relative fluidity of thought patterns. Religion is learned mainly through experiences, stories, images, and the people that one comes in contact with.

- **Mythic-Literal Faith** (7-12 years)

Stage 2 – "*Mythic-Literal*" faith (mostly in school children), stage two persons have a strong belief in the justice and reciprocity of the universe, and their deities are almost always anthropomorphic. During this time, metaphors and symbolic language are often misunderstood and are taken literally.

- **Synthetic-Conventional Faith** (12+ years)

Stage 3 – "*Synthetic-Conventional*" faith (arising in adolescence; aged 12 to adulthood) characterized by conformity to authority and the religious development of a personal identity. Any conflicts with one's beliefs are ignored at this stage due to the fear of threat from inconsistencies.

- **Individuative-Reflective Faith** (21+ years?)

Stage 4 – "*Individuative-Reflective*" faith (usually mid-twenties to late thirties) a stage of *angst* and struggle. The individual takes personal responsibility for his or her beliefs and feelings. As one is able to reflect on one's own beliefs, there is an openness to a new complexity of faith, but this also increases the awareness of conflicts in one's belief.

- **Conjunctive Faith** (35+ years)

Stage 5 – "*Conjunctive*" faith (mid-life crisis) acknowledges paradox and transcendence in relating to reality behind the symbols of inherited systems. The individual resolves conflicts from previous stages by a complex understanding of a multidimensional, interdependent "truth" that cannot be explained by any particular statement.

- **Universalizing Faith** (45+ years)

Stage 6 – "*Universalizing*" faith, or what some might call "enlightenment". The individual would treat any person with compassion as he or she views people as from a universal community, and should be treated with universal principles of love and justice.

## **James W. Fowler**

James W. Fowler III (October 12, 1940 – October 16, 2015) was an American theologian who was Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University. He was director of both the Center for Research on Faith and Moral Development and the Center for Ethics until he retired in 2005. He was a minister in the United Methodist Church.

James W. Fowler III is best known for his book *Stages of Faith*, published in 1981, in which he sought to develop the idea of a developmental process in "human faith".

These stages of faith development were along the lines of Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development.

For Fowler: *Belief* is assenting intellectually to propositions and/or concepts, as set forth in religious doctrines and creeds.

*Faith* is a quality of the person, not of the system; it is an orientation of the whole person giving purpose and goals to one's hopes and strivings, as well as thoughts and actions. Beliefs tend to divide; faith tends more to what unites.

**Sources:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_W.\\_Fowler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_W._Fowler) (The description of the stages was adapted from this source.)

<https://usefulcharts.com/> ("James W. Fowler's Stages of Faith". UsefulCharts.com: 2012. A useful chart showing Fowler's Stages of Faith.)