

James Fowler's Stages of Faith Development

James Fowler's Stages were most extensively explained in his *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, which appeared in 1981. (Harper San Francisco)

In it he outlined six stages of development a person might go through as they mature through adulthood. While he was not referring literally to religious faith, the book is full of references to religion, I suppose as an example of a type of faith in which a person might mature. But James Fowler's Stages, formulated on interviews of actual people wherein their religious beliefs were sometimes extensively discussed, has been widely accepted as referring to spiritual development in general if not specifically to religious belief.

I first became aware of this work after reading some of M. Scott Peck's writings where Fowler is mentioned. I have to admit that however great my interest was in this topic, I gained only the most rudimentary understanding the first time I read about James Fowler's Stages, but have gained more each time I read. In the paragraphs below, I am going to summarize these stages as I understand them in hopes of: 1) inspiring people to read the actual text for a more complete understanding and 2) trying to show how Fowler's stages fit in with the overall idea of spiritual development as expressed by the other theorists.

Early Stages

James Fowler's stages start with what he calls a "pre-stage" that refers to infancy, called Undifferentiated Faith. Here the infant, (none of whom were interviewed!) develops basic trust and mutuality (or lack thereof) with the one's providing care. The quality of interactions in this phase underlie all future faith development for the individual.

When thought and language begin to open the child up to the use of symbols in speech and ritual play, the child moves on to Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith which is typical of children ages 2 through 7. Here the child is egocentric. In this stage, the child's imagination is formed.

But in this stage, reality is not well-differentiated from fantasy. For this reason, adults preaching about the negative aspects of religion - the devil and the evils of sin - can cause great harm to a child of this age, leading him toward a very rigid, brittle and authoritarian personality as an adult. When a child attains the capacity for concrete operational thinking, he can begin to move toward the second of James Fowler's Stages.

Stage 2 - Mythic, Literal Stage

Fowler's Stage 2 is called the Mythic, Literal Stage. Here the child (or adult person stuck in this phase) is likely to start sorting out the real from the make-believe. Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience, but the symbols in those stories are seen as one-dimensional and literal. Moreover, beliefs, moral rules and attitudes are also held literally. Thus, God is an anthropomorphic being in the sky; heaven and hell are viewed as actual places.

The person in the second of James Fowler's Stages is also more able to take the perspective of another person but his view of reciprocity is also rather literal. "If I follow the rules, God will give me a good life." "If I pray, God will grant my wish."

A person may begin to grow out of this phase when he encounters conflicts and contradictions in the stories he is interpreting literally and begins to reflect on the real meanings.

Stage 3 - Synthetic, Conventional Stage

A person will normally move into the third of James Fowler's Stages, the Synthetic, Conventional stage around puberty but apparently, many adults never move beyond it.

Here authority is located outside the self - in the church leaders, in the government, in the social group. Religious concepts are what Fowler calls "tacitly" held - the person is not fully conscious of having chosen to believe something. Thus the name "Synthetic" - beliefs are not the result of any type of analytical thought. Any attempts to reason with a person in this stage about his beliefs, any suggestion of demythologizing his beliefs is seen as a threat.

The name "Conventional" means that most people in this stage see themselves as believing what "everybody else" believes and would be reluctant to stop believing it because of the need they feel to stay connected with their group. It turns out that most of the people in traditional churches are at this stage. And in fact, Fowler comes right out and states that religious institutions "work best" (p. 164) if the majority of their congregation is in Stage 3. (Now THAT explains a lot of the preaching we hear that sounds destined to discourage people from questioning! To properly assure their continuance, churches apparently need people to remain in Stage 3.)

When a person cognitively realizes that there are contradictions between some of his authority sources and is ready to actually reflect realistically on them, he begins to be ready to move to the fourth of James Fowler's Stages.

Stage 4 - Individual-Reflective Faith

According to Fowler, it is ideal that a person reach this stage in their early to mid-twenties, but as has already been discussed, it is evident that many adults never reach it. If it happens in the thirties or forties, Fowler says, it is much harder for the person to adapt.

In Individuative-Reflective faith, what once was tacitly held becomes explicit. The faith the person never reflected about, and was not completely able to articulate how he arrived at it, becomes filled with both a freedom that he now CAN reflect on it, and the burden that he now feels he MUST examine. The responsibility of this can be frightening, and it seems religious groups are always trying to discourage people from making this examination (of course, because it threatens the viability of the institution if people start questioning!)

Fowler's Stage 4 faith requires that the person be willing to interrupt their reliance on external authority and relocate the source of authority within himself. Fowler calls this the formation of an "executive ego," which is not a bad thing, like the other kind of ego. It just means the person is more able to govern himself without the need for rules from the outside. In Fowler's Stage 4, meanings in stories are separate from the symbols themselves, so the stories are demythologized. (In losing the literal meaning of the religious symbols, people can - I think often! - at the same time lose ALL meaning of the symbol and that is how you wind up with so many atheists and agnostics at this stage.)

Loss or demythologization of the symbols can result in grief and guilt in some cases, and the process can take up to seven years to complete. But in the place of the literal symbol, the person gains the ability to make comparisons and whatever meanings they retain are explicitly held (and thus more authentic in that they are personal.)

The strengths of this stage lie in the capacity for critical reflection (and the willingness to face truths that may cause distancing from comfortable thought patterns and thus pain.) But a weakness of this stage is that the person may put excess confidence in the rational, conscious mind, thus ignoring unconscious forces that become more prominent in the next stage.

Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith

According to Fowler, when the person in Stage 4 becomes ready to attend to the "anarchic and disturbing inner voices" of the unconscious mind he becomes ready to move on to Stage 5. Such a move is unusual before mid-life. Here the person begins to expand their world beyond the "either/or" stance of the prior stage toward a "both/and" orientation where the answers (and the power of the rational mind to figure them out) are not so clear.

I especially like this phrase Fowler used, but I don't know how if readers will see what he meant by it: "In a mutual speaking and hearing, knower and known converse in an I-Thou relationship." (p. 185) (I am on perhaps my fourth time reading this material, and I only begin to understand what he meant here!)

People in this stage are willing to engage in dialog with those of other faiths in the belief that they might learn something that will allow them to correct their own truths. To get to this point, it is critical that the person has moved through the stage of demythologizing phase of Stage 4 where they could move away from the literal meanings.

The person in Stage 5 has already had their symbols broken by rational inspection and consciously wills themselves to a more comprehensive (dare we say metaphorical?) interpretation of the symbol. (i.e. God is not a literal being, heaven and hell are not literal places) I like this quote Fowler includes from a "Miss T" that his team interviewed, cited as an example of Stage 5 faith: "...doesn't matter what you call it. Whether you call it God or Jesus or Cosmic Flow or Reality or Love, it doesn't matter what you call it. It is there. And what you learn directly from that source will not tie you up in creeds....that separate you from your fellow man." (p. 192) (...precisely what we are calling a "Mystic" on this site!) So the Stage 5 person in Fowler's system is learning how to reengage with some type of faith that is beyond their rational control, can recognize the partial truths that any given religious tradition might offer but may choose to re-engage with it anyway. He can appreciate and recognize symbols as such, without holding to their literal meaning and is committed to a form of justice that extends to those outside the confines of tribe, class, religious community or nation.

With this very inclusive worldview, people at Stage 5 are in an excellent position to make huge contributions to society but alas! often give in to a paralyzing passivity out of fear for their own comfort and well-being or are paralyzed by the huge gap between reality and the view they would like to hold as real.

Stage 6 - Universalizing Faith

The final of James Fowler's Stages - Universalizing Faith is reached only by the very, very few. Examples he names are Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Teresa.

Apparently people in this stage are able to overcome the action/inaction paradox of Stage 5 and are able to sacrifice their own well-being to that of their cause. NOT in the sense of a soldier going off to war. This is very different! Fowler uses the word "subversive" to refer to these people because their contributions are so radically different from the views of the rest of society. Such people commit their total being to their identification with persons and circumstances where the futurity of being is being crushed, blocked or exploited. (They risk their own safety in order to help the helpless in unexpected ways.)

Summary

So, can you see how James Fowler's stages fit in with the others from this site? His Stages 0 and 1 (IF they were present in an adult) would be roughly equivalent to our (egocentric) Lawless stage.

His Stage 2 and 3 are roughly equivalent to our "Faithful" (ethnocentric) Stage.

Fowler's Stage 4 is roughly equivalent to our "Rational" (world-centric) Stage.

And Stage 5 (and 6, though we'd be hard pressed to find anyone at this stage) is roughly equivalent to our "Mystic" (universal) Stage.

I hope this simplifies Fowler's work for you. If you have a serious interest, you really must read his work directly. I am certain I have not done it justice at all!