**STAGES OF FAITH (by James Fowler)**

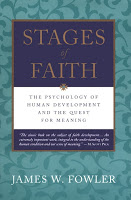
From the Blog ‘Far from Rome’ July 1, 2009

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Stages of Faith: Introduction

[](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0060628669/ref=s9_sims_gw_s0_p14_t3?pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_s=center-1&pf_rd_r=1C0KT20XADWXKRZAE30H&pf_rd_t=101&pf_rd_p=470938131&pf_rd_i=507846)I'm finding it increasingly difficult to write about the things I want to write about without making reference to the work of people like James W. Fowler, whose research into faith development has had a profound impact on my own thinking.  
  
I've decided to write a series of concise descriptions of the various stages of faith identified by Fowler, so that I can make reference to them in my work.  
  
Faith  
  
It's very important to understand that when Fowler speaks of "faith," he is not talking about "belief," and he is not even necessarily talking about anything religious. The "faith" of many people is often entirely secular.  
  
Fowler draws on the thought of Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. For Tillich, "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned" (Dynamics 1), and "whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes a god for him" (Systematic 1.211). Tillich derived this idea from Deuteronomy 6.5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dynamics 3). Needless to say, the biblical God is not everyone's "god," even for those who might insist otherwise.  
  
One might point out that, for many people, there is no single centre of value that commands one's faith, and this is where Niebuhr comes in.  
  
Much like Niebuhr, Fowler uses the term polytheist to describe someone whose faith "lacks any one center of value and power of sufficient transcendence to focus and order one's life" ( 19). This might follow one of two patterns. One might follow a proteanpattern, and have a series of fairly intense commitments that are nevertheless "transient and shifting," where one's faith is marked by "sharp discontinuities and abrupt changes of direction" (Stages 19-20), or one may have a diffuse pattern of faith, where one has "a kind of laid-back, cool provisionality regarding commitment or trust" (20).  
  
Fowler writes,

The practical impact of our consumer society's dominant myth -- that you should experience everything you desire, own everything you want and relate intimately with whomever you wish -- is to make the polytheistic pattern, in either its protean or diffuse form, seem normative. (20)

On the other hand, there are those who have one single dominant centre of value and identity, but it is something that is limited and finite. This pattern of faith is termed henotheism, a term coined by Max Müller to denote "faith in one god...without asserting that (it) is the only god" (20).1 An example of this would be someone whose primary centre of value is their career, their country, etc.  
  
"The henotheistic god," writes Fowler, "is finally an idol":

It represents the elevation to central, life-defining value and power of a limited and finite good. It means the attribution of ultimate concern to that which is of less than ultimate worth. (20)

Finally, Fowler appropriates Niebuhr's notion of radical monotheism. As with the other terms, he is not speaking strictly in terms of religious belief. Radical monotheism, Fowler explains, "implies loyalty to the principle of being and to the source and center of all value and power" (emphasis in original; 23). In this broad sense, it is not to be narrowly identified with traditional Western theism, and it can be conceptualised in both theistic and non-theistic ways.  
  
This does not mean that other centres of value and power do not exist, but it does mean they become far less important.  
  
Most people tend to be polytheists or henotheists, as Fowler defines these terms. Indeed, he acknowledges that radical monotheism "rarely finds consistent and longlasting actualization in persons or communities," and he suggests that it serves as a "regulative principle," or "a critical ideal" against which we can "keep our partial faiths from becoming idolatrous" (23).  
  
With this understanding of faith as something that is not necessarily religious, we can better understand what Fowler means when he speaks of faith development. It applies no less to atheists than it does to Christians (or Muslims, or Jews, or whoever).  
  
It is also important to understand that the stages of faith are formalstages -- that is, they do not describe the content of faith. A Stage 3 atheist will have very different faith content (beliefs and so on) than a Stage 3 Hindu or a Stage 3 Jew. But there will be important parallels between them. They may differ in what they believe, but they will be similar in how they think about their beliefs, how they relate to authority, and so on. I will try to demonstrate this when I actually get into describing each stage.  
  
The Stages of Faith  
  
[Pre-Stage - Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/05/stages-of-faith-infancy-and.html)  
[Stage 1 - Intuitive-Projective Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/07/stages-of-faith-stage-1-intuitive.html)  
[Stage 2 - Mythic-Literal Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/07/stages-of-faith-stage-2-mythic-literal.html)  
[Stage 3 - Synthetic-Conventional Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/05/stages-of-faith-stage-3-synthetic.html)  
[Stage 4 - Individuative-Reflective Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/07/stage-4-individuative-reflective-faith.html)  
[Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/07/stages-of-faith-stage-5-conjunctive.html)  
[Stage 6 - Universalizing Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/08/stages-of-faith-stage-6-universalizing.html)  
  
Notes  
  
[1] Christians often believe in a plurality of supernatural beings, angels and saints and so on, who are often the object of devotion and even prayer, and so Christianity is sometimes described ashenotheistic rather than strictly monotheistic. Fowler, like Niebuhr, uses the term in a much broader sense than this.

Labels: [James W. Fowler](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/James%20W.%20Fowler), [Spiritual Development](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Spiritual%20Development), [Stages of Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Stages%20of%20Faith)

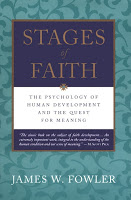
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Stages of Faith: Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith

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This attainment, which Jean Piaget called "object permanence," is an important step in the individual's development of a differentiated self.  
  
This is a traumatic development, Fowler points out, because this is when we begin "remembering our mothers when they are absent from us and...panic about whether they will return" (Stages, 120). For most of us, the mother (or other primary caregiver) does return, and we begin to develop trust.  
  
Fowler writes,

Those observers are correct, I believe, who tell us that our first pre-images of God have their origins here. Particularly they are composed from our first experiences of mutuality, in which we form the rudimentary awareness of self as separate from and dependent upon the immensely powerful others, who were present at our first consciousness and who "knew us" -- with recognizing eyes and reconfirming smiles -- at our first self-knowing. (121)

Fowler explains that these are "pre-images because they are largely formed prior to language, prior to concepts and coincident with the emergence of consciousness" (121).  
  
The quality of the care we receive as infants will play an important role in our faith development as we get older. As Fowler explains, "the quality of mutuality and the strength of trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites) developed in this phase underlie (or threaten to undermine) all that comes later in faith development" (italics in original; 121).  
  
The next stage, the first true stage of faith development, "begins with the convergence of thought and language, opening up the use of symbols in speech and ritual play" (121).  
  
Next: [Stage 1 - Intuitive-Projective Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/07/stages-of-faith-stage-1-intuitive.html)

Labels: [James W. Fowler](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/James%20W.%20Fowler), [Spiritual Development](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Spiritual%20Development), [Stages of Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Stages%20of%20Faith)

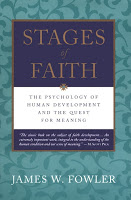
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Stages of Faith: Stage 1 - Intuitive-Projective Faith

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One of the characteristics of the preoperational child is egocentrism. This means that the child is generally unable to take any perspective other than his or her own, nor do they even imagine that other perspectives are possible.  
  
Fowler writes,

In early childhood thought is dominated by perception. This means that the child thinks by way of mental pictures that are imitations of reality as perceived. As yet the child lacks the mental capacity to prolong actions or to reverse them, so as to test the inferences he or she makes on the basis of perception. Causal relations and connections, therefore, are poorly understood. The child's feelings and fanciful imagination have free rein to fill in the gaps in understanding that perception leaves. (Stages, 57)

This inability to take perspectives other than one's own inhibits the child from any real kind of moral reasoning, as Lawrence Kohlberg's research has shown. Kohlberg held that "moral judgment requires the construction and coordination of the points of view of self and others" (Fowler, Stages, 58). For this reason, Kohlberg understood the preoperational stage as "a premoral position." A child at this stage makes decisions on the basis of anticipated reward and punishment.  
  
A child's thought processes at this stage are largely unrestrained by the control of reason. They are not well-equipped to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Concrete symbols, images, and stories play an important role in shaping the child's worldview, including their understanding of God. This happens even in children raised in non-religious families. Fowler, drawing on the work of Ana-Maria Rizzuto, explains that "despite our secularization and religious fragmentation, religious symbols and language are so widely present in this society that virtually no child reaches school age without having constructed -- without or without religious education -- an image or images of God" (129).  
  
The quality of images and stories children are exposed to is particularly important at this age. These may "prove life-opening and sustaining of love, faith and courage," but they might also "[give] rise to fear, rigidity, and the brutalization of souls -- both one's own and those of others" (132).  
  
In his summary of this stage Fowler writes,

The gift of emergent strength of this stage is the birth of imagination, the ability to unify and grasp the experience-world in powerful images and as presented in stories that register the child's intuitive understandings and feelings toward the ultimate conditions of existences. The dangers of this stage arise from the possible "possession" of the child's imagination by unrestrained images of terror and destructiveness, or from the witting or unwitting exploitation of her or his imagination in the reinforcement of taboos and moral or doctrinal expectations. (italics in original; 134)

Intuitive-Projective Stage by Aspects:

Form of Logic (Piaget): Preoperational  
Perspective Taking (Selman): Rudimentary empathy (egocentric)  
Form of Moral Judgment (Kohlberg): Punishment-reward  
Bounds of Social Awareness: Family, primal others  
Locus of Authority: Attachment/dependence relationships; Size, power, visible symbols of authority.  
Form of World Coherence: Episodic  
Symbolic Function: Magical-Numinous (Fowler, 244)

Next: [Stage 2 - Mythic-Literal](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/07/stages-of-faith-stage-2-mythic-literal.html)

Labels: [James W. Fowler](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/James%20W.%20Fowler), [Spiritual Development](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Spiritual%20Development), [Stages of Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Stages%20of%20Faith)

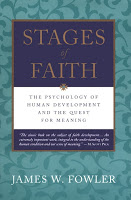
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Source: http://farfromrome.blogspot.ca/2009/07/stages-of-faith-stage-2-mythic-literal.html

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Stages of Faith: Stage 2 - Mythic-Literal Faith

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Mythic-Literal faith typically emerges after the individual reaches Piaget's concrete operations stage of cognitive development. With the attainment of this stage, the individual can better distinguish between what is real and what is merely imaginary, and can now take a perspective other than one's own.  
  
Fowler writes,

The great gift to consciousness that emerges in this stage is the ability to narratize one's experience. As regards our primary interest in faith we can say that the development of the Mythic-Literal stage brings with it the ability to bind our experiences into meaning through the medium of stories. (Stages, 136)

Stories are important for preoperational children, but only at the concrete operational stage are children able to generate their own stories:

The convergence of the reversibility of thought with taking the perspective of another combined with an improved grasp of cause-effect relations means that the elements are in place for appropriating and retelling the rich stories one is told. More than this, the elements are in place for youngsters to begin to tell self-generated stories that make it possible to conserve, communicate and compare their experiences and meanings. (136)

We don't lose our interest in stories as we get older, but there is an important difference in our relationship with stories at this stage compared with later stages. At later stages, we can "step back from our stories, reflect upon them, and...communicate their meanings by way of more abstract and general statements. Stage 2 does not yet do this" (136-137). Fowler uses the image of a river to represent the flow of life. At Stage 2, stories "describe the flow from the midst of the stream" (137). Only at later stages can the individual "step out on the bank beside the river and reflect on the stories of the flow and their composite meanings" (137). In other words, the meaning of the story is inseparable from the story itself.  
  
Fowler explains that he imagined anthropomorphic God-images would be found primarily in preschool (preoperational) children, but found that they were actually much more common in Stage 2 children. He attributes this to the newfound ability to take perspectives of others. The Mythic-Literal child can now imagine God's perspective, which, he says, will have "as much richness--and some of the same limits--as the perspectives now consistently attributed to friends and family members" (139).  
  
Someone at this stage is also likely to be at Kohlberg's second stage of moral development. At this stage justice is equated with reciprocity and fairness.  
  
Fowler describes, near the end of the chapter on Stage 2, an interview with a grown woman who has equilibrated at the Mythic-Literal stage (which is apparently the lowest stage that can persist into adulthood). She explains that she prays everyday so that, "when I need it, it's in the bank" (147). She uses this image a few times in the interview. She believes that by praying and praising God she can, as Fowler puts it, "store up God's good favor against times when special help or forgiveness may be needed" (148).  
  
In Fowler's conclusion, her writes,

The new capacity or strength in this stage is the rise of narrative and the emergence of story, drama and myth as ways of finding and giving coherence to experience.  
  
The limitations of literalness and an excessive reliance upon reciprocity as a principle for constructing an ultimate environment can result either in an overcontrolling, stilted perfectionism or "works righteousness" or in their opposite, an abasing sense of badness embraced because of mistreatment, neglect or the apparent disfavor of significant others. (italics in original; 149-150)

Most people move beyond the Mythic-Literal stage in adolescence, with the transition to formal operational thinking.  
  
Mythic-Literal Stage by Aspects:

Form of Logic (Piaget): Concrete Operational  
Perspective Taking (Selman): Simple perspective taking  
Form of Moral Judgment (Kohlberg): Instrumental hedonism (Reciprocal fairness)  
Bounds of Social Awareness: "Those like us" (in familial, ethnic, racial, class, and religious terms)  
Locus of Authority: Incumbents of authority roles, salience increased by personal relatedness  
Form of World Coherence: Narrative-Dramatic  
Symbolic Function: One-dimensional; literal (Fowler, 244)

Next: [Stage 3 - Synthetic-Conventional](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/05/stages-of-faith-stage-3-synthetic.html)

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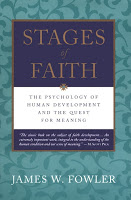
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Stages of Faith: Stage 3 - Synthetic Conventional Faith

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Fowler's third stage, Synthetic-Conventional, typically begins around 12 or 13. A very large number of people equilibrate at this is the stage -- that is, they do not develop beyond it.  
  
Although children and adults at this level will have some things in common, there are also some differences. Nearly everyone will enter this stage, and a certain age this is healthy. When people remain in this stage into adulthood, however, this is usually due to one problem or another. It is necessary to talk about Stage 3 first in general terms, and then specifically how it appears in adults.  
  
An individual can move into the Synthetic-Conventional stage when they have begun to develop what Piaget called formal operationalthinking.

Formal operational thinking may first make its appearance in an alegebra class or in an advanced biology lab. As it emerges it brings with it the ability to reflect upon one's thinking. It appraises a situation or a problem and forms a variety of hypothetical solutions or explanations. It generates methods of testing and verifying the hypotheses. In problem solving formal operational thinking can work with propositions and symbols, manipulating them to find solutions prior to any contact with the actual physical objects or contexts they represent. And just as it can generate hypothetical propositions of explanation, so it can envision a universe of possible realities and futures. Formal operational thought can conceive ideal features of persons, communities or other states of affairs. It can be idealistcally or harshly judgmental of actual people or institutions in light of these ideal conceptions. (Fowler,Stages, 152)

The attainment of formal operations brings with it the ability to think hypothetically. This allows the individual to create hypothetical images of how others see him or her. This leads to a new kind of "self-consciousness." As Fowler writes, "The youth believes everyone is looking at him or her and may feel either a narcissistic inflation or a self-questioning deflation regarding 'the me I think you see'" (153). In significant relationships, this ability to see yourself as others see you results in mutual interpersonal perspective taking. Both the self and the significant other "come to be experienced as having a rich, mysterious and finally inaccessible depth of personality" (153). If God is an important part of the individual's faith, then God too will be "re-imagined as having inexhaustible depths and as being capable of knowing personally those mysterious depths of self and others we know that we ourselves will never know" (153). Referring to the well-documented phenomenon of adolescent conversion, Fowler suggests that it "can be illumined...by the recognition that the adolescent's religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply" (153).  
  
Significantly, he observes that it is not an accident that religious images that appeal to people at the Synthetic-Conventional stage "have the characteristics of a divinely personal significant other" (154).  
  
Another characteristic of this stage is the importance to the individual of the expectations of others. This is reflected in the way people at this stage relate to authority. Authority, for the Stage 3 individual, is located outside the self. "It resides," Fowler says, "in the interpersonally available 'they' or in the certified incumbents of leadership roles in institutions" (154).

This is not to deny that adolescents make choices or that they develop strong feelings and commitments regarding their values and behavioral norms. It is to say, however, that despite their genuine feelings of having made choices and commitments, a truer reading is that their values and self-images, mediated by the significant others in their lives, have largely chosen them. And in their (the youth's) choosing they have, in the main, clarified and ratified those images and values which have chosen them. (Fowler, 154)

This is a good time to clarify something about the relationship between these formal structures Fowler is talking about, and the specific contents of people's faith. When we hear "conventional" we might naturally assume that Fowler means the individual holds the beliefs that are conventional to the religion. But the religious group is only one of several communities the person belongs to, and each community brings different expectations.  
  
I, for example, was raised in a moderately progressive, church-going Catholic family. While I understood who the pope was and I knew something about the hierarchical structure of the Church, it was really my mother who served as the primary authority for me as far as religion goes. It was taken for granted in my house that women should be allowed to become priests, and if I had been asked at age 13 if I agreed with that, I would have unhesitatingly said yes. So people at Synthetic-Conventional can indeed hold views that are at variance with (for example) official Church teaching. But, importantly, they do not originate these views; they inherit them from those they regard as authority figures.  
  
Fowler actually illustrates this difference by comparing two teenagers, a girl who belongs to a fairly conservative Lutheran church, and a boy who belongs to a Unitarian church. They are quite different in what they believe, and it appears that the boy has more mature views, but it is also clear, as Fowler points out, that "the positions he takes are really his own versions of what his community stands for rather than being self-composed perspectives" (158).  
  
Fowler describes Stage 3 as "a 'conformist' stage in the sense that it is acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others and as yet does not have a sure enough grasp on its own identity and autonomous judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective" (173).  
  
Synthetic-Conventional Faith in Adulthood  
  
As I mentioned earlier, many adults never develop beyond this stage. In fact, Synthetic-Conventional represents exactly what many people imagine being "religious" is all about:

Many critics of religion and religious institutions assume, mistakenly, that to be religious in an institution necessarily means to be Synthetic-Conventional. This mistake by critics is understandable. Much of church and synagogue life in this country [i.e., the USA] can be accurately described as dominantly Synthetic-Conventional. (Fowler, 164)

I also mentioned that, when this stage persists into adulthood, it is a sign that something less than ideal has happened. To understand why this is, we need to consider some other characteristics of Stage 3 faith.

For both adolescents in the forming phases and adults who find equilibrium in Stage 3 the system of informing images and values through which they are committed remains principally atacit system. Tacit means unexamined; my tacit knowing, as Michael Polanyi calls it, is that part of my knowing that plays a role in guiding and shaping my choices, but of which I can give no account. I cannot tell you how I know with my tacit knowing. (Fowler, 161)

So people at this stage, though certainly aware that they have beliefs and values -- to which they might feel very strongly about -- do not reflect on their beliefs to any great extent. For adolescents this might be understandable. When this persists into adulthood, however, there is probably something preventing them from examining their beliefs and values. It may be that their cognitive development has not progressed far beyond early formal operations -- and indeed, Fowler does provide excerpts from interviews with two men who fall into this category: "Both come from backgrounds of limited education. Both exhibit difficulty in using language to communicate inner states or their attitudes, values and feelings for others... They are limited in their self-reflection...to either comparisons with or the approval of others perceived to be like them" (Fowler, 170).  
  
Some adults at this stage, however, are highly educated, and if they have not critically examined their beliefs, it is likely, I think, that their religious formation has strongly discouraged them from doing so. They may be quite developed cognitively, quite capable of rational thinking, but they don't apply their rationality to their beliefs.  
  
Synthetic-Conventional Stage by Aspects:

Form of Logic (Piaget): Early Formal Operations  
Perspective Taking (Selman): Mutual interpersonal  
Form of Moral Judgment (Kohlberg): Interpersonal expectations and concordance  
Bounds of Social Awareness: Composite of groups in which one has interpersonal relationships  
Locus of Authority: Consensus of valued groups an in personally worthy representatives of belief-value traditions  
Form of World Coherence: Tacit system, felt meanings symbolically mediated, globally held  
Symbolic Function: Symbols multi-dimensional; evocative power inheres in symbol (Fowler, 244)

Next: [Stage 4 - Individuative-Reflective](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/07/stage-4-individuative-reflective-faith.html)

Labels: [James W. Fowler](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/James%20W.%20Fowler), [Spiritual Development](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Spiritual%20Development), [Stages of Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Stages%20of%20Faith)

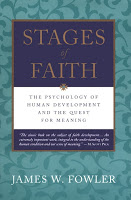
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Stages of Faith: Stage 4 - Individuative-Reflective Faith

[](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0060628669/ref=s9_sims_gw_s0_p14_t3?pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_s=center-1&pf_rd_r=1C0KT20XADWXKRZAE30H&pf_rd_t=101&pf_rd_p=470938131&pf_rd_i=507846)[[A slightly altered version of this post can be read on my new blog.]](http://knownunknown.wordpress.com/writings-3/stage-4-individuative-reflective/)  
  
The transition to the fourth stage, "Individuative-Reflective," ideally happens in the early to mid-twenties, though it can happen later (Fowler, Stages, 181).  
  
This transition, which involves a movement beyond the conventional faith of Stage 3, typically follows a significant change in life. For many, it is the experience of moving away from home, into an environment where one encounters values and beliefs that differ considerably from one's own. This often forces a critical examination of the tacitly held beliefs and values of one's Synthetic-Conventional faith.  
  
Additionally, this transition requires "an interruption of [the] reliance on external sources of authority" that is characteristic of Synthetic-Conventional faith. There must be, as Fowler puts it, "a relocation of authority within the self":

While others and their judgments will remain important to the Individuative-Reflective person, their expectations, advice and counsel will be submitted to an internal panel of experts who reserve the right to choose and who are prepared to take responsibility for their choices. I call this the emergence of anexecutive ego. (179)

(It's not difficult to find elements within religious traditions that aim to mitigate against exactly this transition, which undoubtedly accounts for the large number of adults whose faith development fails to keep pace with their cognitive development. In light of this, it is not at all surprising that we find so many otherwise intelligent people with such immature faith.)  
  
So Fowler has identified two things that have to happen for an individual to move beyond Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional into Stage 4: "the critical distancing from one's previous assumptive value system and the emergence of an executive ego" (179). When both happen, a new identity is formed.  
  
Some individuals, however, will make one of these movements but not the other. On the one hand, there are individuals who, after moving into a new kind of environment, will encounter ideas very different from their own:

They come face to face with the relativity of their perspectives and those of others to their life experience. But they fail to interrupt their reliance on external sources of authority--and may even strengthen their reliance upon them--in order to cope with this relativity. (179)

So if I am a young Synthetic-Conventional person, leaving home to go to university, I might encounter for the first time peers who believe very differently than I do. Now I might be forced to acknowledge that I've come to believe a lot of things -- things I've simply assumed to be true -- because of the family, community, and culture in which I was raised. This might be liberating, but it might also create a great deal of anxiety, particularly if great importance was placed on maintaining those beliefs.  
  
"On the other hand," Fowler writes, "there is a significant group who shape their own variant way of living from a shared value ethos, break their reliance on consensual or conventional authorities and show the emergence of a strong exective ego. Yet they have not carried through a critical distancing from their shared assumptive values systems" (179).  
  
Fowler doesn't provide any examples of what this might look like inStages of Faith (or either of his other books I've read), but I wonder if some conservative and traditionalist Catholics who reject some papal teachings (or entire popes, in the case of many traditionalists) don't fall into this category. They have learned to be critical of external authorities, but they don't critically examine their other beliefs, or consider that those beliefs came from equally fallible authorities.  
  
People who complete only one of these two movements can remain indefinitely in a transitional space that is neither Synthetic-Conventional nor Individuative-Reflective.  
  
Those who do make the transition completely develop a greater awareness of their own ideology, as well as the external factors that have nurtured it, and they can understand the ideologies of other people in the same way. They also understand symbols and rituals in a very different way than before. In the past, these were "taken as mediating the sacred in direct ways" and were therefore seen as "sacred in themselves" (180). In other words, people at Stage 3 tend not to distinguish between the symbol and what the symbol represents. At Stage 4, the meaning of a symbol can be distinguished and expressed without reference to the symbol.  
  
Fowler writes,

This demythologizing strategy, which seems natural to Stage 4, brings both gains and losses. Paul Tillich, writing about religious symbols and their powers, says that when a symbol is recognized to be a symbol by those who relate to the transcendent through it, it becomes a "broken symbol." A certain naive reliance upon and trust in the sacred power, efficacy and inherent truth of the symbol as representation is interrupted. (180)

For many people, this transition brings "a sense of loss, dislocation, grief and even guilt" (180). (When people speak of "losing their faith," I imagine it is often this transition they are talking about.)  
  
"This transition," Fowler writes, "represents an upheaval in one's life at any point and can be protracted in its process for five to seven years or longer" (181). This is less of a problem for younger people, as it can be "a natural accompaniment of leaving home and of the construction of a first, provisional adult life structure" (182). For those who are more established in this structure -- those in their 30s or 40s -- it can be more disruptive and difficult.  
  
With the transition to Stage 4, Fowler explains, the individual begins "to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes" (182). Previously, the individual's faith was in large measure chosen for them. They were Catholic or Protestant or Jewish or Muslim because they were raised that way. Authority is located externally to the self. Beginning with Stage 4, one's faith is self-chosen, and while external authorities may be consulted, the final authority resides in the individual's own judgment (243).  
  
Fowler writes in his summary,

Stage 4's ascendant strength has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology). Its dangers inhere in its strengths: an excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought and a kind of second narcissism in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self overassimilates "reality" and the perspectives of others into its world view. (italics in original; 182-183)

Individuative-Reflective Stage by Aspects:

Form of Logic (Piaget): Formal Operations (Dichotomizing)  
Perspective Taking (Selman): Mutual, with self-selected group or class--(societal)  
Form of Moral Judgment (Kohlberg): Societal perspective, Reflective relativism, or class-biased universalism  
Bounds of Social Awareness: Ideologically compatible communities with congruence to self-chosen norms and insights  
Locus of Authority: One's own judgment as informed by self-ratified ideological perspective. Authorities and norms must be congruent with this.  
Form of World Coherence: Explicit system, conceptually mediated, clarity about boundaries and inner connections of system  
Symbolic Function: Symbols separated from symbolized. Translated (reduced) to ideations. Evocative power inheres inmeaning conveyed by symbols (Fowler, 244)

Next: [Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/07/stages-of-faith-stage-5-conjunctive.html)

Labels: [James W. Fowler](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/James%20W.%20Fowler), [Spiritual Development](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Spiritual%20Development), [Stages of Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Stages%20of%20Faith)

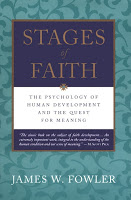
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Stages of Faith: Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith

[](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0060628669/ref=s9_sims_gw_s0_p14_t3?pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_s=center-1&pf_rd_r=1C0KT20XADWXKRZAE30H&pf_rd_t=101&pf_rd_p=470938131&pf_rd_i=507846)James Fowler says that reaching Stage 5, which he calls "Conjunctive Faith," is "unusual before mid-life" (Stages, 198), although it should be noted that a significant minority of people in their thirties, even some people in their twenties, are best described as Stage 5.1  
  
"The name of this stage," he writes inFaithful Change, "implies a rejoining or a union of that which previously has been separated" (64). One moves into Stage 5 when one moves beyond the "either/or" dichotomizing logic of Stage 4, and begins to think more dialectically or dialogically (Stages, 185). He says that the name was inspired by Nicolas of Cusa's notion of the coincidentia oppositorum, "the 'coincidence of opposites' in our apprehensions of truth" (Faithful,64). Someone at this stage grasps the interrelatedness or interconnectedness of things.  
  
"In dialogical knowing," Fowler writes, "the known is invited to speak its own word in its own language... The knower seeks to accomodate her or his knowledge to the structure of that which is known before imposing her or his own categories upon it" (Stages, 185).  
  
In Stage 4, one sees the emergence of what Fowler calls the "executive ego" (Stages, 179). This is when the individual begins to take responsibility for his or her beliefs, commitments, values, etc. Authority, which had always previously been external, is now located internally. This does not change in Stage 5, but now the executive ego "must come to terms with the fact that its confidence [](http://www.amazon.com/Faithful-Change-James-W-Fowler/dp/0687097207/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1250956755&sr=8-1)is based at least in part upon illusion or upon seriously incomplete self-knowledge" (Faithful, 64). Whereas the Stage 4 individual has great confidence in the conscious mind, the Stage 5 individual begins to see this as overconfidence, begins to appreciate the reality and the influence of the unconscious mind, and grasps the need to integrate the conscious and unconscious (Stages, 186).  
  
Stage 5 also brings a different relationship with religious symbols. In Stage 4, the individual is preoccupied with "demythologizing":

Stage 4 is concerned to question symbolic representations and enactments and to force them to yield their meanings for translation into conceptual or propositional statements. As such, Individual-Reflective faith wants to bring the symbolic representation into its (Stage 4's) circle of light and to operate on it, extracting its meanings. This leaves the person or group in Stage 4 clearly in control. The meaning so grasped may be illuminating, confronting, harshly judgmental or gently reassuring. But whatever its potential impact, its authentication and weight will be assigned in accordance with the assumptions and commitments that already shape the circle of light in which it is being question. It will not be granted the initiative. (Stages, 187)

The Stage 5 individual does not abandon this critical approach, but moves beyond it. Stage 5 does not regress to the pre-critical approach of Stage 3 (and earlier), but moves forward into a post-critical phase, which Fowler identifies with Paul Ricoeur's notion of the "second naïveté" (Stages, 187). Here the individual develops "a readiness to enter into the rich dwellings of meaning that true symbols, ritual and myth offer" (Faithful, 65).  
  
These need not be the symbols, rituals or myths of one's own tradition, either. Someone at this stage, Fowler writes, "is ready for significant encounters with other traditions than its own, expecting that truth has disclosed and will disclosed itself in those traditions in ways that may complement or correct its own" (Stages, 186).2  
  
Conjunctive Stage by Aspects:

Form of Logic (Piaget): Formal Operations (Dialectical)  
Perspective Taking (Selman): Mutual with groups, classes and traditions "other" than one's own  
Form of Moral Judgment (Kohlberg): Prior to society, Principaled higher law (universal and critical)  
Bounds of Social Awareness: Extends beyond class norms and interests. Disciplined ideological vulnerability to "truths" and "claims" of outgroups and other traditions  
Locus of Authority: Dialectical joining of judgment-experience processes with reflective claims of others and of various expressions of cumulative human wisdom  
Form of World Coherence: Multisystemic and conceptual mediation  
Symbolic Function: Postcritical rejoining of irreducible symbolic power and ideational meaning. Evocative power inherent in the reality in and beyond symbol and in the power of unconscious processes in the self (Fowler, 244)

Notes  
  
[1] See the age distribution chart in Stages, 318. It shows that 14.6% of the Fowler's subjects aged 31-40 were solidly at Stage 5, and 3.3% of those aged 21-30 were in Stages 4-5. This reflects his research done in the 1970s. I suspect the number might be somewhat higher today, although my reason for suspecting this owes more to my reading of Ken Wilber rather than Fowler. I intend to touch on that in the future, when I get more into Wilber's ideas.  
  
[2] For a quite brilliant example this, see Paul F. Knitter's recent book, [Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian.](http://www.amazon.com/Without-Buddha-Could-Not-Christian/dp/1851686738/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1250530787&sr=8-1)  
  
Next: [Stage 6 - Universalizing Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/2009/08/stages-of-faith-stage-6-universalizing.html)

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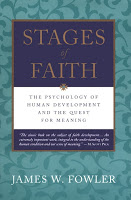
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9.08.2009

Stages of Faith: Stage 6 - Universalizing Faith

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Fowler does name some individuals he considered to be representatives of Stage 6, including Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, as well as people like Dag Hammarskjöld, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Abraham Heschel, and Thomas Merton (Stages, 201).  
  
[](http://www.amazon.com/Faithful-Change-James-W-Fowler/dp/0687097207/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1250956755&sr=8-1)When I first read this, it struck me as problematic. I don't think it's legitimate, after carefully working out the structures of the other stages through careful empirical research, to simply toss that method away and start speculating. I also find it difficult to believe that one has to develop through all of the other stages in order to be a Martin Luther King or a Mother Teresa. As admirable as her life was, did Mother Teresa really ever move that far beyond conventional faith? From what I've read, it seems that she did not. I don't mean to depreciate what she did; I mean only to suggest that what she did could have been done at a lower stage, that it is not indicative of a high level of faith development as Fowler describes it. Or, to put that another way, I would argue that when someone gives him- or herself so completely for others, there is something else at work, something other than the kind of faith development we are concerned with here.  
  
I don't have as much confidence in Fowler's description of this stage compared with the earlier stages, but I will summarise it for the sake of completeness.  
  
Fowler writes,

The structuring of this stage derives from the radical completion of a process of de-centration from self that proceeds throughout the sequence of stages. From the non-differentiation of self and objects in the earliest phases of infancy to the naive egocentrism of the Intuitive-Projective stage, each successive stage marks a steady widening in social perspective taking. (Faithful, 66)

Or, put very simply, one's ability to see things from perspectives other than one's own deepens and widens as one develops.  
  
People at Stage 6 overcome the need, felt in all previous stages, for the preservation for one's own life and well-being:

Heedless of the threats to self, to primary groups, and to the institutional arrangements of the present order that are involved, Stage 6 becomes a disciplined, activist incarnation -- a making real and tangible -- of the imperatives of absolute love and justice of which Stage 5 has partial apprehensions. The self at Stage 6 engages in spending and being spent for the transformation of present reality in the direction of a transcendent actuality. (Stages, 200).

Fowler says people at this stage "typically exhibit qualities that shake our usual criteria of normalcy," and "[i]n their devotion to universalizing compassion they may offend our parochial perceptions of justice" (Stages, 200).  
  
People in Stage 5 "continue to live in the tension between their rootedness in and loyalties to their segment of the existing order, on the one hand, and the inclusiveness and transformation of their visions toward a new ultimate order, on the other" (Faithful, 66-67). In Stage 6, one overcomes this tension.  
  
Stage 6 individuals are often charismatic leaders. The followers of some charismatic cult leaders will readily identify their leaders as belonging to this stage, so Fowler suggests how these dangerous leaders are different:

A good test for distinguishing the authentic faithful leader from the dangerously charismatic copy is whether the leader requires regressive dependence and relinquishing of personal responsibility from his or her followers. Similarly, the authentic spirituality of the Universalizing stage avoids polarizing the world between the "saved" and the "damned." Persons of this stage are as concerned with the transformation of those they oppose as with the bringing about of justice and reform. (Faithful, 67)

Universalizing Stage by Aspects:

Form of Logic (Piaget): Formal Operations (Synthetic)  
Perspective Taking (Selman): Mutual, with the commonwealth of being  
Form of Moral Judgment (Kohlberg): Loyalty to being  
Bounds of Social Awareness: Identification with the species. Transnarcissistic love of being  
Locus of Authority: In a personal judgment informed by the experiences and truths of previous stages, purified of egoic striving, and linked by disciplined intuition to the principle of Being  
Form of World Coherence: Unitive actuality felt and participated unity of "One beyond many"  
Symbolic Function: Evocative power of symbols actualized through unification of reality mediated by symbols and the self (Fowler, Stages, 244)

Labels: [James W. Fowler](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/James%20W.%20Fowler), [Spiritual Development](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Spiritual%20Development), [Stages of Faith](http://farfromrome.blogspot.com/search/label/Stages%20of%20Faith)

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