

HOW TO UNDERSTAND STAGES OF FAITH:

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

This synopsis is a brief summary of the six stages of faith described by James Fowler (1981) in his landmark book, *Stages of Faith*.¹ It is no doubt much better to actually read Fowler's original book. However, in contrast to the students in the first undergraduate class that I taught in developmental psychology in 1976, contemporary students often tell me that they prefer to read no more than five bullet points in lecture notes or no more than 280 characters in social media. Because students in some graduate programs are not allowed (by other professors) to cite works published prior to 2000 (which eliminates most of the world's greatest literature and almost all sacred texts), it seemed useful to provide a short summary that might increase a reader's literary thirst for Fowler's original works. For this reason, I have compiled a list of the six stages of faith that are explained in depth in Fowler's book.

Stage 0: Infancy and Undifferentiated faith (from birth to 2 years) is characterized by early learning of basic trust (or mistrust) and safety (or danger) of one's environment (Fowler, 1981, p. 119). For example, the world can be primitively experienced as warm, safe, and secure in contrast to cold, hurtful, and abusive. Although born as undifferentiated beings, infants at the primal stage develop a primitive awareness that they are separate from the people and objects around them. This undifferentiated stage basically corresponds to the Piagetian *sensory-motor* stage, in which the external world is experienced through sensations—sights, sounds, and scents. The infant learns to interact with the world through

actions, such as sucking, grasping, looking, listening, and touching. Gradually, infants learn a primitive understanding of *causality*—that their actions can cause things to happen in the world around them. Although not part of Fowler's stages of faith, attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1977) provides a useful model for understanding the early developments of attachment prototypes (e.g., secure vs. insecure). If consistent nurture is experienced, one develops a basic sense of trust, security, and safety about parental figures, the universe, and the divine. Conversely, negative experiences in infancy contribute to distrust of parental figures, the universe, and the divine. As toddlers develop in their cognitive abilities, they develop object permanence, which involves learning that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen or touched. Transition to the next stage begins with integration of thought and language, which facilitate the use of symbols in speech and play.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective faith (ages 2 to 7 years) corresponds roughly to the Piagetian *pre-operational* stage. It is marked by a relative fluidity of thought patterns. From a psychodynamic perspective, this stage is characterized by the psyche's unprotected exposure to the Unconscious. Children at this stage are egocentric and they struggle to see things from the perspective of others. With each year, they improve in language acquisition and thinking skills, although they still think in very concrete terms. Symbolic thinking emerges as children learn to use words and pictures to represent objects in their environments. At this

stage, religion is learned mainly through experiences, images, stories, and the people with whom the child comes in contact (Fowler, 1981, p. 122).

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal faith (mostly elementary school-age children from age 7 to age 11 or 12 years) corresponds to the Piagetian *concrete operational* stage. This stage consists of a strong belief in the justice and reciprocity of the universe. Children at this stage in life are often concerned about perceived injustices (e.g., “It’s not fair”). They also begin to think in a more logical and organized manner, but their thinking is still very concrete. They begin to use *inductive logic*, which involves reasoning from specific information to general principles (i.e., from the particular to the general). However, young children are not capable of true *deductive logic*, which requires abstract thinking and the ability to engage in reasoning from a general principle to specific information (i.e., from the general to the particular). Regardless of how bright parents think their children are, abstract reasoning requires more maturation of the prefrontal cortex, which is not complete by late childhood but which accelerates rapidly during adolescence. From a religious perspective, deities are almost always anthropomorphic (e.g., a grandfatherly figure with a beard). During this stage, metaphors and symbolic language are usually understood literally—and therefore misunderstood. Although some adults remain at this level in some aspects of their faith, most individuals move to the next stage some time during their adolescence. If an adult becomes stuck at this stage, there may be a risk of developing “third-grade atheism” (Doverspike, 2019, Footnote 22).

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional faith arises in early adolescence at about age 12 and extends into adulthood (Fowler, 1981, p. 151). As Fowler (1981) observes, “Puberty brings with it a revolution in physical and emotional life” (p. 151). This time corresponds roughly to the Piagetian *formal operational* stage, when the adolescent begins to engage in abstract thinking and thinking about hypothetical problems. Adolescents often become preoccupied with applying deductive reasoning to abstract ethical, moral, social, and philosophical concerns. From a religious perspective, this stage is characterized by conformity to—or rejection of—authority and the development of a personal religious identity. Conflicts with one’s beliefs are ignored due to the fear of threat from inconsistencies. The majority of adults remain at this level in most aspects of the practice of their faith. This stage may characterize the majority of individuals who fill traditional houses of worship. An individual at this stage might be comfortable with endorsement of a creed or statement of faith.

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective faith may begin in the mid-20s to late 30s and may extend into older adulthood (Fowler, 1981, p. 174). It corresponds roughly to the Piagetian *formal operational* stage. This stage is often a period 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 openness and receptivity to a new complexity of faith. At the same time, this openness also increases awareness of conflicts in one’s beliefs. As I recall this time in life when I was earning my doctorate, my father—a devout minister—once told me, “If you were

any open minded, your brains would fall out.” He was right, as I can see now when looking back 50 years ago before I practiced as a neuropsychologist and taught as a professor. At the individuative-reflective stage, faith is no longer equated with certainty of belief but it also includes doubt. In other words, doubt is not the antithesis of faith but rather it is a part of it. In the words of Martin Luther (1483–1546), the German priest and Augustinian friar, “Where there is great faith, there is great doubt.” The English poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) saw this same relationship: “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” An individual at the individuative-reflective might struggle with endorsement of the tenants of a creed or statement of faith.

Stage 5: Conjunctive faith originates in middle adulthood and may include the so-called mid-life crisis (Fowler, 1981, p. 184). An individual at this state is operating at the Piagetian *formal operational* stage. An individual at this stage acknowledges paradox and transcendence relating 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. An individual at this stage might be very uncomfortable with endorsement of a creed or statement of faith.

Stage 6: Universalizing faith, or what some might call enlightenment, may begin as early as young adulthood but it is also a stage that most individuals never reach (the word *achieve* may not be appropriate in this context). It would be

unusual for an individual to reach this stage before age 40—if it is ever reached at all. As Fowler (1981) has observed, “Stage 6 is exceedingly rare” (p. 200). As with the previous three stages of faith, this stage corresponds roughly to the Piagetian *formal operational* stage. 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, justice, and mercy. For Fowler (1981), Stage 6 includes “the criteria of inclusiveness of community, of radical commitment to the justice and love and of selfless passion for a transformed world, a world made over not in their images, but accordance with an intentionality both divine and transcendent (p. 201). When Fowler was asked to name some individuals who were representative of this universalizing stage, he referred to Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997), and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) in the last years of his life (p. 201). Fowler was also inclined to include Rabbi Abraham Heschel (1907–1972), Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), and Fr. Thomas Merton (1915–1968). For the rare individuals at this stage of faith, universal principles become more important than life itself—which can lead to self-sacrifice or martyrdom.

Notes

1. Born in North Carolina, James William Fowler III (1940–2015) graduated from Duke University and Drew Theological Seminary. He earned a Ph.D. (1971) in Religion and Society at Harvard University, with a focus in ethics and the sociology of religion. In 1977, he joined the faculty of the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, where he eventually became a Professor of Theology and Human Development. Fowler was also an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church.

Fowler's *Stages of Faith* reflects his integration of the ideas of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980), whose theory and stages of cognitive development continue to be part of the training of modern educators and psychologists. Fowler's model also reflects Lawrence Kohlberg's (1927–1987) theory and stages of moral development.² Kohlberg (1963, 1964) studied the topic of moral judgment, extending Piaget's (1932, 1948) studies of children's moral development that were published almost three decades earlier than Kohlberg's works.

In Chapter 2 ("Faith, Religion, and Belief"), Fowler summarizes some ideas from Chapters 6 and 7 of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's (1963) book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Fowler's lists the following conclusion first:

"Faith, rather than belief or religion, is the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence. Faith, it appears, is generic, a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief" (Fowler, 1981, p. 14; italics original).

2. Kohlberg's six stages of moral development are organized into three levels:

Preconventional Level

Stage 1: Punishment and Obedience Orientation ("Premoral Stage" or Heteronomous Morality)

- ☑ Physical consequences of an action determine whether it is good or bad.
- ☑ Avoiding punishment and bowing to superior power are valued positively.
- ☑ Pleasure-seeking and the avoidance of pain are the chief guides to conduct.

Stage 2: Instrumental relativist orientation ("Instrumental Exchange" or Naive Hedonism) involves pleasure-seeking and pragmatic reciprocity.

- ☑ Right action consists of behavior that satisfies one's own needs.
- ☑ Human relations are viewed in market-place terms.
- ☑ Reciprocity is seen in a pragmatic way (i.e., "Scratch my back and I'll scratch yours").

Conventional Level

(Conventional Rule Conformity)

Stage 3: Interpersonal concordance orientation ("Mutual Interpersonal Relations," Approval-seeking, or "Good boy, nice girl" morality)

- ☑ Good behaviors are those that are approved by others or please others.
- ☑ Emphasis is on conformity and being "nice."
- ☑ One acts virtuously to gain or maintain approval of others.

Stage 4: Authority orientation (“Law and order” morality, Social System, Conscience, Doing one’s duty and maintaining law and order)

- ☑ Focus is on showing respect for authority and rules.
- ☑ Emphasis on doing one’s duty and maintaining social order.

Postconventional Level (“Principled”)

Stage 5: Social-contract orientation (“Individual Rights” involves social consensus and awareness of relativism or values, Morality of self-accepted moral principles)

- ☑ This stage has a utilitarian, legalistic tone.
- ☑ Common law is established by consensus.
- ☑ Correct behavior is defined in terms of standards agreed upon by a culture, society, or profession.
- ☑ Awareness of the relativism of personal values.

Stage 6: Universal ethical principle orientation (“Universality”) involves ethical principles based on abstract concepts)

- ☑ Ethical principles are self-chosen.
- ☑ Morality is defined as a decision of conscience.
- ☑ Conduct should be governed by individual principles of right and wrong.
- ☑ Ethical principles are based on abstract concepts (e.g., Golden Rule) rather than concrete rules (e.g., Ten Commandments).

Alternative Perspective

In contrast to Kohlberg’s somewhat masculine, linear model, Carol Gilligan (b. 1936) was developed a more feminine, holistic model that became known as “compassion ethics.” She was Kohlberg’s research assistant and most famous doctoral student who later eventually became a lecturer at the University of Chicago (1965-1966), Harvard University (1967), the University of Cambridge (1992-1994), and New York University School of Law (1998-2001). In 2002, she joined New York University as a full professor with the School of Education and the School of Law. Gilligan’s (1989) three studies that were referenced throughout her works were the *college student study* (moral development), *the abortion decision study* (experience of conflict), and *the rights and responsibilities study* (concepts of self and morality across men and women of different ages). From these studies, she formed the framework for her ethics of care. Gilligan (1982, 1989) argued that the feminine voice places more emphasis on protecting interpersonal relationships and taking care of other people. This voice focuses on the “care perspective,” which focuses on the needs of the individual in order to make a moral decision. In contrast, the masculine voice is logical, individualistic, and focused on protecting the rights of people and making sure justice is upheld. Gilligan criticized Kohlberg’s theory on two main points:

1. Kohlberg primarily studied privileged, white men and boys, which Gilligan felt caused a biased opinion against women.
2. Kohlberg’s male view of individual rights and rules was considered a higher stage than women’s emotive, relational point of view of development in terms of the caring effect on human relationships.

References

- Bowlby, J. (1977). The making and breaking of affectional bonds: I. Aetiology and psychopathology in the light of attachment theory. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 130(3), 201-210.
<https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.130.3.201>
- Doverspike, W. F. (2019, September 21). *How to understand Judaism: What I like about Judaism*.
http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_judaism.pdf
- Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1989). *Mapping the moral domain: A contribution of women's thinking to psychological theory and education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kohlberg, L. (1963). The development of children's orientation toward a moral order: I. Sequence in the development of moral thought. *Vita Humana*, 6, 11-33.
- Kohlberg, L. (1964). The development of moral character and moral ideology. In M. L. Hoffman & L. W. Hoffman (Eds.), *Review of Child Development Research, Vol. 1*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Piaget, J. (1932). *The moral judgment of the child* [*Le jugement moral chez l'enfant*]. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.
- Piaget, J. (1948). *The moral judgment of the child. With seven collaborators*. (Marjorie Gabain, Translator). Glencoe, IL: The Free Press. Available at this link: <https://archive.org/details/moraljudgmentoft005613mbp/page/n23/mode/2up?view=theater>
- Smith, W. C. (1963). *The meaning and end of religion*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Correct Citation for Reference Entry

The reference entry correct citation styles for this document are illustrated below. Students should defer to the style preferences of their individual course instructors to determine whether the course instructor has preferences that are more specific than those shown below:

American Psychological Association

Doverspike, W. F. (2024). *How to understand stages of faith*.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Chicago Manual of Style / Kate Turabian

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand Stages of Faith," May 11, 2024.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Note: According to the Chicago Manual of Style, blog posts are typically not included in bibliographies, but can be cited in the running text and/or notes. However, if a blog is cited frequently, you may include it in the bibliography.

Modern Language Association

Doverspike, William F. "How to Understand Stages of Faith" 11 May 2024 [Date accessed]

Doverspike, William, "Resilience: Rising Above Adversity," *Georgia Psychologist*, 56, 3 (July 2002), p. 5.

Note: MLA guidelines assume that readers can track down most online sources by entering the author, title, or other identifying information in a search engine or a database. Consequently, MLA does not require a URL in citations for online sources such as websites. However, some instructors still ask for it, so check with your instructor to determine his or her preference.

Documentation

This document is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: How to Understand Stages of Faith.doc

Server path:

http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_stages_of_faith.pdf

Server file name:

[how_to_understand_stages_of_faith.pdf](#)

Website tab: Practice [Popular Articles]

Link name: How to Understand the Stages of Faith

Workshop Presentation Deck:

N/A

Webinar Presentation Deck:

N/A

Workshop Handouts:

N/A

Published May 11, 2024 | Updated May 11, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.
Content and references last reviewed 2024

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2024). *How to understand stages of faith*.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>