
Handout 1: Stages of Faith Development

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Stages of Faith Development

Pre-Stage: Undifferentiated Faith

Generally children from birth through about 2 years of age.

Have the potential for faith but lack the ability to act on that potential.

Through loving care from parents and other adults in their life young children start to build a lived experience of trust, courage, hope and love.

At this stage, children experience faith as a connection between themselves and their caregiver.

Stage 1: Intuitive-projective Faith

Generally pre-school aged children.

The cognitive development of children of this age is such that they are unable to think abstractly and are generally unable to see the world from anyone else's perspective. As Robert Keeley writes: "These children cannot think like a scientist, consider logical arguments, or think through complex ideas."

Faith is not a thought-out set of ideas, but instead a set of impressions that are largely gained from their parents or other significant adults in their lives. In this way children become involved with the rituals of their religious community by experiencing them and learning from those around them.

Stage 2: Mythic-literal Faith

Generally ages 6 to 12.

Children at this age are able to start to work out the difference between verified facts and things that might be more fantasy or speculation.

At this age children's source of religious authority starts to expand past parents and trusted adults to others in their community like teachers and friends.

Like the previous stage, faith is something to be experienced. At this stage it is because children think in concrete and literal ways. Faith becomes the stories told and the rituals practiced.

Later in this stage children begin to have the capacity to understand that others might have different beliefs than them.

Stage 3: Synthetic-conventional Faith

Generally starts about the age of 13 and goes until around 18. However, some people stay at this stage for their entire life.

Unlike previous stages, people at this stage are able to think abstractly. What were once simple unrelated stories and rituals can now be seen as a more cohesive narrative about values and morals. With abstract thinking comes the ability to see layers of meaning in the stories, rituals and symbols of their faith.

At this stage people start to have the ability to see things from someone else's perspective. This means that they can also imagine what others think about them and their faith.

People at this stage claim their faith as their own instead of just being what their family does. However, the faith that is claimed is usually still the faith of their family.

Issues of religious authority are important to people at this stage. For younger adolescents, that authority still resides mostly with their parents and important adults. For older adolescents and adults in this stage, authority resides with friends and religious community. For all people in this stage, religious authority resides mostly outside of them personally.

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Stage 4: Individuative-reflective Faith

This stage usually starts in late adolescence (18 to 22 years old). However Robert Keeley points out that "people of many generations experience the kind of dissonance that comes with the real questions of faith that one begins to address at this stage of development."

People in this stage start to question their own assumptions around the faith tradition.

Along with questioning their own assumptions about their faith, people at this stage start to question the authority structures of their faith.

This is often the time that someone will leave their religious community if the answers to the questions they are asking are not to their liking.

Greater maturity is gained by rejecting some parts of their faith while affirming other parts. In the end, the person starts to take greater ownership of their own faith journey.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith

People do not usually get to this stage until their early thirties.

This stage is when the struggles and questioning of stage four give way to a more comfortable place. Some answers have been found and the person at this stage is comfortable knowing that all the answers might not be easily found.

In this stage, the strong need for individual self-reflection gives way to a sense of the importance of community in faith development.

People at this stage are also much more open to other people's faith perspectives. This is not because they are moving away from their faith but because they have a realization that other people's faiths might inform and deepen their own.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith

It is a rare person who reaches this stage of faith.

James Fowler describes people at this stage as having "a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us."

People at this stage can become important religious teachers because they have the ability to relate to anyone at any stage and from any faith. They are able to relate without condescension but at the same time are able to challenge the assumptions that those of other stages might have.

People at this stage cherish life but also do not hold on to life too tightly. They put their faith in action, challenging the status quo and working to create justice in the world.

Robert Keeley points to people like Gandhi and Mother Teresa as examples of people who have reached this stage.
