

## Stages of Faith An Interview with James Fowler

### *Stage One: Intuitive/Projective Faith*

The first stage we call intuitive/projective faith. It characterizes the child of two to six or seven. It's a changing and growing and dynamic faith. It's marked by the rise of imagination. The child doesn't have the kind of logic that makes possible or necessary the questioning of perceptions or fantasies. Therefore the child's mind is "religiously pregnant," one might say. It is striking how many times in our interviews we find that experiences and images that occur and take form before the child is six have powerful and long-lasting effects on the life of faith both positive and negative.

### *Stage Two: Mythic/Literal Faith*

The second stage we call mythic/literal faith. Here the child develops a way of dealing with the world and making meaning that now criticizes and evaluates the previous stage of imagination and fantasy. The gift of this stage is narrative. The child now can really form and re-tell powerful stories that grasp his or her experiences of meaning. There is a quality of literalness about this. The child is not yet ready to step outside the stories and reflect upon their meanings. The child takes symbols and myths at pretty much face value, though they may touch or move him or her at a deeper level.

### *Stage Three: Synthetic/Conventional Faith*

There is a third stage we call synthetic/conventional faith which typically has its rise beginning around age 12 or 13. It's marked by the beginning of what Piaget calls formal operational thinking. That simply means that we now can think about our own thinking. It's a time when a person is typically concerned about forming an identity, and is deeply concerned about the evaluations and feedback from significant other people in his or her life. We call this a synthetic/conventional stage; synthetic, not in the sense that it's artificial, but in the sense that it's a pulling together of one's valued images and values, the pulling together of a sense of self or identity.

One of the hallmarks of this stage is that it tends to compose its images of God as extensions of interpersonal relationships. God is often experienced as Friend, Companion, and Personal Reality, in relationship to which I'm known deeply and valued. I think the true religious hunger of adolescence is to have a God who knows me and values me deeply, and can be a kind of guarantor of my identity and worth in a world where I'm struggling to find who I can be.

At any of the stages from two on you can find adults who are best described by these stages. Stage Three, thus, can be an adult stage. We do find many persons, in churches and out, who are best described by faith that essentially took form when they were adolescents.

### *Stage Four: Individuative/Projective Faith*

Stage Four, for those who develop it, is a time in which the person is pushed out of, or steps out of, the circle of interpersonal relationships that have sustained his life to that point. Now comes the burden of reflecting upon the self as separate from the groups and the shared world that defines one's life. I sometimes quote Santayana who said that we don't know who discovered water but we know it wasn't fish. The person in Stage Three is like the fish sustained by the water. To enter Stage Four means to spring out of the fish tank and to begin to reflect upon the water. Many people don't complete this transition, but get caught between three and four. The transition to Stage Four can begin as early as 17, but it's usually not completed until the mid-20s, and often doesn't even begin until around 20. It comes most naturally in young adulthood. Some people, however, don't make the transition until their

late 30s. It becomes a more traumatic thing then, because they have already built an adult life. Their relationships have to be reworked in light of the stage change.

Stage Four is concerned about boundaries: where I stop and you begin; where the group that I can belong to with conviction and authenticity ends and other groups begin. It's very much concerned about authenticity and a fit between the self I feel myself to be in a group and the ideological commitments that I'm attached to.

#### *Stage Five: Conjunctive Faith*

Sometime around 35 or 40 or beyond some people undergo a change to what we call conjunctive faith, which is a kind of midlife way of being in faith. What Stage Four works so hard to get clear and clean in terms of boundaries and identity, Stage Five makes more permeable and more porous. As one moves into Stage Five one begins to recognize that the conscious self is not all there is of me. I have an unconscious. Much of my behavior and response to things is shaped by dimensions of self that I'm not fully aware of. There is a deepened readiness for a relationship to God that includes God's mystery and unavailability and strangeness as well as God's closeness and clarity.

Stage Five is a time when a person is also ready to look deeply into the social unconscious—those myths and taboos and standards that we took in with our mother's milk and that powerfully shape our behavior and responses. We really do examine those, which means we're ready for a new kind of intimacy with persons and groups that are different from ourselves. We are ready for allegiances beyond our tribal gods and our tribal taboos. Stage Five is a period when one is alive to paradox. One understands that truth has many dimensions which have to be held together in paradoxical tension.

#### *Stage Six: Universalizing Faith*

Some few persons we find move into Stage Six, which we call universalizing faith. In a sense I think we can describe this stage as one in which persons begin radically to live as though what Christians and Jews call the "kingdom of God" were already a fact. I don't want to confine it to Christian and Jewish images of the kingdom. It's more than that. I'm saying these people experience a shift from the self as the center of experience. Now their center becomes a participation in God or ultimate reality. There's a reversal of figure and ground. They're at home with what I call a commonwealth of being. We experience these people on the one hand as being more lucid and simple than we are, and on the other hand as intensely liberating people, sometimes even subversive in their liberating qualities. I think of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the last years of his life. I think of Thomas Merton. I think of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I think of Dag Hammarskjöld and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the last years of his imprisonment. These are persons who in a sense have negated the self for the sake of affirming God. And yet in affirming God they became vibrant and powerful selves in our experience. They have a quality of what I call relevant irrelevance. Their "subversiveness" makes our compromises show up as what they are.