

Faith: Is It Still Relevant?

I. Introduction

a. Many of us avoid the word *faith*. The word can sound like a relic of a more superstitious time: faith as the opposite of reason. Mark Twain famously quipped, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”

Many of us grew up in churches where we were told that religious teachings should be believed “on faith.” The story of the Garden of Eden, Moses’ parting of the Red Sea, Lazarus’ rising from the dead, and other miraculous Biblical events had to be believed “on faith.” In some churches “having faith” was the criterion for being saved. Without faith—without the ability to “believe what you know ain’t so”—we were bad Christians. If you were unable to suspend rationality you were guilty of sin.

For many of us, leaving the traditional church was largely an escape from the requirement that we believe the unbelievable “on faith.” *That* kind of faith is not something most of us want.

b. However, over the past 50 years there has been a new understanding of faith. It has become recognized that we all live with *some* kind of faith; we all have faith in something. We all have a sense of why we are here and what is the larger purpose of existence.

For many of us, though, our faith is not consciously thought out. Having given up the traditional religious expressions of faith, we have no other expression of what our faith is. We can’t very well think to ourselves—or talk to anyone else—about our faith. Having no way to think about faith, we can be left intellectually adrift about the meaning of life, and about the ultimate values of life. We need to understand our faith, to be able to think it through and to consciously use it to find meaning in the story of our lives. I hope this homily will help you understand what your faith is.

Today I will be drawing heavily on the work of faith researcher James Fowler, whose major book is *The Stages of Faith*, published in the early 1980s. If you haven’t read it, I recommend it to you. It is considered a classic and may be the most commonly cited publication in subsequent works on the topic of faith. First, let’s go into the new concept of what faith really is.

II. Concepts of faith

a. It is important to distinguish between *faith* and *belief*. Belief involves religious or philosophical statements about what is true; statements that can be true or false. That Jesus was born of a virgin is a belief. That religions are nothing more than group delusions is a belief.

Faith, however, is not fundamentally about particular beliefs. The same kind of faith can be expressed through various beliefs. A Christian, a Buddhist, a Humanist and a Muslim could have the same kind faith but very different beliefs.

b. As James Fowler defines it, faith has three components: images of the ultimate values, images of the ultimate powers, and master stories; values, power, and stories. Ultimate values are the causes that we understand to have the greatest worth; the kind of worth that demands and gets our loyalty and commitment; the values that have the claim of being the most important things in life. Our images of ultimate power are the fundamental forces we believe are acting in life, and with which we should align our

actions. Our master story is how we explain the course of our lives, how and why our lives have followed the paths that they have.

Everyone has these three components of faith, although they may not be fully conscious. We all have a sense of life's ultimate values, ideas about the fundamental powers acting in life, and a story that makes sense of the sequence of events in our lives. Our faith is how we *imagine* the universe works most fundamentally. Our faith is also *relational*. That is, it is about how we see ourselves as individuals in relation to the world; in relation to the existence of the universe. So, our faith is how we imagine the ultimate values in life, the ultimate powers driving human life, and how we understand our life as being driven by those powers; how we understand our life in relation to the fundamental workings of the world.

For a fundamentalist Christian, the ultimate *value* may be worshiping Jesus as understood through a literal interpretation of the Bible. He may believe that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate *power* acting in life, directing events according to God's will. He may understand his own life-course as a story of movements away from and then back toward God's will; the major division in his life may be between the years before he was saved and the years since being saved. All of this is the particular *content* of his faith: the way he imagine the ultimate values, ultimate powers, and the story of his life in relation to those.

For a secular Humanist, the ultimate value may be objective truth obtained through science, applied for the benefit of humanity here on Earth. She may believe that the ultimate power in life is evolution; the natural selection of the fittest organisms and the fittest social structures within a particular environment. She may understand the course of her own life as a movement away from the superstition and ignorance of childhood, and of the masses, and toward understanding based on reason and objective knowledge. All of this is the particular *content* of her faith: the way she imagines the ultimate values, ultimate powers, and the story of her life in relation to those.

For a Zen Buddhist, the ultimate value may be the experience of oneness with the basic fabric of being, formless consciousness free from particular thoughts and concerns. The ultimate power in life may be understood as the movement of consciousness away from base worldly concerns and desires that come from greed and ambition, and toward pure formless awareness and love expressed toward all living things. He may understand his own life course in terms of this development of consciousness from a state of entrapment in worldly *samsara* and toward the bliss of *satori*. All of this is the particular *content* of his faith: the way he imagine the ultimate values, ultimate powers, and the story of his life in relation to those.

So, we see that faith isn't just about "believing what you know ain't so." It is about what you believe *is so*. Now let's look at the normal development of faith through the human life cycle. I think that this may help you understand where you are in your own development of faith.

III. The development of faith (Fowler)

a. Research shows that as each of us grows from infancy, to childhood, to adolescence, to young adulthood, and then to full maturity, our faith changes with each stage of life. Our faith goes through *developmental stages* throughout the course of our life; stages that begin with childish notions about ultimate values, ultimate powers, and

our relation to those; stages that become—if we are fortunate—wisdom about those values, powers, and our life. A person born into *any* religion can traverse all of the stages of faith during her lifetime. Let's take a look at these stages of faith. James Fowler identified six of them.

The pre-verbal infant doesn't have *ideas* about the world; rather, he has *feelings* about the world. Most importantly, he develops feelings that he can depend on the world to fulfill he needs. When he is hungry, his world feeds him. When he is wet, his world dries him. When he is lonely, his world holds him and talks to him. When he is afraid, his world reassures him. When all of this goes well enough—perfection is not necessary—the infant achieves a feeling in relation to the world that is called Basic Trust. This sense of Basic Trust is the psychological foundation for a lifetime of healthy mental development, including the healthy development of faith. If the infant instead develops a sense of Basic *Mistrust* toward his world then his healthy psychological development is in danger, including the development of his faith.

As the pre-schooler acquires language, she begins to have thoughts and ideas about the world. She begins to have the power of imagination to figure out what's going on in the world, how the world works. For the pre-schooler, the content of her faith will be a very simplified version of her parents' beliefs, distorted by her imagination and lack of logic. For example, born into a Christian family, she may have notions about God, Jesus, the Devil, and Heaven that are vivid but that are not put together into any very coherent relation.

The elementary school child begins to acquire basic logic. At this age, the content of the child's faith will still be that of his parents, but unlike the pre-schooler, the seven to ten year-old child will begin to make basic logical sense of the notions about God, goodness, sin, what happens after death, and so on. The logical sense will be expressed through religious *stories*—stories about humans interacting with a very human-like God: humans doing good and being rewarded, humans doing bad and being punished, God being happy when we follow his commands, God being sad and angry when we don't. These stories, of course, are handed down within particular religions. The child hears them and modifies them in his mind based on his own fantasies and still-limited logical abilities. Research suggests, by the way, that even children born into non-religious families develop this *Mythic* level of faith, which is Stage2 of faith development. Children do not escape the stories of the primary religion of their sub-culture.

At about age 12, the adolescent begins to form an image of her *personal* relation with God (or with the ultimate ground of Being in some religions). She begins to form an understanding of the meaning and calling of her particular life in relation to God's will. She still accepts rather uncritically the faith beliefs of her sub-culture. The symbols of her religion are taken as literally sacred representations of God: the Cross, the Sacraments, the Holy Water, for example. God is present in these symbols and they must not be mistreated in art or in other ways. This adolescent stage of faith is called the Synthetic-Conventional Stage, or Stage 3. Her beliefs are conventional for her religious subculture, and the subculture's beliefs are synthesized into a faith that makes personal sense to her and gives her a personal direction in life. According to the research of James Fowler, this conventional stage of faith is the predominant stage in churches and synagogues in the US. This is the highest stage of faith attained by many adults.

Many individuals, usually sometime in their 20s, have experiences that cause them to question the absolute truth of the beliefs within their religious subculture. He ceases his reliance on external authority for the content of his faith. He may notice contradictions among those beliefs, or they may learn enough about other religions to realize that every religion is a product of its culture. He realizes that there is no firm vantage point from which to say that one religion is true and all the others are false. He realizes that religious stories and dogma are products of the human mind. He realizes that his religious symbols are just symbols, not actually filled with supernatural power or value. He is able to evaluate his religion's beliefs critically to see what is illogical or contradicts his morality. This is the Individuative-Reflective Stage of faith, Stage 4.

As Fowler points out, whether a person will move from the preceding Conventional Stage to this Reflective Stage of faith depends greatly on the ideology of the groups with which the person has contact. Someone brought up in a fundamentalist church who attends a fundamentalist college is less likely to develop beyond the conventional stage of faith. Someone brought up in a liberal church who attends a secular college and who takes courses in comparative world religions is more likely to attain the reflective stage of faith.

The loss of conventional religious beliefs can be a major upheaval in life, and can produce a period of psychological turmoil that can last several years. The person converts religiously-based commandments about morality and behavior into psychologically- or philosophically-based *reasons* about morality and behavior—reasons that may not have any firm foundation and that don't carry the power of commandments. The purpose and meaning of life can be brought into doubt since no longer is he following the life script validated by his religion.

One possible reaction to the loss of conventional religious beliefs is stark atheism and nihilism: there is no ultimate point to existence, seek happiness for yourself and the ones you love; you're born, you die, that's it. Others in this faith stage stay within their religion, but not as true believers. They stay for the good feelings and for the community. Others in this stage reject any particular religious beliefs but have a sense of there being "something"—they don't know what—more to life than just living, being happy, and then dying. These are often individuals who call themselves "spiritual but not religious." For many adults this Stage 4 of faith is the highest stage attained. In James Fowler's research, most adults were in the Conventional Stage 3 or in the Reflective Stage 4.

A small percentage of individuals attain the next, fifth, stage of faith, the stage of Conjunctive Faith. Developing into stage 5 is unusual before the age of 50. Here the person moves *back toward religion*. She knows that all religious beliefs are relative to a culture. She knows that the stories of her faith are not literally true. She knows that the symbols of her faith are man-made icons. But that doesn't trouble her anymore. She also feels that science, psychology, and philosophy are not sufficient. She senses that there is a creative force or power toward goodness in the world that is beyond physics and beyond biology. She knows that religions express through symbols and feelings a *truth* about this creative force. She realizes that each religion expresses this universal truth through its own particular stories and beliefs. She is ready to accept the truth of all religions and to learn from them. She may call this force toward goodness God, or Love, or the Christ principle, or the creative ground of Being. A person in this Stage 5 may, for

example, reclaim being a Christian, but with the realization that Christianity expresses truths about the same reality as does Islam or Buddhism.

In his research, James Fowler found rare individuals who attained the next, sixth, stage of faith, which he termed Universalizing Faith. These individuals express total commitment to furthering goodness in the world, regardless of the personal consequences. Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are three examples. Because they are so heedless of the powers that are invested in the status quo, persons in this stage of faith face a high risk of becoming martyrs.

b. Our faith, then, is our *imaginative* construction of the ultimate values of life, the ultimate powers in life, and the story of our life in relation to those values and powers. In the course of our life, we have the opportunity to develop from pre-school faith notions based on fantasy, and then later based on religious stories, to a conventional faith based on a personal relationship with God, then to a reflective level of faith based on critical analysis of religious beliefs, then to a participation in religious traditions based on an awareness of truths that can only be expressed through feelings and symbols. Each stage of faith is valid for a particular level of psychological development. At its best, each stage of faith can fill the person with a sense of oneness with the loving, creative force of the cosmos; each stage can guide and sustain the person through the course of life with its inevitable challenges and losses.

IV. Religions as structures of faith

a. Each world religion is a system of ideas defining ultimate values and ultimate powers in life. Each religion passes on its ideas to the next generation. Each religion sustains its adult members through the changes and losses in life. Each religion can include every stage of faith.

b. Each individual community of faith, each church, has an “average expectable level of faith development.” In most faith communities most members will be at stage 3, the conventional level of faith. In some faith communities most members will be at stage 4, the reflective level of faith. I don’t know that there are any faith communities where *most* members will be at stage 5, the conjunctive level of faith. Rather, there are some faith communities that will be more attractive to, and hospitable toward, individuals who are at stage 5. People choose their particular faith community based on its average expectable stage of faith development. Birds of a faith stage tend to flock together.

c. As Fowler points out, the movement upward from one stage of faith to the next is facilitated by involvement with groups that foster spiritual development rather than spiritual fixation. Groups that encourage questioning and analysis of religious tradition, that encourage the study of other religions and philosophies, that encourage experimentation with spiritual or “peak” psychological experiences help their members move from Conventional to Reflective to Conjunctive levels of faith. According to Fowler, such spiritually nurturing faith communities are few and far between. This young congregation is an attempt to create one.

V. Faith for post-traditional spirituality

a. We have seen that even for those of us who are beyond traditional religious beliefs the term *faith* has relevance. Each of us has notions about the ultimate values and ultimate powers in life and about our particular life story in relation to them. Our faith

may not be fully conscious and certainly may not be critically examined. But we *do* have one.

We have seen that each person develops through stages of faith beginning with uncritical acceptance of the beliefs of our religious sub-culture and then potentially moving through faith stages that become more independent of dogma, more abstract than religious stories, and more universally inclusive of peoples and religions: faith becomes more independent, abstract, and universal.

We have seen that each of the world's religions includes all of the stages of faith. Within each religion, particular church communities will have members who are mostly at one stage of development. Each church will attract, and will be most accepting of, persons who are at that particular stage of faith.

b. Those of us who are interested in the further development of our faith should look for opportunities to study faith, to study other religions, and to study those individuals who have attained the Conjunctive and Universalizing stages of faith, stages 5 and 6. We should also seek opportunities for direct experience of, immediate perception of, the creative ground of Being. We should look for faith communities that will facilitate such learning and such perception. Through such a community, we can move beyond religious or philosophical dogma and attain our own direct understanding of the creative fabric of the universe, which is our soul. Amen.