Fowler’s Faith Development in Children

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James W. Fowler

Son of a Methodist Minister
Experience at Methodist conference center
Comparison of spiritual journeys
Childhood images of God
Faith incorporates human experience & intellect

- Undergraduate degree at Duke University
- M.Div at Drew University
- PH.D at Harvard
- Directory for Faith Development, Emory University
Stages of Faith

Pre-Stage-Primal Faith (ages 1-2)
Undifferentiated Faith: formed in infancy parents most important

Stage 1 - Intuitive-Projective Faith (3-7)
Fantasy filled, moved by examples, mood, imagination, language formed, magical thinking

Stage 2 - Mythic-Literal Faith (8-12)
More concrete, takes into self. Systematic thinking, reciprocal fairness. Less reliance on fantasy, faith based on shared traditions, stories, practices & beliefs
Stages of Faith (cont.)

Stage 3 - Synthetic-Conventional (Early Adolescence & Beyond)
Abstract thinking; see things from another person’s point of view

Stage 4 - Individual-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood & Beyond)
Objectification and critical choosing of one’s beliefs, values & commitments

Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith (Mid-life & Beyond)
Hold together polar tensions, truth is more complex, openness

Stage 6 - Universalizing Faith (Mid-life & Beyond)
Moving beyond the tensions between opposites, emptying of self.
My Project

Children’s Stages of Faith
My Hypothesis:

- Children, age seven, are in transition between Fowler’s Stage 1 and Stage 2 of his Stages of Faith.
- Children in transition between Stages 1 and 2 of Fowler are also in transition between Period II Preoperational Thought and Period III Concrete Operations in Piaget’s theory of cognitive development.
- There is a correlation between the Fowler and Piaget stages with Kohlberg stages.
Guiding Questions:

- Will stories or parables stimulate elements of faith?
- Will answers to questions about the parables reveal elements of faith?
- Will answers allow me to evaluate children in relationship to Fowler’s Stages of Faith.
- Will their answers place them in Piaget’s Period II or in Period III?
- Will their answers place them in Kohlberg’s Level I Pre-conventional Morality between Stage 1 and Stage 2?
The Parable of the Forgiving Father
1. I just read to you the story of The Forgiving Father. Which of the two grown children do you relate or identify with the most? Why?
2. What would you have done if you were the oldest (youngest) child?
3. What would you have done if you were the youngest (oldest) child?
4. How do you think the father felt?
5. Do you like the youngest son’s friends? Why?
6. What does this story tell you about forgiveness?
7. What does this story tell you about your faith? How would you apply it to yourself?
8. Does anyone in this story remind you of God?
9. Can you re-tell me the story of The Forgiving Father?
10. What is the best part of the story?
Results

- Analysis Chart
- Distribution of Stages
- Evaluation of Responses
- Comparison of Fowler, Piaget, Kohlberg
Conclusion

Of the three seven year olds one was in Stage 2, the other two straddled Fowler’s Stage I and Stage II.
Application

Vertical: God and the Child

Horizontal: The Child and Community

Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it” — Mark 10:15

“All train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it” — Proverbs 22:6
The Guiding Questions

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Nature Vs. Nurture

Fowler, Piaget and Kohlberg fall slightly on the nature side of the line because they believe their stages are passed in hierarchical order, in sequence without skipping a stage, or reversing their order. It is based on human physical development and its relationship to cognitive development. The child’s ability to respond appropriately to nurture (their environment) depends on their process of maturation.

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| NATURE | NURTURE |

“In Piaget’s view, the environment is important, but only partly so. The environment nourishes, stimulates, and challenges the child, but children themselves build cognitive structures.”