



Stages of faith and identity: birth to teens

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Faith development theory and research have focused on a generic understanding of faith that sees it as foundational to social relations, personal identity, and the making of personal and cultural meanings [1–9]. The authors ask that the reader think of faith in a more inclusive sense than Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, or Judaic faith. Faith, in the sense used here, even extends beyond religious faith. Understood in this more inclusive sense, faith may be characterized as an integral, centering process underlying the formation of the beliefs, values, and meanings that (1) gives coherence and direction to persons' lives; (2) links them in shared trusts and loyalties with others; (3) grounds their personal stances and communal loyalties in a sense of relatedness to a larger frame of reference; and (4) enables them to face and deal with the challenges of human life and death, relying on that which has the quality of ultimacy in their lives.

Faith, taken in this broad sense, is a common feature of human beings. In the language of child psychiatrist Erik Erikson [10], faith begins with basic trust as the child forms bonds with the mother and other intimate caregivers. As the child matures physically and emotionally, faith accommodates the development of an expanding range of object relations, and when exposed to religious symbols and practices, the child may nurture a sense of relatedness to the transcendent. The authors draw on research, theory, and clinical observations that provide more detailed perspectives on the emergence and development of faith (understood in this broader sense) from birth through the teen years.

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Stages of faith: an overview

In the following descriptions of the seven faith stages and the changes they bring, the authors acknowledge the complex interplay of factors that must be taken into account if we are to begin to understand faith development. These include biologic maturation, emotional and cognitive development, psychosocial experience, and the role of religious/cultural symbols, meanings, and practices. This complexity is increased when gender and race are considered, which the authors try to do in this account. Because development in faith involves all of these aspects, human development—movement from one stage to another—is not automatic or assured. Persons may reach chronologic and biologic adulthood while remaining best defined by structural stages of faith that would most commonly be associated with early or middle childhood or with adolescence. Similarly, contexts of spiritual nurture and practice, coupled with a person's spiritual aptitude and discipline, may lead children to more rapid and deep development in faith.

Appendix 1 provides a detailed supplemental characterization of the structural aspects and operations of each of the seven stages.

Primal faith (infancy to 2 years)

More physical and neurologic growth and development occur in the first year of life than during any other life stage. Assuming a relatively uncomplicated pregnancy and delivery and a healthy neonate, parents can expect the birth weight to double by 5 months of age and triple by the first birthday. Length at birth will increase by 50% during the first year. By the second birthday, the brain will attain 70% of its full adult weight, its neurons sprouting millions of dendrites. By 3 months of age, infants can attend to visual and auditory stimuli for at least 3 to 5 seconds. By 16 weeks, they can hold up their heads, and by 5 months, they have developed characteristic arm and leg movements for contented and angry states. At 9 months, babies can gesture intentionally for desired objects or to be picked up. At 12 months, girls are able to walk with support, with African American and other ethnicities mastering these gross motor skills earlier than many infants of European backgrounds. Girls often achieve these physical milestones slightly earlier than boys. By a girl's first birthday, object permanence—the knowledge that an object continues to exist even when it is out of her immediate sight—is attained [11,12].

Attachment between the infant and her or his parent/caregiver is a process with important implications for the child's future relationships. Attachment refers to the emotional bond begun at birth but nurtured for months thereafter that is enduring, specific to the individual adult and infant combination, and stimulates and is stimulated by physical closeness. After the first successful attachment to the primary caregiver or caregivers, the infant can generalize the ability to attach emotionally to select others. The first year is crucial in shaping the young child's ability to make healthy attachments in other relationships. For too many individuals, inadequate caregiving, abuse, and neglect adversely affect this vital process.

In Erikson's framework, the developmental task of this time period is characterized as the development of a sense of basic trust [10,12].

In this first stage, a prelanguage disposition of trust forms in the mutuality of the child's relationships with parents and other caregivers to offset the inevitable anxiety and mistrust that result from the succession of cognitive and emotional experiences of separation and self-differentiation that occur during infant development. Experiences combining to form this trusting disposition include body contact and care; vocal and visual interplay; ritualized interactions associated with early play, feeding, and tending; and the development of interpersonal affective attunement in the infant's relations with caregivers. Factors such as these activate prepotentiated capacities for finding coherence and reliability in self and primal others, for forming bonds of attachment with them, and for shaping a predisposition to trust the larger value and meaning commitments conveyed in parental care. Anxiety and mistrust have their own developmental pattern of emergence that caregivers' consistency and dependability help to offset [6,8,10,13].

Intuitive—projective faith (toddlerhood and early childhood)

In young children, gross motor, fine motor, and cognitive development are intertwined processes related to the maturation timetables of the central and peripheral nervous systems. Neurons are migrating, proliferating, and making more complex connections. Children become capable of more sophisticated communications with the production of neurotransmitters. Myelination, the sheathing of neurons in protective layers of fatty and protein substances, increases the rate of neuronal firing and facilitates faster, more complex signals between brain cells and from the brain to the rest of the body. Good nutrition is crucial to these physiologic processes, and early educational stimulation is increasingly appreciated for its role in activating certain neural pathways that might otherwise remain dormant or understimulated. The toddler and preschool periods are times of monumental brain development, continuing a young child's susceptibility to physical and emotional neglect and abuse [14,15].

Cognitively, the toddler is in transition between Piagetian stages. The last phase of the sensorimotor stage occurs in the first part of the second year. Piaget's preoperational stage emerges in the third year as the child tries out symbolic thought and representational play. Toddlers are curious about other children, and progress from individual, solitary play (parallel play) to doing the same thing side by side, without significant interaction with each other (associative play). For Erikson, the fundamental issue of this stage is autonomy versus shame and doubt, and if all goes well, the desired outcomes are the positive qualities of self-control and will-power [10,11,14,16–18].

From the time children begin to use language to communicate about self and objects in the world, we see the emergence of a style of "meaning making" based on an emotional and perceptual ordering of experience. Imagination, not yet disciplined by consistent logical operations, responds to story, symbol, dream, and experience. Children attempt to form images that can hold and order the mixture of

feelings and impressions evoked by their encounters with the newness of both everyday reality and the penumbra of mystery that surrounds and pervades it. Death becomes a conscious focus as a source of danger and mystery. Experiences of power and powerlessness orient children to a frequently deep existential concern about questions of security, safety, and the power of those on whom they rely for protection. Due to naïve cognitive egocentrism, children do not consistently differentiate their perspectives from those of others. Lacking simple “perspective taking” and the ability to reverse operations, young children do not understand cause-and-effect relations well. They construct and reconstruct events in episodic fashion. Fantasy and make-believe are not distinguished from factuality. Constructions of faith are drawn to symbols and images of visible power and size. Stories (such as fairy tales) that represent the powers of good and evil in unambiguous fashion are prized and make it possible for children to symbolize and acknowledge the threatening urges and impulses that both fascinate and terrify them, while providing an identification with the vicarious triumphs of good over evil [19]. There is in this stage the possibility of aligning powerful religious symbols and images with deep feelings of terror and guilt, as well as of love and companionship. Such possibilities give this stage the potential for forming deep-going and long-lasting emotional and imaginal orientations—for good and for ill [8].

Mythic–literal faith (middle childhood and beyond)

By the seventh year, the brain comprises 90% of its adult weight, and the process of myelination is largely complete. Fine motor–adaptive skills and small muscle control are refined, permitting elementary school children to tie their shoes easily, snap their fingers, and whistle. Girls and boys are close to the same height and weight until approximately age 10, with girls tending to experience the onset of pubertal changes an average of 2 years earlier than boys [11].

Melvin Levine, MD [20], outlined 12 “developmental missions” for middle childhood. They are to

1. Sustain self-esteem
2. Find social acceptance, primarily with peers
3. Reconcile individuality with conformity
4. Identify and emulate role models
5. Re-examine values
6. Feel successful in the family
7. Explore the freedom and limits of autonomy
8. Grow in knowledge and skill
9. Become reconciled to his or her own body
10. Handle fears
11. Limit and control appetites and drives, including foods, sexual drives, material wants, the seeking of attention
12. “Know thyself” or develop self-awareness

Although the emotive and imaginal funding of the previous stage is still operative in this newly emerging stage, concrete operational thinking (Piaget) makes possible more stable forms of conscious interpretation and shaping of experience and meanings. Operations of thought can now be reversed, which means that cause-and-effect relations are more clearly understood. Simple perspective taking emerges, which insures that the differentiation of a child's own experiences and perspectives from those of others becomes a dependable acquisition. The young person constructs the world in terms of a new "linearity" and predictability. Although still a potent source of feelings, the previous stage's store of images may get "sealed over," and the episodic, intuitive forms of knowing that marked earlier childhood are subordinated with capacities for more logical and prosaic modes of thinking [17,18].

In the mythic—literal stage, the child, adolescent, or adult does not yet construct the interiority—the feelings, attitudes, and internal guiding processes—of the self or others. That is, 10-year-olds do not yet reliably "have" their feelings. They are involved in the process of learning to recognize, interpret, and manage strong feelings and impulses. Similarly, they do not construct God in particularly personal terms, or attribute to God highly differentiated internal emotions and interpersonal sensitivities. In making sense of the larger order of things, therefore, this stage typically structures the ultimate environment—the cosmic pattern of God's rule or control of the universe—along the lines of simple fairness and moral reciprocity. God is often constructed on the model of a consistent, caring-but-just ruler or parent. In this stage, a sense of cosmic fairness at work can often be seen: the child believes that goodness is rewarded, badness is punished.

In gathering meanings, the mythic—literal child primarily employs narrative. In this respect, this stage provides a permanent contribution to meaning making. Stories are as close as the mythic—literal stage comes to reflective synthesis. Children, adolescents, or adults of this stage do not carry out extensive analytic or synthetic reflection on their stories. They offer narratives from the middle of the flowing streams of their lives. They do not "step out upon the banks" to reflect on where the streams have come from, where they are going, or what larger meanings might give connection and integrated intelligibility to their collection of experiences and stories. In this stage, the use of symbols and concepts remains largely concrete and literal.

The mythic—literal stage begins to wane with the discovery that ours is not a "quick payoff" universe (ie, evil or bad persons do not necessarily suffer for their transgressions, at least in the short run) and often "bad things happen to good people." The authors have coined the term *11-year-old atheists* for children who, in having this latter experience, temporarily or permanently give up belief in a God built along the lines of simple cosmic moral retribution.

The mythic—literal stage initiates and develops the beginnings of reflection on the feelings and ideas of faith. It may be that girls, who Gilligan [21] and others see as having an earlier and more developed interest in and vocabulary for interpersonal relatedness, progress more rapidly in awareness of the emotions and skills of interpersonal relatedness. This more rapid development can mean that girls may

give more attention earlier to the dynamics of relationships than boys, bringing greater sensitivity on the one hand, and earlier capacities to manage and manipulate interpersonal relations on the other [21].

Synthetic–conventional faith (adolescence and beyond)

Puberty for girls (comprised of the accelerated growth in height and weight, an increase in the percentage of overall body fat, and the emergence of secondary sexual characteristics, in addition to menarche) usually begins between the ages of 8 and 13 years of age. The average age for menarche in the United States among girls of European American ancestry is 12.9 years, and among girls of African American descent, it is slightly more than half a year earlier at 12.2 years (with a standard deviation of 1.2 years for both groups) [22–24]. For boys, the comparable patterns of the onset of the bodily and emotional transformations of adolescence come, on average, a year or so later.

Accompanying the exploding physical, glandular, and sexual changes brought on by adolescence also can be revolutions in cognitive functioning and in interpersonal perspective taking. With the emergence of early formal operational thinking (Piaget), a young person's thought and reasoning takes wings. Capable of using and appreciating abstract concepts, young persons begin to think about their own thinking, to reflect on their stories, and to name and synthesize their meanings [17,18].

In this period, we see the emergence of mutual interpersonal perspective taking (“I see you seeing me; I see the me I think you see”) [25,26]. The obverse also can be appreciated: “You see you according to me; you see the you you think I see.” This capacity can make youths acutely sensitive to the meanings they seem to have to others and the evaluations those meanings imply. Identity and personal interiority—one's own and others'—become absorbing concerns.

Personality, as style and as substance, becomes a conscious issue. From within this stage, youth construct the ultimate environment in terms of the personal. God representations can be populated with personal qualities of accepting love, understanding, loyalty, and support during times of crisis. During this stage, youths develop attachments to beliefs, values, and elements of personal style that link them in “con-forming” (forming with) relations with the most significant others among their peers, family, and other nonfamily adults. Identity, beliefs, and values are strongly felt, even when they contain contradictory elements; however, they tend to be espoused in tacit rather than explicit formulations. At this stage, an individual's ideology or worldview is lived and asserted; only gradually does it become a matter of critical and reflective articulation.

When earlier deficits in the self and the individual's patterns of object relations have not been worked through and healed, they become factors that can inhibit the use of cognitive abilities in the tasks of identity and ideology construction in adolescence. Frequently, splits between the emotional and cognitive functioning of adolescents or adults are seen that are directly attributable to such unresolved issues and relations from early childhood. Sometimes, the potential of God as a

constructive self-object must be jettisoned because God can only be emotionally populated with the shaming or narcissistic qualities of our earliest and most salient object relations.

One decisive limit of the synthetic–conventional stage is its lack of third-person perspective taking, which means that in its dependence on significant others for confirmation and clarity about one’s identity and meaning to them, the self does not yet have a transcendental perspective from which it can see and evaluate self–other relations from a perspective outside them. In the synthetic–conventional stage, the young person or adult can remain trapped in the “Tyranny of the They.”

The later stages of faith

To put faith stages typically encountered in childhood and adolescence in perspective, it may help readers to have brief sketches of the three later stages that have emerged from faith development research.

In considering faith development theory, in general, and especially the final three stages, it is important to bear the following points in mind:

1. By determining which stage an individual may be operating in at any given time, it is in no way assigning a grade to or judgment about the validity, sincerity, value, or effectiveness of that individual’s relationship to the deity of his or her faith, or saying that his or her spiritual life is better, more faithful, or desirable than anyone else’s, whether in that stage or another. Faith development theory is not intended to be used, nor should it ever be used, as a measure of “how good a Christian,” “how good a Jew,” “how good a Muslim,” or “how good” anyone of any faith tradition may be. Making such judgments constitutes a major abuse of this theory. Proper use of this theory does not put a value judgment on the contents of a person’s faith and religious/spiritual identity but attempts to describe patterns of knowing; relationships with cognitive, moral, and other forms of development that constitute a person’s relationship to the Higher Being of his or her particular religious tradition; and relationships with other humans, inside and outside the particular faith community.
2. With each successive stage comes a series of qualitatively distinguishable patterns of thought, realizations, and behaviors; in each stage, something qualitatively new and more complex is added to the preceding stage or stages.
3. Transition from one stage to another is not inevitable or assumed. For instance, although many elementary school–aged children are best described by the mythic–literal stage, so are many adolescents and adults. Although there are no upper age limits to these stages, there are minimum ages below which the later stages are not normally found. For instance, it is unlikely for an individual to meet the description of the synthetic–conventional stage before the early teens or early adolescent years, and it is rare to see someone in the individuative–reflective stage before the early 20s. On the other hand, one can see individuals much older than the minimum ages transitioning into

the next stage, and it is not unusual for many persons not to reach the upper stages at all. Again, this does not constitute a value judgment on the maturity, sincerity, or worth of any individual's religious faith [2,5].

Individuative–reflective faith

There are two significant indicators that mark this stage. First, a person must develop the ability to reflect critically on the values, beliefs, and commitments he or she subscribed to as part of constructing the previous stage, the synthetic–conventional. This re-examination of deeply held beliefs can be a painful process. Second, a person must struggle with developing a self-identity and self-worth capable of independent judgment in relation to the individuals, institutions, and worldview that anchored his or her sense of being up until that time. Questions representative of this stage include, “Who are you when you are not someone's daughter, son, or spouse? Who are you outside of your educational, occupational, or professional identity? Who are you beyond your circle of friends or familiar community?” All the inherited or familiar symbols, creeds, beliefs, traditions, and religious trappings are scrutinized, and those of other faiths and traditions evaluated for what they might have to offer. In the end, the familiar and traditional may not be rejected or discarded, but if they are retained, then it is with new clarity and intentional choice [2,5].

Conjunctive faith

This stage is characteristic of a truly reflective adult thinker who recognizes that truths of all kinds can be approached from multiple perspectives and that faith must balance and maintain the tensions between those multiple perspectives. This stage makes sense out of paradoxes. For instance, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is all-powerful yet limits His own expression of power and through the sovereign of history, took on the humble and lowly form of a human man and permitted Himself to be put to death at the hands of other humans. Individuals in the conjunctive stage express a principled interest and openness to truths of other cultural and religious traditions, and believe that dialog with those different others may lead to deepened understandings and new insights into their own traditions and beliefs. Other paradoxes that are dealt with in this stage include the realities that a person is old and young, has masculine and feminine qualities, is conscious and unconscious, and is intentionally constructive and well-meaning while at the same time being unintentionally destructive in some aspects of life and community membership. A person is singular and individuated yet has an increased awareness of being dependent on and in solidarity with friends and strangers. This understanding results in the desire for new ways to relate to God, others, and self [2,5].

Universalizing faith

Throughout all the stages, we have seen that the collection of “people who count” has expanded, so that by the time an individual reaches the conjunctive

stage, he or she is concerned about all people, regardless of nationality, social class, gender, age, race, political ideology, and religious tradition. Finally, at this ultimate stage of faith, the self is drawn out of its own self-limits into a total groundedness and participation in one's understanding of God. In reality, those once seen as enemies may be understood to be children of God, deserving of unconditional love. Evil of all kinds is opposed nonviolently, leading to activism that attempts to change adverse social conditions as an expression of that universal regard for all life emanating from such a close alliance with God's love and justice. Although persons of universalizing faith continue to be human, with common shortcomings and inconsistencies, they are exceptional in the strength of their yearnings that all creation should manifest God's goodness and that all humanity be one in peace. In their boldness to live out the convictions of their faith, they are both freeing and threatening to the rest of us. Relatively few individuals achieve this level of vision and faith-related action. Among those very exceptional figures that most people would agree have reached (or did reach) the universalizing stage are Mohandas Ghandi, Mother Theresa, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and, perhaps, former United States President Jimmy Carter [2,5].

Stages of faith: illustrations from major religious traditions

Because faith development theory transcends the categories of specific religions, the reader was asked at the beginning of this article to suspend thinking about a definition of faith limited to specific traditions (such as Hinduism, Catholicism, Confucianism, and so forth). The reality, however, is that in clinical practice, child and adolescent psychiatrists see children and families from many of the world's different organized religions. In addition, clinicians bring their own religious backgrounds and training, or lack thereof, into each clinical encounter. Before turning to specific vignettes of children and adolescents in the various stages according to the theoretic constructs described previously, it may be interesting and helpful to show the parallels in the understanding of faith that are seen in the major religious traditions.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith [27], one of the world's greatest scholars in the interpretations of the world's religious traditions, set forth a succinct characterization of faith:

Faith, then, is a quality of human living. At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event. Men and women of this kind of faith face catastrophe and confusion, affluence and sorrow, unperturbed; face opportunity with conviction and drive; and face others with cheerful charity.

Smith contrasted *faith* with other terms that are frequently used as synonyms for faith: *religion* and *belief*. He found that when closely studied, most of the major

world traditions see faith not just a matter of believing or of adhering to the teachings of a religious tradition but rather, “faith involves an alignment of the heart or will, a commitment of loyalty and trust.” His treatment of the Hindu term for faith, *sraddha*, puts it best: “It means, almost without equivocation, ‘to set one’s heart on.’” To set one’s heart on someone or something requires that a person has “seen” or “sees the point of” that to which he or she is loyal [27]. Faith is a “resting of the heart,” the “investing of trust in and loyalty to a Reality or Being or Power” [2]. Smith points out that the Hebrew (*aman he’min, munah*), the Greek (*pistuo, Pistis*), and the Latin (*credo, credere*) words for faith parallel those from the Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu sources [2,26]. It may be helpful to share a more developed account of this understanding in a major figure in Christian faith: the apostle Paul.

Paul, a key figure in New Testament history and theology, provides an example of a dynamic understanding of growth and transformation in the Christian faith. Paul taught that there are two major kinds of growth and change in faith, each involving the work of the Holy Spirit in individual lives and in the community of faith.

First, there is the process of gradual maturation and reworking of faith, as when an individual moves from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood. Like cognitive, moral, or ego development, faith development can continue to mature across the life cycle. The following is an illustration:

I Corinthians 13:11–12. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.

For Paul’s elaboration on this gradual development in faith through the movement from childhood to adulthood, the following is an excerpt from Ephesians 4:11–16:

We are no longer to be children, lured here and there by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery and craftiness, but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into him who is the head of the church, even Christ, for the building up of the church in love.

Second, Paul witnessed a more dramatic and radical process of recentering the Christian life—a process of conversion or transformation that deepens and intensifies life in relation to God in Christ. Attachments to false centers of value are broken. Christians attach their souls to God as source and center of life, and as lover of souls. Paul wrote from this more radical and transformative understanding of the conversion dynamics of faith in Galatians 1:13–16:

For you have heard of my former manner of life. . . . How I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it. . . . But then God, who had set me apart, even from my mother’s womb, and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal God’s son in me, that I might preach him among Gentiles.

Paul spoke of an ongoing process of conversion, a continual recommitting and deepening of Christians’ faith and walk with God. Paul’s life revealed this dramatic

process of conversion, moving from a worldview and political view in which he was deeply grounded and from which he was persecuting the followers of Christ, to a vital, total, reorienting of his life in commitment through personal encounter with the risen Christ. He wrote in I Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation: the old has passed away; behold, the new has come!”

The dance of faith development in Christian lives has the twin movements of maturation and development and of recentering and ongoing transformation in Christ. Through God’s spirit, this is an ongoing process of metanoia and renewal in the lives of Christians.

Vignettes illustrating healthy child and adolescent faith development

Intuitive–projective faith (toddlerhood and early childhood)

Debbie, a 5-year-old, was told a story about a girl her age and a little brother who were lost in the forest and frightened of the dark. The interviewer asked what she might say to the little brother who was frightened.

Debbie: I’d say—put him—I would say, “If you’re scared of the dark, bring a mask along.”

Interviewer: A mask? Why would you say “bring a mask”?

Debbie: So—to scare the darkness away!

(Piaget called this kind of answer “romanticizing”—an imaginative way of satisfying an adult who asks too many questions. In a few seconds, however, Debbie came much closer to revealing a central source of her own security in the dark.)

Interviewer: What other things could make you feel not so scared of the dark?

Debbie: Somebody with a fuzzy coat on.

Interviewer: Somebody with a fuzzy coat on? Like an animal?

Debbie: No. My mamma has a fuzzy coat.

Later in the interview:

Interviewer: Where do you think the sun came from Debbie?

Debbie: The sky.

Interviewer: How did it get there?

Debbie: I don’t know.

Interviewer: How do you think it might have gotten there?

Debbie: Before anyone was even born, you mean? Mm hm. God.

Interviewer: What do you think God might look like?

Debbie: [Without hesitation] Air. You know why?

Interviewer: Why?

Debbie: Because He’s everywhere.

Interviewer: That makes sense.

Debbie: But not in your hands.

Interviewer: [Puzzled] What do you mean, not in your hands? You mean you can’t hold God?

Debbie: My mom said not in your hands. . . My mum says not in your hands. . . Also, she said, “When you love God He’s in your heart,” and I love God.

Interviewer: And so God is in your heart?

Debbie: Mm hmm.

Interviewer: I think that is a beautiful idea.

Debbie: [Quickly and firmly] And it is *true*! She’s true!

The mythic–literal stage

The following comes from an interview with 8-year-old Will. Will is Catholic.

Interviewer: What do you think children of your age might be most worried about?

Will: Their mother or their father.

Interviewer: Afraid that something might happen to them?

Will: Yes, like if, like, I didn’t know what happened to my uncle. I mean I really got worried. I forgot about it a few minutes and then I remembered. [Voice becomes plaintive and sad.] Oh no, I don’t want him to die. No. I went upstairs and I said a prayer and then came back. My mom was looking down at the floor and I said, “Is he OK?” and she said, “He’s dead.” So I started to cry.

(To relieve the strain of this obviously fresh account of grief, the interviewer asked Will if the uncle was his father’s or his mother’s brother.)

Will: I know what my mother, my mother’s wife is, I mean my mother’s mother is. I know who my father’s mother is, and my father’s father and my mother’s mother. But my mother’s mother died. I’m getting mixed up with my mother’s father and my mother’s mother and my father’s father and my father’s mother.”

Somewhat further, the interviewer asked Will, “What happens to people when they die”?

Will: Oh, they get pale. They have white all over them. Like, my brother read this story—and he was about to attack a bear. And the bear attacked him and he didn’t know it but his face was literary, literally torn off. . . . There was just pale hanging down. . . .

After telling an amazingly vivid and detailed story about Adam and Eve, and the sin of “eating the apple,” Will gives the following characterization of God:

Will: OK. Well, if you want to know who God is, I don’t know. He could be a spider, he could be anything, even a snake. But, God is our father, he’s supposed to be a man. Mary is our mother. God is *invincible*. And there, there, there’s like another person, there’s three people that are part God, mostly God, The Holy Spirit, Jesus, and God. . . .

Interviewer: Does God talk to people?

Will: When their dead, yes.

Interviewer: But not when they are alive?

Will: Yes, well, in a way, yeah. When you pray.

Interviewer: Does God cause things to happen?

Will: No. Well, yes. He causes people to love one another. He helps. And he causes—I don’t know how he does it—but he causes the devil to have pain

somehow. He makes it rain and there's only one way it can rain: [a bit smugly] by *God's power*. And if God wasn't looking at you right now, or taking care of you, you wouldn't be alive.

Interviewer: God makes the decision about when we should die?

Will: Yes. He calls you up there. He calls you up to heaven, yes.

Interviewer: Are you afraid of dying?

Will: Well, I've been wanting to die to see my uncle, but I've thought about it. No, I don't want to die, I like it the way it is. But if God's up there, then I don't care. I don't care. I'd rather go up there.

Synthetic–conventional faith

Consider these passages from a bright 11-year-old respondent named Stan. From a minister's family, and attending good schools, Stan shows evidence of emerging formal operational thinking and thoughtful imagination.

Interviewer: If there were creatures on other planets in the universe, do you suppose they'd be hostile or do you suppose they would be friendly?

Stan: Well, some could be hostile, some could be friendly. I just—there's just one thing I have always believed in.

Interviewer: What's that?

Stan: It's impossible that we're the only people around, because, you know, space just goes on and on. We don't know how far, and it just seems impossible that life is only on one planet.

Interviewer: How do you think life originated?

Stan: From the sea, but I don't know how it came about. In science books, it's from the sea, but in the Bible, God made Adam and Eve and all the animals, but...mostly the Bible tells *why* and science tells *how*.

A recurrent theme in Stan's interview was an almost despairing awareness of the ecologic damage caused by human technology and warfare.

Interviewer: Do you think it was a colossal mistake, then, that human beings ever appeared on the scene?

Stan: No. Because at first we weren't doing anything against nature. We were living with them, or at least in the Bible we were, or in science, as monkeys, we *were* nature. But then as we started evolving and then we turned into *Homo sapiens*, what we are now. Our brains are destroying us. We are so smart and we are building so much that is going to kill us all. Like the automobiles we are making, they're just pouring out poison.

When asked whether human beings are somehow basically flawed, or if they changed from the time of the Bible until now, Stan replied:

Stan: They have, yes, because back then we built smaller houses and small cities and didn't make them real high. We didn't have cars to pollute the air. The only thing we were doing was raising dust and breathing out. But the dust would settle with the rain and the carbon dioxide would go into the plants and they'd put out oxygen. We might have had some evil then, like people got killed...but Adam and Eve were perfect, almost, until they ate the apple—I'll put it that way.

Interviewer: What did that mean, when they ate the apple?

Stan: That started the evil that just spread. There is not a place in this world that there's no evil, except animals. They don't know, you know, what they are doing, you know, the killing. They just know they've got to eat. . . . I just don't think we will ever find anything that we won't need gasoline for. . . . We didn't need it because—if God had just told them not to eat the tree, and then they'd taken off all the fruit or something, I don't think this would have come around except for the devil.

Interviewer: Tell me a little about the devil in that story. Do you believe the devil is a—well, what do you believe about the devil?

Stan: The devil is just a—emotions of people made physical into a mythical character. It's—what the devil is is evil, and he might have taken the form of a snake, but all he was, was evil in the form of a snake. . . . If you take the “d” off of devil, you have evil, and like that, somebody just took the “d” off of it and put something on it, and made the word, devil.

Interviewer: Now, when you say the devil is a “mythical character,” what does that mean?

Stan: It means that people think that he is physical, that he is bodily, but he is in our bodies. But he does not have a body; he uses ours to do what he wants.

Interviewer: Well how would you talk about God? Is God a mythical character, too?

Stan: He is physically; so is the devil, physically, but they are both here in our thoughts and minds. They just—and I just—I don't see why we came around. How did God take the trouble to make us? He didn't have to. He could have just left us monkeys, with no evil or anything. . . .

Summary

In closing, some of the strengths, limitations, and criticisms of faith development theory need to be acknowledged. Fortunately, there was gender balance in the formative sample of 359 interviews from which the theory of faith development derived (50% each of male and female respondents).

In the original sample, Protestants made up 45% of the interviewees, Catholics represented 36.5%, 11.2% were Jews, and 3.6% were Orthodox Christians. A remaining 3.6% were “other.” Given the growth in the numbers of adherents to other major traditions in the United States, interview research needs to be conducted to widen the sample to include Muslim, Buddhist, and secular respondents. Interviewees have not been studied longitudinally.

Furthermore, most of the foundational research was conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s. A new major round of faith development interviews could shed light on the impacts on peoples' faith of “globalization” and the features of experience that have come to be called the “postmodern condition.” These phenomena reflect patterns of radical secularization and the erosion of religious and moral authority on the one hand and, paradoxically, the worldwide growth of fundamentalist and

conservative faith practices on the other. Add to these phenomena the interest of many “nonchurched” persons in “spirituality” and we begin to grasp the richness and diversity that faith development research encounters today. Professor Heinz Streib of the University of Bielefeld is conducting the most significant research in the faith development tradition. The research he and his colleagues are conducting in Europe and in the United States promises to yield some tangible data and insights into these issues.

To date, faith development theory has not been incorporated into child, adolescent, and family psychiatric interviewing and case formulation to any appreciable or measurable degree. These perspectives and inroads into the interior lives and thought processes of young people, however, may be helpful in the understanding of normal and pathologic development and of healthy and psychiatrically ill children and adolescents. Further collaborative work in this area is needed among psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychologists of religion, religious educators, and theologians.

Appendix 1. Stages of faith and selfhood [2,5,7,8,28]

Primal faith (infancy)

A prelanguage disposition of trust forms in the mutuality of a child’s relationships with parents and caregivers to offset the anxiety that results from separations; increasingly rich awareness of others.

Intuitive–projective faith (early childhood)

Imagination (stimulated by stories, gestures, and symbols, and not yet controlled by logical thinking) combines with perception and feelings to create long-lasting images that represent both the protective and threatening powers surrounding the child’s life.

Mythic–literal faith (child and beyond)

The developing ability to think logically helps the individual to (1) order the world more consistently in terms of causality, space, and time; (2) enter into the perspectives of others; and (3) capture life’s texture and meanings in stories.

Synthetic–conventional faith (adolescence and beyond)

New cognitive abilities make mutual perspective taking possible and enable an individual to integrate diverse self-images into a coherent identity. A personal and largely unreflective synthesis of beliefs and values evolves to support identity and to unite oneself in emotional solidarity with others.

Individuative–reflective faith (young adulthood and beyond)

Critical reflection on the individual's beliefs and values, utilizing third-person perspective taking; understanding oneself and others as part of a social system. The internalization of authority and the assumption of responsibility for making explicit choices of ideology and lifestyle open the way for critically self-aware commitments in relationships and vocation.

Conjunctive faith (early midlife and beyond)

The embrace of polarities in a person's life, an alertness to paradox, and the need for multiple interpretations of reality mark this stage. Symbol and story, metaphor and myth (from a person's own tradition and from others') are newly appreciated (second or willed naïveté) as vehicles for expressing truth.

Universalizing faith (midlife and beyond)

Beyond paradox and polarities, persons in this stage are grounded in a oneness with the power of being. Their visions and commitments free them for (1) a passionate yet detached spending of the self in love and justice; (2) devotion to overcoming division, oppression, and violence; and (3) an effective anticipatory response to an in-breaking commonwealth of love and justice.

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