The first thing that needs to be said about “faith”, as researched by Fowler, is that it can refer to either religious or non-religious faith. For Fowler, “faith” is a characteristic of all human beings, whether or not they subscribe to one religion or another, or even to no religion at all. In this sense, “faith” is as universal as human life or human language or human culture. It is also as varied as any of these. “Faith” can be lived by children, by adolescents, or by adults; and in each case it will have a different shape or pattern. In fact, “faith” could be described as the very pattern of trust and commitment that shapes a person's life. “Faith” could also be defined as the way in which humans go about making and maintaining meaning in life. At the very centre of human faith is a movement beautifully captured in the Latin word “credere”, which derives from “cor – dare”, in other words, to give (dare) one’s heart (cor) to someone or something significant.

Fowler theorises about seven stage-like, developmentally related styles of “faith”. In describing these distinctive styles of “faith”, Fowler asks a comprehensive set of critical questions. He asks of each stage of “faith”,

- What form of logical thought does it use? (Piaget);
- How does it facilitate different styles of role taking? (Selman);
- With what forms of moral judgment is it consonant? (Kohlberg);
- Within what bounds of social awareness does it operate?
- Wherein lies the locus of authority?
- What form of world coherence does it manifest?
- How does it allow symbols to work?

The answers given to these seven questions can be understood as seven different perspectives from which to view the life of “faith”, or seven different dimensions of each stage of “faith”. Each stage of “faith” consists of a unique amalgam of these answers.

**Primal or Undifferentiated Faith (Infancy, years 1 and 2):** Bodily contact is crucial at this phase of human development. In the first two years of life, before the advent of any language, the infant has profound experiences of both trust and anxiety. The ability to trust others (so foundational for all forms of faith) seems to be innate; but it also needs to be drawn out of the infant by the promptings of parents and other close relatives and friends. By simply being there in a caring manner, they help to create in the infant a sense of mutuality, which can later blossom into relationships of faith and hope and love. But all is not perfect during this period. The infant often feels the pain of separation, and the ensuing anxiety may even deaden his openness for basic trust. Not yet able to talk or communicate through language, the infant nevertheless develops the “incorporative self”.

**Intuitive–Projective Faith (Early Childhood, years 2–7):** With the acquisition of language skills, a richer “impulsive self” begins to grow. Before the advent of logical thinking, the imagination of the child is able to roam free as a bird. Stories stimulate, rituals and symbols fascinate. This is a time of profound feelings and emotions. It is also the time for constructing those guiding master–images of good and evil, of life and death, of protection and threat, with which the human being begins the long journey into conscious faith.

**Mythic–Literal Faith (Childhood and beyond, years 7–12):** Fowler calls this phase the time of the “imperial self”. The typical primary school child develops the ability to reason at a concrete level, and tries to make sense of the world through notions of causality, space and time. Equally, the child begins to enter into the perspectives of others, and to appreciate that others may see the world in a different light to them. Stories retain their attraction, as key sources of the meaning of life.
Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence and beyond, years 12 etc): With the growing cognitive abilities of the teenager, mutual perspective taking is now feasible. A major developmental task at this stage is to integrate the range of distinct self-images into a coherent identity. Teenagers need to discover whom they really are as persons, within all the relationships that have shaped them so far. They build up a distinctly personal but largely unreflective or unexamined synthesis of values and beliefs; and this combination functions both as a support for identity and also as a way of bonding emotionally with others. This is the period of strong peer-pressure, and of conformity: it is the time for the emergence of the “interpersonal self”.

Individuative-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood and beyond): Though this stage of “faith” may begin to emerge before the end of second-level schooling, it is more usual to find it today at a later stage of life. One may have left the supports of home. One reflects more critically on one’s beliefs and values. One has a greater sense of self and others as belonging to a social system, and not just to families and peer-groups. This is when one’s “institutional self” begins to emerge. At this stage people attempt to internalise the authorities, which give direction to life. They want to assume responsibility for their major choices. The ideal now if to make critically self-aware commitments in one’s relationships and in one’s vocation in life.

Conjunctive (Paradoxical-Consolidative Faith) (Mid-life and beyond): Life is seen no longer in black and white terms, but rather as a combination of “this and that”. “Both/and” replaces “either/or”. One embraces the polarities of life: joy and sadness, health and sickness, even life and death. Paradox now reveals itself as the key to making sense of life. Reality requires many rather than one single interpretation. The rediscovery of the power of symbol, story, metaphor and myth involves a reawakening of the child-like qualities of an earlier period, and leads the middle-aged person into a deeper appreciation of the mystery of truth. Fowler describes this phase as the period of the “inter-individual self”.

Universalizing Faith (Mid-life and beyond): When it seems that one has finally made sense of the complex mystery at the heart of life, there is another opportunity to progress even beyond paradox and polarity, and to find oneself grounded in a oneness with the power of being. The “God-grounded self” has finally come on stream. People at this stage are committed visionaries. They “shake our usual criteria of normalcy”. With passion and yet some detachment they continue to spend themselves in love, devoted to overcoming division, oppression and violence. They are waiting in faith, hope and love, not for Mister Godot, but for the God of the Cosmos.