

I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray.

Yet I turn, I turn,  
exulting somewhat,  
with my will intact to go  
wherever I need to go,  
and every stone on the road  
precious to me.

The Layers, Stanley Kunitz

Young I visited  
this pool; asked my question,  
passed on. In the middle years  
visited again. The question  
had sunk down, hardly  
a ripple. To be no longer  
young, yet not so old  
is a calm without  
equal. The water ticks on,  
but time stands, fingerless.

From Fathoms, R S Thomas

## THE STAGES OF FAITH

The stages of faith have an ancient history trawling back to St Theresa of Avila's interior rooms, the progress of the soul in the writings of St John of the Cross, John Bunyan's A Pilgrim's progress and Dante's Divine Comedy.

Faith is a dynamic, changing and evolving process of becoming. It is a verb, not static like a noun, something we have or have not. It is a way of living that encompasses all of life. Beliefs may remain unaltered but what changes is our understanding, experience and outworking of these beliefs.

Of the six stages James Fowler outlines none is higher or better than any other though each stage does offer a deeper and broader understanding and experience of faith than the stage which precedes it.

*Transitions between faith stages are not a stroll but a shipwreck* – dissolution of sense and an experience of ambiguity and alienation are typical. Such uncertainty may cause paralysis and choosing not to move on.

**Stage 1.** The innocent – Pre-school's blend of fantasy and experience

**Stage 2.** The Literalist – Differentiating above, strongly influenced by rules and authoritative teaching and a literal interpretation of the Bible (20% of adults'). God is a stern but loving parent.

**Stage 3.** The Loyalist – Tribal stage of conformity to deep convictions and security in strong commitments. God is external and transcendent.

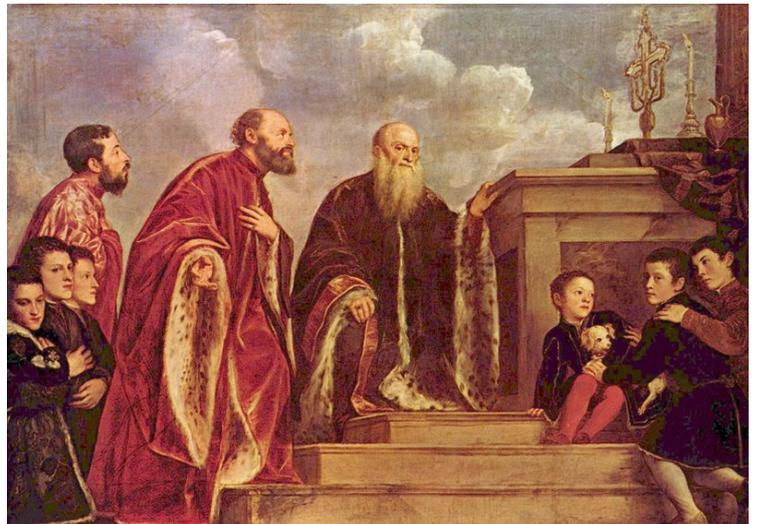
**Stage 4.** The Critic – Received beliefs and values now examined and new sense of self emerges, standing out against significant others.

**Stage 5.** The Seer – Seldom reached before mid-life. Humbled by the unconscious and unknown. Aware of need to hold and face polar tensions, truth is multiform and complex, will live with ambiguity, wonder and mystery, opens to other traditions and receptive to a return to symbols.

**Stage 6.** The Saint – Decentering of self to receive others regardless and abandonment to the ultimate, universal authority of God in all of life.

Read Alan Jamieson's A Churchless Faith on James Fowler's stages, pp110-120.

Based on  
*Painting the  
Word* (John  
Drury) on  
Titian's 'The  
Vendramin  
Family'



## REFLECTION

Titian explores the different stages of development through how the eyes are used.

The children's gazes are lively, but with a fidgetiness that can tip over into boredom. The three boys on the left are hemmed in by their elders... two have lapsed into bored abstraction while the third is just entering the adult world of steady contemplation. This coming-of-age is exemplified by the young and the mature man in crimson robes. Their fervent gazes dominate the picture. But another gaze, at ninety degrees from theirs, acts as a counter-balance. The old man in his dark purple robe occupies the very centre of the picture, and his limpid, friendly eyes are on us. This senior Vendramin seems to have made his life and settled his account with God. He does not hesitate to steady himself, though a layman, with a hand familiarly and unself-consciously grasping the sacred altar. So, he is free from self and seeking and happy to give himself over in welcoming attention to strangers like ourselves.