

Imam Alhaddad and James W. Fowler Perspectives on the Concept of Stages Faith Development: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: The research related to the development of the stages of faith is an interesting theme to be researched, considering that human needs in religion need to be accommodated with qualified knowledge. In Islam, figures who talk specifically about the stages of faith development have not been found much, even though if Muslim scientists more carefully research the writings of contemporary figures, these stages can be found. Imam Alhaddad is one of the great scholars from Yemen who talks about this in his books. In the world of western psychology, James W. Fowler is the initiator of the theory of the stages of the development of human faith. This paper tries to find common ground and differences between these two theories. The author uses a descriptive-qualitative analysis method with comparative research of the views of the two figures. As a result, Fowler and Imam Al-Haddad agreed that the spiritual journey through stages is natural and necessary to reach the depth of faith. In Fowler's theory, faith develops through stages such as Intuitive-Projective Faith (which focuses on external influences such as parents and the environment), to Universalizing Faith which emphasizes the awareness of love and universal justice. In the context of Imam Al-Haddad's teachings, the stages of spiritual development focus on the search for knowledge, the practice of worship, the purification of the soul (tazkiyatun nafs), and reaching the level of ihsan—a deep awareness of Allah's presence in every action. Both theories illustrate that spirituality is not just a matter of knowledge or belief, but also involves a constantly evolving inner transformation.

Keywords: Stage of Faith, Imam Alhaddad, James W. Fowler.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Islam is the number 2 religion with the largest number of adherents after Christianity is also the religion with the fastest development in recent years. The Pew Research Center (2022) projects that this number will continue to increase every year.

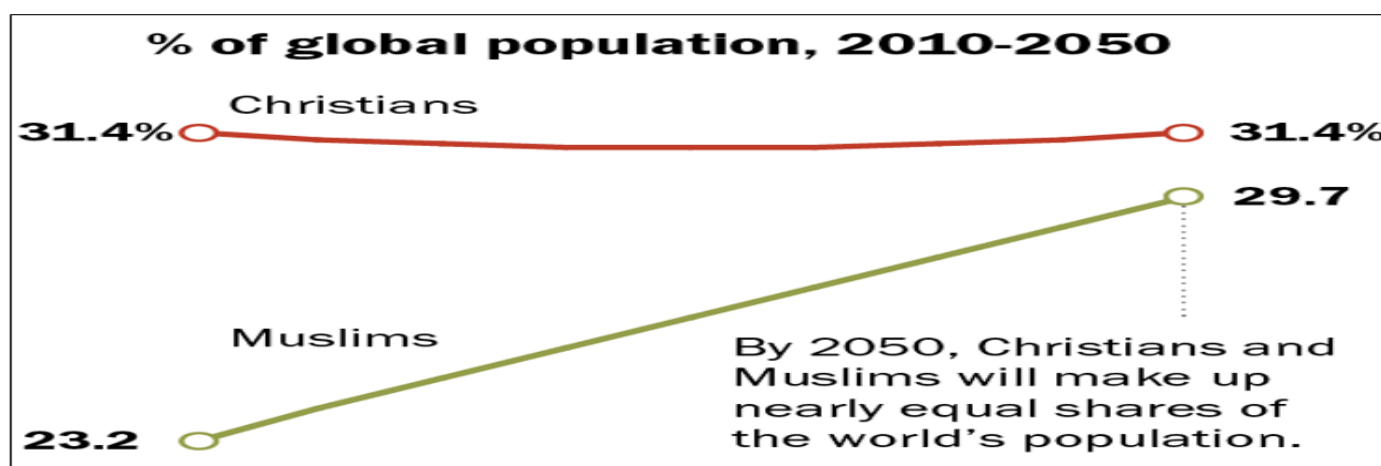


Fig 1 The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projection, 2010-2050. (Pew Research Center, 2022)

The following data presented by Pew Research (2022) shows that it is predicted that the number of religious adherents will continue to increase until 2050. In particular, the number of adherents of the Islamic religion will reach the same figure as adherents of the Christian religion sooner or later.

However, the lack of research that explores the development of the stages of faith from the perspective of Islam is a problem in itself, this stage includes the sequence of ages and developments at that age and its correlation with a person's faith.

Pew research data from 2022 also states that the level of people in Europe, North America and Australia who say

religion plays a small role in their lives, according to the author, is a result of the low literacy that people have about their religious level. This is also because people today do not know the essence of religion

Referring to the largest number of Muslims in the world, namely Indonesia, based on their data, they state that religion plays an important role in their lives with a value reaching up to 83%. Followed by other countries with a majority of Muslims in their country, most of them state that religion plays an important role in their lives. Of course, this is an indication that people's high confidence in their religion must be balanced with good and quality knowledge about their religion.

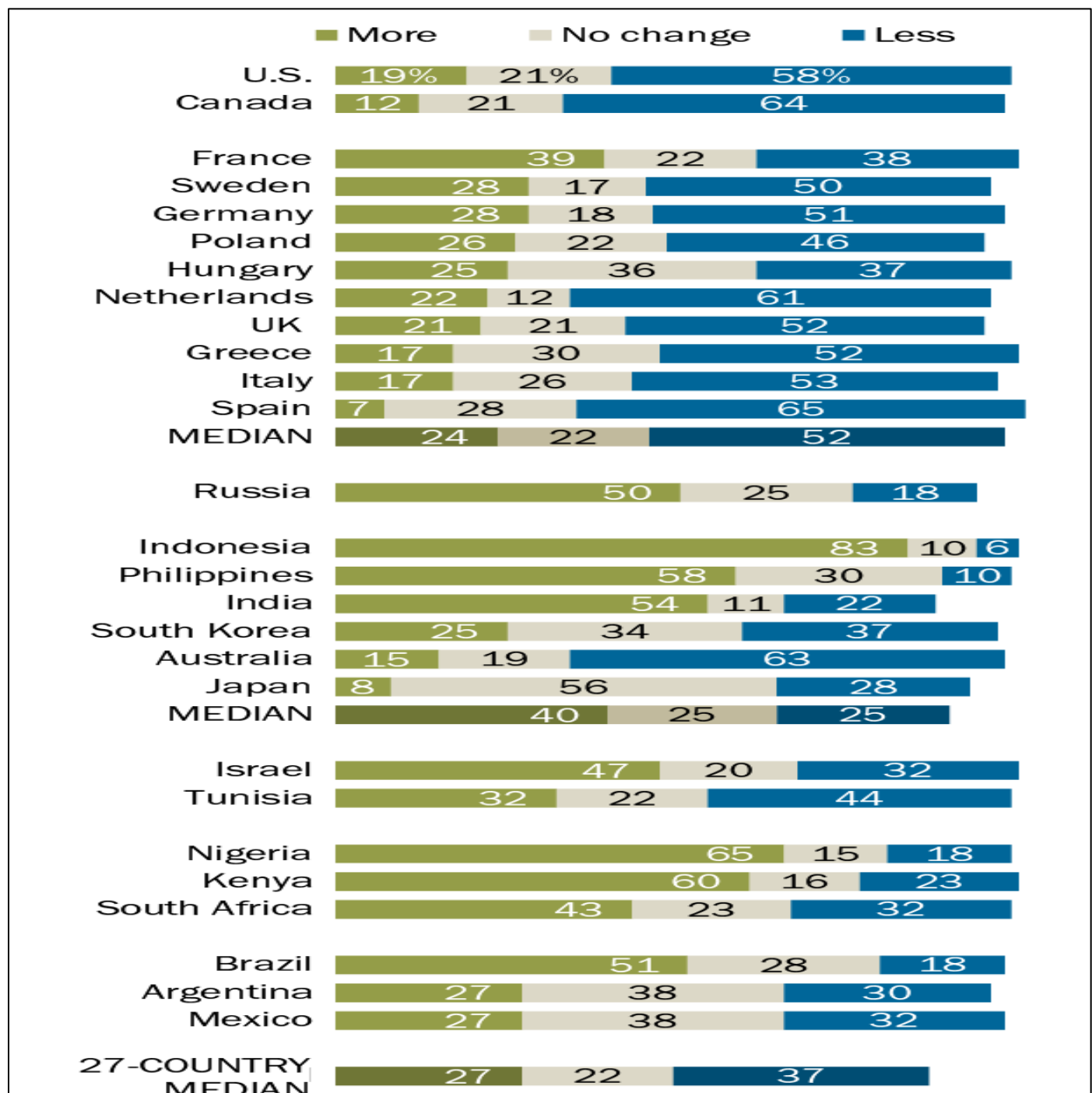


Fig 2 Global Attitude Survey Toward Religions Satisfaction

In the tradition of western psychology, this is something that has been massively done by conducting both quantitative and qualitative research on the stages of faith development and its correlation with other variables (Jones, 2022; Day, 2017; & Randal, 1985).

This is an urgency and novelty that needs to be solved by starting to develop research based on the views of figures, especially Islamic figures in a psychological context, considering that in quantity the number of Islamic communities in the world is really large.

Faith is a deep belief in the truth of a religious teaching or principle, which is reflected in the understanding, commitment, and practice of spiritual values as the foundation of individual and community life. Among the scholars who have an interest in the formation of faith is Abdullah bin Alwi al-Haddad who is famous by the name Imam al-Haddad. He is a 12th-century H scholar who came from the southern Republic of Yemen. He is also referred to as a *mujaddid* or reformer of his time. He has several diverse writings, and most of his writings explore the formation of a human faith (Al-muhdor, Y.A, 2020).

The name of Imam al-Haddad is familiar, because many of his writings have become readings and studies among Muslims. One of the books is *Ratib al-Haddad* or *Wird al-Lathif* which is a collection of *wirid* and *dhikr* which is the daily reading of students in several Islamic boarding schools (Al-Haddad, 2000). There are many dimensions of Imam al-Haddad with his works and thoughts that are worth to investigating, especially in the field of faith formation. There are several researchers who have conducted studies on Imam al-Haddad and his thoughts, but they do not describe his thoughts in their entirety, especially in the aspect of faith formation.

Among the researchers is Achlami (2007) who concluded that the assumption of Sufism leads to attitudes and understandings of fatalism is not proven in the Sufism behavior of Imam Al-Haddad. According to Imam al-Haddad, even though Sufism behavior is considered to carry attitudes and understandings of fatalism, such as *Ridha* (acceptance), *zuhud* (asceticism), *tawakal* (trust in God) and *sabr* (patience), still has a considerable influence on the role of human actions. Imam al-Haddad's teachings on social responsibility and Sufism, such as the enforcement of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, responsibility to the community and family, and jihad in the way of Allah.

According to Imam Al-Haddad, a person who wants to deepen his faith needs to go through certain stages which include purifying the heart, strengthening worship, and practicing noble morals. This stage begins with improving the relationship with Allah through consistent *dhikr* and worship, followed by cleansing oneself from bad traits and strengthening piety (Al-Haddad, 2012). Furthermore, individuals are expected to develop a sense of love for Allah and His Messenger, as well as cultivate the nature of *tawakal* (trust in God) and *ridha* (accept with pleasure in His destiny). This process continues with the attainment of a high level of spiritual awareness, which brings one closer to Allah and has true inner peace (Al-Badawi & Musthafa Hasan, 2016). Imam

Al-Haddad emphasized that this stage is not only theoretical, but must be accompanied by concrete deeds in daily life.

In the world of mainstream psychology, James W. Fowler is known as the initiator of the theory of faith stages. The stages of faith development according to James W. Fowler emerged as a result of efforts to understand how religious beliefs and understandings develop along with individual growth. Fowler, who was inspired by developmental psychology and theories of moral thought, argued that faith is not static, but rather develops through a series of stages that are closely related to age, experience, and self-understanding (Fowler, 1981).

Based on observations of individuals from various backgrounds, Fowler identified six stages of faith development that reflect changes in the way a person interprets and practices religion and how they relate their beliefs to the world around them. This theory not only provides an understanding of the psychological aspects of spiritual development, but also provides insight into the relationship between faith, identity, and social context (Rustam et al., 2021).

II. RESEARCH QUESTION

- How are the stages of faith development conceptualized by Imam Alhaddad and James W. Fowler, and what are the key differences in their theological and psychological approaches?
- How do age, environment, and spiritual goals influence the characteristics of faith development in the perspectives of Imam Alhaddad and James W. Fowler?
- What are the implications of their differing approaches for understanding faith development in the context of spiritual education and psychological growth?

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This research uses a qualitative method with a comparative approach. The comparative method itself aims to compare the existence of one or more variables in two or more different samples (Sugiyono, 2012). Comparative research aims to find similarities and differences related to objects, individuals, work procedures, ideas, criticism of people, and groups. This research can also be used to compare the similarities of views and changes in the views of individuals, groups, or countries towards certain cases, events, people, or ideas (Arikunto, 2010).

In this research, the author uses a qualitative method with a comparative approach, namely comparing and finding similarities and differences in the theory of faith development put forward by Imam Alhaddad and James W. Fowler.

The primary sources consist of original texts by Imam Alhaddad—*Ad-Da'wah at-Tammah*, *Al-Nashaih al-Diniyah*, and *Risalah Adab Suluk al-Murid*—and James W. Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (1981) and *Faithful Change* (1996). These works are treated as foundational documents representing each thinker's perspective. Secondary sources include scholarly interpretations, journal articles, and previous

comparative studies, used to support triangulation and strengthen the analytical framework.

Data were collected through documentary analysis and interpreted using thematic coding. Relevant textual passages were categorized into seven analytical themes: (1) main focus, (2) stages of development, (3) approach, (4) environmental context, (5) distinct characteristics, (6) primary goal, and (7) relation to age.

A hermeneutic approach was also utilized, particularly for classical Islamic texts, to ensure contextual understanding by considering linguistic, historical, and spiritual dimensions. Comparative analysis was conducted through cross-thematic synthesis to reveal both explicit statements and underlying philosophical assumptions.

IV. FINDING OF THIS STUDY

A. Brief Biographies of Imam Alhaddad and James W. Fowler

Imam Al-Haddad was born in the city of Tarim on Monday night, the 5th of Shafar, in the year 1044 AH. When he was 4 years old, he was struck by smallpox which caused him to be unable to see (Alhaddad, 2017). This does not discourage him in seeking the sciences learned in Islam and is able to make him close to Allah SWT. He tried hard to memorize the Qur'an until it was finished. He is very grateful to Allah SWT, pleased (*ridha*) with what Allah SWT has set for him, and does charity to seek the pleasure of Allah SWT.

He is from the city of Tarim in Hadramaut, Yemen. In his time, he was the most *faqih* (expert in *fiqh*) and embrace the madhhab (line of thought) of Shafi'i. He is also the best scholar with the faith of *ahlussunnah* who walks on the understanding of *asy'ariy* and is at the forefront of the way of life and faith in the path of the Sufis. His nickname is "Islamic professor" and "axis of da'wah and guidance". He was a reformer in the order of the *Sâdah Bani 'Alawi*. His lineage traces back to Al-Imam Husin bin Ali Abu Thâlib son of Fathimah bint the Prophet PBUH (Alhaddad, 2017).

The figure of Imam Al-Haddad has achieved perfection of knowledge, intellect, wisdom and the strength of memorization that makes Imam Al-Haddad superior to modern times. The knowledge he conveyed was detailed and complete in his information so that people who learned from him also got a lot of useful value.

The conception of faith used by Imam Al-Haddad to improve faith by paying attention to the urgency of morality comprehensively. Imam Al-Haddad explained that the first step that a human being pays attention to is to be honest in intention. In honesty of intention there is honesty in charity. The intention to seek knowledge because of Allah SWT and to revive the *shari'a* (Islamic law) brought by the Prophet Muhammad SAW, then this kind of intention will support him in charity and towards the next level of faith.

James W. Fowler was born in 1940 and died in 2015. He is a psychologist and theologian from the United States who is famous for his contributions in the field of psychology of religious and faith development. He is best known for his

work on *Stages of Faith*, first published in 1981, in which he put forward a theory of the development of human faith in six stages related to age, experience, and self-reflection.

Fowler combined a psychological approach with theological thought, as well as influences from thinkers such as Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson. As a professor at Emory University, Fowler teaches and researches about the relationship between psychological development and spirituality, and he is heavily influenced by the social and cultural context in understanding how individuals experience and develop faith. His theories on the development of faith have been widely used in religious education and psychology, as well as providing important insights into the dynamics of human spirituality (Jones, T.P, 2005).

B. Stages of Faith

Imam Alhaddad did not explicitly talk about the stages of faith development, but if he is more observant, these stages can be seen through his writings and essays. The stages of development of Imam Alhaddad (1999) formulate the stages of faith development into two phases:

➤ *Riyadhatu al-Shibyan*

(Early Childhood Character Education). At this time the Alhaddad imam offered three stages, namely: *Ta'dib*, *Ta'lim* and *Tahdzib*. *Ta'dib* is the teaching of values that leads to the formation of good character. *Ta'lim* is learning and knowledge about character based on religious norms. *Tahdzib* is the guidance of children about good character (Alhaddad, 1999).

➤ *Al-Riyadhatu wa al-mujahadah*

In this period after the childhood phase, the formation of character steps into the adolescent and adult phases. In this phase, Imam Al Haddad gave one stage, namely proportionality. Which means that character formation must be in harmony between birth and mind, behavior and knowledge, movement process, eating and drinking (Alhaddad, 1999). Likewise, human character must go through the process of introduction, education and learning. At this stage, Imam Al Haddad stated that character formation can be through Sufism or Sufi journey. This means that there is a close bond between the alignment of the soul and the intellect in the individual that is actualized in his behavior and actions (Alhaddad, 1999).

In contrast to Imam Alhaddad, James W. Fowler explicitly talked about the stages of faith development, in the theory of the stages of faith development. Fowler synthesized two theories on cognitive development by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Fowler, 1996). Faith, according to Fowler, is believing or believing in a source or center of transcendent power and faith grows in tandem with the development of thinking ability, and moral development (Fowler, 1981). James W. Fowler, in his theory of the *stages of faith development*, identifies six stages that reflect how a person understands and lives faith throughout life such as:

- The first stage, Intuitive-Projective Beliefs
- occurs in children aged 2-7 years, where faith is imaginative and emotional, influenced by stories or authority figures (Fowler, 1981).

- Mythical-Literal stage
- Ages 7-12 years is characterized by a literal understanding of religious teachings, with a focus on simple moral values.
- Synthetic-Conventional (adolescent)
- Faith becomes more personal but is still heavily influenced by social environments such as family and friends.
- Individual-Reflective stage (young adult)
- a person begins to question and reflect on his or her beliefs, resulting in a more independent faith (Fowler, 1981).
- The Conjunctive Stage (middle adulthood)

Involves an awareness of the complexity and paradox of faith, with an appreciation for diversity and symbolism. Finally, in the Universal stage, faith transcends religious or cultural boundaries, focusing on universal love and concern for humanity, as seen in great spiritual figures (Fowler, 1981).

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Harmony and Incongruity

Imam Alhaddad's perspective of faith is emphasized on the aspect of adab (attitude), this is the forerunner of the birth of Baalawi Sufism which is the core of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, namely morals (Alhaddad, 1999b). So that the process of faith development described by Imam Alhaddad is always colored by the nuances of moral formation that are very thick in each process of development. In his writings, when describing the process of faith, Imam Alhaddad does not only stop at descriptive explanations but always follows it with tips for developing potential at that stage (Alhaddad, 2007).

In the 2 stages of development, Imam Alhaddad explained that childhood is a crucial period (golden age), so it is important to always instill and develop character at this age.

The second in adolescence and adulthood, Imam Alhaddad hinted that this is a precarious age where instability in adolescence can plunge him into a bad direction so that maturity in adulthood cannot be achieved, so it is important to harmonize one's birth and mind (Harani et al., 2021).

James W. Fowler's theory of faith development offers a useful view of how faith develops through stages related to psychological maturity and life experience. He emphasized that faith is a dynamic process, ranging from simple understanding in childhood to more reflective and universal thinking in adulthood (Rustam et al., 2021). However, these theories tend to focus more on Western culture and less accommodate the diversity of spiritual experiences across various religious traditions. Nonetheless, Fowler provides important insights into the relationship between psychology and spirituality.

Both Imam Alhaddad and Fowler saw that spirituality developed through stages, with each stage leading one to a deeper understanding of the meaning of faith and a relationship with God. Both approaches emphasize that spiritual development involves significant internal changes and recognize that a person's spiritual development is influenced by the social environment, culture, and life experiences (Ibda, 2023).

What is different from Imam Al-Haddad's approach to Fowler's theory is that Imam Al-Haddad's approach is very specific to Islam, while Fowler's theory is general and seeks to cover all religious traditions. Fowler emphasizes the relationship of spiritual stages with age and psychological development, while Imam Al-Haddad emphasizes charity and a direct relationship with Allah without an explicit link with age (Rifai et al., 2021). Imam Al-Haddad directs his goals to Allah (theocentric-based), while Fowler points to the universality of humanity (humanistic-based).

Table 1 Result

Aspect	Imam Alhaddad's	James W. Fowler's
Main Focus	Ethics and morality as the core of faith.	Faith as a dynamic process related to psychology and life experiences.
Stages of Development	Childhood: important to instill character. Adolescence and adulthood: essential to harmonize one's physical and spiritual self.	Stages of faith develop according to age and psychological maturity.
Approach	Specific to Islam and the morals of Prophet Muhammad (theocentric).	Universal approach encompassing all religious traditions (humanistic).
Context of Environment	Emphasizes moral formation through social and cultural environments.	Faith is influenced by social, cultural, and life experiences.
Distinct Characteristics	Provides practical guidance for spiritual potential development.	More theoretical approach, based on psychological research
Primary Goal	Direct connection with God (theocentric).	Reflective understanding and universal humanism (humanistic).
Relation to Age	Does not explicitly link spiritual development to age.	Emphasizes the connection between spiritual stages and age-related development

VI. CONCLUSION

Fowler and Imam Al-Haddad agreed that the spiritual journey through stages is natural and necessary to reach the depth of faith. In Fowler's theory, faith develops through stages such as *Intuitive-Projective Faith* (which focuses on

external influences such as parents and the environment), to *Universalizing Faith* which emphasizes universal awareness of love and justice.

This study concludes that both Imam Alhaddad and James W. Fowler acknowledge that faith develops through

stages, although they differ in the structure, orientation, and contextual emphasis of those stages. While Fowler outlines a linear psychological framework tied to age and cognitive development, Imam Alhaddad offers a theocentric, morally embedded process rooted in Sufi spiritual practice and Islamic ethics.

From a broader analytical perspective, this comparison confirms that faith development is not a monolithic process but is shaped by cultural, theological, and philosophical traditions. Fowler's model is more suitable for psychological education and interfaith dialogue, while Imam Alhaddad's framework provides a strong foundation for character education and spiritual training in Islamic contexts. This indicates that the universality of spiritual growth must always be interpreted through the lens of tradition-specific values and practices.

Generically, the study proposes that models of faith development should be understood as both culturally relative and structurally comparable, enabling scholars to build bridges between religious thought and psychological theory without compromising doctrinal integrity. This contributes to the growing field of Islamic psychology, which remains underrepresented in mainstream developmental theories.

This comparative framework encourages further academic inquiry into classical Islamic figures whose psychological insights remain largely unexplored. Future research is recommended to: 1) Systematically map other Sufi scholars' views on spiritual development, 2) Integrate Islamic perspectives into broader developmental psychology curricula, 3) And develop culturally responsive models of spiritual education that align with local belief systems.

This study not only fills a conceptual gap but also opens a dialogue between Western psychological models and Islamic theological traditions, offering a pathway toward a more inclusive understanding of human spiritual growth.

The author recognizes that this study has limitations, particularly in its scope of analysis which only covers a portion of Imam Alhaddad's writings. Many of his other works remain unexplored and may offer deeper insights into the development of faith from an Islamic perspective. Therefore, future research is encouraged to conduct a more comprehensive and systematic study of his complete writings. It is hoped that such efforts will uncover new concepts and contribute to the advancement of Islamic psychology.

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