

Saint Teresa of Avila's Mansions Correlate with the Spiritual Development Stages

Saint Teresa of Avila. (1515–1582) Late in her life sixteenth century Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Avila wrote *The Interior Castle*, a major classic of Christian mystical literature illustrating the steps a soul makes along the road toward greater spirituality.

She described seven rooms, or Mansions, each corresponding to a different phase in the spiritual journey. Mary Jo Meadow, now a retired professor of psychology and religious studies from Minneapolis first spotted the correlation between these rooms and Fowlers' stages and explained them in a 1993 journal article.

In Teresa's First Mansions are people who have not yet made much spiritual progress. They are still under the control of a lot of what she called "reptiles," the pull of the material world—possessions, honor or business affairs—which provide occasions of sin outside the castle. They are also mostly unaware of their own failings. According to Meadow, the First Mansions correlate with Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional (or our Faithful) stage where people generally follow an unexamined set of values and opinions.

In Teresa's Second Mansions people have gained enough self-knowledge to realize that conventional or conformist religiosity is not what they want, but they have not yet made the leap beyond it and thus have not yet converted to the next step. According to Meadow, being in the Second Mansions is like being caught between Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional and his Individuative-Reflective Stage.

The person in the Third Mansions is self-monitoring, and driven by his own reason and his own conscience. While others have spoken of this stage as one in which reason takes predominance over spiritual concerns, Teresa turned it around and said the goal in these mansions (if one desires to progress to the next level) is learning to not trust one's reason too much. Teresa spoke in the language of her time saying in the Third Mansions people are at risk of forgetting to "fear God." Thus to progress beyond the Third Mansions a person would have to diminish the importance he ascribes to his own reason and begin to think in more spiritual terms. Another task in these mansions is to learn that we must not try to convert others to our beliefs. The third mansion corresponds roughly to Fowler's Individuative-Reflective Stage (and our Rational level.)

The Fourth Mansions is the first mystical-type level. Here the soul (person) has generally risen above the level where the "reptiles" of sin can tempt it. (this is the same as saying it is self-governing.) Further, it realizes it is advancing not by its own striving, but with the help of grace. There is a level of acceptance (one of our Mystic traits!) here—the soul no longer shrinks from the trials of life and now attaches little importance to the things of this world. Meadow likens the Fourth Mansions to an "intensification" of the Individuative-Reflective Stage.

In Teresa's Fifth Mansions the soul goes into a sort of cocoon where there is complete trust in the will of God. The ego is diminished and the importance of self and petty worries is reduced. One no longer feels the need to control events and has no trouble controlling his impulses. Meadow correlates the Fifth Mansions to Fowler's Fifth stage—Conjunctive faith. (The fifth through seventh mansions are also analogous to our Mystic level.) Here one begins to acknowledge the truth and validity of other religions and to accept the paradoxes about our existence. The findings of science and the words of scripture both hold valuable truths, though they may seem to contradict one another. There is the uniting of seemingly opposite truths—the person learns to tolerate paradox.

At Teresa's Sixth Mansions there is sometimes intense psychological suffering, but it coexists with joy and an intense desire for union with god. It is likened with the "dark night of the soul." This suffering is also a feature of Fowler's Conjunctive Faith. The person may well be misunderstood by others, may become increasingly occupied in spiritual affairs and does not want to deal with more every day practical issues.

In the Seventh Mansions—the mystical perspective ceases to disrupt ordinary functioning. The person can continue his duties with no difficulty. The person who may have faced inaction before now becomes engaged in the service of God (or service to humanity, as a part of god.) There is a great calm, a forgetfulness of self; the ego is transcended. The interior and exterior aspects of life come into harmony. This is similar to Fowler's uppermost Universalizing Faith stage where the conflicts are reconciled. The person adopts a universal and totally inclusive worldview. He or she may be prone to bold actions that promote that worldview, despite risk to his own personal being. The symbols (of the individual religions) have become transparent and the person understands they all refer to the same Universal Reality.

Meadow concluded that despite being constructed in different locations, times, cultures, circumstances, and languages, and using different methods, "Fowler and Teresa both seem to have arrived at a universal understanding of human spiritual functioning."