

Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys and Developmental Psychology: Toward a Conception of Spiritual Development

ANDREW R. HATALA

Abstract

Previous research outlines the processes of human development with significant detail, including biological, cognitive, and spiritual domains. In contemporary developmental discourse, however, Bahá'í perspectives on spiritual development are virtually nonexistent. In the Seven Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í faith, offers many insights regarding the dynamics of spiritual development. Through a focused study of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, this paper (1) creates a dialogue between classical and contemporary theories of developmental psychology and Bahá'í philosophical perspectives, (2) explores the evolution of the "self," and (3) examines the emergence of spiritual striving in human phylogeny and ontogeny. Overall, it is argued that developmental studies may benefit from a deeper understanding of spiritual development as a core domain of human life.

Résumé

La recherche antérieure souligne en détail les processus du développement humain, y compris dans les domaines biologique, cognitif et spirituel. Cependant, dans le discours contemporain sur le développement, les points de vue bahá'ís sur le développement spirituel sont pratiquement inexistantes. Dans Les Sept vallées, Bahá'u'lláh, le fondateur de la foi bahá'íe, offre de nouvelles perspectives concernant la dynamique du développement spirituel. Par une étude des Sept vallées de Bahá'u'lláh, l'auteur de cet article (1) crée un dialogue entre les théories classiques et contemporaines en psychologie du développement et les perspectives philosophiques bahá'íes; (2) explore l'évolution du « soi », et (3) examine l'émergence

d'une aspiration spirituelle en phylogénie et en ontogénie humaines. L'auteur fait essentiellement valoir que les études en psychologie du développement pourraient bénéficier d'une compréhension plus approfondie du développement spirituel en tant qu'aspect fondamental de la vie humaine.

Resumen

Investigaciones previas bosquejan los procesos de desarrollo humano con detalles significativos, incluyendo dominios biológicos, cognitivos y espirituales. En el discurso contemporáneo de desarrollo, sin embargo, las perspectivas Bahá'ís acerca del desarrollo espiritual básicamente no están en evidencia. En los Siete Valles, Bahá'u'lláh, el fundador de la Fe Bahá'í, ofrece varios puntos de vista acerca de las dinámicas del desarrollo espiritual. A través de un estudio enfocado de los Siete Valles de Bahá'u'lláh, este ensayo (1) crea un diálogo entre teorías clásicas y contemporáneas de la psicología de desarrollo y perspectivas Bahá'ís filosóficas, (2) explora la evolución del "yo," y (3) examina la aparición de esfuerzos espirituales en la filogenia y ontogenia humana. En general, se argumenta que los estudios acerca del desarrollo se pueden beneficiar de una comprensión más profunda del desarrollo espiritual como un dominio central de la vida humana.

The processes of development have fascinated humans for millennia, as evident in various literary works, cultural myths, artistic expressions, or fairy tales that portray heroes and heroines undergoing transformations across the life course.¹ Today, developmental psychologists continue to outline, observe, and theorize about the various elements related to human development, predominantly in relation to biological, psychological, social, and spiritual domains. Over the last few decades in particular, psychological discourse increasingly has recognized the importance of spiritual development in the lives of many diverse peoples, not only because of its observed association to psychological, social, and biological domains, but also because of its own purview comprising a unique existential dimension of human experience involving a purpose or deeper meaning in life.² Although research in this area has grown over the years, a deeper exploration of several key questions is warranted: (1) how should spiritual development most appropriately be conceptualized? (2) What is universal and what is culturally situated with respect to spiritual development?

(3) What are the factors that trigger, cause, foster, or support spiritual development? (4) What is the purpose or goal of spiritual development? And (5) how is spiritual development related to biological processes in both ontogeny and phylogeny?

The purpose of this paper is to address these questions by drawing insights from the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith in order to create a dialogue between Bahá'í conceptions of spiritual development and contemporary theories in developmental psychology. As the Bahá'í Faith is the most recent of the world religions, its perspectives regarding spiritual development have been examined in developmental discourse only to a limited extent. Drawing insights from the Bahá'í Faith is therefore important, not only to augment the already rich developmental literature in this area, but also because of the vast writings on spiritual development and the spiritual dimension of human existence found within the Bahá'í Faith.

In several detailed Writings, Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, outlines the process of spiritual development as a human universal, yet at the same time describes its unique dramatization in ways relative to each individual's historical, cultural, and experiential situations. Spiritual development understood in this way joins the mounting scientific and philosophical discourses—such as works by Bernstein, Bohm, Lample, Medina, Smith and Karlberg, and Rogoff—arguing, in recent years, for a “dialectical” approach to problem solving and the investigation of reality. From this vantage point, human development is simultaneously universal and relative, cultural and biological, linear and circular, mechanistic and organic. It is all and none of these. The theoretical lens therefore adopted for the following analysis is referred to as an *integrative-holistic* or a *unity-in-diversity* perspective, which is inherently multidisciplinary and multiparadigmatic, assuming equality within all levels of analysis (that is, genetics, neurological structures, psychological traits, families, peer groups, and broader contextual influences like culture and ethnicity), thereby attempting to dismantle conceptual borders between nature and nurture, biology and psychology, qualia and quanta, or science and spirituality.

Bahá'u'lláh's mystical work entitled "The Seven Valleys" is the primary source for this paper, as it explores in detail the processes of spiritual development. The description drawn from the Seven Valleys is also complemented by other texts from the Bahá'í Writings where applicable, namely the work of Bahá'u'lláh's son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as well as the work of philosopher and Bahá'í scholar William Hatcher. This paper is composed of four complementary yet distinct sections. First, I briefly describe and summarize Bahá'u'lláh's depiction of the journey of the soul through the Seven Valleys. Second, a dialogue between the spiritual development processes as outlined in the Seven Valleys and contemporary psychological theories of human development occurs. Following this, I discuss the conceptualization of the "self" as presented in the Seven Valleys and its relation to contemporary theories of the self—in particular, Kegan's theory of the evolving self. The final section discusses "spiritual phylogeny" in relation to ontogeny and other contemporary theories of evolution and human sociocultural development.

THE SEVEN VALLEYS

The Seven Valleys stands out among Bahá'u'lláh's works as the most prominent of His mystical Writings. Bahá'u'lláh's composition emerged between 1874 and 1875 in response to the questions of a Sufi judge pertaining to the journey of the soul. The seven stages of the spiritual journey were already familiar to Sufis at that time, having been described by 'Aṭṭár in his *Conference of the Birds* some seven centuries earlier.³ Thus Bahá'u'lláh relates His general acceptance of 'Aṭṭár's seven stages by responding to the Sufi's question in an already familiar style. The general theme involves an individual's or "wayfarer's"⁴ journey of the soul through advancing stages of overcoming selfish tendencies or an identity founded in the limitations of the phenomenal world and thus discovering a true identity in the realms of nearness to the Creator and solidarity with all reality. The Seven Valleys illustrate a compounding sequence of transformational experiences that facilitate and propel individual efforts to develop spiritual capacities.

The first of Bahá'u'lláh's stages is the *Valley of Search*, wherein the wayfarer desperately seeks his Beloved or Creator in all places and all regions: "In every face, he seeketh the beauty of the Friend; in every country he looketh for the Beloved" (*The Seven Valleys* 7). A central quality within this valley is patience. The wayfarer is said to reach nowhere and to attain no goal without remaining firm in the search for the loved one amid all distractions. Apart from patience, determination, sacrifice, effort, and focus on the goal are also crucial: "Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things. That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught, that he may enter the realm of the spirit, which is the City of God. Labor is needed, if we are to seek Him; ardor is needed, if we are to drink of the honey of reunion with Him" (7). Here Bahá'u'lláh describes the path which the wayfarer must take to attain his object. Once a trace of the traceless Friend has been found, the wayfarer enters the *Valley of Love*.

In the Valley of Love the wayfarer, after witnessing a glimpse of his Beloved, becomes like a moth which has found a flame. Longing to reach it, the moth circles around and around, coming closer until it is finally burnt in a brilliant blaze of sacrifice.⁵ Here the heart of the wayfarer is touched by his Beloved and he has fallen in love. Neither reason nor proof settles his excitement: "when the fire of love is ablaze, it burneth to ashes the harvest of reason" (8). This stage marks the beginning of the wayfarer taking leave of self in order to find refuge with the Beloved, a process of self-sacrifice that is coupled with pain. Indeed, the "steed of this valley" is said to be pain and until pain is experienced—like the moth drawn into the flame—the journey will never end. Once this pain of dying to the self is realized, the wayfarer gains understanding and progresses to the next stage of his journey.

The third stage is the *Valley of Knowledge*,⁶ where the inner eye is opened, allowing the wayfarer to understand the mystery of resurrection. That is, the wayfarer finds meaning in death and sees the end in all things. The soul in this valley witnesses a greater perspective of truth and reaches the stage of certitude. The wayfarer is not troubled when faced with pain and calamities. Rather, he will approach them with understanding and recog-

nitiation for he can see the end in the beginning and discovers a hidden blessing and mercy within suffering and tribulation. "In this station he is content with the decree of God, and seeth war as peace, and findeth in death the secrets of everlasting life" (12). Once this new insight is gained, the wayfarer can leave the plane of limitation and ascend into the next stage of his journey.

In the *Valley of Unity* the wayfarer "drinketh from the cup of the Absolute," "pierceth the veils of plurality," and "ascendeth into the heaven of singleness" (17). The wayfarer, like an eagle looking down on the earth with an all-encompassing vision, is freed from the cage of self, released from limitation, and enters into the plane of universality. His vision has widened to such a degree that he no longer sees the phenomenal world subjectively, limited by his own vision, but rather he sees an objective reality through the eyes of the Absolute. With this vision the wayfarer discovers that each created thing in the world manifests some attributes of the Creator—the degree of which depends on its capacity and differs with respect to its kingdom. From here the wayfarer sees knowledge as a single point and realizes that it is only the ignorant that have sought to multiply it. This new vision instills a sense of peace and calmness that initiates entrance into the fifth valley.

With respect to the *Valley of Contentment* and the later valleys, "the tongue faileth in describing these three valleys, and speech falleth short. The pen steppeth not into this region, the ink leaveth only a blot" (30). The Valley of Contentment is marked by true happiness that results from detachment of the world and independence from all things. Joy that was once found in the delights and pleasures of the world is understood to be transitory, thus the wayfarer in this realm holds fast to the hem of the Absolute. Only the wayfarer that has entered this valley has experienced true joy, even though to outward eyes his life is saturated with affliction and suffering. After being content as a result of his detachment from the world, the wayfarer experiences a sense of wonder.

In the *Valley of Wonderment* the wayfarer is said to be struck dumb with the beauty and wonder of the Beloved: "at every moment he beholdeth a wondrous world, a new creation, and goeth from astonishment to aston-

ishment, and is lost in awe at the works of the Lord of Oneness" (32). Like a person who begins to fathom the vastness of the universe, the wayfarer in this valley begins to grasp the immensity and infinite range of creation. He discovers the inner mysteries of the Creator and is led from each mystery to a thousand more. No description can encapsulate the wonders of this stage, but after experiencing the wonder of the Beloved the wayfarer moves toward the final valley on his spiritual journey.

In the *Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness*, which is the furthest state of the mystic knower, the wayfarer dies to the self to find life in God. "Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend" (36). This station marks the culmination of the journey away from the phenomenal world toward the world of the Absolute. The wayfarer is now sanctified from all that exists in the world of creation while at the same time experiences a sense of oneness with all things: "Ecstasy alone can encompass this theme, not utterance nor argument" (39). The wayfarer has now reached the ultimate goal of his search and exists within the realms of nearness to the Creator and solidarity with all reality.

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

According to William Hatcher, the prime condition for the process of spiritual development to occur is the awareness that the process is useful, necessary, and realistically possible. In other words, for an individual to enter the Seven Valleys and to begin the process of their search they must become alert to or recognize the objective existence of the spiritual or Absolute dimensions of reality. Bahá'u'lláh, however, asserts that human knowledge of Absolute Reality is an impossibility, and instead suggests that knowledge of the Manifestations of God—such as Krishna, Jesus, Buddha, Moses, Bahá'u'lláh, and others—is equivalent to the knowledge of the Absolute. Manifestations of God, therefore, constitute an aspect of observable reality that can potentially lead humans to the knowledge and awareness of the spiritual dimension of existence.⁷ Spiritual development is therefore described in Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys as a conscious, self-

directed, autonomous process involving the search for spiritual aspects of reality. Certain terms used to describe the spiritual journey, such as becoming more “self-aware” or “enlightened,” essentially reflect its “conscious” nature.

THE ORIGINS OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Due to this conscious aspect, spiritual development as outlined in the Seven Valleys arguably follows certain biological milestones, such as formal operational abilities that allow for a sense of agency, identity, or self to manifest. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh's son 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggests, “The suckling babe passeth through various physical stages, growing and developing at every stage, until its body reacheth the age of maturity. Having arrived at this stage it acquireth the capacity to manifest spiritual and intellectual perfections. The lights of comprehension, intelligence and knowledge become perceptible in it and the powers of the soul unfold” (*Selections* 285). From this perspective, the origins of spiritual development are necessarily dependent on certain biological processes that emerge or solidify in and around the developmental period of adolescence, making the conscious aspect of spiritual development possible.

Within contemporary developmental literature, neuropsychologists and researchers Newberg and Newberg observe that the period of adolescence typically involves the solidification of certain metabolic brain structures, making possible the basic tenets of personhood including identity, worldview, ideology, and most importantly a sense of agency. In addition, Tilman Habermas and Susan Bluck, researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, suggest that during adolescence humans develop certain cognitive tools (formal operational abilities) that facilitate the appearance of what they term the *narrated self*, thereby allowing individuals to create causal coherence in the individual life story by reference to a single or a few central self-characteristics. In other words, biological processes during adolescence allow for or foster a distinct identity that can be held as a referent through history and changing contexts. Other psychological researchers have also examined the extent to which

adolescence is a “sensitive period” for the development of spirituality. Good and Willoughby, for example, suggest that the normative developmental characteristics for adolescence make teenagers particularly responsive to spiritual overtures. Based on their review, Good and Willoughby argue that the period of adolescence involves, more than other age categories, a propensity towards spiritual explorations, conversion experiences, and spiritual commitments that endure throughout the life span. Similarly, a recent qualitative study by Kelley, Athan, and Miller, involving a religiously and ethnically diverse sample of adolescents (N = 130), also highlights the importance of openness and spiritual striving for adolescents during this important time of self-discovery.

Overall, the origins of spiritual development as a self-directed conscious process in both contemporary developmental literature as well as Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys are similar. In both cases, particular aspects of the human spiritual nature required for development, such as agency, autonomy, or self-identity, may develop only after certain biological processes have occurred during the period of adolescence. The origins of both biological and spiritual development, therefore, may be traced to distinct periods during one's overall life cycle.⁸

THE ENGINE OF GROWTH

The transition between developmental stages of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys can be described as the interaction between binary tensions. Like a magnetic motor that oscillates based on the negative and positive poles of the magnets within, so too spiritual development is driven, from a number of different perspectives, by the oscillating tensions of opposing forces. From one perspective, this binary tension can be expressed as a cognitive process, between the known and unknown, in something akin to Jean Piaget's *equilibration*.⁹ Equilibration, from Piaget's cognitive theories, is the notion that from birth until about two years old, children investigate their reality through a dialogue between *assimilation*—where we use our current schemes to interpret the external world—and *accommodation*—where we create new schemes or adjust old ones after noticing that our

current way of thinking does not capture the environment completely. Similarly, in Bahá'u'lláh's Valley of Search the wayfarer must "cleanse the heart—which is the wellspring of divine treasures—from every marking, and that they turn away from imitation, which is following the traces of their forefathers" (*The Seven Valleys* 5). Here, spiritual development is a consequence of the tension between the known and the unknown aspects of reality. To progress spiritually, wayfarers must successfully navigate between assimilation and accommodation in order to construct a more complete vision of the world.

Although Piaget's cognitive equilibration reflects characteristics of spiritual development, his original model emerged through observing children as they began to interact with the material world.¹⁰ The equilibration process in spiritual development differs significantly insofar as it involves the individual's beginning interactions with the spiritual dimensions of reality. In this way, the Valley of Search could be described as the stage in which an individual comprehends and scientifically investigates the spiritual dimensions of reality or the Manifestations of God—a process that William Hatcher argues ultimately forms the foundation of and prime condition for spirituality.

Another interesting and perhaps more obvious binary tension exists between the material and spiritual aspects of human reality.¹¹ In his paper *The Concept of Spirituality*, Hatcher argues that the material and spiritual duality is a "creative tension purposely given by God, a tension whose function it is constantly to remind the individual of the necessity of making an effort in the path of spiritual growth" (6). When driven by the desire to satisfy physical or material needs, humans can become aggressive towards others and thus insensitive towards their needs—a process depicted all too often by Freud.¹² Overcoming these biological tendencies requires an individual to engage in a daily struggle with himself in order to maintain the "proper" spiritual perspective on life. Prayer, meditation or regular scripture reading, and communication with the spiritual aspects of reality, thus become central aspects of spiritual development insofar as they help individuals center on spiritual existence. In other words, the conscious centering of oneself on the spiritual dimensions of existence

(that is, prayer) assists individuals to overcome biological tendencies and material needs.¹⁵ Indeed, this aspect is most clearly represented in the transition between the Valley of Knowledge and the Valley of Unity, wherein the individual initiates prayer in order to transcend the plane of limitation and arrive within the plane of unity. Overall, then, spiritual development can occur as a result of the tension between material and spiritual human domains; that is, when biological or material tendencies and desires arise, they create an opportunity to respond to the situation by centering one's thoughts on higher realms of spiritual existence.

Looking at the Seven Valleys as a whole, binary tensions are also witnessed between self/other, independence/interdependence, disintegration/integration, visible/invisible, plurality/unity, potentiality/actuality, doubt/certitude, being/nonbeing, death/life, annihilation/substance, and finite/infinite. Within each stage of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, a tension between a distinct pair of binary opposites excites transitions toward the subsequent stages. For example, in the Valley of Search the wayfarer must travel away from self to move towards the Beloved. In the Valley of Love the wayfarer experiences pain as a requisite to the joys of love. In the Valley of Knowledge one must learn to see beyond the immediate suffering of existence to attain true knowledge of being. In the Valley of Unity the wayfarer must learn to see the unity of all things within the plurality of creation. In the Valley of Contentment the wayfarer becomes poor in the world to attain true wealth. In the Valley of Wonderment the wayfarer's own categories are destroyed in order to expose divine reality. In the final valley, nothingness in the world becomes the precondition for subsistence in God. Within each stage, a binary tension is experienced which creates the potential for growth.

In terms of developmental psychology, this binary logic is familiar. Abraham Maslow, for instance, argued that spiritual development occurs dialectically between growth-inhibiting forces and growth-fostering forces. Maslow suggests that growth must entail both reward and suffering and that from a developmental perspective both poles are mutually co-constitutive. Similarly, Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development commonly employs a binary tension that is to be resolved at each

successive stage of development.¹⁴ A core aspect present within Erikson's theory of the life cycle is the idea of a *test* as the motivator for development and growth. Accordingly, psychosocial development occurs at eight critical periods in a person's life where the individual comes face to face with a test—what Erikson terms a *crisis*.¹⁵ According to Erikson, we can respond to the test appropriately so that a corresponding virtue emerges; if not, a corresponding failing will ensue. In this way, the test occurs as the result of binary tensions within each of his developing stages. From yet another perspective, the transition between James Fowler's faith stages is also propelled by a similar binary tension or what he terms *disillusionment*. From Fowler's ethnographic research involving some three hundred interviews, he outlined six stages of faith development that individuals traverse during the course of their lives.¹⁶ Fowler observes, for example, that the transition between stage four (individuating-reflective faith) and stage five (conjunctive faith) is the direct result of conflict between the compromises in stage four involving clear logic of distinctions and the recognition that life is more complex. This disillusionment with one's current understanding in stage four propels an individual toward a more dialectical and multi-leveled approach to truth as apparent in stage five.

To sum, it is evident that a logic of binary tensions or "tests" used to describe the process of growth is employed in Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys as well as several theories in developmental psychology. Although these similarities are striking, it is important to note that distinctions exist. Bahá'u'lláh, Erikson, Piaget, Maslow, and Fowler together share the perspective that a test results from the discrepancy between binary tensions, which further instills an opportunity for growth and development. These perspectives differ, however, in the sense that Bahá'u'lláh invokes a spiritual plane of reality that substantiates the reward of the test (that is, the individual will progress towards God or Absolute Reality), whereas Erikson, Piaget, Maslow, and Fowler primarily suggest that the reward of a test or binary tension consists of a greater perspective of life, psychological satisfaction, or existential well-being. Furthermore, within Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, growth occurs not only by individual efforts alone

but also with the help and grace of God, the Creator. This notion that spiritual forces beyond the physical plane can drive development is virtually absent from the previously outlined developmental theories. A deeper understanding of how this non-material or Absolute aspect of reality interacts with material reality to incite spiritual development may be an important area for future research.

THE STRUCTURE OF DEVELOPMENT

As Fowler notes, developmental theorists typically depict “everyperson’s” stories. Their categories of description are necessarily formal, general, and without specific content. The developmental narrative presented in Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys holds true to Fowler's claim—the direction of spiritual growth is universally towards the (unattainable) ideal of Absolute perfection. The structure of spiritual development, however, as presented in Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, is simultaneously mechanistic and organic, continuous and discontinuous, changing and unchanging. On the one hand, there is what developmental psychologist Richard M. Lerner would call a strong “organismic bias” or discontinuity between the respective valleys insofar as the stages form an invariant sequence and no one can skip a stage.¹⁷ Moreover, distinct stages reflect not only quantitative (knowing more) variations, but also qualitative (a different way of knowing) variations, and the latter stages have at their disposal all the knowledge and abilities gained from earlier stages.¹⁸

This organismic stance is strongly reminiscent of cognitive developmental paradigms (such as those of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg). On the other hand, however, spiritual development reflects what Lerner would call a mechanistic bias, that is, a linear, continuous, or gradual progression over time. From here a stable core of the spiritual self or soul gradually develops to reflect greater degrees of perfection already present within. This perspective is also supported by 'Abdu'l-Bahá when He suggests that the “growth and development of all beings is gradual; this is the universal divine organization and the natural system (*Selections* 198–99). On this note, Rhett Diessner argues that if we apply dialectical

reasoning, the process of development becomes simultaneously mechanistic and organismic: "To be able to distinguish change or development, it is necessary to demonstrate, at minimum, differences in an organism overtime. As soon as this is accomplished, then at least two stages exists. To understand the relationship between the prior and latter states, development must in some way be continuous and circular, or the being would have no continuity of identity" (5). From this perspective, spiritual development becomes a hybrid of mechanistic and organismic perspectives. Perhaps what is required is an exponential conceptualization of spiritual development in order to dismantle apparent discrepancies between mechanistic and organismic perspectives.¹⁹

Hatcher puts forward the idea that development is not linear but exponential, wherein the rate of change necessarily changes, while an internal core endures. In an exponential process of growth, the rate of change at the beginning is small but gradually increases until a sort of saturation point is reached. The metaphorical depiction of distance in the Seven Valleys clearly illustrates this process. In the first two valleys, the wayfarer requires a steed or horse to traverse the extensive distance between him and his goal, the Beloved. After these first two valleys, however, the process becomes easier on foot. Finally, after leaving the plane of limitation (the Valley of Love), the remaining four valleys represent differing degrees of intimacy with the Beloved as the spatial metaphor begins to break down.²⁰ This metaphorical distance imagery essentially depicts an exponential process where the rate of change varies (discontinuous—organismic) but the wayfarer remains (continuity—mechanistic).

The idea of exponential development also sheds light on the view that the process of the Seven Valleys is simultaneously changing and unchanging. In the first three valleys, the wayfarer witnesses change and transformation within the phenomenal world. Once in the Valley of Unity, however, it is clear "that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision" (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys* 18). That is, once a certain saturation point on the journey is reached—signified as the emergence into the plane of

universality—the wayfarer sees all things as emanating from the changeless essence of the Absolute. From the exponential or distance metaphors, this occurs at the point when the horizontal movement entirely subsides, giving way to vertical movement only.

Along these lines, religious scholars van der Leeuw and Steinbock together suggest that human experience is essentially composed of both vertical and horizontal components.²¹ The horizontal dimension involves the extension of life to its uttermost limits, wherein individuals seek a deeper, richer, or superior aspect of life. This horizontal aspect, for van der Leeuw, essentially reflects the evolution of society and the constant temporal changes of the phenomenal world. Staying within the horizontal or temporal dimensions of reality alone, however, can obstruct the later stages of spiritual development and instill a kind of existential anxiety. As Steinbock suggests, people everywhere are searching for some kind of happiness or peace in the world. Paradoxically, however, the more deeply we involve ourselves with “temporal” distractions—that is, the whole realm of transitory, secular, or finite things and activities on the horizontal plane—the more happiness seems to elude us.

Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys addresses this paradox by suggesting that true human happiness, and thus spiritual development, results by breaking through the horizontal and finite dimensions of experience into another “vertical” realm. As Steinbock shows, when we search for “new heights of existence,” attempt to “climb beyond” the self's immediate standpoint, or become open to the “vertical givenness of experience” (220), suffering, anxiety, and death associated with the changing horizontal or temporal aspects of reality become the way to “salvation,” the way to our feeling a sense of fulfillment at home in the world (221). The vertical aspects of reality, therefore, reflect the higher stages of spiritual development wherein reality is perceived as unchanging. The Valley of Unity in this case, situated at the mid point of the journey, possibly signifies the transition between the world of the changing (horizontal dimension) and the world of constancy (vertical dimension). Thus, spiritual development as an exponential process involves both changing and unchanging dimensions in the overall structure of development.

From another perspective, changing and unchanging dimensions or continuity and discontinuity can be seen in a co-constitutive relationship within the dynamics of spiritual development. According to medical anthropologist Gay Becker, a disruption in the normal social order of one's life, such as illness or extreme catastrophe, can be understood as a period of discontinuity that actually propels development and substantiates the universal human need for continuity. In this case, the overall metaphor of the valley itself becomes relevant, in that the "ups" and "downs" of the valley could potentially represent the highs and lows brought on by continuity and discontinuity, respectively. In addition to being an exponential process, therefore, spiritual development also includes dips and peaks within the overall journey. Moreover, these discontinuities or disruptions in the overall continuity of development could reflect a state of *liminality* as described by anthropologist Victor Turner, whereby an individual slips "through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (95).

According to Turner, the liminal state reflects a kind of suffering due to transitions between the stages of one's life that are initiated during times of illness or social transition which inevitably alter our assumptive perspectives of reality. During these liminal stages of confusion, where individuals find themselves outside the normal social order, they become "neither here nor there," or "betwixt and between" spaces and identities (95). Far from these stages being destructive, however, their importance, according to Turner, lies in the innate creative forces of human imagination which are fostered or emerge in order to help transcend the boundaries or the structure of the normal cultural order. The overall trajectory of spiritual development, then, inevitably involves these liminal states of disruption wherein a *test* is experienced. After successfully experiencing and navigating through the tests or liminal phases, the individuals may advance to prior stages and development ensues.

THE GOALS OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

The goals of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys involve, but are not reduced to, (1) the increase in spiritual capacity, which facilitates the (2) resolution of

dichotomous thinking that further increases (3) the knowledge of self and (4) the union with Absolute Reality or more specifically the Manifestation of God.²² The final stage in the Seven Valleys is the knowledge of God or the knowledge of the Manifestation of God, which involves passing through the realms of limitation and leaving behind the world of dichotomous thinking. This knowledge does not come about as a certain cognitive process, but rather it is understood as a way of being, conditional on the ability to give up the self to exist within God or Absolute Reality.

There are similarities here between relinquishing dichotomous thinking in the Seven Valleys and the end goals of other developmental theories. Lawrence Kohlberg, for example, expanded Piaget's cognitive stages to the moral domain.²³ In the sixth and final stage of Kohlberg's theory of moral development, the individual is driven morally from a position of universal principles or ethics grounded in abstract conceptions of justice. This often involves the ability to comprehend the world of paradox, observe unity in diversity, and see the end in all things. Similarly, Maslow suggested that self-actualized people—self-actualization being the final goal of his developmental stages—have the ability to resolve dichotomies, to unite opposites, and to come to the realization that dichotomous thinking is often immature. Furthermore, Fowler's sixth and final stage involves the ability to overcome paradoxical tensions by seeing the imperatives of absolute love and justice: "Stage 6 is exceedingly rare. The persons best described by it have generated faith compositions in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all being. Their community is universal in extent. Particularities are cherished because they are vessels of the universal, and thereby valuable apart from any utilitarian considerations. Life is both loved and held loosely. Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith traditions" (201).

The importance of dissolving this binary logic is also depicted by deconstructionist Buddhist scholar Park as a crucial aspect of the understanding of the "right view" or the "middle path," wherein the individual takes a mental standpoint or perspective from which inherent dichotomies of thinking are dissolved. As before, however, important differences between the goals in Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys and other theories of

development are the ideas of union with God or Absolute Reality. Developmental theories presented here, and also certain deconstructionist perspectives as asserted by Park, avoid ascribing developmental motivation to a metaphysics of the Absolute and assert no transcendental or ultimate reality that stands behind or somehow informs binary existence. In contrast, the goal of spiritual development in the Seven Valleys is to navigate these binary tensions to a state of unity where ultimate reality can be grasped. Indeed, as Nader Saiedi notes in his reflections on Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, the stages of the spiritual journey are the stages of struggle to transcend these fundamental oppositions. In this way, the Seven Valleys importantly highlights the idea that Absolute Reality can be known and understood through the Manifestations of God thus bridging the gap between the known and unknown aspects of reality. Perhaps future research on human spiritual developmental could examine how this metaphysics of the Manifestations of God potentially demystifies ideas of Absolute Reality so as to open the spiritual realm of existence and spiritual development to scientific investigation.²⁴

THE SELF IN BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S SEVEN VALLEYS

The Seven Valleys could be understood to describe the development of the self through seven stages. Thus, briefly reviewing some reflections on the self will aid our overall understanding of development through the Seven Valleys. English philosopher John Locke proposed that the self pertained to a stable inner human core, which he called the *perceiving self*—a central point of consciousness that interprets human experiences and orchestrates both the internal life and the external being in the world. Several hundred years later, the American philosopher and psychologist William James rejected Locke's stable unchanging self, suggesting that the self is stable and coherent while at the same time changing over time and across contexts. James proposed two functional subsystems of the self, which he called the "I" and the "Me." The former pertained to the volitional self or the knower and is continuous across time. The later is described as the socially engaged self that constantly changes and adapts to new situations

and contexts. More recently psychologists and anthropologists including De Munck and Goffman have suggested there is no inner human core or “I” and instead only the performative behavior or “Me” exists. For Goffman the self is simply the behavior that is provided by what he terms *cultural stages*—the scripts and masks that are provided to people by the larger social narratives and discourses. At this point it may be argued that the concept of the “self,” whether as an internal stable core or as an external dynamic representation, is a universal human phenomenon. Indeed, psychological anthropologist Jerome Bruner suggests that “perhaps the single most universal thing about human experience is the phenomenon of ‘Self’” (35).

THE MATERIAL “I” AND THE SPIRITUAL “WE”

Within the Seven Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh describes two aspects of the self. On the one hand, the self is the identity of the individual created by God or the spiritual nature; this is inherently a positive sense and is depicted in such writings as “true loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 156). On the other hand, Bahá'u'lláh also suggests that the self is associated with the ego or the lower nature. It is the self we must struggle against if we wish to progress spiritually and is depicted in such writings as, “let your vision be world embracing rather than confined to your own self” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 86).

Placing this understanding within James’s “I/Me” distinction, it is apparent that Bahá'u'lláh asserts two subcomponents of the “I” that exist along a rich and dynamic continuum and correspond to the spiritual and material aspects of humanity respectively. From this perspective, the lower self or James’s “I” can ultimately be transcended, thus orienting the self towards a separate spiritual category that can be separated from James’s “I/Me” distinction as the “We.” Consequently, the self-aspect that is in dialogue with the social world, or James’s “Me,” can thus be the manifestation of either the “I” (lower nature) or the “We” (higher spiritual nature).

If we look to Markus and Kitayama's theory of cognitive self-construals to develop the "I/We" distinction further, I would like to suggest, from a unity-in-diversity theoretical perspective, that the independent and interdependent organizations of the self, as presented by Markus and Kitayama, coincide with the "I" (material) and "We" (spiritual) self-distinctions, respectively. In other words, the "I" can be described by independent characteristics, whereas the "We" can be described by interdependent characteristics. Markus and Kitayama suggested that *independent* self-construal occurs when individual "behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one's own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and action, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others" (225).

On the other hand, *interdependent* self-construals involve "seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship" (227). The argument here is that instead of thinking of the independent self ("I") and the interdependent self ("We") as external to the individual—as was suggested by Markus and Kitayama—we should instead think of them as internally universal aspects of human nature depicted as both the higher (spiritual) and lower (material) aspects of the self that exist as a continuum, more so than any dichotomy. For example, the description of the material self "I" as seen within the Bahá'í Writings reflects a self-centeredness with regards to one's thoughts, troubles, and distress, with little or no concern for others around one.

The description of the spiritual self or "We," on the other hand, as seen within the end stages of the Seven Valleys, exemplifies the characteristics of a decentered self (interdependent), highly conscious of others in a decent, considerate, self-sacrificing, and responsible manner. By associating the higher (decentered/"We") nature of humanity with the interdependent self-construal is not to assert that entire so-called interdependent populations, such as the Japanese, are completely "selfless" (although one could make the case for this with regard to the ideologies of an empty self prominent in many forms of Buddhism and Taoism). The point here is to argue

that each of these potentials (interdependent/“We” and independent/“I”) ultimately lies within each individual along a rich and dynamic continuum and at the same time corresponds to our spiritual and material nature, respectively. Figure 1 visually depicts these I/We/Me distinctions.

FINDING THE SELF THROUGH SELFLESSNESS

In the journey through Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, the human spiritual identity or highest potentiality is actualized by moving beyond selfish personalities and limited desires. The struggle, dialogue, or interplay between these two dynamic human aspects—as we have already seen within the analogy of a magnetic motor—characterizes much of the spiritual development process. In this way, the Seven Valleys describes the mystery of sacrifice; that is, just as the seed must perish to give way for

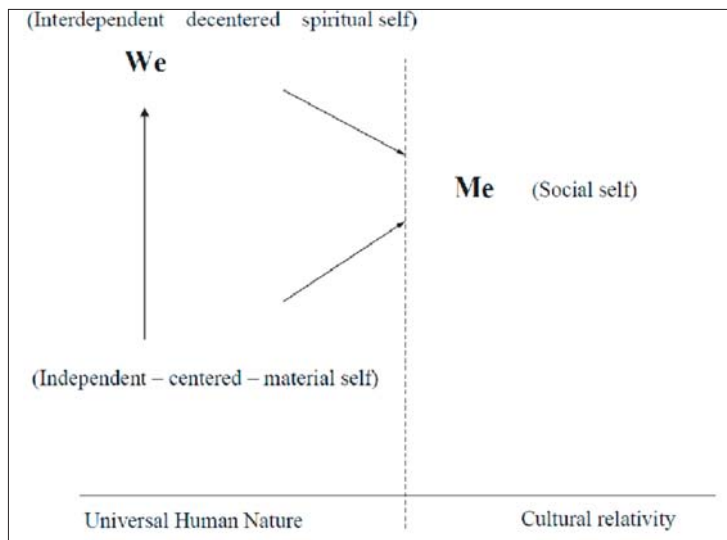


Fig. 1. The Selfish “I” and the Selfless “We” in the Seven Valleys

Although it appears I suggest a dichotomy between the “I” (independent) and “We” (interdependent) aspects of the self, I would actually suggest a continuum between the two, wherein multiple reflections of these characteristics can occur in varying degrees depending on the context and individual choice.

the growth of the tree, so too the movement away from the lower self (“I”) allows the spiritual nature (“We”) to flourish.²⁵ In this way, Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys describes the process of finding one's identity or finding one's true self through selflessness.²⁶

Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan extensively explores the process of how the human self develops through the life course, a study of which reveals interesting points of contrast and similarity with Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys. Kegan's theory of the evolving self attempts to unite constructivism and developmentalism to create a theory of the self within meaning-constitutive evolution, whereby the self creates meaning as it evolves and each developmental stage indicates new qualitative ways of constructing meaning. In Kegan's stage 0 (*incorporative*), the self is primarily subject to the sense and motor output and feedback, and makes no distinction between self and other. This is ultimately equal to Piaget's sensory motor stage and also reflects Freud's “ego feeling” or “oceanic” feeling. In Kegan's stage 1 (*impulsive*), meaning making begins. The individual is able to take that which it is subject to and turn it into an object. The perceptual structure becomes the unreflected subjectivity of the self; it is the lens of the self but the self cannot conceive of it.

In the second stage (*imperial*), disequilibrating interaction with the environment occurs and the person becomes disembedded from perceptions. The individual can now operate on perceptions objectively, as in Piaget's stage of concrete operations. In the third stage (*interpersonal*), the person can now operate on the needs and interests of the self, yet the demands of the social environment remain subject to the person. This stage is characterized by a codependency where the self possesses abstract thought but is still subject to the internalization of others' thoughts. In stage 4 (*institutional*), the self takes on an independent identity subject to its own authority and ideology. It is no longer bound by codependency but is now independent. The fifth and final of Kegan's stages is the *interindividual* stage, wherein the self is able to reflect on its own mental process as an object and look outside the immediate frame of ideologies. In this way the self experiences “interpenetration” of self and other and is subject to interindividuality characterized by dialectic reasoning.²⁷

In each stage of Kegan's theory the self literally constructs a conceptual framework through which it derives meaning from the world. For stage transition to occur, one's current conceptual framework must fall apart, a process described as "disequibration" or tension between the way one views the world and the way the world is. Kegan notes that this self-evolving process can be frightening and requires the faith that there is a new level ahead in order to view the world in a more appropriate manner. In each evolving stage, the self undergoes a dialogue with the surrounding environment or "other" in three movements: (1) beginning as a concept of self undifferentiated from the other, (2) moving to conceptualize a separate individual self, then (3) returning in stage 5 to a new conception of the self in relation to the other. In this way, the entire evolutionary process could be characterized as an arc where the self begins as an interdependent entity ("We"), moves to develop an independent self ("I"), and then finally ends in a state of interindividuality ("We"), where "self" and "other" unite once again.²⁸

The entire structure of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys can be viewed in a similar light. As the Seven Valleys arguably begins during the period of adolescence or in Kegan's institutional stage (when the identity is formed), the Seven Valleys represents only half of the total arc presented by Kegan, or simply as an exponential function as described by Hatcher. For example, in the Valley of Search the wayfarer is essentially an independent self "I" but is longing for and conscious of the existence of a *true* identity. Thus the entire Seven Valleys could be viewed as parallel to Kegan's transitions from stage 4 to stage 5. This also follows with the conception of the "We" as a spiritual self and the "I" as the material self. That is, development in the Seven Valleys describes the simultaneous process of moving away from independent self ("I") toward a "selfless" or interdependent self ("We"). The final stage can therefore be summarized in Saiedi's words as "the apex of the new identity of unity. Veils of selfish and limited ego are burned and new identity is forged based on committed loving, and rational devotion to spiritual virtues" (94).

Here the rhetoric of selflessness as the goal of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys becomes apparent. Selflessness from this perspective can be understood simply as "We." In other words, the self is en route to or defined by

its close association to the “other” rather than its own representations. From this point of view, selflessness can also be understood as a form of altruism or a concept that places the needs and concerns of others before one’s own self. The manifestation of the “We,” Kegan’s stage 5, or the previously defined end stages of development (those of Kohlberg, Maslow, and Fowler), become a state of self-transcendence or selflessness where the “other” becomes central to the self-definition. However, Diessner also notes that selflessness can mean the overcoming of the relative stage of self that the person is currently in. To move from one stage or one valley to the next, one must leave behind a lower self for a higher self—this leaving behind is selflessness and is understood as the meaning of sacrifice. For example, to move from the Valley of Search to the Valley of Love, one must leave behind all previous conceptions of reality. This can cause a great deal of fear and frustration which becomes the test that helps to propel an individual into the next stage. The old self-system is sacrificed and an old epistemology is left behind in order to gain a higher perspective and see the world in a new light.

An important distinction, however, separates Kegan’s view from the Seven Valleys—namely, the idea in the Seven Valleys that selflessness comes from dying to oneself and living in the Absolute. Previous developmental theories typically assert an end goal for an individual that resolves dichotomous thinking, transcends the self, and finds solidarity with all reality. However, this is usually limited to the material or horizontal plane of existence. In the Seven Valleys, on the other hand, Bahá’u’lláh suggests that true unity and identity for the individual lies in leaving the plane of limitation and entering the vertical realms of existence. This suggests that a new look at the metaphysics of the Absolute may be warranted with respect to spiritual development.

Moreover, Kegan’s stages along with Bahá’u’lláh’s Seven Valleys illustrate the transition between the independent “I” toward the interdependent “We.” However, the “We” self-aspect for Kegan, or interindividuality, encapsulates the social realm alone. In contrast, the “We” aspect of the self in the Seven Valleys not only includes the social realm of interpersonal relations but it also involves the sacred aspects of transcendent reality.

That is, the “We” is not limited to the social or horizontal dimensions alone but extends beyond to the vertical and spiritual dimensions.²⁹ Here we can see potential similarities between the metaphysics of the “We” in the Seven Valleys and ideas of the spiritual self in many indigenous traditions the world over. As both Irving Hallowell and Lawrence Kirmayer note, indigenous or aboriginal conceptions of the self are not typically limited to the material plane or social world alone but extend also to the spiritual world.³⁰ In this way, it becomes apparent that a deeper understanding of spiritual development is not only important for contemporary developmental theorists, but also for the potential of creating a dialogue between indigenous and western perspectives and epistemologies. From the theoretical lens of unity-in-diversity, it is hoped that such integration is conceivable and explored in future research.

SPIRITUAL PHYLOGENY

Contemporary developmental scientists, such as Michael Cole and Barbara Rogoff, often note that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In the following it is suggested that the same holds true for spiritual development. When reflecting on spiritual development as illustrated by Bahá'u'lláh, it is apparent that spiritual and biological developments are initiated at separate trajectories throughout life. At conception, biological development begins as the fetus rapidly grows, multiplying cells and developing the structures necessary for future function in the physical world. Once born, the young child continues to grow and develop moving through successive physical, cognitive, and emotional stages. As previously discussed, the period of adolescence, however, is unique insofar as it represents a “sensitive period” for spiritual development. Indeed, Habermas and Bluck suggest that the growing integration of the *person* concept in adolescence allows people to create causal coherence in the individual life story by reference to a single or a few central self-characteristics.

The occurrence of the narrated self or a structured identity as in Kegan's fourth, institutional stage, therefore, becomes a requisite for the process of conscious, self-directed spiritual development, as seen in

Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys. Taking this idea further, it is argued that following these biological changes from conception to adolescence a plateau emerges (that is, adulthood) wherein biological or material development subsides and non-material or spiritual development begins to flourish. This idea is supported by 'Abdu'l-Bahá when He says, "[T]hrough in infancy the signs of the mind and spirit appear in man, they do not reach the degree of perfection; they are imperfect. Only when man attains maturity do the mind and the spirit appear and become evident in utmost perfection" (*Some Answered Questions* 198).³¹

Turning our attention to phylogeny, we observe interesting parallels with ontogeny. Couroush Mehanian and Stephen Friberg observe, for instance, that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only uphold, but also develop and strengthen the notion that the human species came into being by developmental or evolutionary processes that are consistent with the mechanisms of biological evolution. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá likens the entire evolutionary development of humans to varying degrees and stages: "Man, in the beginning of his existence and in the womb of the earth, like the embryo in the womb of the mother, gradually grew and developed, and passed from one form to another, from one shape to another, until he appeared with this beauty and perfection, this force and this power. It is certain that in the beginning he had not this loveliness and grace and elegance, and that he only by degrees attained this shape, this form, this beauty and this grace" (*Some Answered Questions* 183).

In this way, the phylogenetic biological evolution of humanity over millions and millions of years is likened to the ontogenetic biological transformations that occur from conception to adolescence. Along these lines, anthropologist Clifford Geertz points out that since the emergence of *Homo sapiens* in phylogenetic development, the link between biological and cultural change was severely weakened—physiological evolution drastically declined while the growth of culture continued with increasing rapidity. This apparent discontinuity, which occurred some forty to sixty thousand years ago, has led many developmental and evolutionary scientists—such as Berlim, Mattevi, Belmonte-de-Abreu, and Crow—to suggest that genetic mutations prompted symbolic representation that ulti-

mately guided the appearance of modern humans. Indeed, Michael Cole suggests that “In some ways, the most well documented developmental change, from *Homo sapiens* to *Homo sapiens sapiens* is the most mysterious. Except for continued brain growth and some development in tools, there appears to be no clear reason for the sudden flowering of symbolic culture and the rapid expansion of human culture that is now clearly documentable, including sometimes elaborate burial with clear symbolic content, cave art, and ornamentation, not only of tools but for purposes that appear to have no direct utilitarian significance” (642).

The point here is that the human evolutionary process (phylogeny), and the life span developmental process (ontogeny), both begin with rapid biological transformations and then give way to the more abstract nonmaterial aspects of development. From this we can see how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s insight reflects both ontogeny and phylogeny: “[T]hough in infancy the signs of the mind and spirit appear in man, they do not reach the degree of perfection; they are imperfect. Only when man attains maturity do the mind and the spirit appear and become evident in utmost perfection” (*Some Answered Questions* 198). The beginnings of cultural or symbolic systems in phylogeny, as described by Cole, signify the beginnings of an “age of maturity” in the overall phylogenetic development of our species, which, in turn, mimics an “age of maturity” or adolescence in ontogeny. In other words, the emergence of cultural systems or symbolic representation in phylogenetic development, and the emergence of the narrated self and the ability to begin the process of conscious, self-directed spiritual development in ontogeny, both reflect the developmental stage of adolescence and signify the beginnings of maturity. These beginnings in both phylogenetic and ontogenetic development mark the manifestation of human spiritual aspects or capacities, which further facilitate the development of concrete operational thought or symbolic representation. From a Bahá’í perspective, therefore, the development of both the mind and culture are the result of a third variable referred to as the human spirit.

In summary, the conditions for spiritual development are primed after biological elements are organized in a particular way. This is the case for

ontogeny, at the age of maturity, and also for phylogeny, with the flourishing of cultural systems. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, both processes are the result of the attraction of the human spirit (nonmaterial) to the body (material):

Moreover, these members, these elements, this composition, which are found in the organism of man, are an attraction and magnet for the spirit; it is certain that the spirit will appear in it. So a mirror which is clear will certainly attract the rays of the sun. It will become luminous, and wonderful images will appear in it—that is to say, when these existing elements are gathered together according to the natural order, and with perfect strength, they become a magnet for the spirit, and the spirit will become manifest in them with all its perfections. (*Some Answered Questions* 201)

The evolution of the biological system thus allows for or creates the conditions that foster the reflection of the spirit in the human mind, which, in turn, perpetuates the development of cultural systems. The capacity for scientific investigation, the arts, inventions, trades, and more generally, cultural systems, are all beyond nature or the animal kingdom because they result from humanity's spiritual capacities. As Mehanian and Friberg note, 'Abdu'l-Bahá posits that human beings are on a different plane than the animals because of their spiritual and intellectual powers—powers that are evidenced by the sciences, the arts, and human inventions. In other Writings 'Abdu'l-Bahá collectively calls the human powers, which distinguish humans from the animal, the spirit of man: "The animal is the captive of the senses and bound by them; all that is beyond the senses, the things that they do not control, the animal can never understand, although in the outer senses it is greater than man. Hence it is proved and verified that in man there is a power of discovery by which he is distinguished from the animals, and this is the spirit of man" (*Some Answered Questions* 188).

It is important to note that Clifford Geertz suggests cultural evolution and the evolution of the human mind necessarily developed in tandem, not

sequentially. In this way, Geertz argues against previous *critical point* theories that postulate the capacity for acquiring culture as a sudden all-or-none occurrence (as could be interpreted from the above case presented from Cole). From the critical point perspective, mental evolution and cultural evolution are separate processes, the former having been completed before the latter could begin. Geertz argues that this conception is incorrect. Instead, Geertz posits that not only was human cultural accumulation underway well before biological development subsided, but that such accumulation also actually played an active role in shaping the final stages of human biological development. Therefore, Geertz suggests that humans are a product of culture more than they are the discoverer or creator of culture. Thus, it is probably the case that these two factors—culture and mind—have developed together in a complex interaction which supports Geertz's notion that "man's nervous system does not merely enable him to acquire culture, it positively demands that he do so if it is going to function at all" (68). In sum, Geertz suggests that the human mind and the capacity to develop culture gradually develop in tandem over a long period of time and are not the result of a sudden occurrence.

This position put forward by Geertz essentially denies the possibility of a critical point in phylogenetic development that gave rise to human culture or the mind. However, Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that culture and mind both developed after the human spiritual capacity was able to manifest is not necessarily in conflict with Geertz's assertion that culture and mind had to develop in tandem. Human culture and the mind could have developed in tandem, as suggested by Geertz, both being made possible as a result of the human spirit without there being any contradiction between the two perspectives. For example, if we imagine a light continually shining on the earth from the Absolute realm of existence, this can, in some respects, be taken as a metaphor for the human spirit. In other words, the human spirit is always present and shining in full from the beginning of time as is the Absolute realm of existence. Now, in the phenomenal world this light can only become manifest when it has an object to be reflected in. As man develops biologically he slowly polishes the mirror of his mind

piece by piece; that is, he allows more and more of the spirit to be reflected in the mirror of his developing mind.

As this process takes place over millions and millions of years, an increasing amount of light is reflected in the mind and at the same time more and more cultural forms are created—a process that happens in tandem for potentially thousands of years. Little bits of culture and little bits of mind both come into existence as more light is being reflected in the mind and more culture exists for the mind to reflect. Then, however, there would be a time when the mirror of the mind is polished to such an extent that the entirety of the light or spirit of man can be reflected. This is perhaps the period when biological evolution subsides and cultural evolution takes over. It marks a distinct moment for human beings and could possibly be evidenced by the sudden flowering of culture thought to have occurred forty to sixty thousand years ago.

From my perspective, Geertz is correct to assert that mind and culture develop in tandem and are co-constitutive—this is a powerful assertion that moves away from previous ideas of culture needing the fully developed mind. However, at some point there would necessarily be a sudden flowering as the result of the full light of the human spirit being reflected at the period of maturity. Taken together, then, we could suggest this “age of maturity” in phylogenetic development mimics ontogenetic adolescence, both of which signify a decline in biological evolution and a subsequent flowering of nonmaterial symbolic aspects. In like manner, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suggests that

[t]he human spirit may be likened to the bounty of the sun shining on a mirror. The body of man, which is composed from the elements, is combined and mingled in the most perfect form; it is the most solid construction, the noblest combination, the most perfect existence. . . . This perfected body can be compared to a mirror, and the human spirit to the sun. Nevertheless, if the mirror breaks, the bounty of the sun continues; and if the mirror is destroyed or ceases to exist, no harm will happen to the bounty of the sun, which is everlasting. (*Some Answered Questions* 143–44)

Overall, the main argument here contends that just as certain biological advances are necessary for humans to begin the process of spiritual development (that is, the Seven Valleys), so too certain biological advances have occurred during human evolution that have attracted the spiritual aspects of man, resulting in a certain *flowering of mind and culture* while at the same time leading to a decline in biological evolution. Thus, it is proposed that culture and mind are essentially equivalent and both are products of and proofs for the spiritual nature of humanity. Figure 2 displays a visual presentation of ontogenetic and phylogenetic spiritual development.

TOWARD A CONCEPTION OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

The overall goal of this paper was, from a unity-in-diversity theoretical perspective, to develop a conception of spiritual development as presented within Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys. The paper examined this theme from three interrelated aspects: (1) a dialogue with spiritual development and developmental psychology, (2) the evolution of the self, and (3) the relation between spiritual development and phylogeny.

With regard to the relation between spiritual development and developmental psychology, similarities were presented while at the same time noting differences. Most significantly was the idea that spiritual development and biological development, although following similar processes (that is, equilibration), begin at separate times throughout one's life: biological development at conception, and spiritual development at maturity or adolescence. It was also suggested that the dual nature of humanity (spiritual and material), as asserted by Bahá'u'lláh and other religious founders, is the reason for this dual developmental process.

With regard to the evolution of the self, Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys depicts an exponential process of transition where the "I" or lower self gradually extends along a continuum toward the "We" or higher self. Kegan's model of the evolving self was similar except for the fact that the "We" or interdependent self in the Seven Valleys could be substantiated in both a material and spiritual metaphysics, whereas Kegan's view primarily asserts an interconnectedness with other individuals in a material sense.

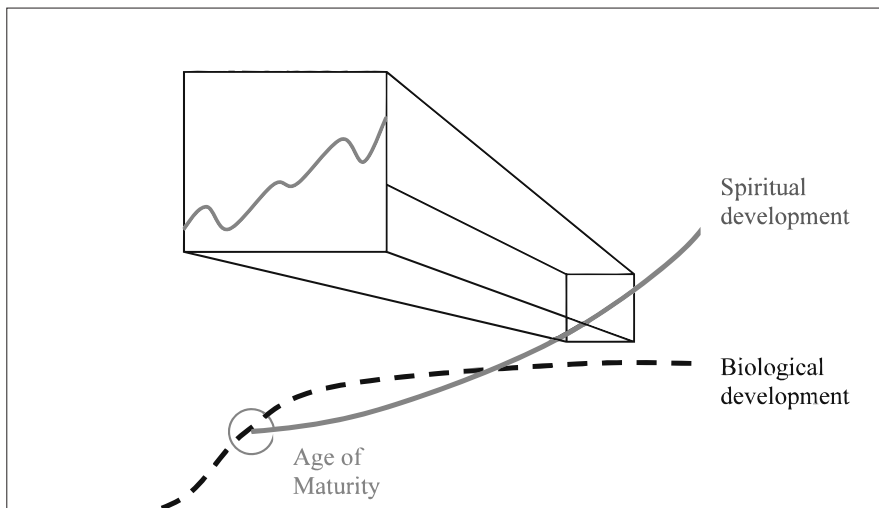


Figure 2. Human Ontogenetic and Phylogenetic Development

Ontogenetic and phylogenetic developments reflect one another. In both cases, the spiritual dimension becomes discernible after the “age of maturity.” The “age of maturity” signifies the point at which biological evolution began to subside (*homo habilis*) and cultural evolution began to increase. The expanded spiritual development section represents the dips and peaks in the overall developmental process as seen in the image of the valleys.

In other words, the self/other distinction for Kegan remained a material concept, whereas in the Seven Valleys, it extended beyond the material to include spiritual dimensions as well. It is interesting to note that this perspective of the self also reflects certain Aboriginal or indigenous conceptualizations wherein the person concept is substantiated in relation to a cosmic order or spiritual reality.

When looking at spiritual phylogeny, it was proposed that the drastic decline of biological evolution and the development of cultural systems were the result of the biological components of the body being able to more fully reflect the human spirit. Moreover, this process also reflects ontogeny in the sense that spiritual development occurs at the age of maturity after certain biological developments occur. Extending this further, we could suggest that the human species as a whole has itself just entered a state of maturity and are only now, as a collective, beginning to

develop spiritually as a conscious self-directed process: "Similarly, there are periods and stages in the life of the aggregate world of humanity, which at one time was passing through its degree of childhood, at another its time of youth but now has entered its long presaged period of maturity, the evidences of which are everywhere visible and apparent" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 438).

Taken together, when reflecting on the three themes presented in this paper and the overall characteristics of spiritual development as presented within Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, the process of spiritual development could be said to involve increasing one's knowledge and understanding of the spiritual dimensions of reality, which requires the conscious process of struggle and sacrifice, that is, giving up that which is lower for that which is higher, in order to reorient the self around the sacred other, the Manifestations of God, or the unity of Absolute Reality that transcends the dualistic nature of the phenomenal world.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

This paper was limited in the sense that it discussed individual development essentially outside of the cultural and social context of which we are all a part. A subsequent paper could specifically address spiritual development as a social process and how individual social relations promote or inhibit individual spiritual development. In addition, a central argument revolved around the idea that spiritual development occurs after the result of certain biological markers. Future studies could investigate the degree to which children can be observed to undergo a spiritual process similar to the Seven Valleys. How is the spiritual development of children similar or different from the presentation of development in the Seven Valleys? Moreover, this could also be extended to children in other cultures; that is, how do children in particular or individuals in general, from other cultures that do not place the same emphasis on cognitive or conscious aspects, conceptualize the development of spiritual capacities? These questions and others like them could help identify important ages in which spiritual developments occur.

Looking at other cultures in detail, future studies could compare and contrast the depiction of spiritual development as presented within the Seven Valleys and differing conceptualizations from other spiritual traditions. Is the spiritual development process a universal? If so, we should expect similar characteristics across all cultures with some of the major themes presented here. If there are variations, however, it might be interesting to identify if those variations are due to the varying cultural landscape or an eternal human core. As noted in this paper, there were similarities between the development of the self toward a union with a spiritual reality within Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys and particular indigenous perspectives of defining the person in relation to certain spiritual characteristics. Future research could investigate the extent to which spiritual development in religious traditions such as the Bahá'í Faith reflects developmental perspectives of indigenous groups, with the intent to create common ground for dialogue in academic fields. Lastly, it may be useful for future studies to examine how the notion that the end of development exists within a metaphysical plane of the Absolute differs or compares with other developmental theories. Perhaps a deeper understanding of the spiritual dimensions of reality will help developmental research understand the motivations and developmental stages undergone by many individuals who define themselves as a composite of spiritual and material beings. In the end, it is the decisions we make in everyday social interactions and our capacity to reflect on their consequences that determines, to a large extent, our proximity to or knowledge of the Absolute.

NOTES

1. See Campbell for more details.
2. For important research into these areas, see Bers; Boyatzis; Culliford; Fowler; Frankl; Hatala, "Resilience and Healing"; Hoare; Newberg and Newberg; Pargament; Tate and Parker; and Wilber, "Waves, Streams."
3. Although Bahá'u'lláh accepted the general structure of the seven stages presented by 'Aṭṭár, important distinctions between Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys and the Sufi mystical work exist and they are not to be understood as synonymous. See Saiedi for details.

4. The original pronoun for the “wayfarer” used by Shoghi Effendi—Bahá'u'lláh's great grandson—in the translation of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys was male. Therefore, during my discussion of the wayfarer I use a similar pronoun. In no way is this to be understood as a biased perspective. The pronouns “he” and “man” are used in the translations to depict all of humanity.

5. See Taherzadeh.

6. As Adib Taherzadeh notes, the word “knowledge” can be misleading here. The original word, *ma'rifat*, used by Bahá'u'lláh is difficult to translate by a single word in English which can faithfully impart its true significance—a combination of true understanding, recognition, and knowledge.

7. Elsewhere, the Bahá'í Writings suggest that man can become aware of the Absolute Reality in four ways: (1) deep inner reflection on one's own self, (2) deep reflection on the created universe, (3) deep reflection on the manifestation of God, and (4) understanding of one's dreams. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions* for details.

8. It is important to note that a growing amount of psychological research is acknowledging the importance of the spiritual development of children. See Culliford, for example. In no way is the suggestion that the period of adolescence is a “sensitive” time for spiritual exploration and development meant to contradict this emerging research. Rather, it is proposed here that adolescence signifies an important time in this process that may have begun in earlier stages. In adolescents, spiritual development takes on a conscious, self-directed characteristic that is arguably not present to the same degree in earlier stages of development.

9. See Piaget, *Equilibration of Cognitive Structures* and *Studies in Reflecting Abstraction* for more details.

10. See Lourenço and Machado or Smith for more details.

11. It is important to note that no (good–evil) value judgments are placed on the opposition between the body and the spirit of man. Bahá'í perspectives assert that man can misuse his spiritual faculties just as his biological faculties.

12. Refer to Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. Sigmund Freud and his aggressive and animalistic perspective of humanity arguably pertains only to fifty percent of what humans actually are. The other human aspects overlooked by Freud involve the capacities to transcend the biological drives and aggressive tendencies (i.e., spirituality).

13. Indeed, from a Bahá'í perspective, prayer is often described as a ladder upon which the human soul ascends unto the spiritual worlds.

14. Erik Erikson's eight stages of development include (1) basic trust versus mistrust (birth–1 year); (2) autonomy versus shame and doubt (1–3 years); (3) initiative versus guilt (3–6 years); (4) industry versus inferiority (6–11 years); (5) identity versus identity confusion (adolescence); (6) intimacy versus isolation (emerging adulthood); (7) generativity versus stagnation (adulthood); and (8) integrity versus despair (old age).

15. See Erikson or Hoare for more details.

16. James Fowler outlined six stages of faith development: Stage 0—"Primal or "Undifferentiated" faith (birth to two years); Stage 1—"Intuitive–Projective" faith (ages three to seven); Stage 2—"Mythic–Literal" faith (mostly in school children); Stage 3—"Synthetic–Conventional" faith (arising in adolescence); Stage 4—"Individuative–Reflective" faith (usually mid-twenties to late thirties); Stage 5—"Conjunctive" faith (midlife crisis) acknowledges paradox (late adulthood); Stage 6—"Universalizing" faith, or what some might call "enlightenment." For an updated and expanded version of Fowler's stages of faith, refer to Culliford.

17. See Lerner for more details.

18. This idea reflects Beck and Cowan's ideas of *spiral dynamics*, wherein human nature is thought to be fluid and not fixed. This view ultimately suggests that when forced by life conditions, humans are able to adapt to their environment by constructing new, more complex perspectives of reality allowing them to handle the new problem. Each new model or conceptual level includes and transcends all previous models.

19. Refer to Lerner regarding arguments for the incongruity between mechanistic and organic models of development.

20. See Saiedi for details regarding "spatial metaphor" in the Seven Valleys.

21. A parallel would be drawn here between the discussions of material and spiritual reality or horizontal and vertical reality. In other words, vertical and horizontal are synonymous with spiritual and material, respectively.

22. This is noted as a crucial distinction between Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys and previous Sufi mystical understandings of the Seven Valleys in particular or spiritual development in general. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that knowledge of Absolute Reality is unattainable without assistance from or knowledge of the Manifestation

of God. This is ultimately why Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him" (John 14:6–7). Previous mystical understandings assert that knowledge of God is possible and that the goal of spiritual development is precisely that. Thus a crucial aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys argues against this idea and posits that the goal is unification with or knowledge of the Manifestations of God, thereby outlining the fundamental importance of the Manifestations of God in the process of spiritual development.

23. In Lawrence Kohlberg's first stage (obedience and punishment driven), individuals focus on the direct consequences of their actions on themselves. In the second stage (self-interest driven), individuals begin to espouse a "what's in it for me" position, in which right behavior is defined by whatever is in the individual's best interest. Stage 2 reasoning shows a limited interest in the needs of others, but only to a point where it might further the individual's own interests. In the third stage of moral reasoning (interpersonal accord and conformity driven), the self enters society by filling social roles. Individuals are receptive to approval or disapproval from others as it reflects society's accordance with the perceived role. During the fourth stage (authority and social order obedience driven), it is important to obey laws, dictums, and social conventions because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society. Moral reasoning in stage 4 is thus beyond the need for individual approval exhibited in stage 3; society must learn to transcend individual needs. Within stage 5 (social contract driven), the world is viewed as holding different opinions, rights, and values. Such perspectives should be mutually respected as unique to each person or community. Finally, in stage 6 (universal ethical principles driven), moral reasoning is based on abstract reasoning using universal ethical principles. Laws are valid only insofar as they are grounded in justice, and a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws.

24. For more information regarding the Bahá'í perspective on the necessary complementarity between science and religion, see Hatcher, *Science and the Bahá'í Faith*.

25. Although it appears that I suggest a dichotomy between the "I" (independent) and "We" (interdependent) aspects of the self, I would actually suggest a

continuum between the two, wherein multiple reflections of these characteristics can occur in varying degrees depending on the context and individual choice. In this way, spiritual development in the Seven Valleys signifies the movement from one end of the continuum to the other.

26. In the end, the choices we make during our day-to-day social interactions ultimately determine our position along this rich and dynamic continuum between our material or independent self (“I”) and our spiritual or interdependent self (“We”). As Larry Culliford, psychiatrist and co-founder of the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group, notes, the more we engage in prayer, scripture reading, practices of devotion, or service to others (essentially any activity that feeds the spiritual self), the closer we become to experiencing a harmony between these seemingly opposite aspects of the self. In other words, like the wayfarer leaving the Valley of Search, we catch a glimpse of the traceless Friend, the Beloved, or Absolute Reality.

27. From Wilber’s transpersonal perspective, Kegan’s stage 5 signifies a collapse of a whole transpersonal second cycle of development rather than a discreet and well-defined stage. Moreover, Wilber also suggests that many claims about nonrational stages or unity-type states, as in Kegan’s stage 5, make a mistake he calls the “pre/trans fallacy.” According to Wilber, the nonrational stages of consciousness (what Wilber calls “prerational” and “transrational” stages) can be easily confused with one another (“Spirituality and Developmental Lines”). From this view, one can reduce transrational spiritual realization to prerational regression, or one can elevate prerational states to the transrational domain, both of which moves commit a fallacy.

28. This idea relates to Martin Buber’s I–Thou relationship. For Buber, the I–Thou relationship characterizes an absorption in and engagement with the “other” without any sense of self-seeking or manipulation. The idea proposes that we are only truly ourselves in this mode of being: “In the most powerful moments of dialogic, where in truth ‘deep calls unto deep,’ it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle round the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge where *I and Thou* meet, there is the realm of ‘between’” (Buber 246).

29. Here we begin to see an interesting perspective of the cross as a religious and spiritual symbol.

30. Indeed, a vision of the “We” as an interpersonal relationship with a spiritual reality is essential for many Canadian Aboriginal spiritual traditions in particular. See Hatala, “Spirituality”; and Hatala and Desjardins for details.

31. In several Bahá'í Writings, when referring to the individual, the term “maturity” signifies adolescents or the age of around fifteen.

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