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# Transpersonal and Other Models of Spiritual Development<sup>1</sup>

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This chapter focuses on exploring various models of spiritual development. It first addresses philosophical dilemmas underpinning the concept of spiritual development by questioning whether these can be addressed without metaphysical assumptions embedded in religious worldviews and thus understood in any consensual way across different historical and cultural contexts. Traditional models of spiritual development are then reviewed, drawing from indigenous, Eastern, and Western cultures. Integrative-philosophical and scientific models, including those from the psychology of religion, transpersonal psychology, and neurobiology, are then presented. The chapter concludes by noting the complexities involved in understanding spiritual development accompanied by suggestions on future directions for these models by highlighting their commonalities and differences and by providing some evaluative perspectives for thinking critically about them.

**Keywords:** *spiritual development, transpersonal, religious psychology, neurobiology*

In the Biblical book of *Genesis*, Jacob, one of the patriarchs of Judaism, dreamed that he saw a ladder that reached from earth to heaven, on which angels were ascending and descending. Such vertical models, which imply ascending to a higher or descending to a lower realm, have been frequently used to describe spiritual development. Implicit in all vertical models is a hierarchical belief that some stages of development, or rungs on the ladder, are higher or lower than others. Other models of spiritual development avoid value-laden imagery. For example, spiritual development can be seen as going in many directions, which makes comparing and ranking various states unnecessary (Ferrer, 2009). Spiritual development can also be seen as expanding in a horizontal, rather than vertical, direction, such that there is no higher or lower, but only different patterns of expansiveness (Friedman, 1983). In this chapter, we attempt to describe these and several other models of spiritual development. It is beyond the scope of a chapter to set forth and com-

pare all of the many approaches to spiritual development stemming from the myriad of religious traditions, each of which may contain more than one model of spiritual development. Instead, we sample a few models we consider representative from indigenous, Eastern, and Western cultures. Then we discuss philosophical models of spiritual development and end with scientific approaches. We hope to provoke thought about these models by highlighting their commonalities and differences, as well as by providing some evaluative perspectives for thinking critically about them. In light of the many variant uses of the three key terms in our title, *spirituality*, *model*, and *development* are defined in some detail below.

## **Spirituality**

As a concept, spirituality has been increasingly differentiated from religiosity (Bartoli, 2007). Religiosity is now frequently seen as pertaining to an organized system of beliefs about the sacred, along with rituals, rules, and other requirements of a belief system endorsed by a group (Fuller, 2001; Pargament, 1997). Such

connotations have implicit social and cultural meanings, referring to something external to the individual (although these may be internalized).

Religious institutions, while supporting positive values such as community and life-structuring rituals, tend to be flawed in one major way: certainty about the truths of one's own religion sometimes leads people to become intolerant. Taken to extremes, this leads to dire consequences, such as genocides (Harris, 2004). Superstition, sexism, dogmatism, and fanaticism appear in many religions, including indigenous, Eastern, and Western, and crusades, genocides, jihads, and holy wars have led many in the West to reject formal religion, propelling books voicing antireligious sentiments to best-seller status (e.g., Dawkins, 2006; Dennett, 2006).

By contrast, spirituality is increasingly seen as an inner process of connectedness with the sacred, a psychological process internal to the individual (Gallup & Jones, 2000; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). Of course, there is significant overlap between the two terms, as spirituality historically has been experienced through religion. But a person engaged in a religious group may or may not have had spiritual experiences *per se*, and a person who has had spiritual experiences may or may not be part of a religious group (Friedman & Pappas, 2007). This distinction between spirituality and religiosity apparently is growing more salient in modern industrial cultures (Miller & Thoresen, 2003).

Spirituality, even when distinguished from religiosity, has been variously defined: that which "infuses human beings with inspiration (from in-'spirit'), creativity, and connection with others" (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999, p. 4), involves a "presence or absence of an individual's focus on higher, broader, and deeper life meanings that transcend ordinary existence" (Krippner & Welch, 1992, p. 122), and the "human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and for some, God" (Canda, 1988, p. 243), to name just a few. Spirituality has been viewed as cognitive or affective, related to transcendence or to everyday life, to enhanced ego development or regression to infantile states, and to devotion to diverse transformational paths (Porter, 1995).

Clearly, spirituality is a diffuse and multifaceted construct. MacDonald (2000) analyzed a number of spirituality measures based on varying underlying concepts of spirituality and found five factors: cognitive,

experiential/phenomenological, existential well-being, paranormal beliefs, and religiousness. MacDonald also identified several outlying factors that did not fit well with his five-factor model (e.g., self-expansiveness; Friedman, 1983). Lately, spirituality has been somewhat commodified based on its presumed tangible benefits, such as higher levels of mental and physical health (Elmer, MacDonald, & Friedman, 2003; Gartner, 1996). However, spirituality can also be related to harmful occurrences, such as psychopathology (Johnson & Friedman, 2008), poor health (Magyar-Russell & Pargament, 2006), vulnerability to the seduction of cults, neglect of practical concerns, and exploitation of followers (Kornfield, 1993). Climbing Jacob's ladder of spiritual development can lead to many outcomes, both ascending and descending—and some may not be pleasant destinations.

One example of difficulties associated with spiritual development is conversion, the adoption of new religious beliefs that differ significantly from previous beliefs, which plays a crucial role in some people's spiritual development. This poses a real conundrum regarding spiritual development. An adherent of the new faith may view converts as advancing in development by discovering the "true" faith, while a member of the previous faith may see them as guilty of one of the worst sins, apostasy. A convert takes on not only a new religious identity, but also a new set of values and behaviors. Insofar as conversion is often part of spiritual development, it illustrates the relativism that seems inherent in any model of spiritual development.

The difficulties in assessing spiritual development are illustrated by the case of Mother Mary Theresa of Calcutta who, in 1946, claimed that Jesus Christ had spoken to her on a train trip to Darjeeling, urging her to leave her teaching position in order to work with the disadvantaged. How do we reconcile this with the discovery that she later lived for decades feeling abandoned by her God? Less than three months before receiving the Nobel prize, she had written to a spiritual confidant, "The...emptiness is so great—that I look and do not see—listen and do not hear" (van Biema, 2007, p. 35). Her published letters revealed that, except for one brief interlude, she had not felt the presence of God for the last five decades of her life (Kolodiejchuk, 2001). This loss of contact apparently started when she began tending the poor in Calcutta and eventually became so severe that she began to doubt the existence

of heaven and even of God. This loss of contact was, to her, a painful and unwanted descent for which she never found an explanation, yet she continued her service and never publicly disavowed her faith. How would we evaluate these contradictory accounts? Did her loss of faith represent a descent (with many years of tireless devotion to the poor simply a compensation) or an ascent (demonstrated by her capacity to persevere in many good works even in the absence of inspiration)?

### Model

We look at the various conjectures about spirituality as models, which we define as follows: “a model matches the reality that it describes in some important ways” and “a model is simpler than that reality” (Rodgers, 2010, p. 5). There are many ways to examine models of spiritual development. For example, one could compare models from different cultural vantages, such as breaking them down into broad categories such as indigenous, Eastern, or Western (although cultural diffusion has cross-fertilized these in numerous ways so they are not “pure” categories). Or one could compare the basis on which truth claims are made: faith-based (religious), logical or other systematic approaches to inquiry not based on empiricism (philosophical), and empirical approaches (scientific).

In addition, spiritual development models vary considerably in form. Some are described verbally as in myths or theories, mathematically as in numerological or modern dynamic systems approaches, graphically as in maps or cartographies, or in other ways. Representations may be relatively straightforward and logical (in the sense of following defined rules for relating symbols) or appear quite alogical or even paradoxical (apparently not following any form of logic or even intending to defy logical grasp, as in Zen Buddhist koans and the parables of Jesus that attempt to point beyond the limitations of logic). Some models rely heavily on metaphor and we note that metaphors hold value not only in the study of spiritual matters (Metzner, 1998), but also have been widely used in science throughout its history (Leary, 1990). In this chapter, we are guided by the metaphor of Jacob’s ladder.

Some approaches to spiritual development do more than merely describe: they attempt to explain how spirituality might evolve. They may employ conventional mechanisms (such as biological, social, psychological, and cultural factors), or supernatural mechanisms (such as karma and grace). Those that link variables together in

an attempt to explain how a process unfolds over time can be properly referred to as “theories.” Those theories amenable to empirical scrutiny (e.g., falsification) may be seen as scientific, while those that adhere to criteria of logic (e.g., being internally consistent) without demanding empirical support might be deemed philosophical.

We do not claim that any model (or type of model) is necessarily better for understanding or facilitating spiritual development. As Western psychologists operating within the scientific tradition, we acknowledge that some readers might find our approach to spiritual development woefully lacking in light of their own traditions, but we hope we are not disrespectful in our attempt to understand and classify them.

### Development

Development usually implies a process of growth across time. It is often assumed that such growth is desirable (as in the idea of maturation), and a failure to develop at a proper rate or to an expected destination (as in developmental delay) is undesirable. As we shall see, even a process that is generally deemed favorable may include real or apparent reverses. Discontinuity between stages of development is often assumed, but some thinkers advocate viewing spiritual development more as a continual process (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996), rather than a process of moving from one discrete stage to another.

Spiritual development, in some models, allows for influences that transcend the physical, such as contact with a divine entity or a sense of profound interconnectedness with the universe. Until recently, Western psychology has generally adhered to the prevailing materialistic paradigm of most sciences, but this situation may be changing (Brydon-Miller & Tolman, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1983).

Spiritual development can be seen primarily as intrapersonal (as changes residing within the individual) or interpersonal (residing among individuals in relationship to community). For example, one divide among Buddhists is between the Theravadan and Mahayanan lineages, the former focusing more on the enlightenment of individuals, while the latter more emphasizing collective enlightenment. Development can also be transpersonal, in the sense of pointing to something beyond the individual as an isolated being and that interconnects the individual to the sacred or cosmos in which, inextricably, one is always embedded (Friedman, 1983).

Some traditions posit a teleology or defined end purpose, such as ending *dukkha* (suffering, or attachment to the impermanent, within Buddhism) or attaining salvation (the attainment of blessed eternal life, within Christianity). In other models, there is no defined terminus and one's spiritual development may be seen as continually unfolding, becoming richer and more profound until death and, according to some traditions, even continuing after death across multiple lifetimes.

In some models, spiritual development may be seen as unexpectedly sudden, as in a rapid conversion (e.g., that of the Christian apostle, Paul) or enlightenment (the immediacy of some Zen Buddhist attainments of *samadhi*). Bucke (1901/1969) asserted that cosmic consciousness comes suddenly and unbidden. In other systems, change is seen as gradual, requiring painstaking effort (years of deprivation and suffering), whereas in yet others it may be seen as unattainable by any effort (contingent on passively receiving grace or subject to karma from previous incarnations). In some models, spiritual development is seen as unidirectionally progressive (always upwards toward a defined goal), whereas in others it is seen as consisting of both ascents and descents, intermixed in various ways. Spiritual development has also been viewed as both widely variant across individuals and invariant in which everyone progresses through the same stages at roughly the same rate. The very notion of spiritual development over time is not universal. At least one thinker (Tolle, 1999) disputed the importance of time itself, stating that dwelling on it is actually a spiritual obstacle.

There have been many attempts to organize spiritual beliefs. One typology was proposed by Rawlinson (1997), who characterized them on two dimensions: hot versus cool and structured versus unstructured. Hot traditions emphasize relationship to a personal spiritual being, while cool traditions emphasize inner growth. Structured traditions emphasize the need to follow specific methods, while unstructured traditions emphasize no specific path. Given the sheer number of approaches and their possible permutations for understanding spiritual development, any summary, including ours, is necessarily limited.

#### **Philosophical Questions**

These numerous models of spiritual development vary in basic philosophical ways, which require examination. For example, does spiritual development necessarily imply some underlying reality apart from the

material plane or are people's beliefs (notwithstanding whether or not they relate to anything substantial in any veridical manner) worthy of study in and of themselves? As psychologists, we write from the latter perspective without taking a position on the metaphysical assumption in the former. Spiritual development may be conceptualized as aimed toward a hypothetical end-point (or range of end-points) seen as more "real" than the ordinary world. Those traditions that see ordinary reality as illusory (e.g., as a veil of illusion or *maya*) may be quite different from those that would use empirical tests (e.g., the scientific tradition) to understand spiritual development. For instance, many forms of meditative practice, which generally involve the self-regulation of attention and concentration, use a model of development to describe the process of deepening the meditative experience itself, rather than necessarily conceptualizing it as a pathway to any sort of spiritual terminus. In these models, such end-points may be welcome as a positive side-effect of meditation but may not necessarily be fundamental to the regimen itself. In other models, a metaphysical terminus, such as eternal salvation or enlightenment, may be the only desired end-point and all salutary benefits at the more mundane level on the way to achieving this spiritual outcome is seen as secondary or even superfluous.

Regardless, any model of spiritual development implies that change can be recognized. Some traditions use specific tests, such as "passing" Zen *koans* by receiving a teacher's approval of one's answer, to demonstrate progressive spiritual attainment, whereas others are less clear in defining progress. These considerations illustrate some of the perplexing epistemological questions involved in this inquiry.

#### **Traditional Models of Spiritual Development**

There are many traditional models of spiritual development. We, of course, do not attempt to provide an overview of all but, instead, provide a few representative examples. We use the broad categories of indigenous, Eastern, and Western to organize this presentation, noting that the order of their presentation is unrelated to any belief in the primacy or superiority of any of the traditions discussed.

#### **Indigenous models of spiritual development**

There are many indigenous models of spiritual development. Eliade (1951/2004) subsumed many of these under the term *shamanism*, which he believed

typically focused on reinstating a sacred balance that had been disrupted. He proposed that experiences of death and resurrection (which occur during rituals such as fasting, torture, or use of psychedelic substances) form a universal core element of spiritual development in the shaman (a development not shared by members of his or her community). The spiritual development of the shaman requires repeated visits to the spirit worlds (often requiring multiple “deaths and rebirths”) and reaps progressively increasing powers; the shaman can eventually at will ascend to higher realms or descend to lower realms, often described metaphorically as through climbing a tree (a metaphor comparable to Jacob’s ladder).

Aspirants for the title of *sangoma*, a spiritual practitioner and healer among the Zulu tribe in southern Africa, for example, undergo trials congruent with this model (Watson, 1982). Other shamanic traditions around the world have well-developed sequences of tasks or skills that aspirants must successfully complete or acquire. Typically, they involve services to their community and clients, such as guarding against sorcery, treating pain and disease, interpreting dreams, resolving family and clan disputes, finding lost objects, locating game during hunting seasons, and arranging ceremonies for such transitions as childbirth, adolescence, marriage, menopause, and death (Krippner, 2002; Walsh, 2007).

Thus, the shamanic path to spiritual development is not primarily one of individual self-improvement or enlightenment, but rather a path of community service. As the shaman’s skills and knowledge increase, his or her success in helping the community is the gauge of his or her spiritual development.

### **Western models of spiritual development**

Spirituality in Western culture has been dominated by the Abrahamic (Judeo-Christian-Islamic) tradition for over two millennia. However, it should be noted that many other rich traditions were suppressed or totally eliminated, such as the mystery schools of the ancient Mediterranean (Burkert, 1987) and the Celtic priesthood (Anderson, 1998), and there are residual traces even today of these formerly vibrant traditions.

Within Judaism, spiritual development has long been judged through being well versed in the Bible and its associated books, as depth of knowledge in these sacred texts was the mark of understanding the will of God. Learning was not restricted to simple ritualistic recitation of the laws, but to the capacity to apply them in daily life and live according to God’s plan. The

spiritually developed individual demonstrates wisdom and compassion through righteously applying the law, as well as balancing justice and forgiveness within his community. Esoteric mystical traditions within Judaism included the act of blessings with the literal process of the breath (as in the Jewish patriarchs breathing upon their successors in bestowing their blessings).

In Hassidism, one variant of mystical Judaism, the very person of a righteous one is seen as the embodiment of wisdom and compassion, while in Kabbalistic Judaism, spiritual development grows in levels from focus on the individual to focus on others, and eventually to focus on God (Berke & Schneider, 2006). According to these authors, the first level focuses on obeying rituals, such as the dietary laws, without a deeper appreciation of their meaning; this stage is seen as that of the animal soul. The next level involves emergence of complex interpersonal understandings, dealing with concepts such as justice; this is seen as the wind soul. The subsequent level develops into a relationship with God, which involves the further actualization of righteousness (putting the will of God into practice); this is seen as the breath soul. The next levels involve experiencing spirituality as disconnected from the body and, eventually, a unitive experience may be attained.

Mystical schools within the Muslim tradition also focus on realizing their relationship to Allah, using methods such as contemplation, movements, and storytelling. Whirling dervishes, members of one Muslim Sufi order, twirl in circles to alter consciousness in order to grow closer to Allah. Members of another Muslim sect, the Druze, hold that spiritual development occurs over several lifetimes; a concept of reincarnation that is otherwise little known in contemporary Western traditions (but was part of early Christianity); reincarnation beliefs are also found in some strands of mystical Judaism, as well as in Hindu, Buddhist, and many Eastern traditions (Chari, 1967). According to Rafea, Rafea, and Rafea (2005), Islamic spiritual development is judged through matching worldly affairs with the will of Allah, aligning the secular with the sacred in accord with Allah’s laws. This is broken into steps: conviction (through a combination of faith and will) that Allah alone is supreme; submission to Allah; ability to distinguish between what Allah does and does not will; and finally, completely identifying with Allah’s will, harmonizing not just with the sacred but with the entire world.

In the Christian tradition, the Biblical New Testament (John 2:12-14) provides a dichotomous model of spiritual development by emphasizing three stages of growth paralleling physical maturation: childhood, young adulthood, and mature adulthood, each with its spiritual characteristics. There is also a long tradition of celebrated Christian saints, such as Thomas Aquinas and Saint John of the Cross, who were recognized for their profound spiritual development based on their attainments. Aquinas proposed stages of spirituality, such as dividing charity into three parts, starting with “beginners” who need encouragement, the “proficient” who need to strengthen their capacity to love, and the “perfect,” who are at union with God (Torrell, 2003). Saint John of the Cross (2003) described the soul’s 10-step journey climbing a ladder of love (like Jacob’s ladder), progressing from body concerns to union with God and, most famously, passing through the “dark night of the soul.” The rungs (stages) are as follows: languishing with love for God and the loss of desire for all things other than God; ceaseless preoccupation with finding God; perseverance in the face of obstacles, accompanied by a sense of worthlessness in comparison to magnitude of the task; gratitude for all that God has already granted and acceptance that no more can be asked; impatience and longing to unite with God; increased charity and purity, as well as repeated contact with God; vehemence in asking for God’s love; holding tightly onto God; perfection sensed as sweetness; and finally, being totally merged with God. Noteworthy, this tenth stage was not expected to be achieved within a human’s lifetime.

Some modern Protestant communities, while not offering an explicit developmental path, honor certain signs of spiritual development. For example, in some Pentecostal churches, handling venomous snakes with impunity and engaging in glossolalia (speaking in tongues) are seen as evidence of high spiritual development. Another widespread and influential spiritual movement in the contemporary US, which is anchored in Christianity, is the twelve-step approach in which spiritual goals and practices are promoted as tools for mastering behavioral and substance addictions (Krippner, 2005). Twelve-step programs are emphatically stage-based and skipping a stage is seen as possibly leading to relapse (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001).

### **Eastern religious models of spiritual development**

There are many Eastern religious models of spiritual development, including those of Hinduism,

Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Shintoism. If any generalizations can be made validly across their great diversity, they seem, in contrast to the Western traditions, to more explicitly contain self-experiments and encourage critical and reflective thinking on the part of the seeker to appraise his or her spiritual development. These include millennia-old systematic change processes that require cognitive control, disciplined effort, and self-reflective awareness that could take decades to master, such as formal meditation practices.

In the West, religion has been viewed as primarily theocentric, emphasizing a relationship to a personal divine figure; by contrast the Eastern traditions, for example, Buddhism and Taoism, often emphasize non-duality and an impersonal divine (Cortwright, 1997). However, some Eastern traditions are theocentric, including Shintoism, which boasts a pantheon of divinities. Eastern religions have been sometimes presumed to be “more spiritual” than those religions from the West by Westerners under the sway of romanticism (Friedman, 2005), but Eastern traditions also have their outer trappings and inner constraints. For example, although Buddhism is often characterized as not being a religion (and sometimes is characterized as a philosophy or even a psychology), Buddhist beliefs include faith assumptions, such as Buddha’s alleged “enlightenment” in which supposedly he became free of karma, a concept inextricably linked to a doctrine of reincarnation. Furthermore, the basic appeal of this religion is on the faith that, since Buddha obtained liberation from karma, others who might follow in His path can also obtain the same result. This and many other tenets of Buddhism (and most religions) are empirically untestable and thus non-scientific, although many attempt to misclassify Buddhism as a psychological science (Friedman, 2009).

One sophisticated Eastern model for spiritual development is the *Yogasutras*, attributed to the scholar Patanjali in the second century BCE; its eight “limbs” or steps laid the basis for Ashtanga Yoga, one of many disciplines purported to “quiet the mind,” transcend one’s usual identity, and “know God” (Yati, 2009). This yoga system proposes many tools for spiritual development: meditation and mindfulness; postures and breathing practices; moderation in lifestyle; and positive virtues such as honesty and not injuring others. Spiritual development is seen as related to attainment of these

qualities. The outer forms of yoga (physical strength and flexibility in *hatha* yoga) are easier to evaluate than the more subtle aspects of this path.

The Buddha's "eightfold path" includes aspiring toward right (or complete) perspective, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right awareness, and right concentration. The first two are said to produce wisdom, the next four to change conduct, and the final two to improve meditation. These eight aspects of the path are not necessarily sequential, like the rungs of Jacob's ladder, but are to be developed simultaneously, each supporting the others (Sangharakshita, 2007; Snelling, 1991).

One symbolic representation of spiritual development from the Zen Buddhist tradition is the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures (Suzuki, 1960), which depict stages in finding and taming a lost bull, an allegory for the search for enlightenment. It starts with searching for the lost bull (realizing there is something more to life), followed by discovery of its footprints (recognizing a spiritual path). Then the bull is glimpsed (the goal of enlightenment is perceived), followed by catching it in a struggle (disciplined effort). The bull is finally tamed (practice becomes more natural), and is ridden home, accompanied by joy. Then the bull is forgotten (transcended); finally, self and bull are both forgotten (all is experienced as emptiness). The source of oneness is reached and the seeker returns to the community to share the fruits of spiritual development with others. One's place on this allegory indicates one's level of spiritual maturity, according to this Buddhist model.

Another approach within Hindu and Buddhist traditions is based on chakras, Sanskrit for "turning wheels," purported focal points in one's "etheric body" (or "subtle energy body"). Although some traditions speak of five, six, eight, or even twelve *chakras*, the best-known versions define seven: the root, sacral, solar plexus, heart, brow, and crown chakras. The chakra levels where one's supposed energy mostly resides, as well as the relative balance among chakra energy, can be used to assess spiritual development (e.g., one whose energy is primarily in the base chakra, related to survival, would be seen as less developed than one whose heart chakra predominates). In this sense, the human body and its supposed energy systems are like Jacob's ladder, with each chakra being like a rung. The level of one's overall chakra energy indicates one's spiritual development.

## Models of Spiritual Development

In some yogic traditions, as seekers develop spiritually a type of energy (*kundalini*) is said to rise upward like a serpent from the root to the crown, terminating if discipline has been sufficiently rigorous in a unitive experience (Avalon, 1919; Goswami, 1980). This developmental sequence may take years of meditative work and is not without risk. One well-known seeker, Krishna (1971), awakened his kundalini "serpent" without supervision, resulting in disequilibrium that took years to resolve.

Spiritual development through activation of the chakras has taken somewhat different forms in Tantra, Shakta, Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Himalayan Bonpo, among others, and in the more recent writings of Aurobindo (1962) and Bhatnagar (Bhatnagar & Lassey, 2009). The latter adept has incorporated Western psychological principles into his developmental model and has prescribed detailed exercises, such as the visualization of various chakras to facilitate spiritual growth.

Taoist paths to spiritual development also emphasize working with one's *subtle body* (the sheath that allegedly envelops the physical body and extends beyond it), often through internal alchemy, visualization exercises, or ritualized movement such as *qigong*, thought to promote mental and physical health (Chia, 1993). These practices interact with traditional Chinese medicine and the purported circulation of *qi* energy through its alleged network of some 265 acupuncture points and the dozen or so meridians that are thought to connect them. Healthy regimens are prescribed to balance one's yin and yang propensities (i.e., one's receptive and expressive propensities). Here, spiritual development takes an embodied approach. However, *qi* is not seen as merely physical, although there are alleged practical benefits for the practitioner's physical, mental, emotional, and sexual health by unblocking energy channels and increasing energy balance (Mayer, 2003; Meech, 2007).

### Integrative-Philosophical Models of Spiritual Development

Underhill (1911/1961) was one of the first scholars to look across various traditions and provide an organizing scheme of spiritual development. She proposed that 5 stages lead toward the ultimate goal of mystical spirituality, the merging of the individual soul with God or the Absolute. The first is "awakening," in which one becomes conscious of the divinity, followed by the



second, “purgation,” in which one struggles to eliminate personal imperfections. The third stage of “illumination” is often mistaken as the last stage, as it is accompanied by a glimpse of “transcendence.” Extraordinary mystics, however, go through a fourth stage, which St. John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul,” a profound sense of abandonment by God. Then if surrender to God’s will occurs, there is a final stage with complete loss of the individual self and a permanent union with the absolute. By organizing descriptions of people’s experiences, Underhill used a philosophical, rather than faith-based, approach and her integration resembles Jacob’s ladder in terms of a vertical hierarchy of spiritual states with development consisting of passing from each state to the next, “higher” one.

More recently, Wilber (1980, 1997, 2000, 2004) organized a massive amount of material into a coherent framework of spiritual development.<sup>2</sup> Taking a cultural-historical approach, Wilber (1980) described four fundamental phases in the evolution of human consciousness. In Wilber’s earliest era, the sense of self was wholly identified with physical being and the primordial forces of nature. Consciousness later became separated from the physiological life of the body, but it had not advanced beyond a childlike sense of magically mingling in this world. In this second era, the myths structuring this reality were still bound to the body, but an external world was recognized and responsibility for events was magically assigned to it. In the third era, with the advent of more complex forms of language some 12,000 years ago, the verbal mind climbed out of the body and into a world of extended time. The physical world could now be represented, manipulated, and narrated through mental symbols, making it possible to use complex shared symbols to understand and control one’s impulses and world. However, the cognitive abilities necessary for self-reflection were not yet well developed and so the individual’s emerging sense of self drew from images of the culture’s mythology. As the capacities for self-reflection evolved and the individual’s assumptions could be tested through deductive reasoning, emerging perhaps some 3,000 years ago in different parts of the world, a self-observing aspect of the psyche came into being. This marked the beginning of Wilber’s fourth era, characterized by the differentiation of the separate personal ego, the capacity to step back and observe oneself. The current era, Wilber’s fourth, is dominated by the rational, self-reflecting, individual ego. In primordial

times meaning was lodged in the group; today it is primarily centered in the individual.

Wilber (2000) also created a model of spiritual development based on his examination of Western and Eastern reports of mystical development. One can, Wilber asserted, progress from “gross level mysticism” to the “causal,” “subtle,” and “integral” stages. The last of these represents the resolution of one’s conflicts and imbalances in favor of a unity of thought, feeling, and action. Wilber contended that children do not have ready access to the higher spiritual realms. He did not dispute the claim that children were capable of having some sort of spiritual experiences, only that they cannot skip developmental stages. He argued that children’s absence of strong ego-boundaries means they cannot differentiate between themselves and the environment, a capacity that characterizes higher-level mystical experiences. According to Wilber (1980, 2000), pre-egoic spirituality differs from “trans-egoic” spirituality and to equate them is to commit a “pre/trans fallacy.” Wilber’s model is probably the most impressive modern example of a vertical model similar to Jacob’s ladder.

However, Wilber’s model has been questioned by many, including Washburn (2003) and Taylor (2009). Washburn’s model is less hierarchical, allowing for alternating ascents and descents. Taylor conceptualized spiritual experiences as occurring at many different levels of intensity and reports of the spirituality of children meet his criteria for being authentic spiritual experiences, albeit at lower intensity levels. Taylor’s model describes five levels that may occur developmentally or may be encompassed within a single experience:

1. A heightening of physical perception; the world seems brighter, more colorful, and more intricate.
2. A sense of the “aliveness” of ordinarily inanimate phenomena; the world comes alive.
3. A sense of meaning, harmony, and benevolence pervading one’s surroundings or the world as a whole.
4. A sense of inner well-being, peace, bliss, or joy.
5. An awareness of spirit in the world—what Christian mystics call deification, what some Buddhist traditions refer to as *nirvikalpa samadhi*.

These experiences can occur in a solitary context or in a communal context, such as group sporting activities, lovemaking, or in a group artistic performance (including among members of the audience at such a performance). Taylor (2009) found support for his

position from Loevinger's (1976) speculation that a child's openness to experience is reduced during maturation, but might be regained at higher levels of ego development. Taylor concluded that spiritual experiences are accessible to individuals at both Wilber's pre-egoic and trans-egoic levels, but that certain aspects of "trans-egoic" spiritual experiences are not a part of the pre-egoic experiences, for example the realization that one's "ego-self" is not one's "true self." This debate about childhood spirituality is also reflected in Hay and Nye's (1998) notion of "relational consciousness," which is proposed as a non-cognitive spiritual construct that presumably bypasses linear cognitive development constraints and allows for the equal validity of childhood and adult spiritual experiences.

Philosophical models of spiritual development use various classification schemes, but in general they use concepts not easily amenable to empirical testing or they have not subjected their speculations to empirical tests, although they may have integrated empirical data into a theoretical edifice. What separates them from scientific approaches is this lack of being open to empirical examination, although the boundaries between philosophy and science are not always clearly delineated.

### **Psychological Models of Spiritual Development**

Many psychologists have proposed stage theories of spiritual development within the scientific tradition, which calls for some form of empiricism, using sensory perception to gain information to support or disconfirm a theory. For example, Roehlkepartain, Benson, and King (2005) presented an overview of various theories of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence. In the quantitative traditions of research, measurement is essential and there is a robust literature using measures relevant to this topic. There is also an abundance of tools designed to assess spirituality, including over 100 identified constructs related to spirituality and the transpersonal (MacDonald, et al., 1995; MacDonald, Kuentzel, & Friedman, 1999; MacDonald, Friedman, & Kuentzel, 1999). Many additional measures have been developed since these review papers, evidencing a growing research tradition (MacDonald & Friedman, 2002). There is also a strong qualitative research tradition in studying spiritual development, as well as a variety of emerging mixed-method approaches (Robbins & Friedman, 2009).

### **Models of Spiritual Development**

### **Psychology of religion**

One of the earliest psychologists of religion, Allport (1969) distinguished between immature and mature religious sentiments. Immature religion uses less developed thought processes, which are concrete and magical (as in accepting sacred scriptures literally), while mature religion uses more developed thought processes (as in seeing sacred scriptures metaphorically). His ideas developed into related concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religion, which can be seen as a stage delineation, albeit with only two stages. Allport's work generated a tremendous amount of empirical research (see Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996), placing it in the realm of science. However, even a scientific approach must face the conceptual conundrum we have pointed out. For instance, some religious traditions hold that accepting scripture literally demonstrates a higher level of spiritual development, whereas other traditions may see uncritical literalism as a relatively undeveloped stage of spirituality.

Morality is the focus of another widely used psychological approach to spiritual development. Kohlberg (1971) was influenced by the well-known Piagetian stages of cognitive development, as he created a model of moral reasoning consisting of six stages. Individuals at presumed different stages of moral development provide different justifications or condemnations of actors in given vignettes. Kohlberg postulated three main stages: a "preconventional" approach based on self-interest without concern for another, a "conventional" approach based on prevailing moral values, and a "postconventional" approach that sometimes contradicted prevailing moral values in service of a higher good. He saw his stages as universal, but progression through the stages occurring at different rates in different cultures. Of particular interest to this discussion is Kohlberg's belief that some people regressed into earlier stages, depending on life circumstances (just as the angels both ascended and descended Jacob's ladder). Kohlberg also sometimes speculated about a seventh stage of cosmic and transcendental morality.

If moral decision-making represents an aspect of spirituality, one's primary form of moral reasoning can be seen as an indicator of spiritual development. Interestingly, some spiritual traditions explicitly defy notions of morality and encourage adherents to break extant taboos. For example, Jesus admonished his followers to shirk the day-to-day responsibilities of family

and other conventional ties in order to follow Him, such as to ignore Sabbath rules in order to help others,<sup>3</sup> while some Hindu tantric practices encourage violating social norms, such as codes of sexual conduct, in order to gain liberation. Thus moral criteria cannot form a uniform approach to understanding spiritual development, since morality itself is so variable. In addition, as religions ossify, the fundamental moral messages of their founders, which often were quite radical, frequently become distorted into instruments of social control benefiting the status quo.

The Freudian approach attempted to build a scientific theory of development devoid of reliance on any vestiges of religion and spirituality (i.e., considering religion and spirituality as *prima facie* signs of failure to mature). However, several followers of this approach created revisions and extensions of Freudian theory that did encompass spiritual development. Erikson (1980) extended Freud's theories across the entire lifespan into an 8-stage model of development. Although each stage can be linked to spiritual development, perhaps most salient to this discussion is Erikson's last stage, integrity versus despair. Erikson argued that, at the end of life, the developmental crisis needing resolution is finding meaning with life itself, including its inevitable end in death. To the extent that this successful resolution requires facing at least existential, if not spiritual, concerns, achieving it can be a mark of spiritual development.

Gilligan (1982) took exception to Kohlberg and Erikson, pointing out that their models were male-centered and hierarchical. Her interviews with women indicated that, when faced with moral decisions, they thought more about caring and connection than about abstract rules. Gilligan interpreted the fact that females tended to score lower on Kohlberg's measures of moral development as an artifact of the model, rather than a demonstration that the moral development of women is in some way inferior to that of men. Her critique exemplifies the dilemma of imposing any uniformly vertical model of spiritual development, as these may not only be culturally and historically limited, but also gender biased.

Perhaps the best-known stage theory of spiritual development is based on both cognitive (Piagetian) and affective (Freudian and Eriksonian) precursors. Fowler (1981) envisioned spiritual development as a sequence of seven universal stages: "Primal or Undifferentiated" faith during the first two years (focused on security issues and not

on faith per se), "Intuitive-Projective" faith in preschoolers (focused on unconscious material and magical beliefs), "Mythic-Literal" faith in grade-school pre-adolescents (focused on following rules, such as in adhering to conventional justice), "Synthetic-Conventional" faith in adolescence (focused on conformity), "Individuative-Reflective" faith in early adulthood (focused on struggles to find personal meaning), "Conjunctive" faith in middle adulthood (focused on achieving reconciliation of paradoxes), and last a "Universalizing" faith, similar to other models of transcendence. As a scientific theory, this developed into a robust research tradition (Leak, 2008).

The psychology of religion, as an empirical scientific tradition, has provided many avenues to understanding spiritual development, typically involving the use of measures and surveys. However, much of this research has been based on a Judeo-Christian approach to spirituality and, as mentioned, may not be very universally applicable.

### **Transpersonal psychology**

The word "transpersonal" was first introduced into psychology by William James in a 1905 lecture and used in 1942 by Carl Jung as the German term, *überpersonlich*, which his English translators rendered as "transpersonal" (Vich, 1988). A few years later, this term was also used by Murphy (1949) and then in the 1960s others picked up the term (Sutich, 1976) as a type of unifying framework. Friedman (1983) applied the term "transpersonal self-expansiveness" to experiences in which one's sense of identity extends beyond its ordinary limits to encompass wider, broader, and deeper aspects of the cosmos. Friedman (2002) later argued that the transpersonal perspective allows a scientific approach to understanding such phenomena that can benefit from the wisdom of religious traditions and spiritual experiences without being bound by their underlying assumptions, a point to which we will return in our conclusion.

In contrast to the psychological study of religion from a more or less "objective" position (such as exploring demographic patterns related to phenomena), transpersonal psychology also embraces the "subjective" study of the experiential aspects of spirituality. Today the distinction between transpersonal psychology and the psychology of religion is fading, as there is a call to broaden the psychology of religion by renaming it the "psychology of religion and spirituality" (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Some scientific research has come out of the transpersonal psychology tradition (e.g.,

Tart, 2009), but most of the work has been experiential. One example of a transpersonal scientific research tradition stems from the *Self-Expansiveness Level Form* (SELF), a self-report test measuring transpersonal self-expansiveness, defined as “the amount of True Self which is contained within the boundary demarcating self from not-self through the process of self-conception” (Friedman, 1983, p. 38). The SELF measures three levels of self-expansiveness derived through using a spatial-temporal cartography in which there is a personal level of the here-and-now, a transpersonal level in which identity expands beyond present place and time such that self dissolves as a separate entity, and a middle level between the personal and transpersonal. In this regard, the SELF was specifically designed not to measure a vertically hierarchical level of spiritual development, but rather a horizontal expansion of the self-concept across space and time. This approach has also resulted in an empirical research tradition, placing it within the realm of science (Pappas & Friedman, 2007).

#### **Neurobiological Models of Spiritual Development**

The neurobiological approach to spiritual development, now in its infancy, uses emerging technologies (fMRI, QEEG, etc.) that can measure the physical expressions or concomitants of spiritual variables. For instance, activation of certain brain states (theta and perhaps gamma brain waves) or the development of certain brain areas (following years of meditation) lend themselves to neurobiological study. Spiritual traditions have long discussed physical factors, such as breath and alleged “subtle energies” (qi or prana), in relationship to spiritual development. A convergence of interest in traditional spiritual issues and these new scientific methods has begun to occur, such as by Krishna (1971) who held several seminars with scientists, attempting to elicit their cooperation in verifying the existence of “kundalini energy,” which he felt held the key not only to spiritual development but also to human genius and creativity. Motoyama (1971, 2009) claimed to have invented a technology for measuring acupuncture points, meridians, and chakras, asserting that his data validate the existence of these ancient constructs, and called for independent replication of his studies. Alper (2001) and McNamara (2009) have linked the neurobiology of spirituality to human evolution and the latter author has proposed that religion was a primary force in the evolution of self-awareness.

#### **Models of Spiritual Development**

The neurobiology of spirituality is therefore emerging as a distinct discipline, with studies of meditation, near-death experiences, dissolving of ego boundaries, and other phenomena taking place with rigorous methodologies. In this regard, accounts of extraordinary experiences studied through the tools of neuroscience are attracting the attention of scholars (Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Krippner & Friedman, 2010). It is even conceivable that one day spiritual development might be assessed by neurobiological indicators (e.g., the overall ratio of theta to beta brain waves produced during meditation, the activation of certain areas in the left temporal lobe of the brain, etc.). This would not necessarily be an exercise in reductionism, but rather an acknowledgement of neurobiological concomitants to spiritual life.

#### **Conclusion**

This chapter began with the metaphor of Jacob’s Ladder as a starting point for discussing models of spiritual development, but there is another lesson to be learned from this Biblical account. Once Jacob reached the top of the ladder, Jehovah was said to have given Jacob and his descendents dominion over all the land that they could see. This promise could represent the rewards of spiritual development (Maslow, 1968). But when it is interpreted literally, as by some of Jacob’s descendents who base their claims to political and economic control of Judea and Samaria on this story, it causes no end of turmoil, bloodshed, and warfare. This illustrates some of the very real challenges for understanding spiritual development, for taking a sacred text literally can have high costs to humanity and the earth. We believe that more deeply understanding and being able to facilitate spiritual development could benefit people in important ways. The models we have described serve as one set of tools to explore this possibility.

Another approach is to recognize barriers to spiritual development. These can be microsocial (as in conformity pressures from other individuals), macrosocial (as in pressures from collective structures such as laws), or individual, as in character flaws. For instance, Trungpa (1973) defined “spiritual materialism” as a pursuit of enlightenment driven by egoistic needs. Clearly, this whole area is one of great challenges and potential rewards, as well as one where the costs can be high if no integration is found.

Ferrer (2009) has argued for a participatory approach to spirituality and its development. He

proposed abandoning any predetermined ultimate criteria for evaluating spiritual development, as they can soon collapse into dogmatic formulations. He argued that this does not mean abandoning discernment, but that we simply recognize that spiritual truth claims cannot be argued in terms of ontology, as their multiplicity is both a natural and essential expression of a mystery to be celebrated. He maintained that this is not an abdication of the obligation to evaluate the differential worth of various paths, but that we need other grounds to evaluate competing truth claims. He was especially averse to the use of any predetermined doctrines (spiritual hierarchies) and instead suggested the consequences of different paths be used to evaluate them. Specifically, he proposed two guidelines: an assessment of how a path might liberate practitioners from self-centeredness, and another assessment of how a path might lead to a person's fulfillment. These proposals recall the pragmatic solution proposed by James (1890) for resolving conflicts between positions (such as belief in free will versus determinism) by looking at their fruits. In this way, different paths to spiritual development may not be universally inferior or superior, just different—and spiritual development may not be subsumable within any one system of understanding or measured in any unidimensional way.

#### Future Directions

We have attempted to capture some of the many complexities involved in understanding models of spiritual development and hope we have supplied readers with some useful concepts to aid their study of this important and provocative avenue of human inquiry. Whether readers see Jacob's Ladder of spiritual development as vertical, horizontal, circular, or something else, we wish them well in their quest. Finally, we hope that the panoply of models of spiritual development does not obscure the goal of so many individuals and traditions to further spiritual development, whether it is seen as salvation, enlightenment, or plain healthy living in a fully embodied state of the here and now.

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#### Questions presenting future directions for the field, difficult problems to be solved, or topics that remain to be addressed:

1. How might spiritual development be significantly influenced by historical and cultural context?

2. Can spiritual development ever be understood in a universal way across all cultures and all times?
3. Can there be models of spiritual development that do not rely on untestable metaphysical assumptions?
4. Can a unifying scientific model of spiritual development be constructed that appropriately addresses the complexity and multidimensionality of this area?
5. What empirical research methods (or mixed methods) might best address the complexity of spiritual development?
6. What innovative or new methods might be created or utilized to study spiritual development?
7. What are possible genetic components of spiritual development?
8. How might spiritual development models better integrate the body, embodiment, and/or somatic phenomenology?
9. How might neuroscience inform, modify, or guide spiritual development models?
10. How might current research with psychedelics and/or pharmaceuticals enhance our understanding of spiritual development?

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## Notes

1. Reproduced (with minor changes) with permission from the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality* (2011), edited by Lisa Miller.



2. Any summation of Wilber's complex thoughts might be criticized as inadequate, as Wilber has produced multiple revisions of his various positions—see MacDonald (2007).
3. Jesus frequently quoted the law by juxtaposing one command with another—making the relativistic case that one law carried higher importance than another, which could also be seen as not necessarily an admonition to ignore the law *per se* but, rather, an interpretation about a point of law based on a notion of a higher good.

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