

Spiritual Development: An Individual Journey

A. W. Orr

Saybrook University

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The word spirituality generally encompasses phenomena that are not material or part of the body. Ideas, concepts, values, and imaginative creations are all spiritual. From this it can be said that much of an individual's identity is spiritual. Theories of human development incorporate some of these. A great deal of individual development involves forming values about right and wrong, and notions of social and cultural norms. However there are some spiritual realms, the mystical and the religious, that are not explicitly part of most developmental theories. They have to do with the idea there is something beyond man, generally something eternal. I make a distinction that *religious* infers the existence of a Supreme Being. James Fowler (1982) as well as Kass and Lennox (2005) concur that a religion consists of a group of individuals who come together as a community formed about a shared set of values and standards that include some form of Supreme Being. Spirituality is a term that does not require either a community or the concept of a Supreme Being. Both Fowler, and Kass and Lennox offer specific theories of human spiritual development. Fowler's theory is built on individual faith built in a community but without a Supreme Being. Kass and Lennox build their theory within the Judeo/Christian/Islamic tradition. What follows is a brief summary of each. Then some alternative views will be considered. Ultimately William James (1902) in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (VRE) caught the essence in the word *varieties*. It should be noted James does not distinguish between *religious* and *spiritual*. The theme of this paper is all the theories are valid, that there are many roads to spiritual development and within any framework each individual's journey is unique.

James Fowler (1982) calls his a theory of faith development. He describes spiritual development. He relates the theory to the life cycle and specifically to Erik Erikson's developmental stages (Crain, 2011). He contrasts his theory with cognitive developmental approaches typified by Piaget. While he notes that faith is not the same as religion he believes it can be part of religion but is deeper, richer, and more personal. Beginning at birth the individual gains a synthetic faith that comes from family and the family's immediate community. In many this is permanent. However as the individual moves into a larger social environment and is exposed to other views there may be conflicts that lead the individual to question these initial values. This can also be caused by external changes in the values the individual has learned. Fowler cites the Roman Catholic Church's change from using Latin in the liturgy to using the vernacular as an example that challenged many. Baring such external changes, conflicts generally occur in adolescence. This directly relates to Erikson's stage of identity versus role-confusion (Crain, 2011). Erikson's role-confusion is a state where the adolescent is torn by conflicting social values and expectations. Feeling that each decision will be a lifetime commitment the adolescent is unable to decide. Fowler refers to this as individuals who are overwhelmed by others' expectations. Fowler continues saying adolescence can also lead individuals to a nihilistic view about the existence of an ultimate being. The comparison with Erikson seems apt.-good job with this paragraph

I interviewed a young man in college who exemplifies this. He was raised Roman Catholic and attended a Catholic elementary school. His mother is not particularly religious. As a child he attended church regularly with his father. When the time came to enter high school the family moved to a different area. There was no Catholic high school immediately available. At this time my interviewee had reached early adolescence. He entered public high school.

Church attendance stopped. He changed his attitude about God. God was like, “the tooth fairy and Santa Claus, a fantasy made up for children.” As he leaves adolescence and enters young adulthood, this has not changed. Currently his attitude toward an ultimate reality or God is essentially nihilistic.

According to Fowler (1982), as some individuals never develop spiritually past the synthetic faith of childhood, not all individuals develop spiritually beyond this stage. Erikson (Crain, 2011) agrees that some individuals never get past the stage of role-confusion but says that the search for identity, ego-identity, is generally a lifelong process. Fowler feels that those whose spiritual development continues follow a path where the individual begins to develop a sense of personal values and to be responsible for his or her commitments. This tends to occur in late adolescence or early adulthood. While my interviewee presently has no sense of a Supreme Being, he is forming values and is accepting the consequences of his choices. As suggested by Fowler he is beginning to form an individual personal faith along with a sense of values.

According to Fowler (1982) late adolescence also tends to be a stage where the myths of conventional religion are lost. Most move past this into an adult stage where much of what was rejected in early adulthood is reunited with personally formed internal values. The power of myths and external ideals is reawakened. This reawakening does not require a return to a belief in a Supreme Being. The individual becomes attuned to the concepts of paradoxes and reconciliation between contradictions. According to Fowler only a few go beyond this to a final stage reaching a transcendent level of faith. Individuals who reach this have an intuitive sense of ultimate reality. Fowler ignores the question of how many individuals remain in the pre-adolescent stage of synthetic belief nor those who fail to develop beyond the questioning stage in

adolescence. My interviewee is too young to have experienced the later stages. However to date his spiritual development reasonably conforms to Fowler's theory.

Abraham Maslow's spiritual development also seems to support Fowler (1982). If we compare Maslow's (1943) original theory of human needs with his final thoughts (cited by Maslow, 1971) we find his thinking grew spiritually. In 1943 Maslow's spiritual development ended with self-actualization as the highest level of human development. By the end of his life he found a higher realm, a transcendent level (Maslow, 1971). Like Fowler, Maslow's transcendent state did not require a Supreme Being. He also saw the transcendent level as rare. Further, Maslow believed that many do not reach the level of self-actualization. In Fowler's theory this could be compared to those whose faith does not go past the conventional. The two approach the concept of spiritual development from significantly different perspectives but share the opinion that many do not reach higher levels.

Kass and Lennox (2005) criticize Fowler's (1982) view that few people achieve a transcendent level of faith. Kass and Lennox use the term spiritual rather than faith. As previously noted, their model is firmly embedded in the Judeo/Christian/Islamic tradition, specifically Christianity and Judaism. It also infers a concept of community and therefore can be called a religious model. This is also implied when they criticize Fowler's model for saying that a sense of social justice and behavioral self-regulation can only emerge in that model when the individual emerges into post-conventional religious belief. For Kass and Lennox these ideas of social justice and self-regulation are prerequisites for spiritual development not a result. They also note that being part of a community reinforces these concepts. Somehow there is an inference in their argument that most individuals can achieve the highest development.

Kass and Lennox (2005) discuss four other models of spiritual development. They see none that truly describe the complex inter-relationships they believe are crucial. Their view extracts certain features from the other models. They see spiritual and moral development being built on cognitive processes. They see object-relations theory providing the means for the development of representations of God. This begins with projections of parental authority to a concept of an external image that becomes a stable aspect of the psyche. One central part of spiritual development is a continuing examination of God's images. They take the role culture plays in creating images of God from social learning theory. Core spiritual experiences are seen as having two components, a phenomenon that leads to a personal conviction of God's existence and an idea of a direct interrelatedness with God. They credit the idea of a core religiosity with Freud though they also credit Gordon Allport for having a great deal to do with making it part of spiritual development.

Kass and Lennox (2005) believe that spiritual development is often enabled by the developmental challenges in the individual's life cycle. They build an analogy to Erikson's idea that the outcome of developmental stages is determined by the way an individual deals with crises (Crain, 2011). To Kass and Lennox God places these crises as challenges for the purpose of creating spiritual challenge. Their model incorporates these elements. Yet the real foundation of the model is Jewish mysticism, specifically the mysticism of Maimonides.

For Kass and Lennox (2005) spiritual development is built on two things. The first is doing good deeds. The Jewish term is *mitzvot*. These are part of daily life and include all areas of daily life, family, work, sexuality, and health. Through doing *mitzvot* the individual is led to a higher spiritual awareness called *halakhah* or *the way*. The whole of the system is a code of behavior that leads to a personal communion with God. One of their observations is that this

process requires an imaginative faculty. From this comes an inner awareness of God's presence despite the fact that God has no physical existence. Though their sequence resembles Fowler (1981) their emphasis on action leading to growth as well as their emphasis on God clearly distinguishes it.

The *halakhah* is viewed by Kass and Lennox (cite) as the basic therapeutic tool in Judaism. They see it as occurring in stages beginning with an infant's unregulated behavior. This develops into an adherence to *halakah* that is literal. Reflection on the *halakhah* leads to a nonliteral understanding. Finally there is an ultimate immersion and experience of God. Unlike Fowler (1981) they see this last stage as normal. They say psychologically their model is built on behavioral, cognitive, and relational concepts.

Kass and Lennox (2005) conclude their article with a case study of a young woman named Karen. Essentially Karen's story, in the spiritual sense, bears witness to the developmental theory they have articulated.-for example.... They conclude by referring to their theory as a formulation though not the only formulation and conclude that spiritual development plays an important role that can connect traditional spiritual practices with psychology. They infer the case of Karen is generally applicable. They do not really support this.-where do you see the flaw

The way that Kass and Lennox (2005) consistently refer to the Supreme Being as God might be construed as applying a Christian concept to the Jewish mystical idea. Edward Hoffman (2007) and Gershom Scholem (1961) concur that in Jewish mysticism the Supreme Being is beyond any conceivable human comprehension. They use the term *ein sof* or ultimate mystery.-I really like this concept; thanks for reminding me☺ Despite Scholem's (1961) focus on Kabbalah, a different approach to Jewish mysticism, he says the concept of the *ein sof* applies

to all Jewish mysticism. Hoffman (2007) examines several Jewish mystical traditions including Maimonides agrees with Scholem. The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich (1953) essentially agreed about the mystical nature of God when he wrote, “God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him” (p. 227). Essentially Tillich is challenging the Christian concept that God is also Man.

Unlike Scholem (1961), Hoffman (2007), and Tillich (1953) there seems to be a sense in Kass and Lennox (2005) that God ought be reified despite the fact they say God has no physical existence. In Christianity the concept of a reified God is found in Christ as both God and human. This distinction is a reason I conclude their theory is basically Christian. As noted they also criticize Fowler (1981) for the lack of a Supreme Being. Kass and Lennox could be criticized for its necessity. I see this as a distinction not a criticism. Individuals may either be comfortable or uncomfortable with the Christian concept of God. At this time my interviewee is uncomfortable with it.

Kass and Lennox (2005) build their theory on the reality of some form of Supreme Being with whom an individual connects. Fowler (1982) suggests a transcendent level where the individual is intuitively connected to ultimate reality. There are other traditions where spiritual development that do not incorporate the idea of a Supreme Being. Eastern religions, especially Buddhism, have attained a significant presence in Western thought. There are many diverse approaches to Buddhism (Powers, 2007). Eugene Taylor (1999) writes about the approach most Americans are aware of. The Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are leading contemporary Buddhist writers within that tradition. It incorporates an *eightfold* developmental *path* that, like Kass and Lennox (2005) is built on action (Hanh, 1998). The path leads to a transcendent state. It is achieved through a realization of a profound interconnectedness of the entire universe and

all that is encompassed by it. The ultimate Divinity is the totality of the universe including all that is in it. Unlike the Western Concept of a Supreme Being, the Eastern Divinity is explicitly within each individual. The individual does not gain a connection the Divine but realizes he or she is Divine. The transcendent state, the direct awareness and connection with the universe is not always attained nor is it necessary. It is a goal.:-)

There is one other approach to spiritual development, one that has become widely known in American culture. According to Taylor (1999) its basis is psychological and millions have embraced it. For this reason it merits discussion. The movement is built on spiritual principles articulated early in the twentieth century. Taylor traces the influence of Buddhism on both American spirituality and psychology back to the 1890's. He sees these influences fused in VRE (James, 1902). The focus of VRE is on the psychological nature of religious experience, something James viewed as outside organized religion. James' VRE is a series of lectures that are built around the spiritual transformation of specific individuals. Some are moments of profound insight. Some are slow journeys over the course of years. According to James the experiences are always solemn and directly involve an experience of the Divine. These are the only common characteristics. However, the crux of James' argument is that the meaning of the Divine is specific to the individual's understanding of it. The concept that the efficacy of any experience lies solely in its meaning and utility to the experiencing individual is the essence of James' Pragmatism (James, 1907). Within James' thought all theories of spiritual development are useful to the extent they are meaningful. Each individual is free to develop uniquely.

Taylor's (1999) thought is similar to James' (1907). He articulates it in a concept of an unstructured religion of the American people, a folk religion. There is one that Taylor, like many others, sees as a major spiritual movement in the twentieth century. It appears in many

diverse guises centered on Twelve Steps to spiritual recovery. Typically all manifestations are referred to as Twelve Step Programs (Bevacqua & Hoffman, 2010). All derive from the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (Anonymous, 1939). The Twelve Steps represent a path that includes finding an individual sense of the Divine. The Harvard historian Ernest Kurtz (2008) has traced the origin of the Twelve Steps directly back to VRE (James, 1902). Bevacqua and Hoffman also traced the origin to VRE with an entirely different method. The Twelfth Step (Anonymous, 1939) indicates the developmental nature of the process as it says, “Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs” (p. 60). In the second edition of Alcoholics Anonymous (Anonymous, 1955) the word *experience* is changed to *awakening* (p. 60). This suggests the understanding of the nature of the developmental process evolved over time. It is considered normal for individuals to reach the Twelfth Step though this does not really require reaching a level of transcendence.

The Twelve-Step approach to spiritual development is also built on the concept of a fellowship (Anonymous, 1939, 1955) for the purposes of mutual support. In his history of the Alcoholics Anonymous fellowship Ernest Kurtz (1979) sees community as a clear, mandatory, component. The focus of the Twelve-Step program is on the group not the individual. This is also shown in the individual stories of members as they generally emphasize the importance of the group. These make up over half the material in the book, Alcoholics Anonymous (Anonymous, 1939, 1955). Some carry from one edition to the next. Some are dropped and replaced by others. These individual stories are in the nature of bearing witness to the effectiveness of the Twelve-Steps. Kurtz tells us that most meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous involve the concept of individuals bearing witness. According to Kurtz, Taylor (1999) and

Bevacqua and Hoffman (2010) the Twelve-Step approach to spiritual development is one of the largest spiritual movements of the twentieth century. Considering the importance of community to Twelve-Step Programs combined with a connection with something Divine, they meet Taylor's concept of a folk religion.

Some of the models of spiritual development we have looked at share an idea that development occurs in a sequence of stages and ultimately leads to some sense of the divine. Fowler (1981) ties his theory to life cycle stages and an intuitive connection to an ultimate reality. Kass and Lennox's (2005) theory moves in stages and directly deals with a Christian concept of God. James (1902) and the Twelve-Steps (Kurtz, 1979) take no position on the relationship between spiritual development and the life span. In both there is a spiritual transformation that may be a sudden singularity or occur over time.

All share the sense that spiritual development leads toward an awareness and personal relationship with something beyond the individual. I phrase carefully as Fowler (1982) uses the phrase *ultimate reality* in lower case. In Buddhism (Hanh, 1998) it leads to a transcendent state where the individual becomes intimately connected with an infinite Divine that includes the Divinity of the individual. This differs from Western concepts of a Divine that is outside the individual. Unlike Fowler, most Western theories of spiritual development typically directly incorporate this idea. Despite its mystical nature, even the *ein sof* (Scholem, 1961; Hoffman, 2007) is a term representing the God of Judaism. Of the theories discussed only Kass and Lennox (2005) discuss spiritual development in terms of God as used in Christianity. However the origin of the Twelve Steps and of Alcoholics Anonymous (Kurtz, 1979; Bevacqua & Hoffman, 2010) started in and grew away from protestant Christianity.

A last question is whether spiritual development is necessary. Returning to the life of my interviewee. He is in a state where matters of the spirit are irrelevant. His sense of morality is centered on the self. Yet he does a great deal for the benefit of others. The distinction is that he sees altruism as an approach to life that leads to personal benefit. Conforming to social norms and cultural expectations does not trouble him. As he is in his late adolescence his feeling may change as he faces the continuing challenges of life. Possibly he will continue to develop spiritually along the path suggested by Fowler (1982). It is also possible the value of myth (Kass & Lennox, 2005) will reawaken and God will no longer be a fantasy. Does this matter?

I would answer this question as I believe William James (1907) might. Is this individual's present level of spiritual development beneficial and useful to him? I would say it is. James asserted that utility and usefulness are the sole criteria that can be used to judge. So long as any approach to or theory meets the standard of utility and usefulness to an individual, that approach or theory is valid. This paper highlights some features of a few theories of spiritual development. As it can be inferred that all have utility and are beneficial at least for the author(s), they are all valid.

Fowler (1981), Kass and Lennox (2005) and Twelve Step Programs (Taylor, 1999) are attempting to create a formal theory of spiritual development. Hanh (1998) and James (1902) are describing spiritual development as it exists without creating a formal theory. James and my interview describe the spiritual development of real people. Essentially they are case studies.

James' VRE (1902) is a book I have used for decades. In all this time I never comprehended the way VRE is embedded in James' Pragmatism (1907). I was reminded that when dealing with a writer such as James rereading familiar material can lead to deeper understanding and insight. I learned the most reading individual stories, including the one in

Kass and Lennox (1985) and Anonymous (1939). Truly each is unique. The exercise confirms my feeling that direct study of human beings gives me a far more comprehensive view in any area. We can discern patterns and form theories based on common features. However doing this leads to a loss as we fail to see the rich and complex beauty that is found in the individual. The development, including spiritual development, and life journey of each individual is unique. The richest learning takes place when studying these journeys.

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