In a pioneering work, Rhett Diessner offers a holistic view of core psychological domains - from cognitive development to developmental stage theories to moral development to action research and more - while integrating Western and Eastern thought and scientific and spiritual understandings with an underlying Baha’i perspective.

_Psyche and Eros_ will interest transpersonal psychologists not only for its spiritual approach to such a breadth of psychological themes, but even more for its adherence to the principal of the harmony of science and religion, which gives validity to reason and faith, fact and inspiration, and secular and sacred texts in arriving at essential truths.

Rhett Diessner, professor of psychology at Lewis-Clark State College, was, in 1985, Lawrence Kohlberg’s research and teaching assistant at Harvard. In the preface, he notes that Kohlberg “made it clear that people with a Baha’i viewpoint or other tolerant religious viewpoints were assets in his research community” (p. viii). Diessner thus “attempts to interpret the field of western psychological science through the spiritual principles of the Baha’i Faith,” (p. vii) using psyche in its original Greek sense, of ‘soul’ or ‘spirit,’ and psychology as the coalescence of spirituality and science.

The wide range of essays making up the eleven chapters in the book represent two decades of the author’s work making “sense of psychology as an empirical science, informed by spirituality and religion” (p. viii). The result is a book that contributes significantly to an emerging field that applies spirituality to the study of individual and collective patterns of growth in order to identify their true potentialities when scientific research is harmonized with universal spiritual principles.

A few highlights of the book’s content give a sense of its place in this new paradigm. The first chapter provides a foundation for understanding human reality by explaining the two central axioms that humans are created in the image of God, and that, because God can have ‘no comparison or likeness,’ humans are actually created in the image of the Manifestation of God, and thereby posses the qualities and attributes expressed by the Prophet-Founders of the universal religions. A corollary concept, the two forms of oneness, is also explained, with Ultimate Reality being “absolute oneness,” which is indivisible, transcendent, and eternal, and the unity of the human race being “unity-in-diversity,” which is “like white light that has within itself all the colors of the rainbow” (p. 6).
The second chapter argues that action research is not a technique or particular method of research but rather a way to focus on the issue of final cause; its purpose is action, change, and in particular transformative action that results in improving the human condition in a specific context, which is fitting for research done from a spiritual psychology approach.

Next, in reinterpreting central questions of the discipline, “Developmental Psychology Made New: Glimmerings from Spiritual Psychology” starts with the premise that the basic nature of human beings is the soul and then explores the qualities that God has created in the human being, specifically the capacities to know, to love, and to will. This chapter moves well beyond the narrow materialistic scope of mainstream psychology and will be of particular interest to transpersonal psychologists.

The fourth chapter, “Western and Middle Eastern Developmental Stage Theories,” identifies similarities and contrasts between Piaget’s genetic epistemology theory of cognitive development, Erikson’s psychosocial theory of human development, and a classic Middle Eastern seven-stage sequence of the development of the soul (nafs in Arabic, or psyche in Greek), as described by the Baha’i leader Abdu’l-Baha, and which is also familiar to Islamic and Sufi scholars. The most engaging similarity found among these theories is that they all regard the human psyche as a dynamic entity developing throughout the lifespan and moving towards human perfection, a view which encourages hope and gives a teleological meaning to life. The value of connecting this Middle Eastern model in particular to the western psychological theories is that it allows the psychologist to view “human spiritual development as resulting from an interaction between the psyche’s capacity ‘to will’ and the divine grace of God” (p. 50).

The fifth chapter, “Selflessness: Congruencies Between the Cognitive-Developmental Research Programme and the Baha’i Writings,” charts “an avenue of communication for psychologists with members of a “post-modern” religion over topics of mutual interest” by discussing four major concepts shared by both: 1) a developmental teleology, 2) the stage-like nature of development, 3) the importance of an epistemic focus, and 4) selflessness (p. 55). As both a psychologist and a Baha’i, Diessner offers the insight that “a fruitful area for empirical research would be to investigate which moral virtues are particularly useful or critical for the development of the self and selflessness” (such as, courage, honesty, a regard for truth, lack of prejudice, care and concern), the hypothesis that “certain virtues are more important for different stage transitions,” and the conclusion that “there is a spiritual challenge in shedding an earlier stage of cognition in human development, which results in spiritual growth” (pp. 63–64).

The book’s title essay, in the final chapter, offers a fascinating metaphorical interpretation of the myth of Psyche and Eros from the point of view of the Baha’i writings. It confirms the idea that psychological and spiritual transformation is realized through a series of tests and trials that lead to the eternal union of the soul (Psyche) with love (Eros).
If there is a weakness to this collection of essays on a spiritual psychology, it may be that for some it expresses an advanced understanding of the Baha’i teachings without providing an historical or social context to place it in. However, those unfamiliar with the Baha’i faith and its writings can turn to any number of introductions that are readily available.

Briefly, what transpersonal psychologists may want to know about a context for the book’s exploration of a spiritual psychology from a Baha’i point of view is that the Baha’i faith, in just over 150 years, has become the second most widespread religion in the world, due largely to its contemporary spiritual and social principles. The underlying concept, often referred to as progressive revelation, is that throughout history, God has revealed Himself to humanity through a series of divine Messengers, whose teachings provide the basis for the advancement of human society. These Messengers have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. In our time, Bahá’u’lláh, the latest of these Messengers, has brought new spiritual and social teachings that already unite a worldwide community in the core beliefs of one God, one human race, and one evolving religion, what Jung could have been alluding to when he said, “The real history of the world seems to be the progressive incarnation of the deity.”

The book’s strength is in illustrating how the Baha’i teachings can shed light on the academic pursuit of psychology. One example is the Baha’i Faith’s uniqueness in acknowledging the harmony of science and religion as a core principle for our age, and how this sees the two as interdependent, parallel, and complementary knowledge systems representing one Reality.

An intriguing implication of Professor Diessner’s analysis of moral development from both a Kohlbergian and Baha’i perspective (Ch.6) is that as greater and greater numbers of people become aware of, and possibly adopt, the Baha’i principle of the oneness of humanity, it is likely that we will also be able to find greater and greater numbers of individuals at Kohlberg’s Stage 6, universalizing moral principles, for which he originally said only a very small percentage of the population would achieve.

These eleven chapters point to a number of principles, or axioms, which could be identified as characterizing a spiritual psychology from a Baha’i perspective, some of which include: 1) human reality is three-fold: physical, human/social, and divine (Ch.9); 2) human reality (psyche/soul) mirrors the oneness of the Manifestations, but is experienced as ‘unity in diversity’ (Ch.1); 3) human beings will attain their highest good through conforming themselves to spiritual principles that are part of the universal reality (Ch.6); 3) moral development requires human beings to move away from materialism, the root cause of racism, nationalism and sexism, and to move closer to God (Ch.10); 4) though we can not know God, we can know divinity, or the attributes of Holiness as they are expressed in the world through the Manifestations of God (Ch.1); 5) psychological-spiritual transformation occurs through a dialectical
process of tests and trials which lead to the union of opposites, and the union of the soul with (divine) love (Ch.11).

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