

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SPIRITUALITY**Author:** H.B. Danesh**Published by:** Paradigm Publishing, Victoria, and Nine Pines Publishing, Manotick, Ontario, 1994, 270 pages; second edition forthcoming

Arthur Koestler once wrote that the great breakthroughs in science and art stem from "the sudden interlocking of two previously unrelated skills, or matrices of thought." He defines this process as the "act of creation" and suggests that most great new theories and discoveries are born of this "bisociative pattern of the creative synthesis. . . ."¹ Dr. H. B. Danesh may well have succeeded in achieving just such a creative synthesis in this new book, *The Psychology of Spirituality*, which seeks nothing less than to outline a ground-breaking new theory of human consciousness and psychology.

In line with Koestler's description, the book arrives at this new understanding by combining two allegedly antagonistic fields of thought: psychology and spirituality. The result is what Dr. Danesh calls "the psychology of spirituality." Its central objective is to "integrate the biological, psychosocial, and spiritual aspects of our reality into a fuller and more balanced understanding of human nature and human needs" (17). Dr. Danesh, a psychiatrist who has practiced and taught for more than 30 years, begins by tracing the development of psychological theories over the last several hundred years, pointing out that they have largely focused on a materialistic/mechanistic view of human reality. "[T]his view of human nature holds that we are basically animals at the mercy of our instincts and that we are driven in our lives to obtain pleasure and avoid pain at all costs," he writes (24).

While many of these theories represent an advance over ancient concepts of human psychology, he argues, modern materialistic explanations have now reached a dead end. "The materialistic philosophy," he writes, ". . . disclaims any purpose in life and encourages people to live according to their desires, feelings, and instincts. This approach uses all human capacities in the service of self-gratification and self-aggrandizement. As a result, greed, injustice, extremes of wealth and poverty, aggression, and war are seen as inevitable and perhaps even necessary" (29). The author then poses an alternative explanation for the complex and dynamic state of being we call consciousness: that the ultimate human reality is a spiritual one.

He acknowledges that many people will find this view difficult to accept. "To begin with, the very concept of spirituality is suspect," he writes. "We live at a time when many scientists deny or question the validity of such concepts as soul, spirit, or spirituality. Furthermore, many religions have lost their respectability because of their reliance on blind faith and because many of their practices are (or seem to be) superstitious or prejudiced" (27-28).

1. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Dell, 1964) 120-21.

Yet, he writes, it is only through an exploration of such concepts as the soul and spirit that a number of fundamental problems with the material-centered psychological theories can be addressed. At one level, he argues, a purely materialistic model of human nature would seem to predict that humans would be happy when their material or "animal" needs—including here even such needs as freedom and intellectual attainment—are satisfied. Yet in Western societies, at least, it is often those people who should be most satisfied in terms of material wealth or attainment who find themselves looking for a therapist. The author writes:

There is, however, a very fundamental difference between humans and animals. Animals do not deviate from instinctual laws. Humans, clearly, have a choice. Our response to basic instincts of hunger, pain, fight or flight, and sex are quite different from animals. We may decide to fast or diet rather than eat. Some may decide to fast until death in order to make a point, often to seek justice. . . . Others do not eat even though hung[ry] and food is accessible (as in anorexia nervosa). Still others do not share food with the starving masses even when they themselves have more food than they need. These are all unique to human behaviour. (46)

On a broader level, the author suggests, a purely materialistic view of human psychology is insufficient to explain the progress of human civilization, whether in terms of the drive to create works of art, music, and architecture, or in terms simply of the "spiritual qualities" of love, sacrifice, and altruism that hold societies together. Or, conversely, how the absence of spiritual qualities and the resultant greed, corruption, and egotism can lead to the downfall of a civilization. But the author's theory is more than merely a criticism of materialism. It is also a full and distinctive exposition of an alternative theory of human psychology.

In brief, the author outlines three basic "capacities" of the human soul: knowledge, love, and will. These capacities are what distinguish us from animals, and all human activities—beyond those associated with mere physical survival—can be understood in the framework of those fundamental capacities:

Knowledge, love, and will have special, unique, and enormous powers. Knowledge has the power of discovering and demonstrating the realities of all things. It works like the sun, under whose rays the qualities of everything become obvious and understandable. Knowledge likewise gives us the power to discover realities. Love, in its turn, has the very remarkable power of attraction, that force which brings people, things, and ideas together. Indeed, what makes the physical world function is the power of attraction among the various parts of the atom. What makes families and societies work together is also the power of attraction. The same is true of ideas and views of the world. Attraction is the power of love and the thing that makes its activities possible. Will, the third attribute of the human soul, also has its own power: the power to choose, to decide, and to act. Finally, whenever we speak of love or knowledge or will, we should remember that they are ultimately most effective if employed together. (72)

These three capacities can be correlated with three elemental human "concerns," observes the author. He identifies these concerns as self, relationships, and time. He then charts these three capacities with the three concerns and comes up with a model for their integration, showing how each cross-correlation has several stages—which in many cases correspond to stages of human development that have been previously outlined by psychological theorists—along with some new elements. Dr. Danesh uses a simple chart to illustrate this model (81). As can be seen, each intersection on the table identifies several stages in human growth and development. Many psychological problems and illnesses, he writes, stem from the failure of an individual to develop beyond one or more stages.

The integration of self and knowledge, for example, takes place in three stages: self-experience, self-discovery, and self-knowledge. During childhood, the author writes, human beings are appropriately self-centered, then move into self-discovery in adolescence, and finally into self-knowledge as mature adults. But if this normal path of spiritual development is arrested, as perhaps when someone fails to grow beyond self-centeredness or simple self-discovery, problems result. "It is through self-knowledge that we become aware of the fundamental nobility of our being, begin to validate the spiritual nature of our reality, and give meaning and purpose to our lives," writes the author. "Without self-knowledge life becomes anxiety-ridden, confusing, frightening, and painful. This is why people who have not had the opportunity for healthy and integrated development with respect to their self-knowledge, become confused about themselves, the nature of their reality, and the purpose of their existence" (84). The author goes on to characterize the stages of development that occur in each of the nine intersections between the capacities and concerns he outlines. He then develops this model into a therapeutic process for helping a person achieve integration across all of these areas, and he convincingly correlates these elements with the latest discoveries in body-brain-mind research.

Dr. Danesh, who served for some years as Secretary-General of the Bahá'í Community of Canada and is currently director of Landegg Academy and the Institute for International Education and Development in Weinacht, Switzerland, indicates that the source for many of his ideas has been his private study of world religions—and in particular his study of the Bahá'í Faith. Yet this book is by no means an attempt to preach or proselytize. It is rather, in the best tradition of Koestlerian creativity, a wholehearted attempt to combine the insights from a life of study in one field (psychiatry) with the insights from a life of service (religion) in another.

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