

# **Generating and Applying Spiritual Capital: the Case of the Bahá'í Community**

Prepared for the Conference on the Social Scientific Study of Religion  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 10-13 July 2013.

Michele Wong  
ExCEL3, Faculty of Social Sciences, the University of Hong Kong  
[mcswong@hku.hk](mailto:mcswong@hku.hk)

David A. Palmer  
Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong  
[zongshuren@gmail.com](mailto:zongshuren@gmail.com)

WORK IN PROGRESS – PLEASE DO NOT REPRODUCE OR DISSEMINATE  
WITHOUT THE AUTHORS' CONSENT.

## **Abstract**

This paper takes the case of the Bahá'í community to explore the generation and application of spiritual capital by faith-based organizations. Based on documentary research, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with leaders and volunteers in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau, we consider the following aspects: (a) What are some of the Bahá'í concepts and teachings which are relevant to the notion of spiritual capital, and guide and inform the group's work? (b) How does the Bahá'í community consciously and systematically generate spiritual capital, through its training programs and leadership and decision-making processes? (c) What are the specific areas of social action and service in which spiritual capital is applied and further generated in educational processes at the grassroots and in Bahá'í-inspired projects and NGOs? The case study aims to identify areas for future theoretical discussion, empirical research and application in the field of spiritual capital.

## **Introduction**

The Bahá'í faith, which appeared in Iran in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, is best known for its universalistic teachings on the oneness of humanity, the unity of religions, the equality of the sexes, the harmony of science and religion, and social justice. Bahá'ís see their mission as working towards bringing about the realization of the statement of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892): “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens”. Formally established among over 2000 ethnic groups and tribes in over 218 sovereign countries and dependent territories, the Bahá'í faith is second only to Christianity in its global reach (Britannica 2010), forming one of the most globalized, albeit thinly

dispersed, communities on the planet. According to the Bahá'í teachings, service to humanity is an essential dimension of personal spiritual growth. In places where Bahá'í communities have reached a certain size, maturity and capacity, organized contribution to social and economic development has become a natural and important outgrowth of their consultations and plans. There is no clergy in the Bahá'í faith; the community is governed by elected lay councils at the local, national and international levels. Universal participation in decision making and social action is a fundamental goal and institutionalized component of Bahá'í institutions and Bahá'í -inspired social development NGOs.<sup>1</sup>

Although the history of Bahá'í endeavours in social service goes back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Iran, it was in the late 1980s that social and economic development became a priority of Bahá'í communities worldwide. At present, Bahá'í -inspired NGOs of growing size and complexity exist on all five continents; many of them now focus their efforts on nurturing grassroots initiatives and community-based organizations. Bahá'í-inspired efforts in community building and social service begin as small-scale volunteer initiatives with little or no financial assistance or expert intervention, starting only with small groups having nothing but the innate desire to do something to improve the conditions of life, and consulting with each other on the problems to be addressed and the lines of action to follow. In contrast to conventional social services and projects which begin with grants, expert knowledge, or various types of institutionalized incentive programmes, the Bahá'í approach can be characterized as a form of “creation out of nothing”, starting with only inner motivation, concepts, and faith. Although faith and belief, whether in the revelation of Baha'u'llah or in the spiritual value and significance of service to humanity, is probably a necessary condition for the long-term success and sustainability of such efforts, the experience of Bahá'í communities has shown that, alone, it is insufficient to raise the individual and collective capacities required to sustain initiatives, projects and agencies of growing duration, scale and complexity. Learning how to build such capacity has become an important challenge and area of discourse and training within Bahá'í institutions and training programmes. This is a challenge faced by most social groups and movements when they grow in size and resources – but Bahá'ís are critical of the discourses and practices of “professionalization” and “expert knowledge” which are typically associated with such efforts. However, this does not imply a preference for spontaneity, disorganization and disregard for outcomes -- Bahá'í discourse and training programmes on community building and social action, are replete with such terms as “planning”, “human resources”, “systematic”, “institutional capacity building,” “generation and application of knowledge”, and so on. How, then, do Bahá'ís translate and reflect faith and spiritual motivations into sustained social action with ever higher levels of organization? Our conceptual framework on “spiritual capital” may offer some insights into this process.<sup>2</sup>

The term “spiritual capital” never occurs in Bahá'í discourse, and most Bahá'ís would feel uncomfortable with such a term, which, at first glance, appears to have connotations of the instrumental use of spirituality by the forces of economic capital – a proposition completely at odds with the Bahá'í teachings. Indeed, a spiritually grounded critique of established social structures based on material value and power

---

<sup>1</sup> A few paragraphs and sentences in this paper are reproduced from Palmer 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See David A. Palmer and Michele Wong, “Clarifying the Concept of Spiritual Capital”, paper presented at the Conference on the Social Scientific Study of Religion, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 12 July 2013.

domination is explicit in Bahá'í scripture and is the subject of systematic study and discussion in Bahá'í study materials on social action. To notions of charity and philanthropy which offer palliative help within an unquestioned structure of power relations, Bahá'í institutions tend to prefer empowerment at the grassroots through building a new pattern of social relations based on spiritual principles.

Our exploration of spiritual capital in Bahá'í community building is based on our own, working definition of spiritual capital defined as “*the individual and collective capacities generated through affirming and nurturing the intrinsic spiritual value of every human being*” (Palmer and Wong 2013). In this paper, we will explore how the spiritual value of every human being is affirmed in the Bahá'í teachings, how communities and institutions endeavor to nurture this spiritual value at different scales from small groups to a international institutions, and consider the individual and collective capacities which are generated through this process. This paper is part of the “Spiritual Capital in the Third Sector” (SPIRIT3) project of the ExCEL3 initiative of the University of Hong Kong.<sup>3</sup> It is one of several case studies of the generation and application of spiritual capital in faith-based organizations. Other cases being researched include local and international groups of Christian, Buddhist and Chinese folk religion background. Each case will explore the distinctive forms and expressions of spiritual capital within different religious traditions and social contexts.

Sociological studies of contemporary Bahá'í communities have focused on the United States (McMullen 2000, Garlington 2005), Denmark (Warburg 2006), India (Garlington 1997, 1999) and Papua New Guinea (Were 2005, 2007). These accounts are based on fieldwork conducted between the 1970s and 1990s. Since that period, there has been a significant evolution in Bahá'í approaches to community building, both in terms of the expansion and consolidation of the religious community itself, and in terms of its participation in service to the broader society (Palmer 2012). This paper is based on a review of relevant Bahá'í scripture, documents emanating from the Bahá'í World Centre based in Haifa (Israel), participant observation in activities of the Bahá'í community of Hong Kong and Taiwan, and semi-structured interviews with members of Bahá'í institutions and of a Bahá'í-inspired educational and development NGO.

### ***The inherent spiritual value of the individual***

In the *Hidden Words*, a compendium of mystical verses by Baha'u'llah which is the most popular and widely read Baha'i scripture, the voice of God speaks thus to humans:

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee: therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.

With the hands of power I made thee and with the fingers of strength I created thee; and within thee have I placed the essence of My light. Be thou content with it and seek naught else, for My work is perfect and My command is binding. Question it not, nor have a doubt thereof.

Noble I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created.

---

<sup>3</sup> We would like to gratefully acknowledge the ExCEL3 initiative, funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club and the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Hong Kong, for the SIP grant which has made this project possible.

The verses quoted above affirm humans as reflecting the “image of God”, containing the “essence of [God’s] light”, as a “perfect” and “noble” creation. As in most religious traditions, the Bahá’í teachings enjoin prayer, meditation, and the practice of virtues in daily life as the primary ways of expressing and developing the inherent spiritual value of the human being. In the words of one of our interviewees, he defined spiritual capital as possessing these divine virtues – love, justice, compassion, patience, steadfastness, understanding, wisdom, unity and so on. These virtues are seen as attributes or names of God, divine powers which give humans the capacity to transform their individual and collective lives. Thus from a Bahá’í perspective, capacities should not simply involve knowledge and skills, but include the vast potential inherent in the human being, beginning with their *spiritual capacities*. As the director of a Bahá’í-inspired NGO explained, “Capacities are inherent in the individual. This goes back to how we look at the human being. We don’t look at the human being as being basically an animal with a better intellect. We look at human beings as fundamentally a spiritual being with both an animal and spiritual nature. Human beings have inherently spiritual capacities .... There is a Bahá’í quote that says “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education alone can cause it to reveal its treasures.” What we need is a process that allows people both to develop and express it.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Individual and social transformation***

The Bahá’í teachings emphasise that spirituality finds its expression through service: “the field of service represents the environment within which spirituality can be cultivated.”<sup>5</sup> As one Auxiliary Board member (local community advisor) stated: “We see life consciously as ‘I am in this journey of transformation and this journey accelerates when I’m serving others’. We don’t do this service for our own transformation but it’s part of it. When one tastes the joy related with that transformation, it inspires one to want to do more.”<sup>6</sup> This also highlights the transformational and self-generating qualities of spiritual capital – spiritual capital changes the nature of social action away from instrumental purposes and toward a more pure foundation of intrinsic value – this effect, in turn, generates even more spiritual capital. So whilst spiritual capital provides the motivation for social service, service itself also generates more spiritual capital.

The transformation of human society not only requires the transformation of the *individual*, but also the deliberate creation of new societal structures. This is seen as a ‘two-fold moral purpose’ of ‘individual and collective transformation’. Individuals must be educated and empowered, but attention must be given to the cultural, scientific, technological, educational, economic and social conditions that shape them. The “continuous interaction between the development of the individual and the establishment of new social structures provides a path of social change and avoids both complacency and violence.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Interview with a member of the Continental Board of Counselors for Asia.

<sup>5</sup> The Ruhi Institute official website <http://www.ruhi.org/institute/path.php>, Accessed 25 Sept 2012

<sup>6</sup> Interview with an Auxiliary Board member

<sup>7</sup> Bahá’í International Community. ‘Education and Training for the Betterment of Society’ Bahá’í International Community’s contribution to the 55th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women 22 February 2011 <http://www.bic.org/statements/education-and-training-betterment-society> Accessed 19 Sep 2012

In the words of Abdu'l Bahá, "For man two wings are necessary. One wing is physical power and material civilisation; the other is spiritual power and divine civilisation. With one wing only, flight is impossible. Two wings are essential. Therefore, no matter how much material civilisation advances, it cannot attain to perfection except through the uplift of spiritual civilisation."<sup>8</sup> Social and economic projects thus arise naturally from the teachings of the Bahá'í faith. "It cannot be overemphasized that venturing into social and economic development rests upon the fundamental principles enshrined in the Teachings concerning the inter-relationship between the spiritual and material aspects of life, and if social and economic activity is not placed on a spiritual basis it may well prove counter-productive or even harmful, as without a spiritual base the people are likely to become corrupt or materialistic."<sup>9</sup>

At the root of the Bahá'í conception of service to others and to humanity, is affirming and nurturing the intrinsic spiritual value of each individual. This begins with the practice of virtues and ethical behavior, treating others as being essentially divine and spiritual in nature. It is extended through the nurturing of spiritual qualities among children and youth, and through the mutual support and accompaniment of adults. Any Bahá'í-inspired project, programme or agency devoted to some form of social service or to the improvement of the material conditions of life, will be built on this foundation.

Often, this entails making a special effort to affirm and nurture the spiritual value of those populations who are devalued according to prevailing social and material norms. This includes women, whose empowerment has always been a central concern of Bahá'í development efforts, and adolescents aged 10-13, who are typically seen as little more than rebellious older children, as "tweens" whose value lies primarily as targets of advertising and consumption. Bahá'í communities affirm and nurture the high ideals of this population and, in the past few years, have accorded a high priority to the "spiritual empowerment of junior youth" by forming thousands of groups, led by older youth acting as mentors, in which adolescents develop their spiritual capacities through mutual study, social support, and jointly-initiated small-scale service projects. In certain parts of the world, Bahá'í community building efforts have also emphasized the value and contribution of all, consciously breaking down barriers between members of different castes (in India), of different races and ethnic groups, or of different age groups. In all cases, the affirmation of the spiritual value of each individual, implies that *all* humans, regardless of gender, ethnicity, caste, age or social background, are equally valued members of the human family and must be empowered through community-building efforts.

### *Spiritual principles*

For one Bahá'í author, social development is perceived as "a systematic application of the principles of the Faith in order to upraise the quality of human life."<sup>10</sup> Bahá'í discourse frequently refers to the application of "spiritual principles": "At the heart of all collective action, therefore, is a concern for the application of spiritual principles.

---

<sup>8</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982 second edition

<sup>9</sup> Cited in a letter to an individual written on behalf of the UHJ in *Lights of Guidance*, 552-553

<sup>10</sup> Holly Hanson, *Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1989: 10

Not only do such principles point the way to practical solutions, but they also induce the attitudes, the will, and the dynamics that facilitate implementation.”<sup>11</sup>

“There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem. Any well intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures.”<sup>12</sup>

Examples of “spiritual principles” mentioned in Bahá’í discourse and practice include: the oneness of humanity/unity in diversity; equity and justice; equality of the sexes; trustworthiness and moral leadership; independent investigation of truth; beauty; and, service.<sup>13</sup> These principles are derived from the explicit teachings of the Bahá’í faith, but they have universal social relevance beyond any particular religious tradition.

“This paradigm provides an entirely different framework from other paradigms, such as market share, profit maximization, “the bottom line”, wealth creation, competitive strengths and management techniques that are put forward by some experts as the underlying reasons for an enterprise’s viability and prosperity.”<sup>14</sup> Spiritual principles offer comprehensive, enduring and inspiring goals to strive towards.

Spiritual principles provide the *link between* intrinsic and instrumental value, as well as *guidelines* for generating and applying spiritual capital.

There are three aspects to spiritual principles:

1. *Intrinsic value and inner yearning*: Firstly, a spiritual principle describes an intrinsic spiritual value, which derives from a spiritual orientation to life. The “oneness of humankind”, for example, refers to an inner spiritual consciousness of and yearning for oneness and unity among all people. It is also an expression of religious teachings, such as “all humans were created in the image of God”.
2. *Outer collective goal*: Secondly, it describes an outer, social state in which this inner quality finds its expression; it is thus a collective goal. It is also an environment in which the inner spiritual quality can be nurtured. For example, in reference to the principle of the oneness of humankind: a condition of war, conflict, or division is an environment in which our inner yearning for oneness finds itself wounded and oppressed; it thus generates a strong desire to change the situation and build a world of peace and oneness among humans.
3. *Guideline for action*: Thirdly, it describes a principle to guide action in the realization of the inner yearning toward its outer expression. In this example, any

---

<sup>11</sup> Office of Social and Economic Development, BIC. *For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá’í Community’s Approach to Social and Economic Development*. 2008: 11

<sup>12</sup> Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1985: 13

<sup>13</sup> *Valuing Spirituality in Development*. A concept paper presented by the BIC to the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, hosted by the President of the World Bank and the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace. International Community, February 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, Don. *To Build Anew: Creating Bahá’í Inspired Enterprises*. Canada: Paragon-Quest Publications, 2002:

effort to build more peace and oneness, must itself follow the principle of oneness: the ends do not justify the means.

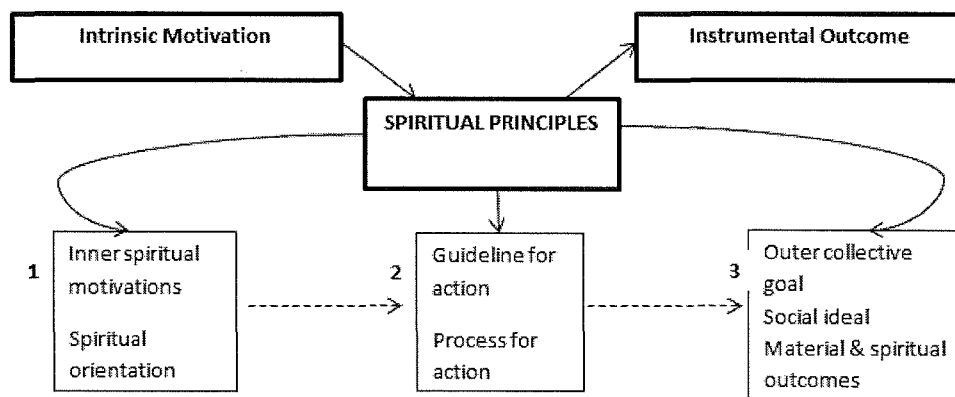


Figure 1 Spiritual Principles as a process that orients and aligns individual spiritual motivations & social action towards an outer collective goal.

A spiritual principle thus involves inner spiritual motivation, outer social ideal, and the process of action from the motivation to the social ideal.

Furthermore, spiritual principles are mutually reinforcing and inseparable from each other. For example, the equality of men and women is inseparable from the principles of oneness and of justice.

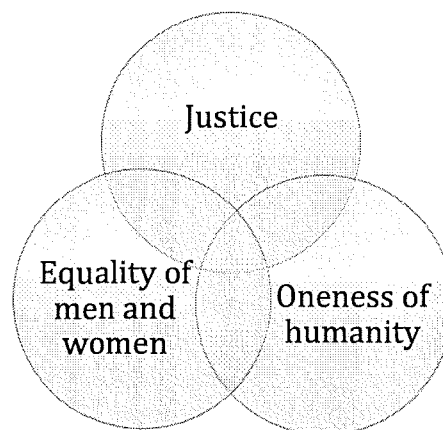


Figure 2 Spiritual Principles as interconnected and mutually reinforcing

To take justice as another example of a spiritual principle: it begins with an inner yearning for justice among all people and feeling of pain at instances of injustice in the world (*inner intrinsic motivation*). This inner yearning finds its expression through *acting* to build a world that is more just (*outer collective goal*). The actions involved in the *process* of building a more just world must also *align with the principle* of justice, so that unjust methods cannot be employed to attain justice (*guideline for action*). At the same time, the principle of justice is inseparable from the principle of equality or the principle of oneness (*interconnected and mutually reinforcing*) as each principle is a precondition for the other.

## Consultation

Within Bahá'í communities, the application of spiritual principles to social action involves a systematic approach to learning, which involves: *study* of Bahá'í scripture and other sources of knowledge; *consultation* among those involved; social *action*; and, *reflection* on action, in a constant effort to generate and apply knowledge to improve society. Planning and doing are thus parts of one whole. The Bahá'í framework for action is rooted in a dynamic of learning. "We see ourselves as a learning organization... we don't have a blueprint for development but what we have are spiritual principles and our learning from the field of development; insights from everything we see. Learning has to be at the heart of the process. So we follow a process of consultation, action and reflection."<sup>15</sup> Bahá'ís believe this process allows communities to identify their strengths and needs; to be tolerant of mistakes; to experiment with new ideas and methods to ensure greater effectiveness; and to become the primary agents of their development.

All Bahá'í bodies (religious institutions, small community groups, NGOs, even families) make decisions through the collective decision-making process Bahá'ís call 'consultation'. The Bahá'í writings advise: "Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding."<sup>16</sup>

Consultation is a means of jointly considering an issue and a means of allowing an idea to grow. The process is characterized by four features: 1) Release of creative energies from the minds and hearts of those involved; 2) New understanding and enlightenment; 3) Sharing and interaction of appropriate information, ideas, thoughts, feelings, impressions; 4) Conducted in atmosphere fostering love, unity. "Bahá'í consultation can be defined as a process for producing a change in order to accomplish some definite purpose. This involves a sharing and interaction of thoughts and feelings in a spirit of love and harmony."<sup>17</sup> The process and goals of consultation should be aligned with spiritual principles.

For this method of decision-making to function properly, certain spiritual capacities and practical skills among those who take part in consultation are required and nurtured. These include: purity of motive; radiance of spirit; detachment; attraction to divine fragrances; humility; patience; and servitude. Consultation is described as a "delicate process of taking these lofty principles and putting them into practice"<sup>18</sup> Two spiritual conditions are prerequisite for consultation: absolute love and harmony amongst members, which is compared by one author to a hydrofoil in boating – discussion becomes qualitatively different and glides along on a high plane; and turning to God to ask for aid, which is compared by the same author to musicians tuning up instruments before performance.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Interview with President of the M Foundation

<sup>16</sup> Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: 168

<sup>17</sup> Kolstoe (1985): 9

<sup>18</sup> Kolstoe (1985): 2

<sup>19</sup> Kolstoe (1985): 22



When making decisions, the first step is to understand the situation: searching out the truth, with freedom to express one's thoughts. When deciding, moderation is called for, and majority opinion prevails. "The crispiest and most succinct decision generally comes the moment consultation merges into a sharp focus of consensus."<sup>20</sup> If this does not happen, further discussion entails, followed by a vote in which only votes in favour count. Difference in opinions is not seen as a drawback, rather "the shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions".<sup>21</sup> Key to this entire process is the spiritual capacity of detachment – once an idea is expressed, it belongs to the group. Thus once a decision is reached, it is no longer simply a 'decision of the majority' but of the whole group: criticism is discouraged and everyone is obliged to help execute the collective decision.

From the Bahá'í perspective, the importance of intrinsic spiritual motivations over instrumental values is clear: "whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light."<sup>22</sup> Bahá'ís do want beneficial *outcomes* to result from consultation, so long as they are guided by *intrinsic* values. The most important result of consultation is not how good the decision or how brilliant the idea was (*instrumental*) – rather it is the spirit (*intrinsic*) with which consultation was conducted and the decision executed. For example, fostering oneness and interdependence is one purpose of consultation. It is not just to solve problems and make good plans (*instrumental outcome*), but through the process it also redefines and realigns power relationships (*intrinsic value*).<sup>23</sup> "If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundation."<sup>24</sup>

The intrinsic and instrumental value of consultation to awaken and unlock a sense of hope and awareness in downtrodden people has been discovered and used by many non-Bahá'í groups. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire calls this process 'conscientization'; development workers call it 'animation'. Consultation that is conducted within a framework of spiritual capital is unique because it calls for spiritual capacities and principles, which focuses on intrinsic values and positive responses to problems.<sup>25</sup>

### Community growth process

According to our working definition of spiritual capital (Palmer and Wong 2013), the spiritual value of human beings can be affirmed and nurtured; the motivation and will to align one's actions to spiritual value can be strengthened. Bahá'í communities endeavor to do this through a series of educational processes at the grassroots: "In thousands of communities, Bahá'ís have set in motion neighborhood-level processes that seek to empower individuals of all ages to recognize and develop their spiritual

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932": 21-22

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 22-23

<sup>23</sup> Hanson (1989): 58

<sup>24</sup> *Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976: 411

<sup>25</sup> Hanson (1989): 42

capacities and to channel their collective energies towards the betterment of their communities".<sup>26</sup>

The focus is on nurturing community life at the grassroots, integrating training, expansion and consolidation. This is defined as an "educational process" aiming at the "twofold purpose" of "individual and collective transformation" in which participants "walk together on a path of service", simultaneously pursuing their personal spiritual development and engaging in acts of service of increasing complexity, both for the Bahá'í community and for the broader society, in "a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development" (UHJ 2010). Although this path of service is defined as "drawing on the power of the Word" through group study of Bahá'í scripture (or, in Bahá'í-inspired secular social service projects, the study of spiritual principles without reference to religious sources), at no point are the participants required to convert to the Bahá'í Faith. Whether or not they identify as Bahá'ís, all participants are described as walking towards the common goal of service to humanity.

The initial instrument of this process of study, service and community building is the "study circle", a group of typically three to twelve participants who study a series of books designed by the Ruhi Institute, a Bahá'í training centre located in a town near Cali, Colombia (Ruhi Institute 1991). Ruhi is a Persian name that means 'spiritual' and the Ruhi Institute offers a sequence of educational courses and educational programs for diverse age groups, from children aged 5 to adult. In recent years, its educational programs have been adopted by an increasing number of agencies worldwide. The Ruhi courses are intended to build capacity for service in community development. It applies the concept of "being and doing" and incorporates "action and reflection" as a key learning strategy.<sup>27</sup> 'Being' refers to inner transformation and gaining understanding of common concepts; 'doing' refers to taking action and gaining experience. This refers back to the idea that planning and doing are thus parts of one whole. "Ruhi materials are designed to move participants progressively toward deeper levels of understanding: understanding the basic meaning of Bahá'í writings; understanding their application in one's personal life; and reflection on the implications of Bahá'í writings for the broader society."<sup>28</sup> The Ruhi Institute offers core 'trunk' courses, and different countries have also developed 'branch' materials relevant to their own local contexts.

The affirming and nurturing of spiritual value begins with children aged 5 or 6. The Ruhi curriculum enables parents and volunteers to run children's classes which focus on laying foundations of moral character and virtues. In the early years of childhood, "great emphasis is placed on the development of spiritual qualities and on those beliefs, habits and patterns of conduct that constitute the essential attributes of a spiritual being."<sup>29</sup>

Special importance is also given to youth aged 11 to 15, which is recognized as a critical time for the construction of their moral identities. The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme, designed to empower youth to channel their constructive and creative energies towards the betterment of their communities. "The

---

<sup>26</sup> BIC. "Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism". BIC's Contribution to the 18th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, 3 May 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Closson, Rosemary B., and Sylvia Kaye. "Understanding the Ruhi Institute: A Global Faith-Based Adult Education Process." *Adult Learning* (Jan 2007): 10

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Bahá'í children's classes for spiritual education, <http://www.ruhi.org/materials/list.php#children> Accessed 25 Sept 2012

Junior Youth programme seeks to help youth to develop their noble nature and their powers of expression so they can discuss more lofty themes and begin to recognize spiritual force and also the spiritual reality of their own lives”<sup>30</sup>. The Junior Youth programme consists of eight titles of training materials which are all concerned with developing language skills, the power of expression, a moral orientation to life, a critical reading of marketing and consumerist messages which objectify youth, and skills of consultation for planning and conducting service projects. Though the moral concepts in the materials are drawn from the Bahá’í teachings, they are not religious in nature, nor do they treat subjects that are specifically Bahá’í.

Those aged 15 and older can follow the main sequence of courses offered by the Ruhi Institute, in the form of ‘study circles’. Participants engage in discussions on scriptural passages in a semi-structured format, in which a “tutor” or “facilitator” ensures that all participants have their say and that the progress of the group keeps at a good pace, without dominating the discussion or imposing his or her views. Each course is designed not only to impart knowledge, but also skills and attitudes; after completing one 40-hour course, the participants are ideally able and motivated to initiate one of a set of collective activities designed to strengthen the fabric of community life. After the first book in the series, participants host small-scale, informal devotional gatherings in their homes or other spaces. In the second book, they learn to elevate social discourse by applying spiritual principles and perspectives in conversations on topics such as education, the status of women, social unrest, world peace, and dealing with diversity. The third book provides concepts and skills for becoming a teacher of a small childrens’ moral and spiritual education class. As they advance in the sequence of courses, participants learn how to start a group for adolescents (aged 11-15) devoted to applying moral and spiritual principles to their own lives and to small-scale social service projects. By the seventh course, they learn to become a study circle tutor themselves.

An effective study circle, as it progresses through the sequence of courses, acquires capacities of group communication, consultation and planning, and experience in initiating and conducting regular devotional gatherings, childrens’ classes, junior youth groups and study circles for older youth and adults. The participants in all these activities tend to be drawn from the study circle’s natural networks of family members, friends, co-workers or neighbourhood acquaintances. Not all are self-identified Bahá’ís; they may identify as followers of other religions or of none at all – but it is the organic links between these participants and the activities, which constitutes the initial nucleus of community growth through face-to-face study, consultation, prayer and service. No special status or rank is given to study circle tutors, childrens’ class teachers or so on – all are considered purely voluntary services; there is no formal leader. Besides the study materials, no equipment or objects are needed. At this small group level, there is no formal organization. Though firmly grounded in Bahá’í theology and scripture, training materials focus on ethics, spirituality, prayer, social issues, acts of community service, and the moral and spiritual education of children, youth and adults. Bahá’ís have learned to view the concept of study circle as a path of spiritual study open to all, regardless of religious background. The practical orientation of the courses helps to generate small group communities which consciously blurs the boundaries of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ spheres, without eliminating them altogether.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a Junior Youth Animator

<sup>31</sup> Palmer, David. "From "Congregations" to "Small Group Community Building": Localizing the Baha'i Faith in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China." *Chinese Sociological Review* 45 (Dec 2012).

Once the capacity to nurture community life at the grassroots has taken root, groups can begin to focus their attention on social action to improve the material and social conditions of their community. This typically begins with simple, one-off service activities. Out of thousands of such activities of a fixed duration worldwide, a few hundred have evolved into sustained projects, some of which, as they have accumulated experience, have grown into NGOs capable of managing complex development programmes. Such organizations have emerged in South America, Africa, India and Cambodia (ITC 2011: 47-56), but the development of Bahá'í communities in the Chinese world has not yet reached such a stage.<sup>32</sup>

The approach described above is an ideal, illustrated by the Bahá'í World Centre in newsletters and reports from localities around the world, to be studied and learned from by Bahá'ís worldwide (ITC 2008). In most cases, the adoption of the approach has been a long and uneven process. While at the time of writing, the four core activities of the system – study circles, childrens' classes, junior youth groups and devotional gatherings – were in place in virtually all Bahá'í communities around the world, the self-perpetuating, self-sustaining, intensifying and mutually reinforcing community building process was only beginning to take root, in some 5000 microregions ("clusters") around the world.

In summary, the educational endeavours of Bahá'í communities generate spiritual capital through the following processes:

- 1) *Affirming and nurturing the spiritual value of individuals*: Whilst some NGOs may be eager to deliver programs and services with an eye to maximizing output and efficiency, Bahá'í approaches perceive the first step to sustainable and effective social action in the development of an inner spiritual orientation, a strong moral foundation, a clear conceptual framework, and the ability to "read society", and this begins from childhood. In other words, spiritual value and principles need to be nurtured before the necessary capacities can be developed.
- 2) *Develop individual and institutional capacities for social action*: The nature of the training process develops spiritual, emotional, intellectual and practical skills. An effective study circle or training programme builds on spiritual principles to develop capacities of group communication, consultation, planning, and experience in conducting small scale acts of service.
- 3) *Creation of organic social spaces*: Social spaces are created naturally in pre-existing social networks and spaces, creating the structures conducive to social action. Organic links between participants constitute the initial nucleus of community growth. This avoids excessive reliance on 'centrally-organized' activities, and empowers groups to develop their own capacities and natural social spaces.<sup>33</sup>
- 4) *Leads to acts of service of ever increasing complexity*: Through studying the material, groups are encouraged to put their learning into practice through social action to improve the material and social conditions of their community. This typically begins with simple service activities. Out of thousands of these activities, some will evolve into sustained projects and NGOs, but they all begin from these informal small group community building efforts and grow organically.

---

<sup>32</sup> There are NGOs in China founded and operated by Bahá'ís, but they operate as purely secular entities, separate from the community building processes described here.

<sup>33</sup> Palmer (2012)

- 5) *Self-perpetuating and expanding human resources*: By the seventh course in the sequence, participants learn to become study circle tutors themselves and can start their own ‘study circles’ of new participants. In one Taiwanese city, within two years, one study circle had developed into dozens of study circles and children’s classes, forming a densely connected community: “Within two years, dozens of mothers were leading their own study circles or teaching children’s classes, and over 130 parents, children and youth were participants in those activities.”<sup>34</sup>

Institutional growth within the Bahá’í community follows an organic rather than mechanistic progression. As discussed in the education processes, grassroots initiatives begin with a simple set of actions that can be managed by the local community. Complexity emerges organically as participants gain experience and increase their capacity to make decisions about their material and spiritual progress and implement them.<sup>35</sup> Organizational structures are created out of such need to support projects of a more sustained nature and more ambitious goals. These organizational structures become necessary to coordinate action, integrate efforts, and provide coherence for programmes of greater scope and complexity.

## Bahá’í model of organic growth

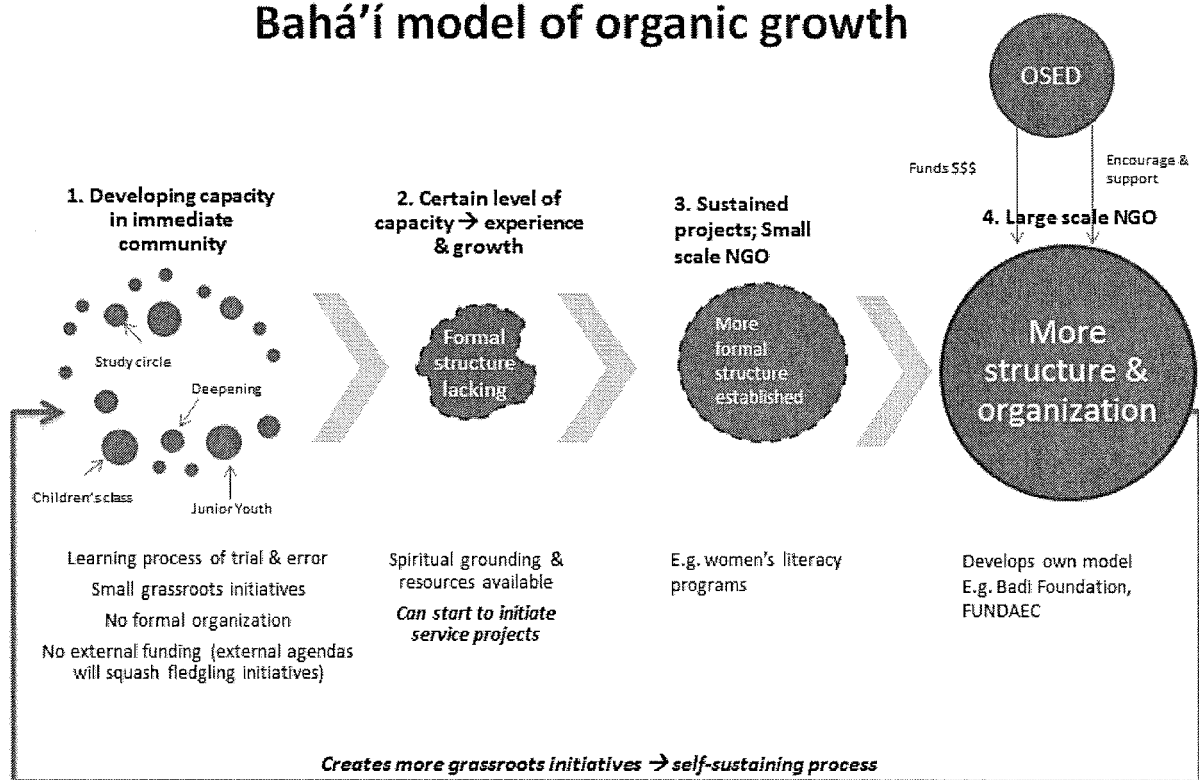


Figure 5 Bahá’í model of organic growth

### *A Bahá’í -inspired NGO: the “M” Foundation*

<sup>34</sup> Palmer (2012)

<sup>35</sup> OSDE, *For the Betterment of the World*, 2008

An example of a cluster of sustained community initiatives that matured into a NGO is the “M” Foundation, a Bahá’í-inspired NGO based in a medium-sized Asian city, which started in 1990. The NGO styles itself as “Bahá’í-inspired” because, although it takes inspiration from the teachings and the processes of community building described above and emanating from the Bahá’í experience, its own programmes are of an entirely secular nature and make no reference to any religion. The Foundation runs a series of projects in different areas. It manages its own accredited school, which has over 260 students from preschool through the secondary level, the curriculum of which concentrates on the development of students’ character and intellect and capacity to serve, in addition to the International Baccalaureate. It also facilitates the formation of junior youth spiritual empowerment programmes in public secondary schools in the city. In rural areas, it is involved in three major areas of project activity: the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme; the Environmental Action Programme, which works with rural women to help them become promoters of sustainable environmental action; and the Institutional Capacity Building Programme. The other two initiatives fall under the umbrella of this Institutional Capacity Building Programme.

The Institutional Capacity Building Programme is a “training project designed to introduce a certain understanding of society and nature of social and economic development and individual contribution. These are designed to empower people to see they could contribute and at the end of this program the people would design little projects to do something.”<sup>36</sup> Similar to Bahá’í educational processes, it involves small participatory groups of, for example, rural women, who study materials together to deepen their spiritual orientation to life and apply spiritual principles. They help small community-based organizations (some formal, some not) to build institutional capacity so that they can become organizations which can contribute to the advancement of their community. The human resources raised either become trainers for the Junior Youth programme or work on the Environmental Action Programme. After their initial training, participants are helped to establish organizations and supported through regular visits and training. “The strategy the Foundation takes is that we find individuals who want to run one or two of the other programs we run, and we start by training the core people in in those programs in how to run those programs, and if they really want to go ahead and do something in their own community we help them to establish a community-based organization / community-based initiative and then work with this group of people over a period of time, three or more years, to help them to really strengthen their organization.”<sup>37</sup>

From the Bahá’í perspective, development needs to start *inside* the community first in order to build strong foundations for social progress – community structures and decision-making bodies need to be established first for real community-based development to take place.<sup>38</sup> Progress depends on the natural motivations of the grassroots rather than the imposition of pre-packaged interventions from the top or from outside. Due to the belief in the nobility of all mankind, social action must be participatory and empowering; and in the creation of new knowledge, rural people need to be the producers of their own knowledge. “Fundamentally, we do not believe that projects designed from outside and delivered to a rural area, can ever result in

---

<sup>36</sup> Interview with President of the M Foundation

<sup>37</sup> Interview with President of the M Foundation

<sup>38</sup> Hanson (1989): 76

real development. The nature of development has to be capacity building at the local level.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, universal participation can be seen as both a spiritual principle and goal of the Bahá’í community.

An example is given by the M Foundation on its Environmental Action program, which was introduced to people at an agricultural university in the form of a youth volunteer program:

“This was initially seen as a chance to bring large numbers of youth as trainers for our program to work with rural women, and as these students were studying agriculture, they would have access to knowledge about agriculture and could help rural women improve their production systems. It sounded really good, so we began to work with college students. Not too long after implementing the program, we realized that in fact – what made us assume these college students had more knowledge about agriculture than rural women? We realized that was an invalid assumption. If we are really striving to develop the capacity of rural women, why are we putting our effort into training these youth, rather than the rural women themselves? Aren’t there equally capable people among the rural women? And so we realized that that wasn’t consistent [with our spiritual principles].”<sup>40</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper examined the case of the Bahá’í community to explore the generation and application of spiritual capital as defined in our concept paper (Palmer and Wong 2013). The paper explored how Bahá’ís apply spiritual principles to nurture and protect the spiritual value of the individuals and communities they serve. Through the Bahá’í community’s decision-making process, methodology of learning, educational processes, and model of organic growth, we can see the application of spiritual principles such as unity in diversity, the oneness of mankind, equity and justice, the equality of the sexes, trustworthiness and moral leadership, and universal participation, among others. These spiritual principles inform and unify inner spiritual motivations, describe an outer social ideal, and also unify their process of action from inner motivations towards the social ideal.

This paper is a mere preliminary sketch, an attempt to present the Bahá’í self-understanding of the connection between spirituality, social action and organizational culture. For lack of space, we have not touched on the relevant aspects of Bahá’í concepts of leadership and power, as well as Bahá’í discourses on the relationships between the individual, the community and social institutions. Nor have we yet selected specific local Bahá’í communities and/or NGOs, to consider more concrete cases beyond the general principles enumerated here. Besides a more complete and localized description of Bahá’í concepts and practices related to spiritual capital, this article raises several questions for further research:

---

<sup>39</sup> Interview with a member of the Continental Board of Counselors for Asia

<sup>40</sup> Interview with President of the M Foundation

1. On comparative models for the generation and application of spiritual capital between different organizations, religious traditions, and non-religious approaches. Are different theologies, cosmologies or ideologies associated with different approaches or forms of spiritual capital? Or do different socio-political and cultural contexts inflect spiritual capital in different ways? We hope that these questions may help to move the discussion on religion, philanthropy and social action, beyond the enumeration of links between religion and altruism in a general sense, or analyzing the political implications of religiously-motivated social service, toward examining different forms of social empowerment and organizational cultures and processes associated with different approaches to spirituality in their application to social action.
2. In our concept paper, we have tried to isolate spiritual capital as an autonomous concept, which is not a mere subset of social, cultural or religious capital, nor the instrumentalization of spiritual resources for economic or social purposes. The sketch of the Bahá'í case in this paper has focused on the understanding of intrinsic spiritual values and their application. A full examination, however, does need to consider the relationship between spiritual capital thus understood, and social, cultural and economic capital as they are generated and applied by and within Bahá'í communities; as well as the relationship between intrinsic and instrumental values.
3. Indicators of spiritual capital, and/or methods of assessing the effectiveness of the approaches to capacity building described above, are another area for future exploration. This should include both the indicators and assessment methods employed by Bahá'í institutions themselves, as well as possible approaches derived from social scientific methodologies. Any discussion of such indicators and methods of assessment would need to include a consideration of the value systems, instrumental purposes and power relations potentially embedded within the indicators or assessment tools themselves, and whether they are consistent with the intrinsic spiritual values and principles they would aim to measure.



## References

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982 second edition.

A letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá’í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932".

A letter to an individual written on behalf of the UHJ in *Lights of Guidance*, 552-553.

Abizadeh, Arash. "Democratic Elections without Campaigns? Normative Foundations of National Bahá’í Elections." *World Order* 37, no. 1 (2005).

Bahá’í International Community Official Website, ‘What is the Bahá’í Faith?’  
[http://www.bahai.org/faq/facts/bahai\\_faith](http://www.bahai.org/faq/facts/bahai_faith)

Bahá’í International Community (BIC). *Valuing Spirituality in Development*. A concept paper presented by the BIC to the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, hosted by the President of the World Bank and the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace. International Community, February 1998.

---. 3 May 2010. "Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism." BIC's Contribution to the 18th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.

---. 22 February 2011. ‘Education and Training for the Betterment of Society’ Bahá’í International Community’s contribution to the F12 Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. <http://www.bic.org/statements/education-and-training-betterment-society>

Bahá’í International Community, Office of Social and Economic Development. *For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá’í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development*. 2008.

Bahá’í Topics, ‘A Global Community’ <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-6-0-1.html>

*Bahá’í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976.

Bahá’u’lláh, *The Book of Certitude*, 3d. ed. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982.

Britannica. “Worldwide Adherents of All Religions.” In *Britannica Academic Edition*, 2010. [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com).

Brown, Don. *To Build Anew: Creating Bahá’í Inspired Enterprises*. Canada: Paragon-Quest Publications, 2002.

Closson, Rosemary B., and Sylvia Kaye. "Understanding the Ruhi Institute: A Global Faith-Based Adult Education Process." *Adult Learning* (Jan 2007).

Eade, Deborah. *Capacity-Building: An Approach to People-Centred Development*. U.K.: Oxfam, 1997.

Garlington, William. 1997. "The Bahá'í Faith in India: A Developmental Stage Approach." *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Bahá'í Studies* vol. 1, no. 2 (June, 1997). Published online at <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/bhpapers/india1.htm>, accessed on 20 June 2012.

---. 1999. "The Development of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa: 1941-1974." *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Bahá'í Studies* vol. 3, no. 1. Published online at <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/bhpapers/vol3/malwa.htm>, accessed on 20 June 2012.

---. 2005. *The Bahá'í Faith in America*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Hanson, Holly. *Social and Economic Development: A Bahá'í Approach*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1989

Kolstoe, John. *Consultation. A Universal Lamp of Guidance*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1985.

Kong, Siew-Huat. "Nurturing the Governance Capacities of Religious Community: Some Experience of the Bahá'í's in Macau." 2012.

ITC (International Teaching Centre). 2008. *Attaining the Dynamics of Growth: Glimpses from Five Continents*. Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre.

---. 2011. *The Five Year Plan, 2006-2011. Summary of Achievements and Learning*. Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre.

Lample, Paul. *Creating a New Mind: Reflections on the Individual, the Institutions, and the Community*. Florida: Palabra Publications, 1999.

McMullen, Michael. 2000. *The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Palmer, David A. 2012. "From "Congregations" to "Small Group Community Building": Localizing the Bahá'í Faith in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China." *Chinese Sociological Review* 45.

Ruhi Institute. 1991. *Learning about Growth: The Story of the Ruhi Institute and Large-scale Expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in Colombia*. West Palm Beach, FL.: Palabra Publications.

Shoghi Effendi. *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991.

Smith, Peter. 1987. *The Babi & Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

The Ruhi Institute official website. 'Bahá'í children's classes for spiritual education'  
<http://www.ruhi.org/materials/list.php#childre>

---. 'Walking a path of service' <http://www.ruhi.org/institute/path.php>

Universal House of Justice. 'Universal participation' Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986, September 1964.

---. The Promise of World Peace, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1985.

Warburg, Margit. 2006. *Citizens of the World. A History and Sociology of the Bahá'ís from a Globalisation Perspective*. Leiden: Brill.

Were, G. 2005. "Thinking through images: *Kastom* and the coming of the Bahá'ís to northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11 (4): 659–76.

---. 2007. "Fashioning Belief: The Case of the Bahá'í Faith in Northern New Ireland." *Anthropological Forum* 17(3): 239-253.

