

Spirituality as Navigational Device: Guiding Youth Toward Thriving

Pamela Ebstyn King

Thrive Center for Human Development

Fuller Theological Seminary

As our world and cultures continue to radically change, many of the conventional civic, social, and religious institutions that served to weave together the fabric of western society are eroding. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram are replacing people's allegiance to actual in-person organizations. This shift is causing young people to come of age in networks often lacking honesty, clear beliefs, authentic intimacy, accountability, rituals, and formative practices. Consequently, many youth are being raised with competing narratives, without a succinct worldview, or a secure sense of belonging. This lack of grounding and connection pose many challenges for establishing identity, meaning, and purpose—all important developmental endeavors of adolescence. Therefore, many youth serving professionals are not surprised that rates of teen anxiety and depression are at an all-time high as we embark on the third decade of the 21st century. Yet, amidst these alarming rates, an increasing body of empirical research indicates that spirituality—an often overlooked aspect of contemporary life—can be an extremely effective resource for the positive development of youth (Hardy, et al, 2019; King & Boyatzis, 2015).

Research findings link spirituality and a variety of positive youth outcomes such as academic success, having a sense of purpose and hope, and engaging in volunteer service. However, not many youth practitioners are equipped to use the valuable developmental tools available within spirituality. One reason for this is that spirituality has been traditionally

associated with religion, which is generally reserved for personal and familial observance and excluded from public domains. As a result, youth-serving professionals in secular settings such as education, youth services, juvenile justice, and mental health often do not consider integrating spirituality into their work with youth. Learning how to approach and draw on spirituality could undergird practitioners' work and greatly benefit the youth they are serving.

Spirituality is an underutilized resource for youth today that can serve as a dynamic navigational device for youth, guiding them through their culture's constantly changing milieu. Specifically, this chapter provides a broader and more accessible understanding of spirituality as an integral player in youth's development. Rather than being limited to religious traditions, spirituality is an engagement with transcendence, or something beyond the self, that both prompts and sustains attitudinal and behavioral changes central to resilience and thriving. This chapter offers a conceptual framework to help practitioners identify and effectively use the many resources available to youth within the realm of spirituality, but also warns about spirituality's potential pitfalls, so practitioners can approach spirituality in a constructive way.

Defining Terms

Cutting edge youth development theory, practice, and research acknowledges the importance of the systems and relationships in which teens develop and not only focuses on the problems and ills of youth, but also highlights youth strengths and approaches to Positive Youth Development (PYD; Lerner et al., 2015). Increasingly, the experience of transcendence, whether experienced among people, nature, and/or one's perception of a greater reality, is considered an important part of a young person's developmental environment and a potential source of resilience and thriving.

Religion and Spirituality

Initially, psychology treated religiosity and spirituality as the same construct (James, 1987), but as the empirical study of these fields developed they are now recognized as both distinct and overlapping. *Religiosity* involves engaging in the doctrines, community, and rituals of a religious tradition, and *religious development* occurs as one's capacity to engage in these facets grows (King & Boyatis, 2015). Research shows that religion can be a multi-dimensional resource for youth's development through offering belief systems, relationships, and ritual practices (King et al., 2013). These components are all important in aiding youth in forming a sense of identity, belonging, meaning, and purpose (King, 2003). Religion can also be an effective vehicle for spirituality, defined as practices linked to experiences beyond the self, and there is a body of evidence supporting a relationship between spirituality and youth thriving. Yet, while religion has proven helpful, rates of religious participation and attendance have been in steady decline in western cultures in the last several decades (Pew Research Center, 2018). Increasingly, scholars and practitioners are working to understand how spirituality is experienced and pursued outside of religious contexts, so we don't lose all that spirituality still has to offer.

Spirituality refers to one's experience of and response to one's perception of transcendence (King et al., 2020). Transcendence involves experiencing God, or another form of ultimate reality, and occurs through one's cognitions, affect, and often through the senses. For instance, a youth might experience transcendence when they feel a connection with God or other people during a worship service, when confronted with natural beauty or art, or while helping others in need. When experiencing transcendence, one's awareness and focus is shifted from one's self and the mundane towards a greater reality that provides a more expansive perspective and provides meaning. In this way, spirituality offers opportunities for youth to explore how they fit in a more expansive sense of reality, and provides opportunities for self-exploration and

identity formation. Spirituality provides a framework for locating one's self in the broader world, beyond immediate circumstances. Spiritual experiences can inspire devotion to beliefs, encourage complex social emotions like admiration, compassion, and moral elevation, and serve to motivate prosocial behavior. People develop spiritually through growing in their capacity to cognitively and affectively have transcendent experiences, impacting how they understand themselves and the world, and leading to value-aligned behaviors (King et al., 2014; King et al., in press). Such experiences have orienting power in a young person's life and enable youth to integrate their beliefs as values with a sense of personal identity (King et al., 2014; Lerner et al., 2003; Riveros & Immordino-Yang, 2021). In this sense, spirituality provides "coordinates" that help youth locate themselves within their communities and develop their ideals, values, and ideas of how to live them out.

Resilience and Thriving

Both religion and spirituality can serve significant roles in adolescent development through providing beliefs and narratives, transcendent emotions, and relationships. Each of these elements support resilience and thriving (King, 2003). *Resilience* is the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress (Masten, 2001). It is developed within specific contexts like families, school, congregations, neighborhoods, and the larger community. While resilience involves "bouncing back" to normal in the face of adversity, thriving refers to optimal and purposeful development. Thriving includes the continual discovery of purpose, the growth of one's strengths, the cultivation of relationships, and the evolving ethical and spiritual ideals that enable one to pursue purpose while also becoming more resilient through the ups and downs of life. In short, thriving is the process of transformation towards one's purpose and becoming one's most authentic self *with* and *for* others. When thriving, youth

exhibit adaptive growth towards an enduring goal that is meaningful to them and makes a contribution beyond themselves. Spirituality and religion help youth develop a sense of themselves within a greater context, orient themselves relative to their beliefs and values, and explore how they fit and where they might contribute. In the following section, I offer a conceptual framework to identify the different types of resources available through spirituality and/or religion, and how they may function as a type of navigational device to help guide and direct youth on the path of resilience and thriving.

Conceptual Framework

According to the increasingly influential perspective of Positive Youth Development (PYD), the beyond-the-self attitudes and actions characteristic of a thriving young person generally require some form of spiritual transcendence to ignite and sustain his/her commitment to generative contributions beyond the self. With this in mind, the following framework considers how spirituality has the potential to engage youth in ideological, social, and transcendent contexts that promote both individual development (i.e., identity, purpose, character, and competence) and a contribution to the greater good (i.e., caring, civic engagement, and contribution).

Spirituality as Ideological Context

The psychologist, Erik Erikson (1965) recognized the potential in religion, a more organized form of spirituality, to aid in psychological development. He pointed to religion as an important aspect of the sociohistorical matrix in which identity takes shape. He argued that religion is the oldest and most lasting institution that promotes fidelity—the commitment and loyalty to an ideology that emerges upon the successful resolution of the psychosocial crisis of identity formation (Erikson, 1968). Having a cohesive ideological matrix or belief system

through which to form identity is particularly significant and timely for adolescents who are naturally asking questions of identity, belonging, and meaning. Religion offers a narrative that provides beliefs, values, and morals that enable youth to make sense of the world and understand their place within it.

Although Erikson specifically wrote about ideology and religion, his thinking may be applied to less-institutionalized forms of spirituality. Spirituality draws young people towards a greater reality in a way that not only engages cognitive understanding, but is also accompanied by elevated affect or emotion. In activating multiple brain systems, young people's beliefs can become integrated into their identities as orienting sources of meaning. For example, a young person can be taught many existential and/or moral beliefs, but they are more apt to internalize the meaning of these beliefs when the beliefs take on sacred or a grand importance along with being relevant to their lived experience (Mirandez & Immordino-Yang, 2021). For example, a teen may espouse that she believes recycling is important. However, until she has an experience that leads to the realization and consideration of the actual effects on her personal life and the broader world, that the belief about the importance of recycling becomes a value with such weight that it is integrated into her identity and shapes her behaviors. In this way, spiritual beliefs and narratives enable youth to make sense of their lives by weaving themselves into a larger inter-connected tapestry. Spirituality promotes the construction of meaning, because it prompts youth to consider their beliefs, identity, and experience in the context of realities beyond themselves. In this way, spirituality can provide the same foundational ideological component as religion—beliefs, values, and morals—that aid in positive youth development.

Spiritual beliefs can also help youth make meaning out of current events and personal experiences. In a chaotic world, heightened emotional and cognitive awareness that accompanies

transcendence assists adolescent identity formation and well-being. Spirituality offers youth more ultimate answers and a bigger perspective on life issues than most youth activities and pursuits. Transcendent worldviews can give youth both psychological grounding and help direct their behavior, preventing confusion and despair when navigating the plethora of decisions presented to them.

Most forms of spirituality include morals that are prosocial and encourage youth to make tangible contributions to society. For example, research demonstrates that youth who identify as religious or spiritual are more apt to participate in civic engagement than their less-spiritual or religious peers (Benson et al., 2012). Research shows that when youth engage in community service within a religious or spiritual context, they tend to adopt a spiritual rationale for their actions demonstrating how spiritual beliefs provide interpretive value for their life experiences.

Spirituality as Social Context

In addition to an ideological context, spirituality can provide a variety of social contexts, which are vital to support thriving. More often than not, spirituality is practiced within a community or alongside others. It could be practiced in a congregation's youth group, yoga studio, or meditation class. Spirituality can also play a role in people gathering around a common interest or goal that has life-giving meaning. For some youth this might be climate change, or it could be social justice, or political engagement. Spirituality can also be present in a shared pursuit towards wellness like in 12-Step addiction recovery programs. Each of these unique social contexts give youth the chance to interact with like-minded peers and adults, providing the opportunity to cultivate meaningful relationships. Evidence shows that youth need meaningful relationships and to feel known and loved. Non-traditional spiritual communities offer an alternative to traditional religious communities; the connection with others is crucial for

well-being. In this manner, spirituality provides contexts for youth to develop the relationships and support they need in order to thrive.

Religion not only provides a transcendent worldview, but generally exemplifies these principles and behavioral norms in the lives of fellow believers. Research shows that the embodiment of beliefs and values is what makes religion so effective in the development of a prosocial identity (King, 2003). During adolescence, personal integration is facilitated not only by clear belief systems and teaching, but also by having those beliefs and values lived out in actual lives. Youths' spiritual pursuits involving consistent relationships that support their beliefs and sense of purpose are more influential than the spiritual pursuits they engage in individually. As youth move away from formal religious institutions, the exploration of spirituality and spiritual practices serve to orient youth when they are able to see themselves within a community with similar beliefs. Formal religion and some forms of spirituality offer these types of communities. Community support and role models, who actually live out the ideals and values of belief systems, are vital contributors to the orienting and directing power of spirituality in the lives of youth. Youth come to understand themselves within their contexts and communities, and not in isolation.

Many spiritual traditions have explicit role models, such as a guru, priest, rabbi, or spiritual director; fellow worshipper; or even a late saint or founder of the faith documented in sacred texts. A young person is able to grow spiritually through emulating this person's life or conduct. Also known as spiritual modeling, this practice is founded on social modeling and observational learning in the acquisition and maintaining of human behaviors, and further illustrates the potential social influences of spirituality on positive youth development (Bandura, 2003). Intergenerational relationships provide another important social influence for youths'

growth and formation. For example, one study found that religiously active adolescents report higher levels of social interaction and trust with their parents, immediate friends, and the significant adults in their lives (King & Furrow, 2004). Further analysis revealed that these intergenerational relationships improved the influence of religiosity on moral outcomes. These findings suggest that religious youth are embedded in a social context that is characterized by interactive, trustworthy relationships. People in this context share common goals, beliefs, and values that lead to prosocial behaviors and actions. In addition, research demonstrates that participating in trustworthy relationships promotes reflection and internalization of one's commitments to these goals, beliefs, and values. This meaning-making process informs a sense of identity that is vital to sustained moral, caring, and civic behaviors (Rodriguez & Immordino-Yang, 2021; Colby & Damon, 1995). For non-religious spiritual practices to be effective, this finding suggests that strong relationships with parents, grandparents, teachers, counselors, and spiritual directors are a vital component of how spirituality assists in helping youth to thrive.

Spiritual communities and contexts often provide an avenue for altruistic social experiences that nurture morality and compassion. Many spiritually based organizations offer service opportunities for adults and youth, whether in local, national, or international settings. For example, interviews with a woman recognized for her extraordinary commitment to serving the poor revealed that her strong sense of moral identity was shaped within her congregation (Colby and Damon, 1995). After working alongside her pastor, and with the children in her church's congregation, this woman began envisioning a ministry to serve homeless people living around a garbage dump in Mexico. Spiritual communities or organizations often play a similar

role in motivating youth to serve others, while also equipping youth with the skills and competencies to do so.

Spirituality as Transcendent Context

Perhaps the most unique aspect of spirituality is the potential for transcendence. Many non-religious youth programs and organizations offer ideology and social environments, but not many intentionally promote experiences of transcendence. Engaging in spirituality may help youth connect with a reality beyond themselves that is represented in the Divine, creation, or other forms of existential or cosmic beliefs. In addition, spirituality can be experienced in contexts that are not related to supernatural or sacred realities, but rather enable youth to experience transcendence and connection to a greater entity such as a political cause or movement. Although further research is warranted, a young person's perception of the significance of the source of transcendence (e.g. God, Allah, a racial justice movement).

Such experiences of transcendence have great potential for nurturing positive development in young people. Experiences of transcendence are powerful and help youth orient themselves around their values and beliefs and direct their lives toward what matters most to them. Youth's identity and self-worth can be deeply affirmed through connecting to a reality, movement, or cause beyond themselves. For example, Judeo-Christian traditions teach that believers are in a special relationship with God. Spiritual practices and rituals enable believers to experience this personal relationship, leading to a deeper sense of belonging to God. In Judaism, being the covenant people of God has always been at the core of Jewish identity. From the ancient Israelites to contemporary Jews, staking claim as the chosen people of God has been central to Jewish history (Furman, 1987). Within the Christian tradition, believers are taught to understand themselves as "sons or daughters of God" The Christian Bible also refers to

believers being chosen by God. Both traditions acknowledge the uniqueness and inherent value of each person. Understanding oneself as beloved or chosen by the Creator may have profound implications for identity.

Within some Eastern traditions, intrinsic value is found in understanding people and the Divine to be of the same essence.. For example in the Hindu tradition, the *Atman* (the individual soul) and *Brahman* (the cosmic spirit) are one and the same. Peace, compassion and a sense of purpose (dharma) are found through a deepening understanding of the unity between Self, Universe, and Spirit (King & Roeser, 2009). Spiritual traditions that promote an awareness of the connection between individuals and something greater than themselves—like a group, all of humanity, the universe, or a divine being—can potentially help a young person understand his own worth.

Youth may also experience transcendence through a connection to specific people. For example, youth who identify with a specific political party may locate themselves as members of a historic or national tradition with a set of beliefs, values, and possibly rituals. In addition, race or ethnicity can also provide a sense of community, establishing a deep common bond with people who have gone before them, as well as those who live in the present alongside them. Participating in such a historic and current community can help young people feel like they are part of something greater than themselves. Not only may this lead to a strong sense of self-worth based on belonging, but also a sense of commitment and responsibility to those that share their tradition.

Not limited to religious traditions are experiences of transcendence that occur in nature. Young people may find a reinvigorated sense of identity through being part of creation. Encountering the majesty of creation or being sensually aroused through the aesthetics of

nature—whether the enormousness of mountains, the intricacies of a flower, or the power of a storm—may inspire a different perspective of one’s self or one’s life. For example, being outdoors may inspire some youth to take seriously the call to stewardship of the environment. Responding to this call could lead to a greater sense of purpose in the world.

Spirituality also promotes transcendence through ritual, whether through worship, spiritual practices, or rites of passage. Ongoing worship rituals may promote one’s awareness of the Divine, connectedness to other people, and confirm one’s place in a community. For instance, one of the foremost religious practices within Islam is *salat* or prayer. According to this tradition, believers pray five specific times a day. In this repetitive act, believers experience solidarity with other Muslims worldwide who are also prostrating themselves toward Mecca. The Lord’s Supper, or Communion, provides Christians with a consistent experience of transcendence that is shared with the “communion of saints,” which refers to all believers past and present. In the practice of the Lord’s Supper believers partake of consecrated bread and wine that represents Christ’s body and blood. Believers do this as a way to experience union with Christ, and with a mystical understanding that they are participating in this act with the entire communion of saints.

Rituals of rites of passage promote opportunities to not only confirm identity, but also engender a sense of obligation. For example, within Judaism, *bar* or *bat mitzvahs* serve to recognize a boy or girl, during their transition to manhood or womanhood, as a member of a synagogue. This confirms that the boy or girl is a valued part of the body of believers. Within the Christian tradition, a young person’s confirmation takes place within a parish or congregation. Confirmation serves as a time to confirm a young believer’s commitment to beliefs and their religious tradition, as well as for the faith community to commit to nurture and care for the spiritual formation of the young person. These religious rites of passage are events that

intentionally celebrate and affirm a young person's sense of identity as a believer as well as recognize their place within their faith community, potentially contributing to both personal development and commitment to something beyond themselves.

Spiritual practices or rituals also foster experiences of transcendence. For example, the practice of meditation can lead to the realization of higher states of awareness and eventual enlightenment, yielding complete understanding of one's own unity with the essence of being (Dahl et al., 2020). Fasting from food allows an individual to focus their concentration on the spiritual aspects of life. Or serving the poor provides the opportunity to uncover the intrinsic value of others, cultivate gratitude, and engage in self-sacrifice. Significant for youth, these practices develop character, allow for the exploration of different competencies and skills, and affirm the youth's uniqueness. Gaining a heightened consciousness through spiritual practices can lead to an understanding of interdependence with others (Yaden et al., 2021). For youth, this plays an important role in both motivating and sustaining an altruistic or generative lifestyle. Increased awareness of the connection between self, others, and the Divine leads to a manner of living that is carried out with the utmost respect and compassion.

Figure 1 illustrates this conceptual model, suggesting that spirituality promotes positive development in young people (King, 2008). The model depicts spirituality consisting of ideological, social, and transcendent dimensions. In addition, thriving is depicted with two core components, optimal individual development and commitment to the common good.

[COMP: INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE.]

Figure 1. Spirituality's Potential Influence on Positive Youth Development

Spirituality as a Navigational Device

This chapter suggests that spirituality can play a valuable role in supporting young people's thriving. At the same time, youth today have a myriad of options for finding a sense of belonging, affirming a unique sense of self, and accessing opportunities for growth. Young people participate in families, sports, entrepreneurial enterprises, jobs, philanthropy, social media, and different forms of civic engagement. Personal endeavors such as pursuing art, academics, and sports also offer pathways for development. The breadth and depth of ideological, social, and transcendent resources accessible through spirituality enable spirituality to function as a type of navigational device that provides guidance and direction as youth navigate the challenges and opportunities of adolescence.

Beliefs, values, and narratives; relationships and a sense of belonging; and experiences of transcendence are all necessary for young people to grapple with issues including questions that are critical to the formation of self and to understanding their role in contributing to the common good. Explicitly pursuing spirituality allows youth to actively engage in constructing belief systems, in supportive communities, and in practices that involve transcendence. Through each of these pursuits, youth cultivate skills to navigate sources of meaning and support in a chronically and rapidly changing world. Youth practitioners can help reinforce this process through encouraging youth to seek out spirituality within cohesive prosocial belief systems with supportive communities that offer opportunities to explore the transcendent. In doing so, youth workers assist young people in ways that go beyond their immediate interactions, making a more lasting impact. Specifically, professionals can support the exploration of spirituality by helping youth clarify their beliefs, personal narratives, and senses of identity within their contexts. Professionals should be mindful that youth need role models and resources to support their explorations. Support from like-minded communities provides a sense of belonging, assisting

youths' quest for meaning, and providing opportunities to lead and serve. Professionals should equip youth with various spiritual practices - they can teach, practice, and hold youth accountable in their explorations. In addition, professionals should provide youth with specific resources to assist their explorations and development of such practices. Many resources are available online and at www.thethrivecenter.org.

Spirituality serves as a dynamic and ongoing guidance system. Rather than being static, it gives youth an inexhaustible way to understand morality and their own motivations. At its best, spirituality connects and grounds youth in the deeper meanings in life, providing answers to existential questions like: Who am I? To whom do I belong and to whom am I responsible? What is my purpose? The journey of clarifying one's answers to these questions in the constantly changing demands and opportunities of different times and circumstances during life, provides youth direction and serves to orient them through the turbulent waters of adolescence.

Spiritual institutions or communities are especially well suited for assisting youth in this task because they provide intentional and coherent worldviews that offer prosocial values and behavioral norms, grounded in a greater narrative. Believers often embody these ideals and values and serve as role models. Spiritual communities connect youth to others and provide an intergenerational network of enduring, caring relationships through which youth may wrestle with issues pertinent to development, keeping youth directed toward purpose. Youth may also find service opportunities within spiritual communities that provide occasions to grow in competency and character, experience agency and personal significance, and discover passions and strengths. Finally, spirituality promotes transcendent experiences, helping youth to move beyond their daily concerns and potentially encounter the supernatural or other people in a meaningful way, orienting them toward purpose during difficult times. These encounters can

facilitate optimal individual development and inspire commitment to the well-being of the broader community.

Although other institutions and activities give youth a wide range of opportunities, they rarely offer religion and spirituality's breadth and depth of developmental resources. Seldom do organizations intentionally provide ideological cohesiveness; supply an intergenerational social network to nurture and sustain beliefs, meaning, and values; and present opportunities for sacred and communal transcendence. The confluence of these three dimensions enables religious contexts to serve as especially potent resources for positive youth development. In a world in which youth are less interested in formal religion, spiritual practices that provide the same key factors available in traditional religious communities, can provide an excellent substitute, but should provide the same ideological cohesiveness, intergenerational social networks, and nurture and sustain belief and values, and present opportunities for exploring the transcendent to optimally support youth in their journey to stay aligned and activated on a thriving trajectory.

Spirituality Gone Awry

The intention of this chapter is not to promote spirituality as a social panacea, but to recognize spirituality's potential to effectively support youth development. However, just as spirituality has the ability to aid in positive youth development it also has the capacity to harmfully steer youth off course. Understanding spirituality's shadow side is a necessary component in benefiting from what it does have to offer, and prompts the questions: What occurs when spirituality is not at its best? What if the self is sacrificed for the sake of other people or a misguided understanding of the Divine? What if other people are neglected for the sake of the self? Let us consider the possibilities.

An optimal spiritual context affirms both individual development and engenders a

commitment to the greater good. This balance is important, because if one component violates the other, healthy development does not occur. For example, if a spiritual or religious tradition emphasizes the community, without valuing the uniqueness of its members, youth may not have the necessary opportunities to explore different aspects of identity. When youth are not given the freedom to explore—either forced or pressured into adopting a specific ideology, specific set of behaviors, social group, or expression of spirituality—identity foreclosure is at risk.

Taken to the extreme, cults devalue the individuality of their members in order to elevate the group's ideology and identity. This is visually apparent when spiritual groups demand that their members dress alike, which is often seen in cults. Another example, taken from current events, is suicide bombings. These terrorist acts illustrate the devastation caused by religious groups that value the religion's goals and ends more than each individual's life.

On the other hand, some traditions are ineffective in nurturing positive youth development, because they emphasize the individual over and above the community. For example, some forms of spirituality focus primarily on the individual's spiritual experience, and do not encourage a sense of community or making a contribution to the larger society. For youth, when this occurs, although their personal worth is reinforced, they lose out on the support and accountability of a broader circle. Youth also don't benefit from learning what it means to belong to the wider community or world, nor do they experience how to play a valuable part in other people's flourishing. Solitary forms of spirituality that are not connected with a group of believers or followers also lack the rich web of support that is so effective for youth's optimal development. The absence of supportive relationships, and also the absence of transcendent experiences that include other people, may cause youths' self-concept to lack full integration morally, civically, and spiritually, and rather may focus on self-gratification or personal

satisfaction. Conversely, forms of religion and spirituality that exalt the individual over a greater good can promote a sense of narcissism, entitlement, or exclusivity, preventing youth from engaging civically and missing out on important aspects of their development.

[COMP: INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE.]

Figure 2. Circumplex Model of Positive and Negative Forms of Spirituality

Figure 2 presents a circumplex model that depicts the significance of spirituality nurturing both individual development and a commitment to something beyond the self (King, 2008). The vertical axis, labeled “Self,” indicates higher or lower levels of individual development, where the horizontal axis, labeled “Other,” represents high and low levels of commitment to the greater good. The labels in the four quadrants represent extremes for illustrative purposes. For example, the upper-left quadrant is labeled “Narcissistic” because this quadrant is indicative of forms of spirituality that promote individual development over and above nurturing a commitment to contributing to the greater good. Conversely, the lower-right quadrant is labeled “Cult-like,” to represent at the extreme oppressive forms of spirituality that mandate serving the greater good or at least the spiritual community to the detriment of individual personal development and fulfillment. The upper-right quadrant, labeled “Optimal,” represents the outcome of spirituality, where individual development and commitment to the common good are both promoted. In contrast, the lower-left quadrant, labeled “Negligent,” represents contexts that do not nurture the self or a commitment to the common good.

Conclusion

Spirituality and its impact on well-being and development is a burgeoning field of study, rife with possibility for youth workers. Practitioners have the exciting opportunity to be a part of this evolving field through utilizing spiritual resources to cultivate an environment where youth

can thrive. As youth workers skillfully activate all three of the contexts explored in this chapter—ideological, social, and transcendent—they enable spirituality to serve as an important asset for youth. In addition to drawing on the multifaceted resources of spirituality in their direct work with young people, practitioners can support youth as they integrate beliefs into a coherent narrative, and join supportive communities, engaging in practices that sustain their spiritual development. Whether involved directly or indirectly, adults need to be mindful of the ways spirituality can be both extremely helpful, as well as detrimental, to the development of a young person’s identity and sense of meaning and purpose in life. As a result of youth workers’ thoughtful engagement with spirituality, we should observe youth developing their most authentic selves, demonstrating resilience in moving towards their goals, and making meaningful contributions to the world.

REFERENCES

- Bandura, A. 2003. On the psychosocial impact and mechanisms of spiritual modeling. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 13, no. 3: 167–73.
- Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Syvertsen, A. K., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2012). Is youth spiritual development a universal developmental process? An international exploration. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7,6, 453-470.
- Colby, A., and W. Damon. 1995. The development of extraordinary moral commitment. In M. Killen, D. Hart, et al., eds., *Morality in everyday life: Developmental perspectives*, 342–370. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dahl, C., Wilson-Mendenhall, C. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2020). The plasticity of well-being: A training-based framework for the cultivation of human flourishing. *PNAS: Proceedings*

from the National Academy of Sciences in the United States of America, 117, 51, p.

32197–32206. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2014859117>

Erikson, E.J. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.

Erikson, E. H. (1965). Youth: Fidelity and diversity. In E. H. Erikson, ed., *The challenges of youth*, 1–28. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Furman, F. K. 1987. *Beyond Yiddishkeit: The struggle for Jewish identity in a reform synagogue*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hardy, S., Nelson, J., Moore, J. & King, P. E. (2019). Processes of religious and spiritual influence in adolescence: A review of the literature, *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 29(2), 254-275.

James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. New York; Longmans, Green. (Repr. in William James: Writings 1902-1910. New York: Library of America, 1987.)

King, P. E. 2003. Religion and identity: The role of ideological, social, and spiritual contexts. *Applied Developmental Sciences* 7, no. 3: 196–203.

King, P. E. (2008). Spirituality as fertile ground for positive youth development. In R. M. Lerner, R. W. Roeser, & E. Phelps (Eds.), *Positive youth development and spirituality: From theory to research* (pp. 55-73). West Conshohocken, PA, US: Templeton Foundation Press.

King, P. E. & Boyatzis C. (2015). Religious and spiritual development. In M. E. Lamb & C. G. Coll (Eds.), *Social and Emotional Issues* (Vol. 3) of the *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science* (7th ed.). Editor-in-chief: R. M. Lerner. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, p. 975-1021.

King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014). Adolescent spiritual exemplars: Exploring

- spirituality in the lives of diverse youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186-212.
- King, P. E., & Furrow, J. L. (2004). Religion as a resource for positive youth development: Religion, social capital, and moral outcomes. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(5), 703-713.
- King, P.E., Mangan, S., & Riveros, R. M. (in press). Religion, spirituality, and youth thriving: Investigating the roles of the developing mind and meaning-making. In W. Davis, E. Worthington, & S. Schnitker (Eds). *Handbook of Positive Psychology, Religion and Spirituality*. New York: Springer.
- King, P. E., Ramos, J. S., & Clardy, C. E. (2013). Searching for the sacred: Religion, spirituality, and adolescent development. In K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, & J. W. Jones (Eds.), *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality (Vol 1): Context, theory, and research* (pp. 513-528). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.
- King, P. E., & Roeser, R. W. (2009). Religion and spirituality in adolescent development. In R. M. Lerner, & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology: Vol. 1. Individual bases of adolescent development (3rd ed.)* (pp. 435-478). Hoboken, NJ, US: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- King, P. E., Vaughn, J. M., & Merola, C. (2020). Spirituality and adolescent development. In D. T. L. Shek & J. Leung (Eds.) *Volume VII: History, Theory, and Culture*. In S. Hupp & J. Jewell (Eds. in chief). *Encyclopedia of Child and Adolescent Development*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Lerner, R. M., E. M. Dowling, and P. M. Anderson. 2003. Positive youth development: Thriving as the basis of personhood and civil society. *Applied Developmental Sciences* 7, no. 3: 172–80.

- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Bowers, E. P., & Geldhof, G. J. (2015). Positive youth development and relational-developmental-systems. In W. F. Overton, P. C. M. Molenaar, & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science: Theory and method* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–45). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118963418.childpsy116>
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American psychologist*, 56(3), 227–238. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227>
- Pew Research Center, Being Christian in Western Europe,
<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>.
- Riveros, R., & Immordino-Yang, M.H. (2021) Toward a neuropsychology of spiritual development in adolescence. *Adolescent Research Review*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-021-00158-1>
- Yaden, D. B., Giorgi, S., Kern, M. L., Adler, A., Ungar, L. H., Seligman, M. E., & Eichstaedt, J. C. (2021). Beyond beliefs: Multidimensional aspects of religion and spirituality in language. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000408>

Figure 1. Spirituality's Potential Influence on Positive Youth Development

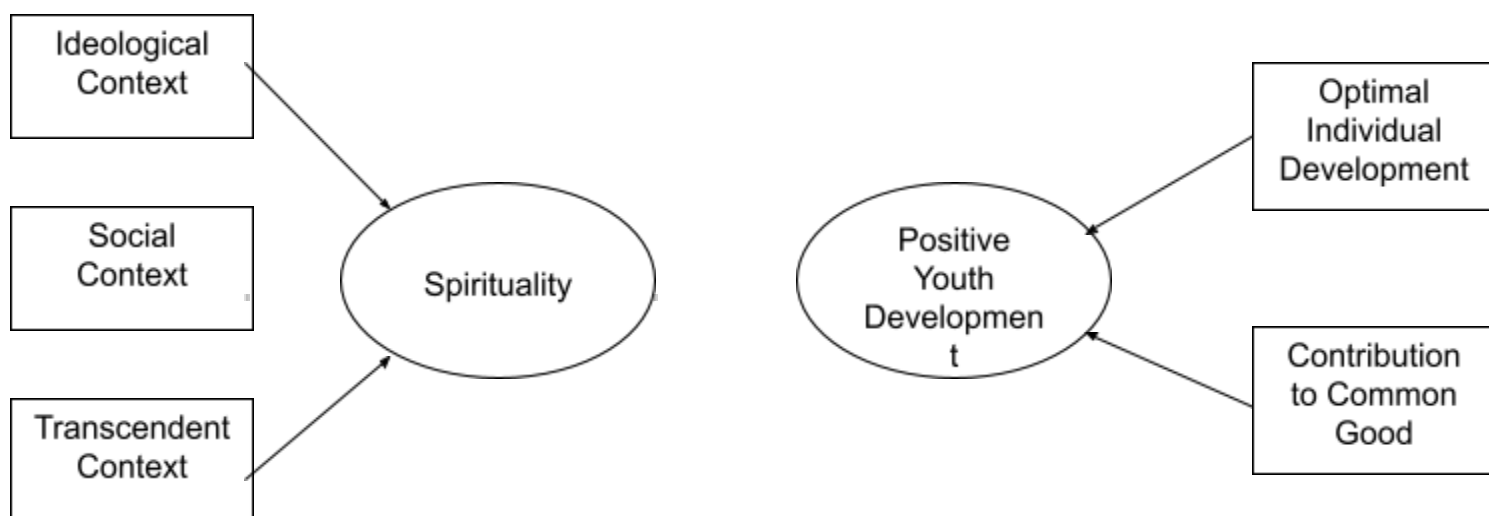


Figure 2. Circumplex Model of Positive and Negative Forms of Spirituality

