

# Spiritual Development in Childhood and Youth: A response to the Sage *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*

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## Abstract.

This article gives a detailed assessment of the usefulness of the new *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* from Sage Publications, arguing that it is an important baseline study of current research, and that it demonstrates that every aspect of research in this field requires new research. It argues that new research into spiritual development must clearly distinguish this from religious development, and that the construction of a secular non-theocentric psychology of spiritual education is urgently required.

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*The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006) was published by Sage [1] in the USA in 2006 alongside an encyclopedia of religious and spiritual development (reviewed in Bigger 2007). It provides a comprehensive collection of new studies on spirituality and religiosity as viewed from the standpoint of largely American developmental psychology. There are 34 chapters with 68 listed interdisciplinary contributors (67 writers plus a foreword by Robert Coles). Of the editors, Eugene C Roehlkepartain, and Peter L Benson are from Search Institute[2], which describes itself as non-sectarian and not-for-profit; Pamela Ebstynne King and Linda Wagener are from Fuller Theological Seminary. The book consists of 350,000 words covering 500 dense pages of discussion. It launched the Search Institute's *Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* based in Minneapolis, USA. The Search Institute sets out a scientific mission to help young people to grow up as healthy, caring, and responsible individuals. Working mainly with religious youth, it proposes 40 *developmental assets* [3] that young people need if they are to grow up to be healthy, caring, and responsible individuals.

This handbook is a welcome comprehensive collection, bringing together studies on religiosity and spirituality, particularly in the USA, and providing a baseline for future study. Its references to American research is exhaustive (less so to research elsewhere). It will be an essential text from a psychological perspective for future researchers. This said, the claim to be 'scientific' does not give the conclusions privileged status. In this volume the background to most studies is research into Christian religiosity (admitted many times in the book) and the many writers have been key players in this research. Although the editors have insisted on a multifaith focus, the gaps in research are very obvious. There is in general a theistic bias although to be fair the handbook's schema refers to 'religious or secular'. "Religious and spiritual development" often appear as a phrase (2, title; even "RS factors" in 28, see below) as if overlapping: future researchers will need to beware of this fundamental category error. A few chapters are more precise - 6 (Alexander and Carr), on philosophical issues, 12 (Hart) on spiritual experiences, and Part VI, (29-34) on future developments[4]. If this volume is to provide the baseline for future study, these chapters should be prioritised by future researchers.

For my critique to be better understood, let me state that my general personal stance is to study spirituality non-theistically as a dimension of human experience, and only when this is understood to apply these insights to religiosity:

We need to regard spirituality inclusively as a quest for personal meaning at the highest level, which includes intellectual, ethical, social, political, aesthetic and other such dimensions. It marks a *quality* of reflection which is holistic in scope, transcends material needs and ambitions, and transforms the personality in positive ways." (Bigger, 2000:23).

This is not to reject religions, with whom I work closely. Organised religions claim the term *spirituality* for themselves so the term needs to be defined unambiguously to be useful. Nevertheless we need some way of labelling our “personal togetherness” (Bigger, 1999:6) – deep personal meaning-making, the holistic development of human potential and the human spirit in its totality based on individual autonomy within a relational and ethical engagement with the world. One helpful definition (10, Wagener and Malony) is:

“Spirituality ...is the essential potentiality for addressing the ultimate questions that are intrinsic to the experience of being human”. It is personal, experiential and integrative including transcendence, morality, belonging, connectedness, meaning and purpose (p.139). The ‘sacred’ are those precious things beyond negotiation, on which people base their lives. Some visualise these theocentrically, as God-given. A pacifist vegetarian declares clear but secular personal sacred ground (they could additionally become Jains). Organisational religion requires adherence to dogmatic teachings demanding compliance rather than personal expression. New religions tend to emerge when spirituality outgrows the confines of the religion in which it grew up, but these also become dogmatic when organised. Secular spirituality should not be dismissed as new age fads just because these are a current bandwagon for publishers. We need to research how an atheist or agnostic can express human potential and integrated holistic thinking, in life, family, work and society.

William James (1960 [1902]) described spirituality outside of religious traditions as “personal religion”, and of “enthusiastic” but “solemn emotions”, with the divine defined as “that which prompts solemn reactions”. The British school curriculum developed this into “implicit religious education” (Schools Council, 1977) focusing on questions such as *who am I deep down? How do I relate to others? How should I respond to the world? How should I use language and symbol to express deep meaning?* (Hampshire, 1978). Implicit religion is in this usage general everyday ‘religious’ responses unconnected to explicit doctrinal systems and faith traditions. Personal religion, or in our terminology *spirituality* is therefore quite separate from *religiosity* where this means *being a pious and faithful member of a religious community*. Much in this Handbook is about measurements of religiosity in this sense. To argue that religiosity contains elements of spirituality requires specific analysis rather than assertion: we would need an open mind about whether the overlap exists, and if so whether it is helpful or harmful to each category – whether for example organisational dogmatic religion might inhibit, constrain or misdirect authentic spiritual experience.

The Handbook has an introductory chapter and six parts: foundations; descriptive approaches; connections; ecologies; developmental outcomes; and future perspectives. The introductory chapter makes the following working assumptions for the Handbook:

1. That religiosity and spirituality are universal human processes encouraging narrative building, self-transcendence and personal integration.
2. That it is a multidimensional domain.
3. That spiritual development is a process involving growth within a community of practice.
4. That it is both personal and relational.
5. That it is life shaping, positively or negatively.

The psychoanalytic assumption of religion as illusion and delusion is noted (pp.6f) locating this Handbook in the phenomenology of Robert and Jane Coles, who recognise these illusions as significant in life coping and personal transformation (Coles, 1990). However, it conflates religion and spirituality: concerns for *religious* development should not set the agenda for a Handbook on spiritual development. The introduction rightly points to the lack of interdisciplinary research and understanding, and therefore the limited horizons currently on offer. The editors agonize over definitions: is spirituality part of religiousness? Or separate from it? Or part of an entire dimension of psychological life? It is crucial that the opening chapter of such a large handbook is clearer than this about its scope. This handbook privileges a connection between religion and self transcendence “in

which the self is embedded in something greater than self, including the sacred” (p.5). Spirituality does not require an external referent – a theology, deity, prophet or teacher as a purveyor of truth. That produces heteronomy (following rules laid by others) and not personal integration. The spiritual quest is inner personal wisdom. ‘Self-transcendence’ may mean only that we are not selfish in seeking a broader-based wisdom.

*Foundations* explores spirituality and religion; stages of faith; positive youth development; philosophical issues; and measurement and research design. Only the chapter on philosophical issues (6, Alexander and Carr) problematises the issues of spirituality and development involved, which makes it refreshing; but this analysis threatens to undermine other chapters which are built on the assumption that spirituality and religion are inter-related, and that there children can develop spiritually. Neither of these are necessary positions; but take them away and the Handbook collapses. Six ‘continua’ are suggested for current definitions of spiritual education:

1. Confessional or non-confessional,
2. Religiously tethered or untethered,
3. Theologically objectivist, collectivist or subjectivist,
4. Independent of or reducible to morality.
5. Culturally thick or thin,
6. Pedagogically cognitive or affective (knowledge or emotions).

The complexity is due in part to the political use of spiritual education, often for confused reasons such as to improve morals, outlook and behaviour. In schools, learning should be life transforming rather than just information (Buber’s *Lehrstoff*), and learning experiences need to be open and joyful. For future philosophical enquiry, they nominate: wholeness; the characteristics of communities that foster spiritual development; and the nature of transcendence. They suggest a revolutionary morality:

“The formation of caring, morally and spiritually committed young people who reject selfishness, disregard for others, and injustice” (p.87).

Future research needs to problematise this position. Fowler’s *stages of faith* theory (3, Fowler, Dell) is an application of Piaget’s cognitive development theories, supported by data from religious retreats. There is an assumption that being in tune with these retreats rates highly as spirituality: in fact the reverse might be true if the dogma closes down options. Religious orthodoxies tend to find free spirits to be a huge threat. Religious development is knowledge based, knowing more about one’s religion and its scriptures and practices; spiritual development is more of a growth of insight and wisdom. Already, Scarlett (2) has critiqued stage theory as culturally insensitive and too rigid and requiring further research (p.31). The relationship between spiritual and religious development is tackled in 4 (Hay, Reich, Utsch) but is impeded by a crucial scoping decision:

“To make this task manageable, we focus primarily on forms of spirituality that have a referent shared with traditional religion.” (p.46).

This is an illustration of the mind-set. The reason given are that traditional religions were founded by spiritual people so some of their spirituality survives. This begs too many historical questions to be useful; a critical study of the relationship between religion and spirituality is still needed. Their rationale that spirituality is inbuilt in the human species – presumably a product of evolutionary biology, as Alister Hardy (1984) believed – is a useful starting point. Of course, not all evolutionary vestiges remain useful, and some, like blood-lust, are socially damaging. In future research this will need to integrate with modern neuroscientific studies of the brain, a field which has barely begun. That scientific work “may be deadly for spiritual development” (p.54) I am not convinced, though I agree that science is unhelpful for some forms of religious belief. Future research needs to explore spiritual development as a thing in itself, not as a by-product of religion and not as necessarily beneficial.

Potentially, *positive youth development* (5, Lerner, Alberts, Anderson, Dowling) should highlight an important issue, but again spiritual and religious are confused: it concludes that young religious people get into less trouble, which may be true, but begs many questions, like are they good because

they are religious, or religious because they are good? We need to know whether and how spiritual understandings can turn a delinquent adolescent around. There are attempts to *measure* spiritual development or attainment (7, Gorsuch, Walker). But, how should we score the strength of a firm but dubious belief? Should a strong naïve belief in God score high or low, and be any different from a strong belief in Santa Claus? Should *doubt* score high or low? There is a constant danger of circular argument, where high scoring criteria are selected, and *what is not asked* may be important.

*Descriptive approaches* gives an anthropological approach. Religious and spiritual pathology (10, i.e. normal versus pathological spirituality, Wagener, Malony) despite the language used mainly deals with religious pathology. So under the heading 'Pathological Spiritual Development' (p.140) the text begins with "spiritual and religious pathology". The discussion covers a broad range of phenomena, in which what is normal and what is pathological is problematic. If spiritual development means to integrate experience and knowledge into a meaningful system (p.140), in one sense we all fail all of the time; and in another sense there cannot be an arbiter between normal and abnormal. Who decides? And on what basis? Indeed belief in God (and certainly some beliefs in God) may be as pathological as a mature adult believing in Santa Claus. The world does not normally recognise it as so, but being normal need not be the same as being in the majority. If most people are racists, it is not pathological to be anti-racist. At one point, a tight definition is given, that the abnormality leads to self harm or harm to others: but in this case, we would focus on the symptom (the harm) rather than muse about its cause. Delusions may have a medical neuropsychological cause: even Lawrence Kohlberg had mystical delusions during his last decade which profoundly altered his view of the highest stage of faith. For the pathologically delusional, visions may seem real and precious. 11 (Gottlieb) looks at the implications explores the implications of the African belief that children are reincarnated and come at birth from an invisible mystical world, which tugs them back. This explains infant mortality and gives some comfort. Reincarnation would imply also that infant spiritual experiences should be taken seriously as memories of another life and world. Hart (12), through a survey of university students, emphasises the importance of early spiritual experiences for children.

"Spiritual moments are direct, personal, and often have the effect, if only for a moment, of waking us up and expanding our understanding of who we are and what our place is in the universe. They can serve as benchmarks and catalysts for spiritual growth" (p.164).

This chapter supports the non-religious view of children's spirituality by focusing on *wonder*, *wondering*, *wisdom* and *relational spirituality (between you and me)*. Children "already have a spiritual life; they have access to wisdom and wonder, struggle with questions of meaning and morality, and have a deep sense of compassion" (p.175). Awe and wonder focuses on overwhelming moments of insight and intuition, or peak experiences, not the pale imitations encouraged in the school curriculum.

'Wondering' is philosophical curiosity; 'wisdom' is about integrating knowledge and being; and relational spirituality is about care and compassion. His 'spiritual' bottom line about being caring humans is in fact *moral*, an ethic of compassion.

#### *Connections*

This section explores neuropsychology, attachment, cognitive-cultural factors, morality, civics, identity and personality. On neuropsychology (13, A. Newberg, S. Newberg) the effects of meditation on the brain are explored. The literature is in its infancy, and this discussion is too closely structured through Fowler's stages of faith. Future research should focus on the perspectives of evolutionary biology, and examine whether mystical experience is related to brain chemistry. There is a great deal of myth to be weeded out under the guise of brain laterality, brain gym and similar bandwagons. This includes the view, found frequently in this volume but unevicenced, that humans are constructed as spiritual entities. The chapter on attachment theory (14, Granqvist, Dickie) is heavily based on research with church congregations. It claims a link between strong attachment with God and on the one hand strong attachments with parents, and conversely (through compensation processes) weak and abusive relationships. In other words, since the sample all believed in God, some linked this with

strong attachment, others as compensation for poor attachment. For people without a belief in God, the relationship is likely to be more complex. The authors admit that attachment research needs a broader base. On cognitive-cultural factors (15, Johnson, Boyatris), questions are asked about why humans have developed both spiritual awareness and supernatural beliefs. The searchlight here comes from evolutionary biology and posits that these aspects of thinking may be explainable biologically but can produce illusions and delusions as well as insights. “The challenge is to understand how this development is psychologically organised and culturally scaffolded in ways that are both valuable and true” (p.220). In other words, we need ways of differentiating between unhelpful delusions and beneficial insights. For Wolpert (2006), the answer is that humans understood and misunderstood the concept of causality.

Moral development (16, Walker, Reimer) is presented as independent of religion, but linked in that generally religious people tend to be morally aware. Future research needs to separate moral actions from moral posturing – examining what people say about morality is not sufficient, but needs informing by what people do. Issues of autonomy need addressing: moral *development* is the increasingly internalising of responsible and informed decisions and attitudes. People make their own moral decisions for reasons which they work out based on principles they value. This is different from being given a code of behaviour which they are expected to apply. Behaviour codes can end up being *immoral*, when people who think differently are persecuted or punished, or attacked as enemies. Ideally religious adherence should include moral autonomy, using principles such as love and justice: we could thus use moral awareness as a means of evaluating religion. Research on civic engagement (17, Donnelly, Matsuba, Hart, Atkins) also needs to be broadened to ascertain how this affects worldview and attitudes of people in general.

Identity (18, Templeton, Eccles) distinguishes between corporate identity (being a Christian, being a Muslim, being Welsh) and personal identity. Although the two are connected, personal identity is more deeply rooted. At this level, relationship with a transcendent being is a side issue on which people differ. The “personally sacred” (p.255) is relevant to us all as those principles that we hold dear as central to our thinking and action, as markers of good faith. ‘Self transcendence’ (p.255), transcending the self, is described as a search for meaning beyond our personal agenda, seeing our personal needs as part of a much larger whole or holistic vision. Spiritual identity is a potential research topic so long as it separates itself from religious identity. 18 tends to focus on religious identity, corporately held and to some degree internalised. Spiritual identity should be about what kind of people we are and aspire to be, which is quite separate from what we choose to believe.

The chapter on Personality (19, Kneezel, Emmons) is dominated by the Self Determination Theory (SDT, Deci and Ryan, 1985) that people strive towards integration and differentiation of the self. In school, motivation is extrinsic as adults set the agenda; nevertheless a degree of personal identification with the topic discussed is possible. Intrinsic motivation is a self-drive. Five factor personality trait continua are explored – extroversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism. However, whether we are extrovert or introvert is non-judgemental; the other four contain elements of judgement: being open to experience, conscientious, agreeable and emotionally balanced paints a picture of someone positive, all-together, coherent. Perhaps these four personality continua can tell us something about spiritual development? We could add also *intrinsically motivated, goal oriented and clear self identity*. We might see spirituality as the depth point on these continua. Far from being fixed and stable over time, these constantly adjust over time and vary in different social contexts. They are all things we can work on.

#### *Ecologies.*

This section deals with ethnicity, the family, mentors and congregations. On ethnicity (20, Mattis, Ahluwalia, Cowie, Kirkland-Harris) we are given world-wide examples. We seek to understand ourselves and our world *together*: culture is a part of this understanding, for better or worse. I share

some concerns with the writers: we should not be simplistic about what Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and others *should be*. There is variation, including people from a religious culture who are nominal adherents, not actively involved. An individual might be attracted to more than one religion: Buddhism for example comfortably pairs with most other faiths. Nevertheless, there is a central assumption I am not comfortable with, that spiritual development is the opposite to secularism (p.293). Secularism is the opposite of organised religion. It is possible to reflect profoundly on the depths of one's existence in relational terms (i.e. be spiritual) without modelling reality in supernatural terms (i.e. being secular). The Handbook frequently recognizes that non-religious people can indeed be spiritual, and laments that there is little research on non-religious spirituality. This is a blind spot in the data of great significance.

On the influence of the family, “for better or for worse” (21, p.305, Boyatris, Dollahite, Marks) the focus is on religiosity, even though the term spirituality is used. Our parents and wider family affect the whole of our lives in one way or another; nevertheless, different children of the same parents respond differently as children decide to follow or reject attitudes of nurture. If we lay aside the content of *belief* we might explore the extent to which nurture into decent human values might be more long lasting irrespective of whether the child retains the parents' religious beliefs and allegiances. Mentors and role models (22, Schwartz, Bukowski, Aoli) focuses on religious leaders as mentors. There might however be a tendency for charismatic religious figures to insist on obedience without question and inhibit both cognitive and spiritual development. The following chapter (23, Roehlkepartain, Patel) asks similar questions of congregations encouraging “acts of compassion, service, and justice” (p.334). A congregation equally by policing a party-line can also discourage free reflection.

#### *Developmental Outcomes.*

This section deals with religious coping, resilience, delinquency, well-being and thriving, and physical health. Religious coping (24, Mahony, Pendleton, Ihrke) is problematised and helpfully sets an agenda for future research. I would add that research into coping in general, and strategies children and young people use, would be particularly valuable. There may be a link between general spirituality and coping. On resilience (25, Crawford, Wright, Masten), again problematised, religion/spirituality is said to produce coherent guidelines which “strengthen family relationships” and “improve personal growth and development”, but can also have negative effects (p.366). Delinquency (26, R. Blakeney, C. Blakeney) results from lack of guidelines. The main theoretical modelling is of delinquency coming from lack of developmental integrity and “spiritual missteps” (p.377). Something needs to break into the “delinquent trajectory” (whether *testing, stuck at the crossroads or split*) or vicious cycle to enable “transformation” (p.378). 27 (King, Benson), on adolescent well-being and thriving deals with health, academic achievement, civic engagement through the mechanisms of developmental assets, identity, and meaning. Religion is shown to be a positive factor. This chapter advocates moving “beyond an overreliance on stage theory” (p.394). 28 (Oman, Thoresan), on physical health refers to religious and spiritual factors as “RS factors” (p.399), again hiding any distinction between them. The authors claim a positive relationship between RS factors and good health. The data is generally from Christian populations, and the general conclusion reached that: “Physically and mentally healthier children tend to grow up more often in caring families that are free from conflict, coldness, aggression, or neglect” (p.405). The claim is that religious families tend to manage these things better. All of these chapters emphasise the paucity of data, the bias in current research towards American white Christians, and the need for more research. This indicates that nothing in these chapters is certain. In fact in terms of general spirituality untied from religion in general and Christianity in particular, the slate is largely blank. Studies in coping, resilience, delinquency, well-being and thriving among children and adolescents (not tied to religion) are much needed: what does the average young person need to thrive mentally and physically? And what part of this is deep-rooted enough to be described as ‘spiritual’. Of the many cultural systems around (including religions) we need to know more about what promotes thriving, and what inhibits

it – and what is meant by thriving. This might not only draw on personality research, but even transform it.

The final part looks towards the future: psychotherapy; practice; child and youth care programs; and public policy. Psychotherapy (29, Miller, Kelley) asks through case studies how both general and religiously specific spirituality (e.g. prayer and meditation) might help psychoanalysts help damaged youngsters. It draws on Wilber's location of spiritual development in ego development, and Richards and Bergin's concept (1997) of the Spirit of Truth (the inner core values by which we thrive) as "the source" (pp.425, 432) viewed both from religious and secular viewpoints. If we act *in good faith*, we thrive. Symptoms which are "signals of a spiritual challenge" can be transforming if we work through them. Borgman sees a gap between research and practice (30): in closing this gap we have to recognise today's secular and religious pluralism, and take every opportunity for collaborative working between researchers and professionals. This is applied to work with children and young people (31, Scott, Magnuson) using a general model of spirituality which implies that all children are engaged on their own spiritual journey and need appropriate and relevant ("congruent") support – for which care workers need to be trained. Rebellion against a system may be a *proper* resistance to damaging expectations. Four themes are then explored: Gift giving; suffering; forgiveness; and creation/rebirth (meaning here *transformation*). Public policy and civic society (32, Hornberger, Jones, Miller) examines the whole public service industry from the point of view of social justice and positive human values.

"The challenge for this generation is to grow the consciousness of our common humanness;...that all human beings are interconnected and interdependent in an ever shrinking global village that is interwoven with nature and the web of life that is the world around us ... to create a sustainable and just society so that all children and adolescents may participate in and contribute to society." (pp.469-470).

The final two chapters serves as a conclusion for the whole work, and seek to set a future "scientific" agenda. 33 (Ratcliff, Nye) focuses on childhood spirituality, tracing the history of research in spirituality and religious development, and the beginnings of the focus on children. The emphasis is on the need to talk with children, over time. The struggle over a definition for spirituality is noted, including the need to include 'atheistic spirituality' (p.475, citing Robert Coles, who is credited with inspiring the move away from religious development to spirituality). The need for clear definition and rigorous mixed methods methodology is declared to be the next great challenge for researchers, as lack of methodological clarity casts doubt on most previous research. They also ask that spirituality research covers more diverse populations globally, and tackles some real social questions and seeks to be useful – by researching the experiences of street children, delinquents, drug addicts and so on.

34 (Benson) draws conclusions about "the science" of this research. This is seeking order out of chaos, since throughout the book there has been no clear definition of spiritual development, nor clear distinction between spiritual and religious development so that atheistic spiritual development can be understood. Benson's discussion of definition favours spiritual development being a universal process (or "domain of development", p.486) which can be informed by religion but can be independent of it. This goes further than most writers in most chapters, and the research on which their analysis is based. However, he doesn't go far enough: we should understand spirituality as a thing in itself (that is outside of any religious context or agenda); only when we have some insights from this should we compare it with religious development to see if this helps or hinders the processes we have identified. This means that all talk of religious development as an aspect of spiritual development is inappropriate. Later comparisons between religious and spiritual development are appropriate, so long as they are not assumed to contribute to the discussion of the nature of spirituality. Religions which promote spirituality can then be contrasted with religions which inhibit or prevent it.

Benson builds an “architecture” for a “comprehensive” theory, essentially a model (p.488). The person at the centre is shown to be influenced separately by culture and contexts, and to develop over time in the light of significant life experiences. That influence may be weak or strong. The crucial key “motivations” within the person’s view of self are: meaning, purpose, obligation; and contribution. These are expressed in a framework “about what is good, important, real” which we either create or inherit. The assumption might be that if we score highly on these four motivations, then we are very spiritual, and our score on each can be used diagnostically to scaffold our development. However, we might accept a myth that we have inherited (for example a creationist myth) without working out any issues in our lives. Ideas of meaning are theoretically and socially constructed: in nature, animals like us are born, breed and are eaten – and that is really all there is to life. Humans have over time learned to avoid being eaten, except by germs, viruses and cancers. Humans have instead limited their numbers by war and the abuse of power. The reality is that humans are by nature self centred and aggressive. We have in various ways learned to value the safety of community. We understand the positive consequences of giving, and the negative consequences of selfishness. Some are able to work this process through to an abstract principle which we would follow even if the personal consequences are negative. *Purpose* is *meaning in action* – why we decide to take a particular path. A self-centred *meaning* would lead to an acquisitive and/or empire building *purpose*. Under the label *ambition*, it is highly regarded by many selection processes. A *relationship-valuing* meaning would lead to an *altruistic* purpose. How much of these is personality and how much learning is one of the issues in need of research. A self-centred person has little sense of relationship value outside of ‘value for me’, so little sense of *obligation* to others and little reflection on our *contribution*. This shows that the self definition of *meaning* that we create is crucial for all aspects of our further development. If we inherit a ready-made view, we have to critique it, internalise our responses, and move beyond what we are given. Comparing what we have inherited with what others have inherited through dialogue is part of this learning which scaffolds our development. If what we have inherited is unhelpful and negative, positive scaffolding is particularly important.

Benson’s final section, “the field-building challenge” brings some relief by agreeing with my concerns. Current research “raise many questions” (p.493). Many things are “still unsatisfying”. Much “is loaded with assumptions that need to be challenged”. His view is that we are only at the beginning of this process – and I agree. This handbook is essentially therefore a ground clearing exercise. Whether we finally end up with “a psychological measure of spiritual thriving” (p.493) I doubt (measuring instruments are so problematic), but the journey should be profitable. This phrase – *spiritual thriving as an active process* – is a worthy one to end the book. This needs to be the basis of future study which should focus on spirituality as a general psychological construct, whose benefits and pathology need to be understood. Religious development will be part of this study, but not in a privileged sense as organised religion inhibits spirituality as much as it promotes it and divides people on the basis of dogma. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of empathetic inter-religious dialogue demonstrate that this is an important area to tackle. Spiritual development without reference to divine beings or higher forces needs also to be explored: understanding the metaphoric nature of religious language is a powerful means of understanding ourselves and developing deep inner spirituality.

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[1] Part of the SAGE Program on Applied Developmental Science (consulting editor Richard M Lerner), ISBN 0-7619-3078-7, xvi plus 543 pages, hardback, price £85.

[2] “Search Institute is an independent, nonprofit, **nonsectarian organization** whose mission is to advance the well-being of adolescents and children by generating knowledge and promoting its application. To accomplish this mission, the institute generates, synthesizes, and communicates new knowledge, **convenes organizational and community leaders, and works with state and national organizations**. At the heart of the institute’s work is the framework of **40 developmental assets**, which are positive experiences, relationships, opportunities, and personal qualities that young people need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.” <http://search-institute.org/>

[3] Available on <http://www.search-institute.org/assets/40AssetsList.pdf> (accessed 10.2.2007).

[4] Chapter numbers are given in bold throughout this article.