



## Preliminary concepts and findings regarding spiritual development Society for Research on Adolescence, March 2006

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### A. Defining *spirituality*

Spirituality can be defined as ***that which is involved with an individual's quest for the sacred.***

Development of self  
Life and historical events  
People, practices and institutions  
Religious-philosophic systems

Thus, the scientific study of spirituality is ***the study of that which is involved with an individual's quest for the sacred.*** Individuals' "quest for the sacred" may also be called ***the pursuit of a spiritual ideal*** or more simply, ***the living of a spiritual life.***

### B. Defining *sacred*

The sacred is ***that which is deemed the highest value or the "ultimate. This "ultimate" is often (but not necessarily) said to exist behind, beneath, before, beyond and/or within the "given"***

The sacred is described in terms of *ultimate concerns or spiritual ideals* such as an...

***Ultimate Being*** – God, Allah, etc.

***Ultimate State of Being*** – Enlightenment, Moskha, etc.

***Ultimate Reality*** –Satchitananda, Tao, etc.

***Or any ultimate value equivalent (justice, truth, etc.)***

What is deemed sacred is both

- (a) Culturally-constituted and historically transformed/transmitted, and  
[e.g., as studied in philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies]
- (b) Subjectively (personally) construed and developmentally transformed/transmitted  
[e.g., as potentially studied in the biological and psychological sciences or the learning-, developmental-, and cognitive-affective-behavioral-neurosciences]

The concept of ***human development*** lies at the nexus of the cultural-historical and individual-psychological views of spirituality and the sacred.

## B. Defining *the given*

The *given* can be defined as the material creation (e.g., the cosmos), nature (e.g., the earth), humanity (e.g., our species), human cultures, shared human endeavors (e.g., work, learning) and what is termed “normal waking consciousness” in the human being.

## C. Defining *quest for the sacred*

Individuals' *quest for the sacred* can be defined as ***an active orientation of oneself toward the realization of the ultimate within the context of the given. Such realizations may be described as:***

*Union with God (i.e., an Ultimate Being)*  
*Attainment of enlightenment / liberation (i.e., an Ultimate State of Being)*  
*The direct apprehension of truth, beauty, goodness (i.e., an Ultimate Reality)*  
*Or the actualization of “ultimate values” like justice, mercy, etc.*

Individuals' active orientations towards the sacred ***manifests at the various levels of their being—***

Body-brain-behavior (e.g., habits, non-verbal and verbal behaviors)  
Mind (e.g., emotions and representational belief systems)  
Awareness (e.g., attention and will)  
Social ties (e.g., significant relations with others and institutions)

These various levels of being are synonymous with a holistic account of individuals' self/identity and related to the historical concept of the “Great Chain of Being”

## D. Defining *spiritual development*

*Spiritual development* can be defined as ***a process of self-transformation***, characterized by a progressive process of self-transcendence and communion with and concern for all that is, ***that occurs as a function of individuals' active orientation towards the sacred across the lifespan.***

*Self-transformations* involve both transcendences of levels within the person (e.g., awareness-intuition over discriminative reason over reactive emotions and habits; and transcendences of ego-centered phenomena within levels (selfish habits to selfless service, self-focused emotions such as pride and envy to selfless emotions such as compassion and forgiveness; self-focused goals such as hedonism, wealth and power to selfless goals associated with community, service, and contribution); and a general movement away from a self-focus to a concern with other.

Spiritual transformations in identity are paralleled by a corresponding developmental process involving the phenomenological awareness of individuals that I call ***the progressive sacralization of the given.*** The sacralization of the given, by definition, manifests in various domains of a person's worldview and phenomenal experience—and is characterized by a gather sense of the sacredness of the creation and one's relationships to nature, social others, human cultures, human endeavors (e.g., work, learning) and one's own consciousness.

In sum, the quest for the sacred becomes a question of human development due to the hypothesis that it is marked by lifespan transformations in identity and in the

sacralization of the given. ***These transformations are marked by self-transcendence and an expanding communion with and concern for all that is, respectively.***

#### **E. Defining the *motivation for spiritual development***

*Spirituality*, as an active orientation toward “ultimate concerns,” and *spiritual development*, as a sustained orientation towards such concerns across levels of being over the lifespan, are *motivated* processes.

The source of energy that motivates spiritual development is what can be termed *essential motivation*. Whereas extrinsic motivation has its origins outside the self, and intrinsic motivation has its origins within the self, essential motivation refers to the ground of being from which basic needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence spring. Essential motivation can be defined as **a subtle energy that directs individuals’ pursuit of and realization of “ultimate concerns” within the context of the given.**

A key process associated with awakening and unfolding this subtle energy of “essential motivation” that may be available for scientific study is the ***educable human capacity to willfully sustain and direct attention-awareness to particular objects of awareness over time.*** When the *power* of this energy is awakened, strengthened, and joined with a directive psychological representation of an ultimate concern (e.g. a spiritual ideal such as the goal of Union with God or Self-Realization) over sustained periods of time, the process of spiritual development progresses.

#### **F. Defining spiritual education**

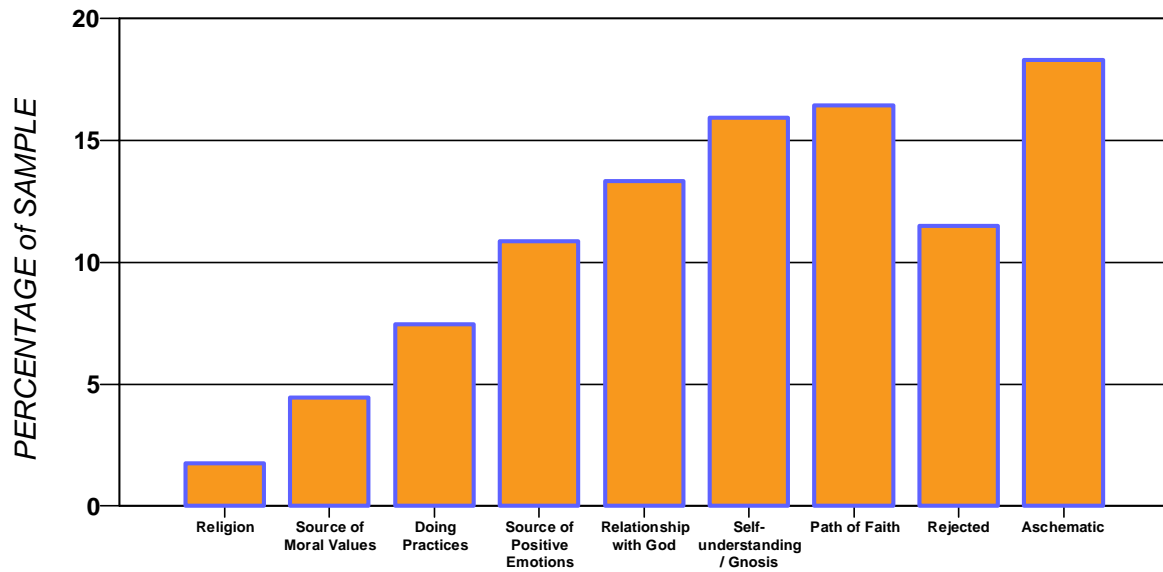
*Spiritual education* refers to calculated cultural or self-initiated efforts to cultivate one’s active quest for and realization of the sacred through the awakening and active direction of essential motivation towards fruition in the realization of ultimate ends.

*Spiritual education* relies upon expert teachers, a supportive community of practice, engagement in sustained spiritual practices, and philosophical study to accomplish such an end.



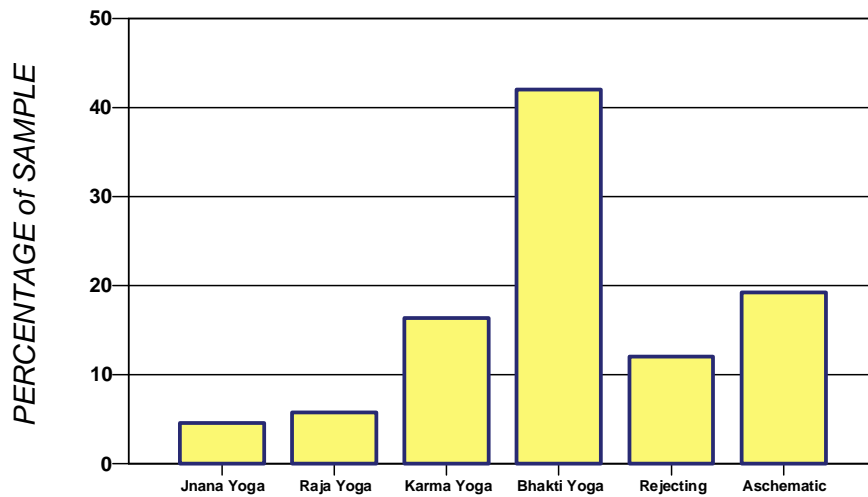


**Emergent Meanings of Spirituality Among Indian Adolescents  
(Ages 12 to 15; n = 967)**



**Researcher-Derived Conceptual Categories**

**Cultural Coding of Meanings of Spirituality Among Indian Adolescents  
(Ages 12 to 15; n = 921)**



## Religion and spirituality in India

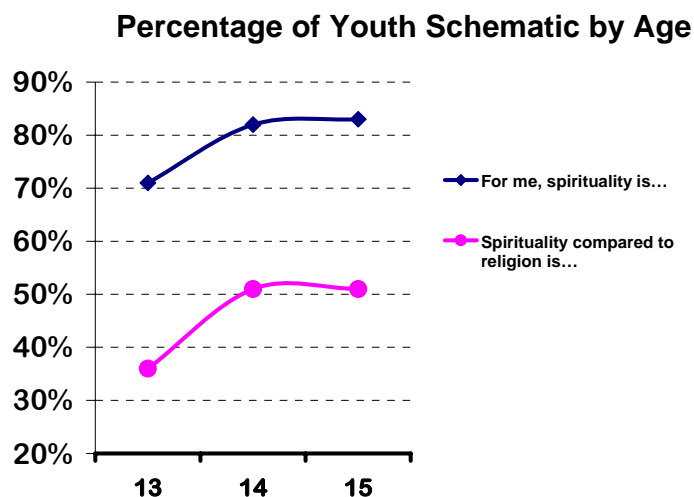
In America, there is widespread interest in whether or not individuals, including adolescents, view the concepts of religion and spirituality as the same or different (e.g., Fuller, 2003; Smith, 2004). In order to assess this conceptual territory among Indian adolescents, we searched for equivalent concepts and terms in Sanskrit / Hindi / Marathi that denoted “religion” on the one hand and “spirituality” on the other. Several Indian scholars were asked to give their ideas on such terminology, and we arrived at the terms “dharma” for religion and “adhyatma” for spirituality. The definition of dharma is extremely complicated as there is no English equivalent to the term. In Hinduism, dharma is sometimes translated as a general “way of life” and it denotes one’s personal obligations with respect to caste, social custom, civil law, and sacred law (American Heritage Dictionary 2004). In a sense, dharma can also refer generically to religion and its customs and traditions (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2003). The word “adhyatma” refers to that which is spiritual or that which pertains to one’s Self, essential nature, soul, spirit, or oneself as a manifestation of supreme Brahman. Adhyatma (specifically, adhyatma vikasa) can also refer to a process of spiritual unfoldment brought about by engagement in contemplative practices. Spiritual unfoldment refers to the blossoming of one’s highest inner qualities as a function of spiritual discipline and practice (Feuerstein, 2001).

Thus, we asked Indian youth the following question:

Do you think *religion* (e.g., *dharma*) is the same thing as *spirituality* (e.g., *adhyatma*)?

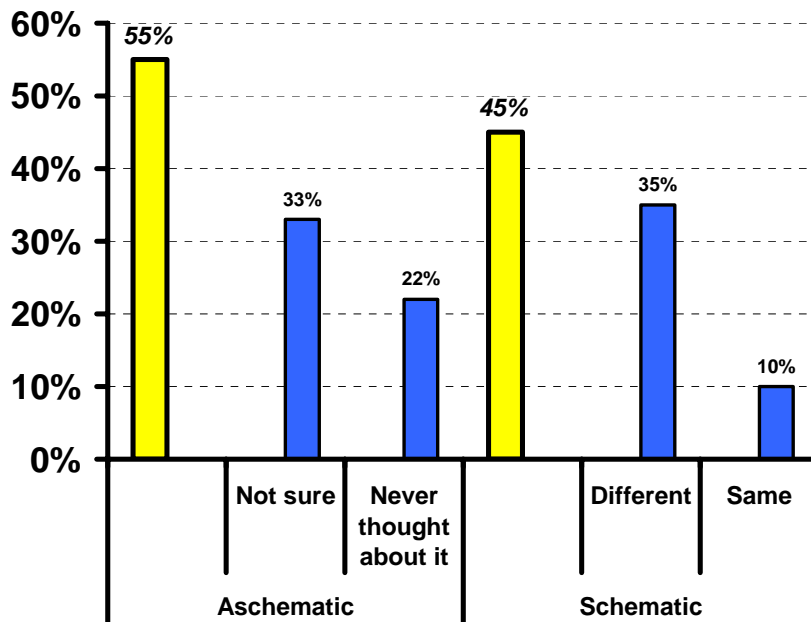
Individuals were asked to check one of the following responses: Yes / No / I’m not sure yet / I have never thought about it. The first finding from this question concerns whether or not the adolescents in our study, aged 12 to 15 years, had any conceptual understanding of the question. Youth could indicate their lack of schematicity (indicating absent or forming knowledge) for this question by checking “I’m not sure yet” or “I have never thought about it” and their schematicity (indicating conceptual knowledge) by checking “Yes, they are the same” or “No, they are different.” We found that the ability to render an opinion on this question increased linearly with age and grade (see Figure 1 below). For instance, among 7<sup>th</sup> graders only 28% gave a response indicating schematicity, whereas this rate rose to about 50% among the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders, respectively.

Figure 1



Overall, out of the 592 youth surveyed 45% did give an opinion. Of that group, most say religion and spirituality are different, whereas about a quarter say that they believe these two terms denote the same phenomena.

### Are religion and spirituality the same or different? (n = 592, ages 12-15)



In order to understand adolescents' conceptualizations of the commonalities and differences between these terms, an open-ended follow-up question for those adolescents with an opinion was asked: Why are religion / spirituality the same or how are they different for you? We found the following psychological dimensions of differentiation.

Over-lapping psychological dimensions of conceptual differentiation among Asian-Indian Adolescents

	<i>Religion</i>	vs.	<i>Spirituality</i>
DIMENSION 1	<b>Particularistic</b> Symbolic / ritual forms		<b>Universal</b> Underlying essence
DIMENSION 2	<b>Social-historical</b> Social group membership		<b>Individual-psychological</b> Contemplative state or process
DIMENSION 3	<b>Moral</b> Outer conduct and virtue		<b>Mystical</b> Inner quest and self-knowledge
DIMENSION 4	<b>External orientation</b> Outer divinity		<b>Internal orientation</b> Inner divinity
DIMENSION 5	<b>Negative valence</b>		<b>Positive valence</b>

Examples of Dimension 1

<i>Religion</i>	vs.	<i>Spirituality</i>
<b>Particularistic</b> Symbolic / ritual forms		<b>Universal</b> Underlying essence

*In a religion one tends to worship a particular religious God or element. But in spirituality one talks of an overall pure consciousness which is the same for all religions. Therefore religion is only for those who belong to that particular religion, but spirituality is for everyone.*

*I think that all religions (Hindu, Muslim, Christian) finally have the same essence. And to understand this essence or meaning is spirituality.*

*I think that all religions finally lead to the same source. Understanding this is what is called spirituality. That is why religion and spirituality are different.*

*In religion one worships a manifested form but in spirituality an unexpressed energy is worshipped.*

*Religion is more specific, while spirituality is more inclusive.*

## Examples of Dimension 2

<b>Religion</b>	vs.	<b>Spirituality</b>
<b>Social-historical</b>		<b>Individual-psychological</b>
Social group membership		Contemplative state or process

*Religion is something which is born with us but spirituality is something we cultivate and practice to see God.*

*Religion refers to a group or sect that follows one type of God. But spirituality means developing one's character through concentration and meditation.*

*I think religion is something that has been imposed on us to some extent, but this is not the case with spirituality...our spirituality is more personal than our religion. Religion tells us how to behave but spirituality tells us who we are. That is why if one ever wants to test oneself or know who one really is, spirituality is more useful.*

*I think religion means the continuance of practices which came from older days but spirituality means going deep into one's own mind – concentrating on where the thoughts of our mind take birth without our thinking...*

*Religion means the community we belong to – spirituality is a calm state of mind.*

## Examples of Dimension 3

<b>Religion</b>	vs.	<b>Spirituality</b>
<b>Moral</b>		<b>Mystical</b>
Moral conduct and virtue		Spiritual quest and self-knowledge

*Religion refers to the lifestyles different societies deem as good. There are many religions. Spirituality, however, is limited to knowing oneself. It is beyond religion and has this one goal – knowing oneself.*

*In my opinion religion and spirituality are 70% different because religion tells us what to do and what not to do, spirituality teaches us to introspect.*

*Spirituality is the search for the power that sustains the world. Religion is doing one's duty.*

*Religion is how people living in a particular country behave – their rituals, lifestyles, etc. Spirituality is reaching God through one's will and effort.*

*Religion refers to the duties one has to carry out in life, spirituality refers to "Who am I" and the process of becoming aware that we are part of God.*

*Religion refers to the lifestyles different societies deem as good. There are many religions. Spirituality, however, is limited to knowing oneself. It is beyond religion and has this one goal – knowing oneself.*

#### Examples of Dimension 4

**Religion** vs.

**External orientation**

Relation to outer divinity

**Spirituality**

**Internal orientation**

Relation to inner divinity

***Religion is believing that there is some other spirit that controls your actions. On the other hand, spirituality is believing that you are the spirit who controls your actions. I am a spiritualist..***

***Somehow when I think of religion I think of God, sacrifices, and rituals. Spirituality to me is something different – something that doesn't believe in a supernatural being controlling our lives. To me spirituality is understanding of the Self, and the theory of believing that we are responsible for what happens to us.***

***Religion is worshipping or believing in something that has importance to you, like an idol. Spirituality is looking deeper inside and trying to understand yourself.***

***To me religion is very outward—ceremonies, rituals, etc. Spirituality is much deeper. It is about my spirit and my understanding of it. Spirituality looks inward for answers and religion tries to find something outside.***

***Religion is all about finding God, while spirituality is all about finding yourself.***

#### Examples of Dimension 5

**Religion** vs.

**Negative valence**

**Spirituality**

**Positive valence**

***It is better to be spiritual than to follow old customs and beliefs. Religion should be followed only to a certain extent. Spirituality is made of the essential truths from all religions. I don't think one should follow religion.***

***Religion is something which has many defects, but spirituality is defect-free.***

***Religion is much more specific and narrow-minded. Spirituality is open and it doesn't always mean that one has to follow a religion (perform rituals, etc.) to be spiritual. Religion is more like "blind faith" whereas spirituality is much deeper.***

***Spiritual calms us down but religion at times creates conflicts among people.***

#### Indian concepts regarding two distinct dimensions of religion

These psychological dimensions of differentiation relate to two different dimensions of religion /spirituality that are discussed in Indian scriptures.

*The ethnic-cultural dimension.* According to the ancient Indian philosophic tradition known as Vedanta, every religious/spiritual tradition is composed of two different dimensions – religion as a historically situated and therefore a temporal sociopolitical expression, and religion as an eternal set of principles and practices leading to the experience of God , or any value

equivalent to *God* (Ranganathananda, 1997). The first dimension is termed *smṛti* and is defined as the local, parochial, and temporarily applicable side of religion. *Smṛti* is the ethnic-cultural dimension of religion that is relevant for a particular historical age and people (*yuga dharma*). It consists of behavioral prescriptions and injunctions (do's and don'ts); rules and regulations concerning food, dress, marriage, and other social issues; and legends, myths, and cosmologies. In the Indian tradition, there is a widespread understanding that because historical ages and the needs of peoples change, so too must the ethnic-cultural dimension of religion change with the times lest it begins to obscure rather than support the path leading to the experience of God or any value-equivalent.

*The eternal-spiritual dimension.* The second dimension is called *śruti* and is viewed as the eternal and universally applicable aspect of religion. *Śruti* is the eternal-spiritual dimension of religion (*sanātana dharma*) that is given different expressions in different historical periods. It consists of "the truly spiritual part, with its emphasis on personal morality, worship and adoration, and the disciplines designed to ensure the spiritual growth of humans" (Ranganathananda, 1997, p. 65). The spiritual truths that comprise *śruti* are described as non-personal and are said to be available for reconfirmation by contemplative practitioners from any background in any historical age who engage in the spiritual practices designed to disclose these truths (e.g., contemplation, meditation, chanting, scriptural study, service, etc.).

*Divergence in ethnic and eternal religion.* According to Vedantic philosophy, human and social problems can arise when obsolete elements of ethnic-cultural religion continue to dominate after their period of relevance and applicability. The signs of such obsolescence and domination include rigidity in religious social customs, continuation of long-standing inter-religious and intra-religious frictions and disharmonies, immobility of attitudes, stagnation in legends, myths and cosmologies, and a general lack of assistance in the inner spiritual development of seekers. Thus, in the Indian understanding, changes to *smṛti* to keep it aligned with *śruti* given changes in historical and geographical realities is a key part of any "religious tradition." In certain ages, *smṛti* (ethnic religion) can diverge from *śruti* (eternal religion) and cause human problems and stagnation in spiritual growth.

*Spiritual, but not religious.* The *smṛti-śruti* conceptual distinction may offer insight into an on-going American concern with the difference between "religion" and "spirituality" – with religion becoming synonymous with what the ancient Indians called "ethnic religion" and spirituality becoming synonymous with "eternal religion" in this post-modern age. It appears that throughout the history of the United States, for example, there has been a concern among a substantial minority of the population (sometimes called the "unchurched") that churches did not support a path to God but rather were conveyors of anachronistic customs, traditions, and legends. In the United States, alternative spiritual traditions outside the mainline churches that have served the interests of such individuals have existed for over two hundred years. Adherents to such alternative traditions today sometimes define themselves as "spiritual but not religious." It would seem that, lacking a vocabulary and conceptual framework to articulate this well, such individuals are attempting to differentiate between the time-honored principles and practices leading to spiritual insight from the time-bound institutional customs and traditions that seem to obfuscate rather than support authentic spiritual seeking today (Fuller, 2003).

## References

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