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Spirituality

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Whether within or outside of the framework of institutionalized religion, spiritual development refers to a process of increased depth of awareness, connection to the transcendent, and search for ultimate meaning as well as engagement in spiritual practices. Spirituality is regarded as a significant and universal aspect of human experience, but relatively little attention has been paid within established life-span theories and models to the study of spiritual development as integral to human normative development. Throughout history, and across cultures and traditions, spirituality has played an integral role in individuals' lives, and in the overall human experience. In some countries, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, and the United States of America, where divinity is largely present in the culture and discourse, between 90% and 100% of young adults have expressed a belief in God, according to the World Values Survey. In comparison to other countries where there is more separation between religion and spirituality, such as France, Sweden, Great Britain, and Spain, lower expression of a belief in God (less than 70% of young adults) but higher engagement with spirituality outside of the framework of religion are reported. Despite its universal potential, spiritual development does not always occur, and its developmental course may be quite varied across individuals even within the same culture in its pace, manifestations, and saliency in different life periods with differing levels of personal investment and a variety of potential triggers. Spiritual development differs from other developmental processes, such as the physical, cognitive, or emotional domains. Spiritual development often involves a volitional and active exercise of choice. This entry provides an overview of key points in conceptualizations and research in spiritual development: definition, models of development, contexts, and stages in life-span development.

Spirituality: Context, Definitions, and Conceptualizations

Historically, Western scholarship has acknowledged multiple aspects of human existence, including the spiritual. However, the Cartesian mind–body dualism of the 17th century led to an ideological split between empirical science and theology. During the 20th century, with the exception of scholars such as William James, a psychologist and philosopher whose books include *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), the dominant positivistic and naturalistic standpoints in the behavioral sciences tended to view spirituality as inappropriate for scientific exploration. The emergence of postmodernism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries paved the way for a resurgence of the scientific study of spirituality as part of a larger cultural and intellectual movement, away from mechanistic conceptions of reality and toward a more nondualistic and holistic view. Furthermore, a growing body of research demonstrated an association between spirituality and greater well-being and physical health and as a protective factor in psychological adjustment to negative life experiences.

Despite this growing interest, spirituality's complex and multifaceted nature has contributed to lack of clear conceptualization. Still, most discussions of spirituality include several shared dimensions: the existence of a transcendent dimension, the relation or connection to that dimension, and the search for ultimate questions concerning the nature, purpose, and meaning of life. Each of these dimensions may encompass practices (such as prayers, meditation, or rituals), beliefs (attitudes concerning transcendence, deity, mortality, and beliefs concerning a person's connection to the transcendent), and experiences (such as mystical/unitive or numinous experiences). The specific contents of these dimensions may be manifested differently across spiritual traditions due to cultural, environmental, and individual influences and can be individually and institutionally oriented. Environmental influences may include effects of distinct social contexts, intentional activities such as spiritual practices as well as engagement with spiritual teachers, peers, or groups. Influences at the individual level

may include distinct life experiences, which can involve negative valence events, such as crisis, adversity, or suffering, bringing about radical change in values or beliefs, and also positive valence events involving peak experiences or various transpersonal experiences. Both positive and negative influences function as potential turning points in the path of the individual's spiritual life.

Throughout history, religions have functioned as institutional sociocultural frameworks in which individuals understood, expressed, and experienced their spiritual concerns. Thus, the terms *religiousness* and *spirituality* have traditionally been interchangeable in the social sciences, and religion was seen as a broad domain encompassing both individual and institutional components. Since the turn of the 21st century, with postmodern sociocultural trends challenging traditional patterns and encouraging pluralism, relativism, and exploration, these terms have become increasingly polarized and viewed as related yet different. Spirituality is generally considered as an individualized, experiential connection to the transcendent, and religion is associated with an organized system of beliefs and rituals, intended to facilitate a connection with the transcendent. This partial polarization is also reflected in a growing proportion of Western individuals who identify themselves as *spiritual but not religious* and the emergence of new religious and spiritual movements and practices as alternative platforms for individuals' spiritual development outside of institutional religions.

Models of Spiritual Development

Models of spiritual developmental processes can be conceptualized through three broad perspectives, each differing in the nature of the process (i.e., gradual or sudden), conceptualization or substance (e.g., spiritual transformation, changing allegiance, or spiritual development), and the various contexts in which it may take place (both within and outside institutional religions) as part of a universal phenomenon of human development.

The first perspective delineates gradual maturation, most often through stage models. Some of the few human development theories which considered the spiritual aspect mostly treated spiritual development as forming part of the highest or most advanced stages of adult development. This view is reflected, for example, in an expansion of ego interests toward more ultimate concerns, such as generativity and finding meaning in life, described in Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory. A central model of life-span spiritual development is James Fowler's faith development model, which portrays a sequence of seven universal stages. In its essence, individuals progress from a *primal or undifferentiated faith* (focused on security) during early childhood to a *synthetic-conventional faith* (formal operational thinking, focused on the interpersonal, strong connection to groups, and on conformity to norms) in adolescence through stages of young adulthood and midlife toward a *universalizing faith* (similar to enlightenment or transcendence; rarely attained) in late adulthood.

Within the framework of transpersonal (beyond the personal) psychology, several other developmental models integrate processes of spiritual change and view them as reflecting a universal stage within a general theory of human development. Abraham Maslow, the founder of transpersonal psychology, suggested that an individual who has reached self-actualization can develop further to transcend the personal self and reach self-transcendence. The individual's later construct of the *hierarchy of needs* places the transpersonal stage as the highest form of development and proposes three phases of universal human development: a deficiency-motivated stage, a humanistically motivated stage, and a transcendently motivated stage. In line with this model, Ken Wilber emphasizes an integrative model of spiritual human development, including 10 stages which are categorized across three phases

of development: The *prepersonal* reflects subconscious functioning, which is largely instinctual and influenced by basic biological needs. The *personal* refers to conscious mental processes mainly oriented toward the concerns of the ego, wherein the development of a coherent self-identity is achieved. Last, the *transpersonal* is associated with awareness beyond ego consciousness. Transpersonal models therefore emphasize a development in which a change in self-consciousness toward self-transcendence and the spiritual sphere occurs.

The second perspective conceptualizes spiritual development as the broadly integrative construct of spiritual transformation. Unlike universal sequential stages or maturation, spiritual development may occur through a more distinctive and nongradual process, such as radical religious conversion by which a person moves from believing in one set of religious values to another or through the phenomenon of what's been called *quantum change*, which exemplifies a sudden spiritual realization and transformation. Such examples can be found in religious, mystical, or transpersonal experiences, such as peak or near-death experiences, and as a result of posttraumatic growth, such as loss, life-threatening illness, or severe addictions, and particularly as part of mutual-help organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

The third perspective conceptualizes spiritual development as a more gradual and incremental evolution of spirituality over time, most often involving an intentional process chosen by the individual and high levels of investment. This process is often viewed as a journey, search, quest, or inner work with no specific end point because the individuals are constantly exploring their spirituality more deeply and are always developing.

Irrespective of the perspective from which spiritual development is viewed, or its catalyst, or whether the change is sudden and dramatic or gradual and incremental, or whether development takes place within or outside a traditional religious context, it is almost always accompanied by profound personal change. This change may demand a transformation of the self, often interpreted as the emergence of individual's spiritual identity, reflected in overall purpose, way of being, beliefs, values, and behaviors.

Spiritual Life-Span Human Development

Accumulating evidence supports the importance and relevance of the spiritual dimension to almost all stages of life, beginning with the *big questioning* evident in childhood, to its contribution to identity formation in adolescence, through its support of self-integration in adulthood, revealing an even deeper existential exploration in late adulthood.

Studies have identified a variety of spiritual experiences, concerns, and capabilities in childhood, among them feelings of wonder and awe; capability to thoughtfully consider life's big questions regarding meaning, purpose, or death; and a deep sense of interconnectedness and empathy toward others. However, because immature thinking is more intuitive, such experiences may be missed by conventional standards of mature rational thought. Research has also demonstrated that children can develop an understanding of God as a nonhuman agent and that they treat this agent as importantly different from humans, especially in cultures where divinity is more salient. During adolescence, individuals progress from the concrete childhood impressions of religion and begin to reflect on deeper issues related to existential and transcendental realms. In this life stage, spiritual development contributes to positive youth development, values, civic engagement, and a sense of purpose and identity. During emerging adulthood, interest in novel forms of spiritual searching and

practice may surface, as is evident in the spiritual search activities of college students in an attempt to discover purpose, meaning, fulfillment, depth, wholeness, and authenticity.

Adulthood is considered a developmental period ripe for spiritual development due to the accompanying neurological, cognitive, and socioemotional maturation it involves as well as the increased strivings for meaning and self-transcendence after major developmental concerns such as identity, establishing a family, and an active involvement in the world of work have been met and resolved. During this life stage, life events may trigger a search for spiritual development. For example, one of the main domains of positive change of posttraumatic growth following experiences of adversity is spiritual change, reflecting an engagement with fundamental existential questions and increased interest in issues of a spiritual or religious nature. Spiritual development is also often associated with later stages of adulthood, during which individuals tend to seek greater meaning in their lives and face existential end-of-life concerns. The increased interest in spirituality is also reflected in the prevalence of spiritually sensitive practices available, such as spiritual care and chaplaincy, particularly relevant for dying individuals (and their families) receiving palliative care.

Spirituality reflects a multidimensional developmental process, influenced by individual, cultural, environmental, and contextual factors. The potential for spiritual development is considered inherent to human nature and universal across cultures, but its salience and the manner in which it is expressed (i.e., whether within or outside of the framework of institutionalized religion) may greatly vary between individuals.

See also [Ages and Stages](#); [Beliefs](#); [God](#); [Identity](#); [Religion and Faith](#); [Spirituality](#)

- spirituality
- spirituals
- later adulthood
- human development
- religion
- developmental processes
- maturation

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Further Readings

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