

# With Their Own Voices

*A Global Exploration of How Today's Young People  
Experience and Think About Spiritual Development*

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**With Their Own Voices: A Global Exploration of How Today's  
Young People Experience and Think About Spiritual Development**

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# Advancing Research in Spiritual Development

A primary goal of Search Institute's Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence is to contribute to and help stimulate research on the processes and dynamics of spiritual development. This is, of course, complex territory, made more so by working across cultures, languages, and traditions. However, we believe there is much to be learned that will contribute both to science and practice.

We believe the time is right to be investing these issues, as our world seeks to come to terms with pluralism and the burgeoning interaction—both fruitful and destructive—across cultural, spiritual, and religious differences around the world and, increasingly, within countries. We also perceive growing interest in examining these issues in multiple disciplines, as scholars and practitioners seek to enrich their understanding of the dimensions and dynamics of human development as a whole.

Several operating assumptions or hypotheses that grow out of current understandings of human development have guided our work to date, raising big questions that we (and others) seek to illuminate through ongoing investigation. These include the following:

- Spiritual development is an intrinsic part of being human. It includes processes that are manifested in many diverse ways among individuals, cultures, traditions, and historical periods.
- Spiritual development involves both an inward journey (inner experiences and/or connections to the infinite or unseen) and an outward journey (being expressed in daily activities, relationships, and actions).
- Spiritual development is a dynamic, nonlinear process that varies by individual and cultural differences.
- Spiritual development, though a unique stream of human development, cannot be separated from other aspects of one's being.
- Spiritual development can be conceptually distinguished from religious development or formation, though the two are integrally linked in the lived experiences of some people, traditions, and cultures.

This first report of the findings from the first three years of the center's research is a descriptive portrait of some of our work, with an emphasis on listening to the voices of youth in 17 countries as they think about spiritual development and spirituality in their own lives. Later reports will focus on such issues as the dimensions of spiritual development, the relationship of spiritual development to health and wellbeing, theory and definition of spiritual development, and the positioning of spiritual development within the broader field of human development.

We invite you to join us in this journey of listening and discovery.

# Starting a Fresh Conversation with Young People

*"I wasn't interested in this topic before [the focus group], but now I actually am." (Female, 17, India)*

*"It's a weird subject, but I would like to know more information about it." (Male, 17, Israel)*

*"I would like to talk about it a lot more. . . . But the people I know are not really focused on talking about spiritual things." (Male, 14, United States)*

### SPIRIT

From Latin *spiritus*: "soul, courage, vigor, breath." Related to French *spirare*, "to breathe."<sup>1</sup>

"The vital principle or animating force within living beings. . . . The essential nature of a person or group."<sup>2</sup>

Spiritual development—and its relatives, spirituality, religion, faith, and belief—is one of the awkward issues in youth development and a blind spot in the broader field of human development. It focuses on a dimension of life that is difficult to define and contentious to talk about. People hold strong opinions about what it is and why it does or doesn't matter. Some see it as off-limits, a private matter for families—not the stuff of public discussion or shared action. Or, on the other hand, the devout can be skeptical if the discussion is not grounded in particular religious or cultural beliefs.

And yet, there is growing recognition that spiritual development is an important, if complex, dimension of life that must be better understood and nurtured within a holistic understanding of youth development. But what is it? How do we talk about it? Can it only be understood in parochial terms, or can we find common ground in society that allows us to open up, examine, and nurture spiritual development as a core part of positive youth development?

An important place to start is to ask young people: *How do they think about this aspect of life? Is it important to them? What helps them on this journey? What gets in the way? How does it influence who they are and who they are becoming?*

## Listening to Young People Around the World

From 2006 through 2008, the research team at Search Institute's Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence—together with partners in many parts of the world—has been listening to young people's own perspectives on spiritual development (Display 1). These young people, between the ages of 12 and 25, live in 17 countries (Table 1). Through a series of exploratory focus groups, interviews, and surveys, they offer insight into spiritual development among today's youth.

This study offers one of the first snapshots of spiritual development across multiple countries and contexts, including both developed and developing nations. The goal during this formative stage of our work has been to engage young people from as many countries, religious backgrounds, and cultural contexts as possible. Though this introduces a number of complex dynamics to the research, the hope is that it helps to reduce the inevitable bias that comes when a theory or framework is generated in a single culture, tradition, or context.

<sup>1</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/spirit>.

<sup>2</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Retrieved from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/spirit>.

## SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Nathan Y.

Age: 16

Country: United States

Tradition: Buddhism

Sixteen-year-old Nathan is Chinese American and a Tibetan Buddhist. Karma is a central, grounding concept and core to his spiritual beliefs, as is the idea that all of us are created equal. "I believe everybody is part of this world. Everyone is kind of in the same boat. So we all need to hopefully ideally get along and help each other and live happily together. And I think just accept everybody. I mean obviously not everyone is the same. But just accepting people's differences."

He is aware of the long history of Tibetan persecution by the Chinese and sees some irony in that but is also comfortable with it. "I don't feel really protective of anyone or any group or anyone," he explains, again stressing harmony. "But I definitely wish that they could get along...I think a lot of people in this world are just kind of ignorant of other people I guess, and just believe that their beliefs are right, no one else is right, and therefore they're wrong and you should just get rid of them or something like that. And I just don't understand how people can think that." He appreciates the peacefulness of Buddhism noting "There are never any wars over Buddhism."

His father died when Nathan was quite young. This change in his family life influenced Nathan's perspectives in that he started thinking about things more and seeing things in light of a bigger picture. Also impacting his spiritual development are visits with extended family, religious leaders who have stayed at his home with him and his family, trips to "Dharma camp," and courses he has taken in his Episcopal school.

Music, playing the violin in particular, is part of Nathan's spiritual practices. He experiences a sense of the transcendent when he plays or listens to music.

## What Is in this Report

This report introduces the first findings from these multi-dimensional studies. It includes:

- Preliminary findings from surveys of more than 6,500 youth in eight countries. The survey examined their perspectives related to spiritual experiences and development, offering new insight into both the similarities and differences among young people across different traditions and cultures.
- Insights and quotes from youth focus groups in 13 countries around the world.
- Snapshots of the lives and perspectives of a dozen young "spiritual exemplars" who were nominated and interviewed through this project.
- An introduction to an emerging framework for understanding core dimensions of spiritual development.

These findings are preliminary and exploratory. The samples are not representative of their countries or their traditions, so it is impossible to generalize the findings. Further research is needed to confirm or reshape the patterns. However, this study and its findings are unique and important. The theoretical underpinnings of the approach and the breadth of populations being examined break new ground for how we think about and understand young people's spiritual development. We hope this emerging work encourages a new dialogue about young people's spiritual development in many contexts and cultures. And we seek input and perspectives from other scholars as well as young people, practitioners, parents, and others who have a stake in young people's development.

## Emerging Themes

**Interest**—This research—using qualitative and quantitative methods with diverse samples of young people in different parts of the world—suggests that a sizable proportion of the youth population is interested in and committed to spiritual development. The readiness to participate in the surveys, focus groups, and interviews suggests that a lot of young people—across many countries, cultures, and religious traditions—would welcome more opportunities to talk about, explore, and reflect upon their own spiritual beliefs, experiences, practices, and priorities. In most countries where surveys were conducted, fewer than 1 in 10 youth said they didn't believe life has a spiritual dimension. Strong majorities see spiritual actions and commitments as part of their core identity. They rely on these commitments and experiences to give them hope in tough times.

**Spirituality and religion**—Like adults, many youth struggle with the relationship between religion and spirituality. Young people in our survey sample are most

likely to say they are both spiritual and religious (34%), with 24% indicating that they are spiritual, but not religious. They are also mostly likely to see both religion and spirituality positively, though a third view religion as “usually bad.”

**Resources for their spiritual life**—Young people say parents are the most common resource to help them with their spiritual life. However, about one in five youth (18%) indicate that no one helps them. When asked what experiences and influences make it easier or harder to be spiritual, at least three-fourths of young people in the survey pointed to being outside or in nature, listening to music, serving others, and being alone as nurturing their sense of hope, peace, and joy—experiences identified by our advisors as active expressions of spirituality. They also noted that the influence of family and friends makes being spiritual easier.

## An Invitation to a Conversation

*With Their Own Voices* shares initial findings from this study in order to encourage new, broader public conversations about spiritual development as an integral part of human development. This first report provides descriptive data from the surveys, focus groups, and interviews as a way of listening to young people’s own perspectives and experiences. In the process, new questions and opportunities will surface to frame a next phase of research and practice that engages young people as active partners in their own healthy development.



### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Eugene

Age: 17

Country: Kenya

Tradition: Christian

Deeply humble, Eugene is keenly aware of coming from meager social and financial resources. He is thankful to God for the ability to consistently live “above his means” in the opportunities, experiences and resources he has been given by

the demonstration of “God’s favor” in his life. He wants, for example, to be a pilot and has had some training, though it is not something a person of his socioeconomic status would typically be able to do.

Eugene is a Christian and takes the Bible very seriously. He strives to live by all of its teachings. His mother has been his greatest example of living by faith, as she has trusted in God for providing everything, particularly after the death of Eugene’s father. “...She’s really impacted my faith,” he says, “in the sense that she’s shown me that when you move away from trusting your own self and actually trust God totally, it means moving away; it doesn’t mean you move away halfway, it means you really tell God, ‘I don’t know how this is going to happen, but I’m believing your Word.’ And you just hold onto that.” Having experienced the fulfillment of God’s promises firsthand, such as through his mother finding a way to pay for a school they can’t afford and having had the opportunities to take flying lessons, he has a rock-solid faith in God.

Today he feels that two of his biggest spiritual challenges are carrying the burdens of past mistakes, even as a young child, and learning to forgive, particularly himself. Blessed by being the recipient of others’ financial donations, Eugene wants to make enough money to do the same for others as an adult.

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## DISPLAY 1 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES THAT SHAPED THIS REPORT

This report integrates key findings from five distinct but overlapping exploratory studies conducted by Search Institute's Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence between 2006 and 2008.

### A FIELD TEST SURVEY OF ADOLESCENTS

**Purpose:** This field test study explores core dimensions of spiritual development, seeking to shed light on the commonalities and differences in how young people experience and understand spiritual development within and across diverse cultures and traditions. Further analyses will empirically test the theoretical models that are guiding the Center's work and will also set the stage for future research.

**Methods:** Young people completed a 200-item survey either on paper or through a Web site. Data were collected by research partners in each participating country. These partners also worked with Search Institute to ensure that the survey was appropriate for their culture. Data were collected between May and September 2008.

**Sample:** A total of 6,853 young people (ages 12 to 25) in eight countries: Australia, Cameroon, Canada, India, Thailand, Ukraine, United Kingdom, and United States. The samples include young people from a wide range of cultural and religious traditions, including youth who are not religious.

### A FOCUS GROUP STUDY OF YOUTH, PARENTS, AND YOUTH WORKERS

**Purpose:** To explore how young people, parents/guardians, and adults who work with youth in a variety of contexts and cultures understand spiritual development, its dimensions, and the factors that shape it. Particular attention has been paid to similarities and differences across cultures, contexts, and traditions.

**Methods:** An interview protocol was developed and tested, then research partners in each country were engaged to conduct the focus groups. Recordings were transcribed and analyzed using grounded theory methods.

**Sample:** A total of 77 focus groups in 13 countries with 175 young people, ages 12 – 19, 133 parents/guardians, and 147 adults who work with youth. Data were collected in Australia, Canada, China, India, Israel, Kenya, Malta, Nigeria, Peru, South Africa, Syria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The participants self-identify with a broad range of religious traditions. Data were collected between September 2006 and February 2007.

### IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH ADOLESCENT EXEMPLARS

**Purpose:** This study seeks to identify core principles of spiritual development found in youth who were nominated by adult advisors for their extraordinary spiritual life.

**Methods:** Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with young people (ages 12 to 21) who were nominated as "exemplars" of spiritual development, based on criteria derived from the social science literature and input from advisors. Transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory methods. Data were collected between September 2007 and January 2008.

**Sample:** A total of 32 young people from diverse backgrounds and traditions in six countries: India, Jordan, Kenya, Peru, United Kingdom, and United States.

### AN EXPERT PANEL CONSENSUS-BUILDING PROCESS

**Purpose:** This process seeks to develop a consensus-based framework for understanding spiritual development during childhood and adolescence across cultural, religious, and international differences. Through this process, criteria for a definition were established, then four iterations of feedback tools generated the scope of the theoretical framework.

**Methods:** An online survey tool was utilized to collect feedback from a network of advisors. Data were collected between March and December 2007.

**Sample:** A total of 120 social scientists, theologians/ philosophers, and youth development experts who served as advisors to the Center. They live and work on six continents, represent multiple professional disciplines, and are affiliated with 11 religious and philosophical traditions.

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS

**Purpose:** To link the emerging findings from field research with published research.

**Methods:** Ongoing database searches have been completed throughout the project. Nearly 2,000 references are catalogued at: [www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org](http://www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org).

**Sample:** Articles from around the world and from many different religious traditions and cultures.



**TABLE 1 ABOUT THE SAMPLES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THESE STUDIES\***

|                              |                    | <b>SURVEY</b> | <b>FOCUS GROUPS**</b> | <b>EXEMPLAR INTERVIEWS</b> |
|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Total Sample of Youth</b> |                    | 6,853         | 175                   | 32                         |
| <b>Countries</b>             | Australia          | 430           | 7                     | –                          |
|                              | Cameroon           | 1,020         | –                     | –                          |
|                              | Canada             | 416           | 6                     | –                          |
|                              | China              | –             | 10                    | –                          |
|                              | India              | 2,047         | 27                    | 6                          |
|                              | Israel             | –             | 21                    | –                          |
|                              | Jordan             | –             | –                     | 2                          |
|                              | Kenya              | –             | 12                    | 6                          |
|                              | Malta              | –             | 22                    | –                          |
|                              | Nigeria            | –             | 11                    | –                          |
|                              | Peru               | –             | 12                    | 4                          |
|                              | South Africa       | –             | 16                    | –                          |
|                              | Syria              | –             | 12                    | –                          |
|                              | Thailand           | 1,040         | –                     | –                          |
|                              | Ukraine            | 1,000         | –                     | –                          |
|                              | United Kingdom     | 371           | 6                     | 8                          |
|                              | United States      | 529           | 13                    | 6                          |
| <b>Gender</b>                | Female             | 3,180 (52%)   | 89                    | 13                         |
|                              | Male               | 2,941 (48%)   | 85                    | 19                         |
| <b>Age</b>                   | 12 – 14            | 1,551 (25%)   | 38                    | 2                          |
|                              | 15 – 17            | 1,672 (27%)   | 98                    | 10                         |
|                              | 18 – 21            | 1,786 (29%)   | 29                    | 20                         |
|                              | 22 – 25            | 1,112 (18%)   | 0                     | –                          |
| <b>Religious Identity</b>    | Agnostic           | 599           | –                     | –                          |
|                              | Atheist            | 346           | –                     | 1                          |
|                              | Buddhist           | 711           | 1                     | 1                          |
|                              | Christian          | 3,189         | 95                    | 18                         |
|                              | Hindu              | 982           | 19                    | 3                          |
|                              | Muslim             | 526           | 26                    | 6                          |
|                              | Jewish             | 133           | 4                     | 2                          |
|                              | Native/Traditional | 52            | 0                     | –                          |
|                              | Pagan              | 25            | 0                     | –                          |
|                              | Sikh               | 29            | 5                     | 1                          |
|                              | Other              | 233           | 10                    | –                          |
|                              | None               | –             | 12                    | –                          |

\* Totals may not sum, due to missing data.

\*\* Additional focus groups were conducted with parents and youth workers.





## **A. How Young People Think About and Experience Spiritual Development**

1. Most youth surveyed believe life has a spiritual dimension
2. Some youth interpret experiences as spiritually meaningful; others do not
3. Many young people want to talk about spiritual matters
4. Most young people see themselves as spiritual, and most see themselves doing well spiritually
5. Young people see spiritual development as both “part of who you are” and an intentional choice
6. Many youth believe in or experience the transcendent

## Most Youth Surveyed Believe Life Has a Spiritual Dimension

When you ask young people, the vast majority will assert that life has a spiritual dimension. For some, it grows out of a sense of meaning, purpose, connectedness, or inner peace. For many, it is related to their understanding of or experience with God or a higher power. And for some, it is based in their experiences in nature and in community.

### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT



Name: Amneh

Age: 21

Country: Jordan

Tradition: Islam

As a Muslim girl living in Jordan, the decision to leave her home

and live in a house with other girls while studying at university was a bold one for Amneh, but not uncharacteristic. Courage is one of her traits.

Amneh's culture, upon which her religion is a tremendous influence, typically dictates that women should live at home with their immediate families until they are married. Her choice was not, however, a rejection of the teachings of Islam. To the contrary, she holds fast to the belief that "God created the world. He created Adam and Eve. And then when Adam and Eve married they had children, and so they reproduced and so on." As descendants of those first humans, Amneh believes we are here for the same reason they were created—to worship God.

Amneh credits being raised by a widow, after her father's death very early in her life, with allowing her a bit more freedom than she would have had if her father had been part of her upbringing. Her mother's influence came significantly from acts of charity (such as feeding poor, hungry children who arrived on her doorstep) and made a significant and lasting impression on Amneh. She hopes to do right by her mother, including pleasing her and being able to care for her as both women get older.

Of the values taught by her faith, modesty is among the very highest in importance for Amneh as evidenced by the way she dresses and covers her head. Having a strong character in general drives many of Amneh's choices, including becoming involved in a character development group that revealed her strengths in leadership. She is currently a mentor to younger people in similar groups. In addition, Amneh's dream is to work with developmentally delayed children.

In our survey of youth in eight countries, we first asked young people to select from nine choices of what it means to be spiritual. As shown in Figure 1, their most common responses, on average, were "believing there is a purpose to life" "believing in God," and "being true to one's inner self." On average, only 7% of youth said they didn't believe life has a spiritual dimension. (About 28% of Australian youth surveyed have this perspective.)

Though the language examples they used varied across cultural contexts, youth participants in focus groups described an inherent capacity for awareness of, or awakening to, spiritual development.

*"I think spirituality is important to everyone. . . . Maybe the word 'spiritual' is more important in some people's lives, but the whole definition and the concept, I think it's there in everyone." (Female, 16, India)*

*"Spirituality is important. If you lost your spirituality, you lost the attraction, you would become only flesh like a messy garlic." (Female, 13, China)*

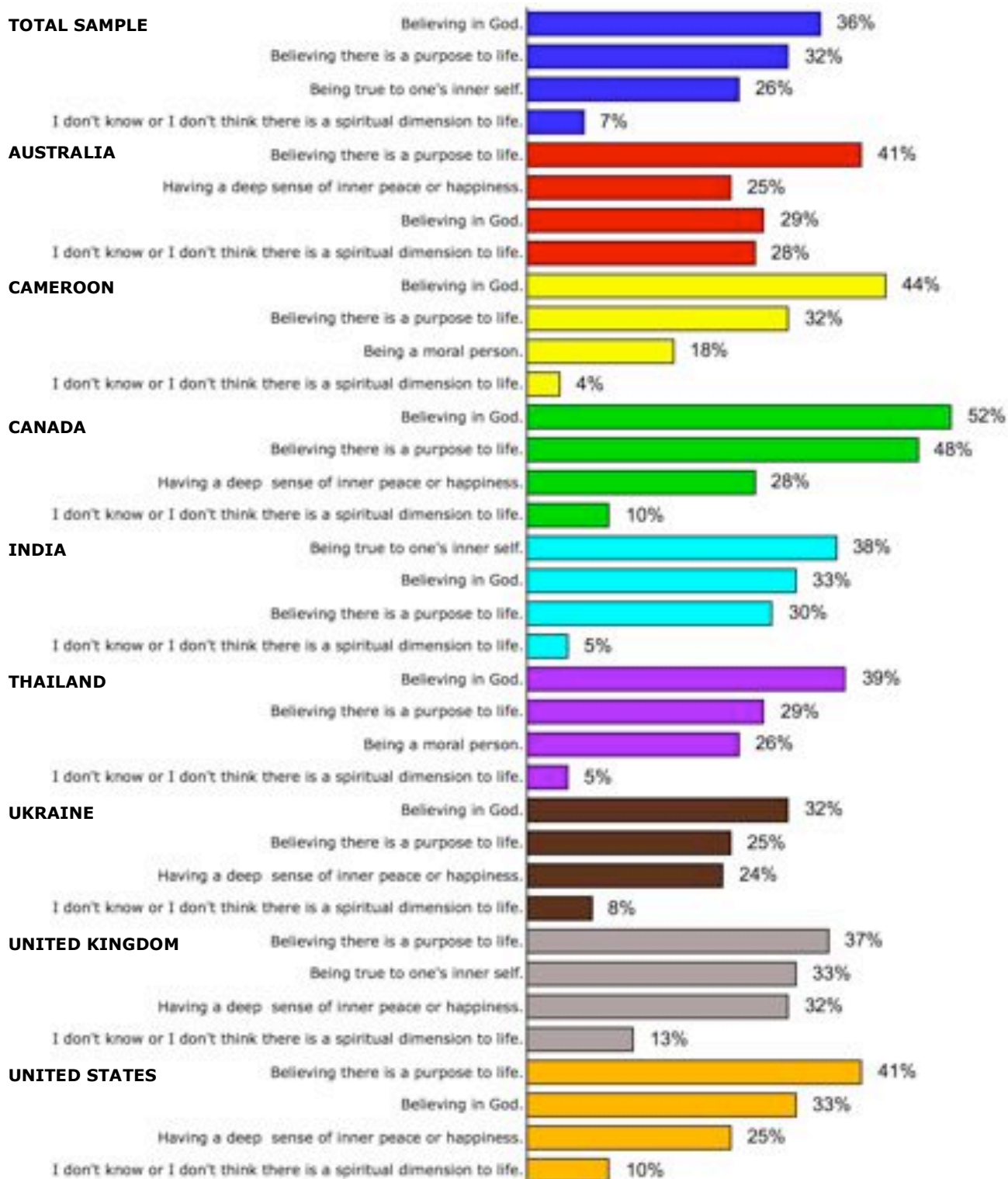
However, it is important to note that this area of life is confusing to many young people, particularly those who are younger. Consider these comments in focus groups:

*"Actually I fail to understand spirituality. There are so many different things about spirituality. So I don't . . . If I can't understand spirituality, I can't comment on it." (Male, 14, India)*

*I don't even know what spiritual means. (Female, 12, Peru)*

**FIGURE 1 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SPIRITUAL?**

When asked to identify what it means to be spiritual, youth (ages 12 to 25) were most likely to say it means “believing there is a purpose to life,” “believing in God,” or “being true to one’s inner self.” Here are the three most common responses in each country (out of nine choices), plus the percentages of youth who said they don’t think or don’t know if there is a spiritual dimension to life. (Youth could select one or two choices.)



## Some Youth Interpret Experiences as Spiritually Meaningful; Others Do Not

Young people differ in whether they interpret a range of experiences as being spiritual. For example, about three out of four youth in the survey said they have experienced “an overwhelming sense of love, complete joy and ecstasy,” yet most of them do not consider these experiences to be spiritually meaningful (Table 2). Similarly, half of youth (52%) have had a feeling of oneness with the earth and all living things, but many did not perceive it to be a spiritually meaningful experience.

### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Ian\*

Age: 20

Country: Ireland, United Kingdom

Tradition: None

Ian is a graduate student enamored with the sciences, calling himself spiritual but not religious, defining spirituality as “searching for something to believe in.” With one exception, he prefers to not discuss matters of spirituality and philosophy with others because he finds it causes tension and strife, two things in conflict with his purpose in life: to be open and friendly, peacefully co-existing. However, he does have one confidante, Phil, an adult mentor, who helped him begin to formulate his own ideas and opinions, and with whom he debates, speculates, and openly grapples with faith issues.

An intellectual skeptic from the beginning, Ian quips that he has always felt that he has thought more about religion than most kids his age. Growing up Protestant in Northern Ireland, Ian devoted himself to giving his heart to Jesus at an early age, after the deaths of several family members raised fears and doubts about what happens after death. Some Christian peers, boys in a religious youth group, assured him that with this commitment and “If you stay good and you do just exactly as you’re meant to, then you go to Heaven to live eternally.”

After finding initial comfort in this promise, Ian began exploring what it meant to be Christian. His questions typically led to more questions and ultimately to questioning the existence of a higher power. At the same time, Ian was discovering his passion for science and the answers it provided to why things are the way they are. It seemed the more he learned about science, the more he “lost his faith”—but he is much happier to have moved on from the “false hope” offered by praying and on to a greater sense of hope offered by searching for truth. A chance meeting with Phil (Ian played on his hockey team) led to deep, philosophical and intellectual musings over pints of beer, which inspired him to explore the works of different philosophers. Comforted by his ability to chart his own path, Ian says of his journey, “I hope there’s something more than just all of this, and I always look for answers.”

\* Pseudonym; requested that his real name not be used.

When we focus on those experiences that young people say they have had *and* that they consider to be spiritually meaningful (and that are most commonly experienced by youth who were surveyed), about one-third of youth surveyed identified each of the following experiences as ones they have experienced and considered spiritually meaningful:

- Having inner strength to make it through a difficult time.
- Feeling a profound inner peace.
- Feeling complete joy and ecstasy.
- Feeling an overwhelming sense of love.
- Experiencing God’s energy, presence, or voice.

There are several geographic or cultural differences in how young people interpret these experiences. Generally, youth from the United Kingdom and Australia were least likely to report having these experiences. Youth from Cameroon were the most likely to report having them but not considering them to be spiritually meaningful. Youth from the United States and Canada were most likely to say they had these experiences and also considered them spiritually meaningful.

**TABLE 2      YOUNG PEOPLE’S EXPERIENCES—AND WHETHER THEY ARE SPIRITUALLY MEANINGFUL (TOTAL SAMPLE)**

|   | Have Never Had This Experience | Have Had This Experience . . .               |  |
|---|--------------------------------|--|--|
|   |                                | But It <u>Was Not</u> Spiritually Meaningful | And It <u>Was</u> Spiritually Meaningful |
| Having inner strength to make it through a difficult time.                            | 22%                            | 39%  | 38%                                      |
| Feeling a profound inner peace.   | 24%                            | 40%  | 36%                                      |
| Feeling complete joy and ecstasy.   | 20%                            | 48%  | 33%                                      |
| Feeling an overwhelming sense of love.  | 26%                            | 44%  | 30%                                      |
| Experiencing God’s energy, presence, or voice.  | 51%                            | 19%  | 30%                                      |
| Experiencing a feeling of emotional closeness or connection to the people around you. | 23%                            | 49%  | 29%                                      |
| Meeting or listening to a spiritual teacher or master.                                | 52%                            | 24%  | 23%                                      |
| Feeling of being oneness with the earth and all living things.                        | 48%                            | 30%  | 22%                                      |
| Seeing a miraculous (or not normally occurring) event.                                | 47%                            | 30%  | 21%                                      |
| Experiencing a healing of your body (or witnessing such a healing).                   | 52%                            | 28%  | 20%                                      |
| Experiencing angels or other guiding spirits.   | 68%                            | 17%  | 15%                                      |
| Encountering a great spiritual figure who is no longer alive.                         | 71%                            | 17%  | 12%                                      |
| Communicating with someone who has died.  | 74%                            | 16%  | 10%                                      |



## Many Young People Want to Talk About Spiritual Matters

In many cultures and societies, conversations about spiritual development can be considered off limits. The issues are perceived to be too personal or private or divisive for public dialogue. And in some societies and settings, talk of spirituality and religion is actively discouraged. In regard to young people, the assumption tends to be that they need to be taught what to believe (they are “empty vessels”) or that they are not very interested. As a result, it appears that young people in many different parts of the world do not have many opportunities to talk about or examine this area of life, other than being socialized into a belief system or set of doctrines within their tradition or culture. When it comes to spiritual development, young people too often get one of two messages:

- It’s not something we talk about; or
- If we talk about it, let’s focus on what you should believe.

In the eight-country survey, we found that about one-third of youth surveyed said they talked at least monthly with their friends about spiritual issues such as the meaning of life, why we are on Earth, or God or faith (Table 3). The frequency of these conversations varied considerably across the participating countries. For example, only 19% of youth surveyed in Australia said they talk about the meaning of life with friends at least monthly, compared to 49% of youth in Cameroon. And 53% of Australian youth surveyed said they “never” talk with friends about God or faith, compared to 10% of youth surveyed in Cameroon.

Similarly, though almost two-thirds of youth indicate that they have talked with their parents at least a few times in the past 12 months about the parents’ beliefs and faith (Figure 2), those conversations do not appear to be frequent. Only 24% indicate that they have these conversations at least once a month, and only 12% indicate that they have these conversations weekly.

Few focus group participants had ever reflected on their own experiences of spirituality or on what it means to be spiritual—beyond the doctrinal, programmatic, or linguistic frameworks provided by their religious traditions. One young person who was nominated as a spiritual exemplar does not feel comfortable talking with his friends and family because of fear about their reaction to the spiritual path he is on. Consider these quotes:

*“I think people feel comfortable talking about spirituality with anyone with whom we feel we are valued.” (Female, 15, United Kingdom)*

*“To be spiritual you need to have an opinion. But here in this community, you always have to shut up. But in other communities, if you say something you will be appreciated for what you say.” (Male, 15, Israel)*

*“I know lots of people in my life are deeply spiritual, but I feel like that’s something that’s private almost—and I don’t see that side of them.” (Female, 17, United States)*

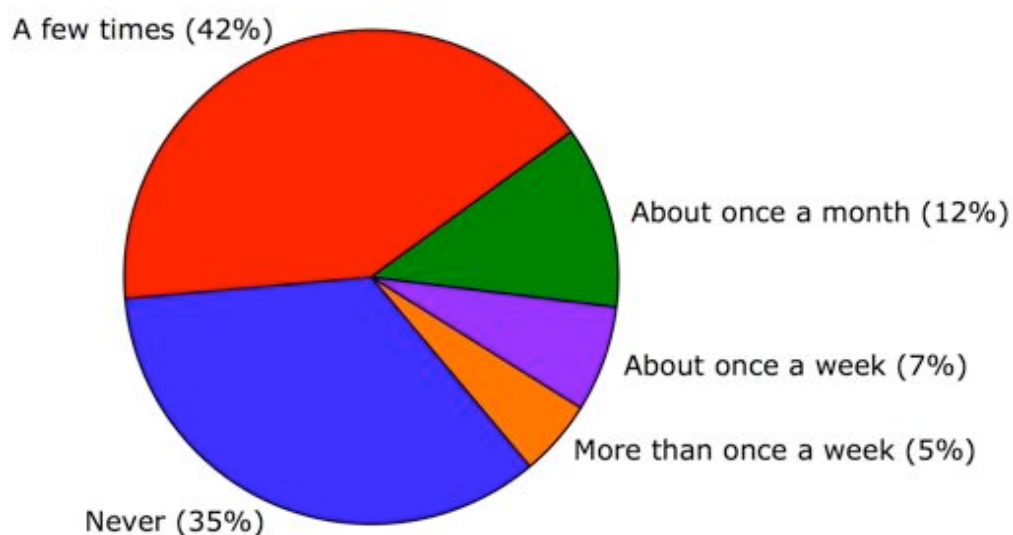
In the focus groups, most young people welcomed the opportunity to explore the subject with intention and purpose, and without any fear of being judged as wrong. Despite uncertainty about the subject of spirituality, most of the participants were actively engaged in the conversations and eager to learn more. Thus it appears that many young people in many locales would value safe, caring places where they can share their experiences, explore their questions, connect with others, and give voice to the things that matter deeply to them without being judged or “corrected.”



**TABLE 3 CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SPIRITUAL TOPICS WITH FRIENDS**

| How often in the past 12 months have you talked with your friends about . . . ? |                  | TOTAL SAMPLE | Australia | Cameroon | Canada | India | Thailand | Ukraine | United Kingdom | United States |
|---|------------------|--------------|-----------|----------|--------|-------|----------|---------|----------------|---------------|
| The meaning of life.  | Never            | 25%          | 55%       | 13%      | 32%    | 31%   | 22%      | 20%     | 20%            | 24%           |
|   | At least monthly | 37%          | 19%       | 49%      | 37%    | 30%   | 42%      | 34%     | 41%            | 43%           |
| Why we are on Earth.  | Never            | 34%          | 58%       | 13%      | 36%    | 45%   | 29%      | 30%     | 30%            | 33%           |
|   | At least monthly | 30%          | 17%       | 50%      | 35%    | 47%   | 39%      | 28%     | 37%            | 33%           |
| God or faith.   | Never            | 26%          | 53%       | 10%      | 28%    | 26%   | 27%      | 32%     | 17%            | 23%           |
|   | At least monthly | 36%          | 19%       | 53%      | 44%    | 29%   | 38%      | 28%     | 45%            | 44%           |

**FIGURE 2 FREQUENCY OF CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS ABOUT PARENTS' BELIEFS**



## Most Young People See Themselves as Spiritual, and Most See Themselves Doing Well Spiritually

In addition to believing that there is a spiritual dimension to life, most young people we surveyed in most countries also see themselves as being spiritual. More than one-third would say they are “very or pretty spiritual,” and another one-third of those surveyed see themselves as “sort of spiritual.” As shown in Figure 3, those percentages vary considerably across different countries, ranging from a high who see themselves as at least “sort of spiritual” of 88% in Thailand to a low of 53% in the Australian sample. It is also noteworthy that 40% of youth surveyed in Cameroon did not see themselves as being spiritual, even though Cameroonian youth were among those most frequently reporting various potentially “spiritual” experiences, as well as often engaging in various spiritual practices.

We also asked young people to self-evaluate how well they are doing spiritually (Figure 4). Youth in

### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Gaurav

Age: 18

Country: India

Tradition: Hindu



“Being spiritual is knowing oneself,” says Gaurav, who says he is practically but not spiritually religious. Practically in that he participates in Hindu rituals and traditions; spiritually in that religion is for him not something that makes him who he is, but rather that comes into his life from “the outside.”

Spirituality is different from religion in that it guides him from within. “When you’re spiritually awake you know what’s the best you can do. And that is the time, if you are not content with a particular thing, you go on doing it until you actually find the right spot,” whether that’s in a game of cricket, one of his information technology classes, or with friends and family.

This knowledge of what is right comes for Gaurav from within, from ongoing introspection and a feeling of self-satisfaction that he describes not as pleasurable or selfish, but as being content with the knowledge that the action he is taking is the important one at that moment in time. The moment is, in fact, what matters most in this young Indian man’s life. “I am very much living in the present with what I have on my hands,” he explains. “And I’d like to move on to other things, or give preference to other things, but the first preference will always be to what is important *at the moment*.”

A focus on the here and now and learning what he can from each person and each situation gives Gaurav patience and a sense of calm of which he is proud, though he is reluctant to seem prideful or as if boasting. On the contrary he believes that everyone is equally important, regardless of their career success, intellect or ability to deal with life situations, and that there is something he can learn from everyone. “Everyone has their good side and their bad side, . . . but everyone is special in their own way and when you look at people you learn from them.”

the United States and the United Kingdom were most likely to say they were doing well spiritually. Youth in Cameroon and Ukraine were least likely to see themselves as doing well spiritually. This finding is striking, given that youth in Cameroon are among the most likely to see life as having a spiritual dimension, and they are among the youth most likely to talk with others about spiritual matters.

It is also important to note that some focus group participants do not see being spiritual as a priority for them, particularly not right now.

*“I have 40 years ahead of me to be more spiritual and think about religion” (Male, 17, Israel).*

*It’s important to be spiritual, I feel. But it doesn’t really affect me or anything. (Female, 18, India)*

FIGURE 3 **HOW SPIRITUAL ARE YOU?**

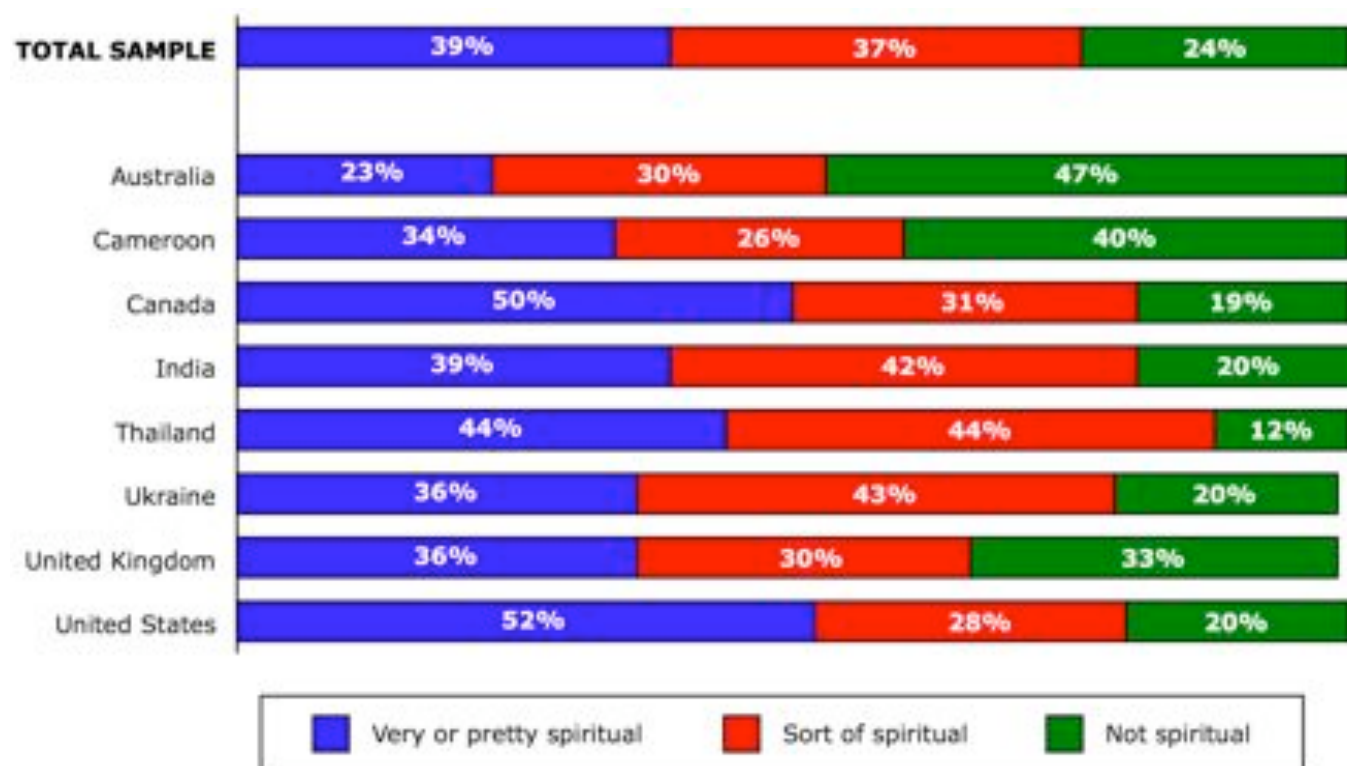
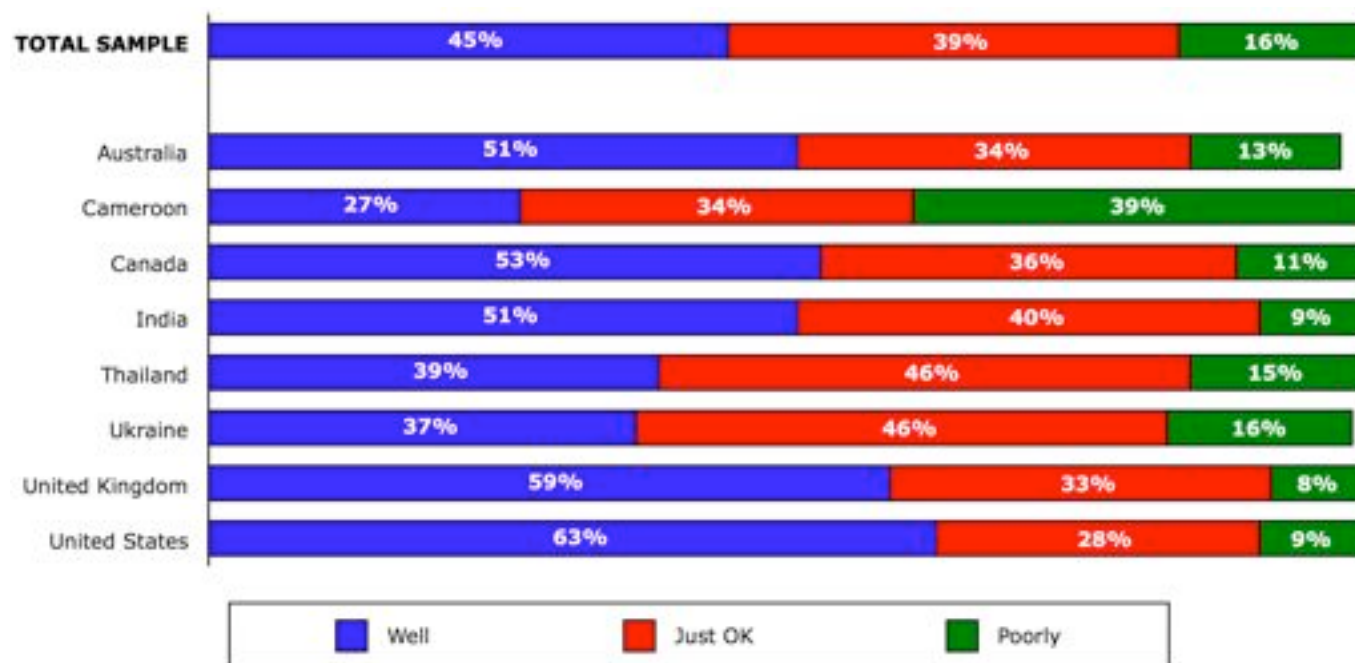


FIGURE 4 **HOW ARE YOU DOING SPIRITUALLY?**



## **Young People See Spiritual Development as Both “Part of Who You Are” and an Intentional Choice**

*“I was a hell of a lot more spiritual when I was younger than I am now.” (Male, 15)*

*“ Oh . . . I know I’m way more spiritual now.” (Female, 17)*

This dialogue between two Canadian youth during a focus group captures well the perceived ebb and flow of spiritual development during childhood and adolescence. In the surveys and focus groups, young people indicate that they do not see spiritual awareness, agency, and engagement as being dependent upon age. But they do see growth and change in their own lives and in the lives of other young people.

In general, half of the youth surveyed (55%) indicated that, overall, their spirituality had increased over the past two or three years (Figure 5). Only 20% indicated that it had decreased. More specifically, the majority of youth surveyed reported that various aspects of their spirituality changed across the past two to three years, with the largest proportion saying they became more spiritual (Figure 6). Fewer than one in seven said any of the dimensions measured had decreased.

Seven out of 10 say they have more of a sense that life has meaning or purpose. In addition, about half say they have become more spiritual in general, that they feel emotionally close to God or a higher power, and that their spiritual life has become more important to them. In contrast, fewer than one in five said they have become less spiritual, feel less close to God or a higher power, place less importance on their spiritual life, or have less meaning and purpose in life. At the same time, close to half of the young people said their doubts and questions had increased.

Young people in focus groups often distinguished between the natural capacity for spirituality and being actively spiritual. For a number of the youth, being spiritual requires an individual to choose to activate their agency.

*“All people can be spiritual if they want to.” (Female, 12, Peru)*

*“If one wants to become spiritual, it will depend on the will of that person. If he wants to, he can.” (Female, 11, Syria)*

*“If you don’t want to be spiritual, then can’t nobody make you do it,” (Female, 14, United States)*

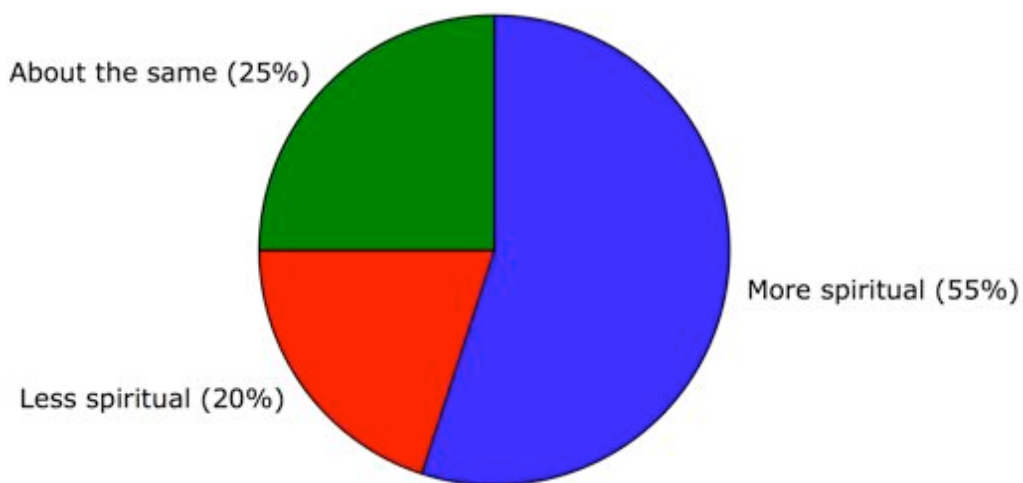
In addition, young people seem to see spiritual development as reflexive—the more a person is attentive to it, the more he or she recognizes it and the more it “grows.”

*“The more you grow, the more you understand. And the more experiences you have, the more the significance of spirituality in our life changes. So I guess I can’t pinpoint what has changed, but I think whatever I have seen until now has made spirituality even more important than what it would have been if I had not seen those things.” (Male, 18, India)*

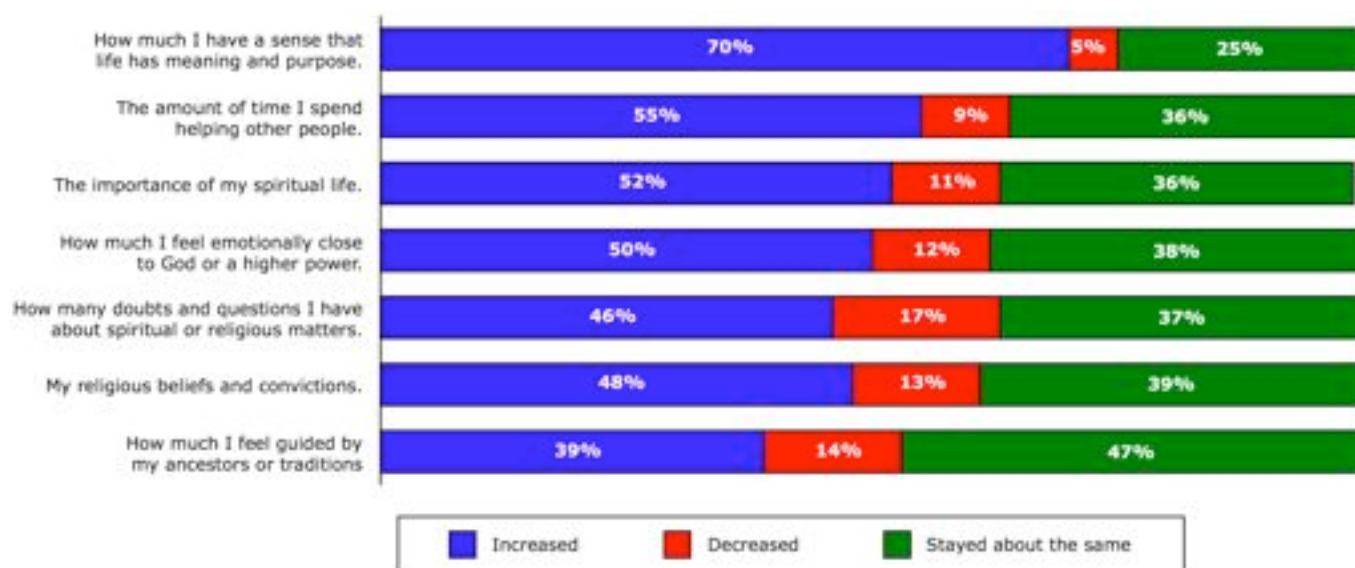
*“The more spiritual you are, the more you understand. It’s like sport, everyone can do sport, but the more you do it, the better you get at it. Your spiritual depth only gets deeper as you get older.” (Male, 18, South Africa)*

**FIGURE 5 PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGES IN SPIRITUALITY**

Percentages of youth who say they have become more or less spiritual in the past 2-3 years.



**FIGURE 6 PERCEIVED CHANGES IN ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY (PAST 2-3 YEARS)**



## Many Youth Believe in or Experience the Transcendent

*"Being spiritual is believing in things that are not real, intangible, that cannot be perceived by our senses, but that you know exist." (Male, 14, Peru)*

For many people, the notion of transcendence is integral to an understanding of spirituality or spiritual development. In our survey, the vast majority of youth said they believed that there is a God or a higher power (Figure 7). Only 8% indicated that they do not believe in God or gods/goddesses, and 10% indicated that they did not know.

The survey also asked about other beliefs about the spiritual nature of the universe, each of which is more commonly held in some religious traditions and cultures than others. As shown in Figure 8, four of these beliefs are at least "probably" true for a majority of the youth in the survey:



### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Nathan R.

Age: 20

Country: United States

Tradition: Judaism

Nathan is an outgoing, social, and articulate college junior. He thrives on relationships and connections with many people of all ages including his parents, rabbis, friends, fellow synagogue members, classmates, and colleagues.

Though humble, Nathan is also proud of his ability to reach out to and accept others. He treasures the interfaith dialogues and connections he made through a summer job with an interfaith network in his hometown, Chicago. Through this experience he had interactions with other Jews, Christians, and Muslims that went beyond, he explains, "Why do you wear that thingy on your head?"

Interestingly, he says it is his passion for his Jewish faith that has in part set the stage for his openness and curiosity about others, noting the Jewish values of acceptance, social justice and social action. Participating in Interfaith experiences in high school and college, and attending a public school where Judaism was not the norm, has given him ample opportunity to reflect on his own rituals and traditions and build rapport and understanding with many non-Jews.

Singing is a key way that Nathan practices and experiences spirituality, noting that he sometimes craves a "professionally led"—meaning by a Cantor or Rabbi—prayer service. He is open about where he attends services, however, going so far as to find synagogues in places he is vacationing.

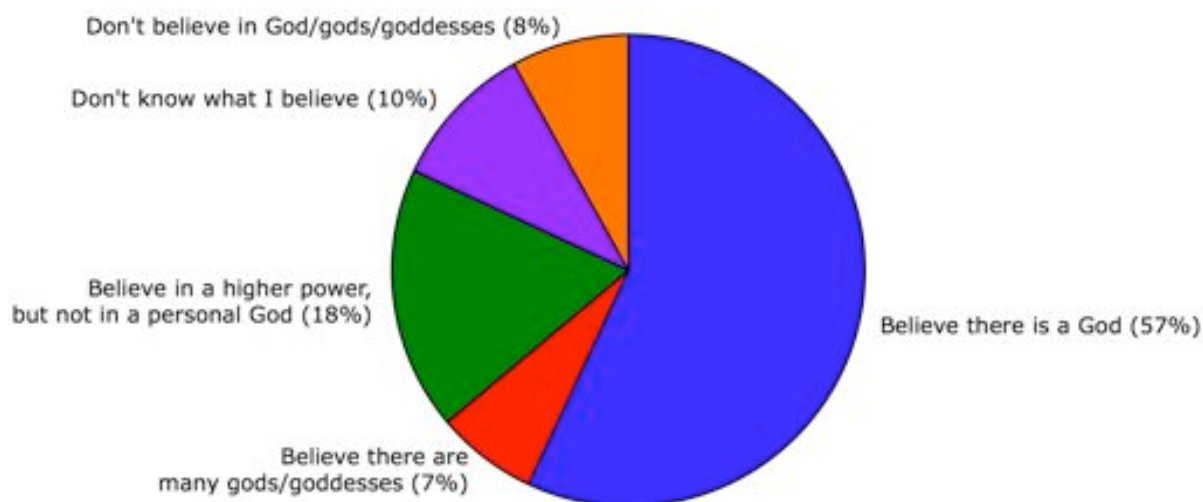
Nathan credits his parents and his early experiences with Jewish practices as starting him on a journey that he says will continue. Those experiences did not, however, convince him of the existence of God. "Sometimes you get the impression when you're in Hebrew school, when you're younger," he recalls, "that God sits up in the sky somewhere on a...big chair looking down on what you're doing. And that just is always like a very uncomfortable thing to me." For the moment he is content with the communal aspects of Judaism and does not think about whether there is a divine being, though he doubts that will always be the case, saying "I think that's something that might come later."

- All living things are connected to each other;
- There is life after death;
- They have experienced God or some other mysterious presence; and
- There is a spirit world, spiritual beings, or spiritual powers.

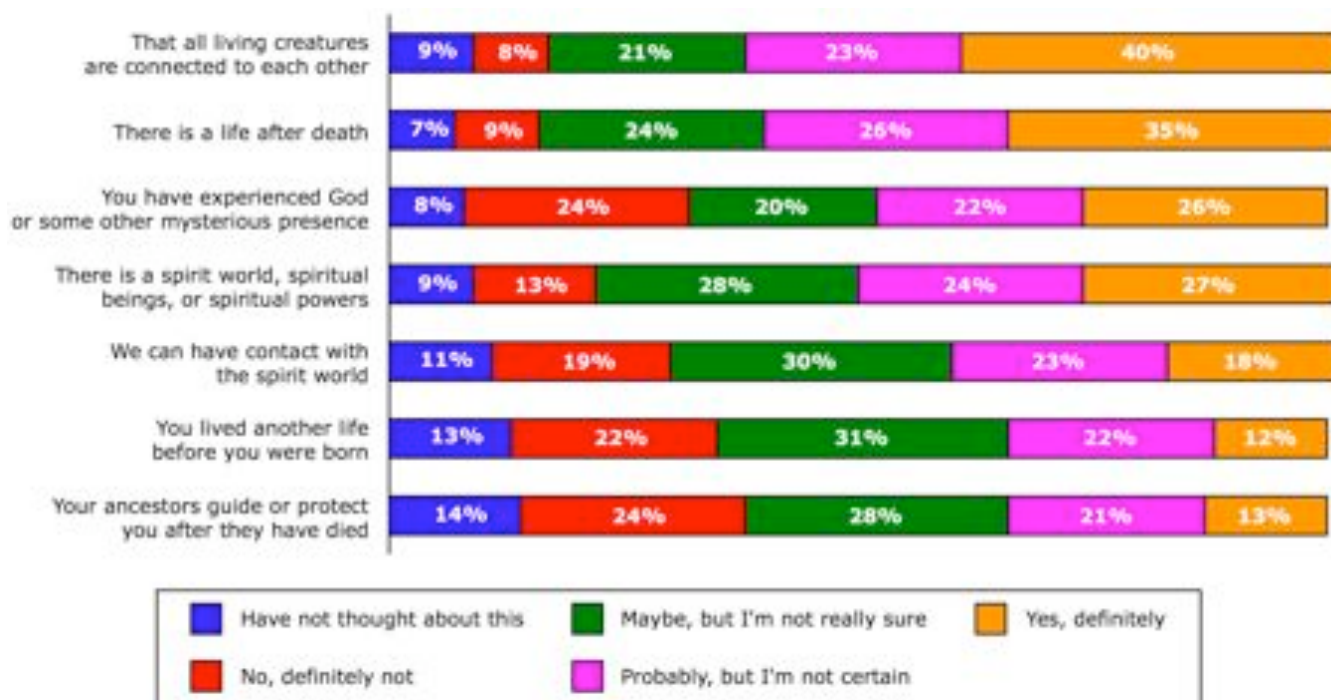
Only about one in four youth surveyed "probably" or "definitely" believe that they lived another life before they were born (reincarnation) or that ancestors guide or protect you after they die.



**FIGURE 7 WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SURVEYED BELIEVE ABOUT GOD**



**FIGURE 8 YOUNG PEOPLE'S BELIEFS ABOUT SPIRITUAL PHENOMENA**









## **B. Perspectives on the Relationship Between Spirituality and Religion**

7. Youth see religion and spirituality as related, but different
8. Most young people see both spirituality and religion as positive

## **Youth See Religion and Spirituality as Related, but Different**

Like adults, many youth struggle with the relationship between religion and spirituality. The survey of youth reaffirmed the complexity of the relationship between the two concepts in young people's experiences.

As shown in Figure 9, youth in this study are most likely to indicate that they are both spiritual and religious (34%), with 23% indicating that they are spiritual, but not religious. One in five (20%) of the youth surveyed indicated that they don't know.

However, these percentages vary among the young people surveyed in different countries, as shown in Table 4. Youth surveyed in Cameroon, Canada, and the United States were most likely to indicate that they are both spiritual and religious. Youth surveyed in Ukraine were most likely to say they were not sure or had not thought about it.

That percentage of youth who say they are not sure or have not thought about it declines significantly when comparing younger youth and emerging adults in the U.S. sample (Figure 10). However, the patterns of change vary in different countries, though overall levels of "not sure" decline across this age group in each of these countries.

In focus groups, youth also talked about the relationship between the two ideas, but their descriptions revealed little consensus. More often than not, young people believe spiritual development may and often does include religious experience and religious development. For some youth, religion and spirituality are synonymous. Others see religion as a practical dimension of, or context for, the expression of spirituality:

*"Spirituality is the search for answers and religion provides the answers." (Female, 15, United Kingdom)*

*"Religion is more of a place. . . . It's there you're supposed to find spirituality." (Female, 17, United States)*

*"You don't have to be religious to be spiritual, but you have to be spiritual to be religious. If you're fully religious, you've got to be spiritual." (Male, 15, Canada)*

FIGURE 9 **RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL, BOTH, OR NEITHER?**

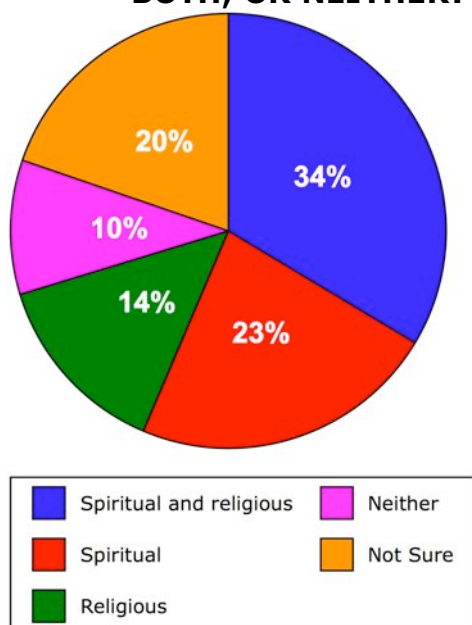


FIGURE 10 **NOT SURE IF RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL, BY AGE**

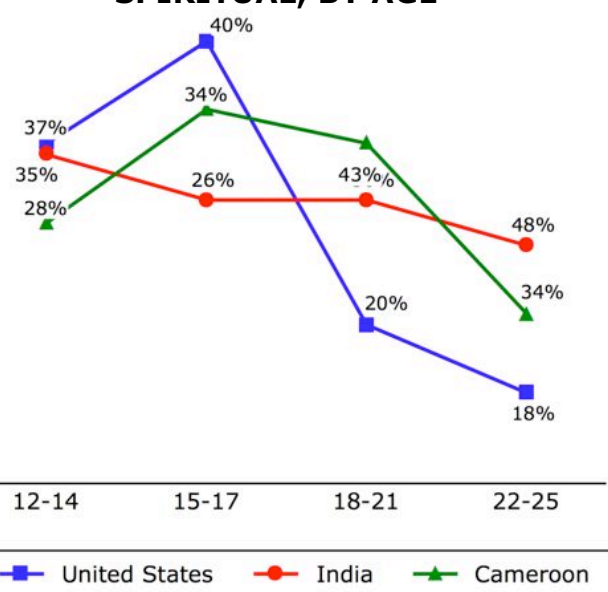


TABLE 4 **RELIGIOUS? SPIRITUAL? BOTH? OR NEITHER?, BY COUNTRY**

|                | Spiritual and Religious | Spiritual, Not Religious | Religious, Not Spiritual | Neither Spiritual Nor Religious | Not Sure/Have Not Thought About It |
|----------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Total Sample   | 34%                     | 23%                      | 14%                      | 10%                             | 20%                                |
| Australia      | 20%                     | 21%                      | 8%                       | 27%                             | 25%                                |
| Cameroon       | 44%                     | 15%                      | 33%                      | 4%                              | 5%                                 |
| Canada         | 47%                     | 18%                      | 10%                      | 8%                              | 17%                                |
| India          | 34%                     | 23%                      | 12%                      | 8%                              | 23%                                |
| Ukraine        | 23%                     | 30%                      | 8%                       | 7%                              | 33%                                |
| United Kingdom | 23%                     | 35%                      | 5%                       | 27%                             | 10%                                |
| United States  | 43%                     | 27%                      | 6%                       | 8%                              | 16%                                |

NOTE: This item was not included in the Thai survey because of language and cultural constraints that do not distinguish between religion and spirituality.

## Most Young People See Both Spirituality and Religion as Positive

Though young people have a clear sense, in most contexts, that religion and spirituality are related but different, that is not necessarily a value judgment on one or the other. In fact, a majority of youth surveyed see both being religious and being spiritual as “usually good” (Figure 11). In focus groups, however, young people were more likely to interpret religion less positively than spirituality, as suggested by the following quotes:

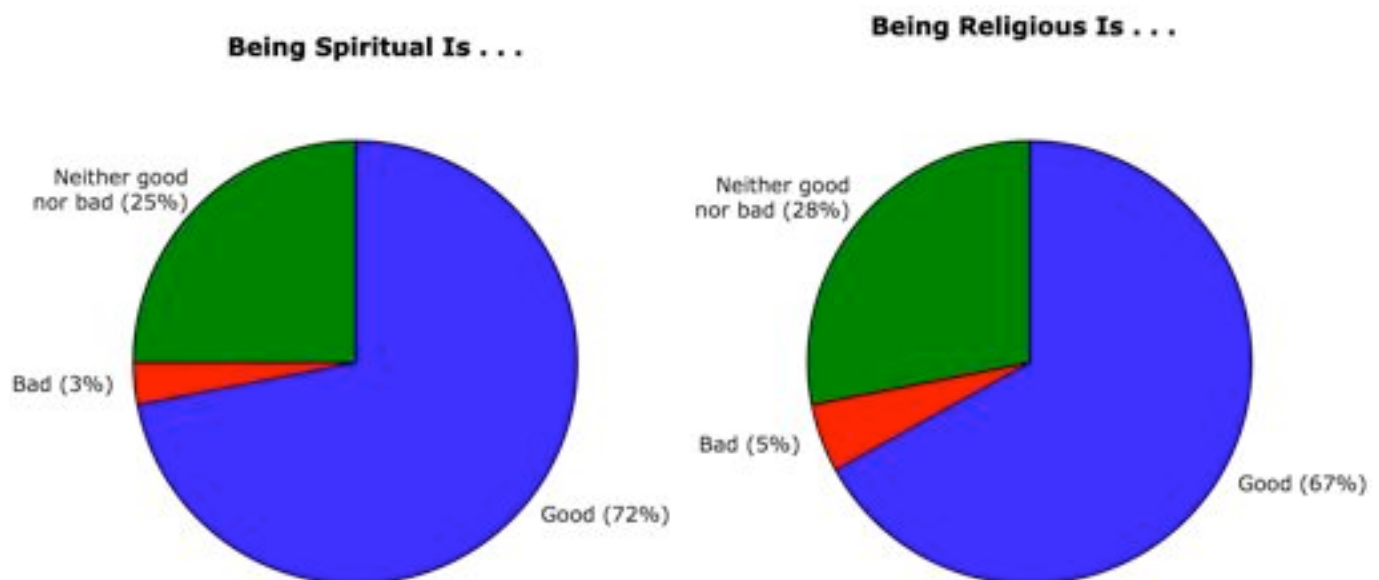
*“Spiritual is something one experiences in your own being. Religion is, well, your religion. Most of our religion is forced—the do’s and don’ts. Being spiritual means standing on a mountain with the wind blowing through your hair, and the feeling of being free.” (Female, 15, South Africa)*

*“Spiritual can be anything, except bad things. . . . Someone is very spiritual when they are in church 24/7.” (Female, 13, South Africa)*

*“‘Religious’ is kind of knowing the things in your head, but ‘spiritual’ is knowing them in your heart.” (Female, 15, Australia)*

*“The spiritual has a soul. . . . A religious person is not a good one. The spiritual does not commit any mistakes, while the religious does.” (Female, 11, Syria)*

FIGURE 11 THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY





## **C. Influences and Experiences That Shape Young People's Spiritual Development**

9. Everyday experiences and relationships nurture young people's spirit
10. Youth most often nurture spiritual development alone or by helping others
11. Many young people say family and friends help them spiritually—but one in five say "no one" does
12. Most youth see their parents modeling religious or spiritual activities
13. Levels of religious involvement vary considerably across participating countries

## Everyday Experiences and Relationships Nurture Young People's Spiritual Development

Like all areas of human development, spiritual development is not just the task of an individual; it occurs within a broader context of people, places, worldviews, and narratives that shape the person. Persons also shape those same contexts as they engage with the world around them. This dynamic interaction between young people and their context lies at the heart of human development.

The core process of “developing a way of living” begins to articulate how young people have agency in their own spiritual development. We now look at this dynamic from the other direction: How the people, places, narratives, and culture around young people shape and give meaning to spiritual development as an integral part of that process. These influences in young people's ecology of development may either encourage or inhibit their spiritual development.

Figure 12 shows that at least three-fourths of young people in the survey pointed to being outside or in nature, listening to music, serving others, and being alone as being experiences that make it easier for them to be spiritual. They also noted that family and friends most often make it easier, though up to 1 in 10 say these relationships can make it harder.

The young people surveyed are less likely to point to spiritual mentors, religious activities, school, or the Internet as making it easier to be spiritual. Experiencing challenges in life is seen as making it more difficult. This finding contrasts with the sentiments of many of the youth in focus groups. They indicated that spirituality was a resource that helps them through the hardships of life and that they have grown spiritually during difficult times.



### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Emma

Age: 18

Country: United Kingdom

Tradition: Christian

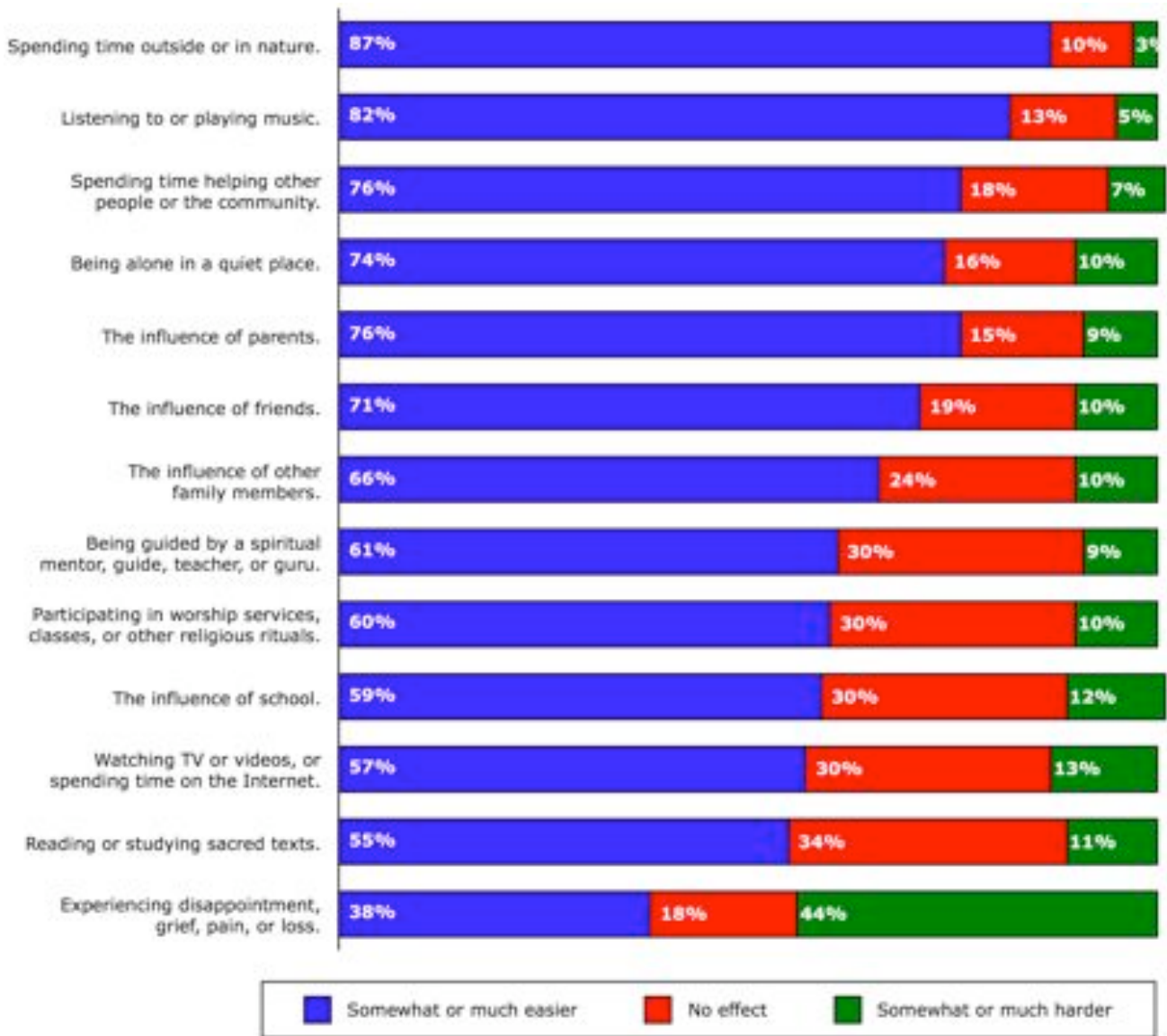
It was divine intervention, believes Emma, a young British Bible college student, that led her to Uganda and a life-changing experience.

In looking for a global mission opportunity, Emma found a Christian organization placing volunteers in Mexico, as well as an organization that had placements in Africa where she had dreamed of serving. The dilemma was that the organization working in Africa was not Christian, and Emma's faith is central to her being, as she believes her purpose in life is to worship God and “be his hand.” After a night of prayer she decided she would go to Mexico. Then, as she recalls, “I got a phone call from the Christian organization which said, ‘Actually, we'd like you to go to Uganda.’” While she was there, she felt she was very much able to listen to God speak to her.

God has and continues to meet Emma in all situations in her life, she says. And even when she cannot see His presence, she trusts it is there. Emma also takes responsibility for nurturing this relationship, which she describes in very personal terms. “The ideal spiritual person is somebody who spends as much time as possible with God,” she explains. “Because the more time you spend with God, the better relationship you'll have and become a better Christian.” She works on this through daily prayer, devotion reading, and social activism—such as buying products made without exploitation and “being a steward” of the earth, and caring for and sharing with her friends. She is not afraid to talk about her faith and her beliefs with friends and family and considers this part of showing her love for them. Emma strives for authenticity in all facets of her life, from relationships to living a principled life to finding God in nature walks along the beach.

**FIGURE 12 WHAT MAKES SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT EASIER OR HARDER?**

How much does each of the following make it easier or harder for you to find meaning, peace, and joy?





## **Youth Most Often Nurture Spiritual Development Alone or by Helping Others**

Young people engage in a wide range of intentional activities and practices to nurture their spiritual development. These may be practices that are tied to a particular religious tradition, or they may be “secular” or cultural practices that young people and others find nurture their spirit.

In our survey, we asked young people how often they engage in 21 different practices that may help them grow spiritually. Many of the options are practices that are encouraged in a range of religious and cultural traditions. As shown in Table 5, all of the practices are done by fewer than half of the youth in the total sample. That is, there is no one practice that most youth across these samples all engage in. Given the diversity and breadth of the sample, that is not surprising.<sup>1</sup>

But there are some practices in which almost half of all youth surveyed engage. The most common practices overall involve reading books, praying or meditating alone, helping others, or showing love, compassion, or humility. Each of these actions may be tied to a wide range of religious traditions and would also be practices that youth who do not identify with a religious tradition might engage in.

As we would expect, the levels of youth engaged in these practices vary considerably across the countries in the study. For example, 71% of the Cameroon youth said they pray or meditate by themselves often or very often, compared to 25% of the youth from Australia. And while only 19% of the total sample say they participate in online discussions related to religion and spirituality, 52% of the youth surveyed in Cameroon said they participate often or very often.

Youth from Australia and the United Kingdom generally were the least likely to ever engage in these practices, and youth from Cameroon, the United States, and India generally were the most likely, with a few exceptions. (For example, Indian youth were among the least likely, with Australian youth, to read books about spirituality, and, with Australian and UK youth, to read scriptures. US youth were among the least likely to fast, participate in online discussion groups about spirituality, or do bowing, chanting or sacred movement.

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<sup>1</sup> We do not know whether these youth take their own initiative to participate, or if these practices are encouraged or required by their family, school, or community. Further analysis will yield insight into whether and how these practices are related to other aspects of spiritual development.



**TABLE 5 PRACTICES THAT NURTURE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT**

| Youth who say they have done each of these things “often” or “very often” in the past 12 months to support their spiritual development. | <b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b> | <b>Australia</b> | <b>Cameroon</b> | <b>Canada</b> | <b>India</b> | <b>Thailand</b> | <b>Ukraine</b> | <b>United Kingdom</b> | <b>United States</b> |
|---|---------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Read books  | 47%                 | 36%              | 69%             | 48%           | 41%          | 41%             | 44%            | 52%                   | 49%                  |
| Prayed or meditated by yourself   | 44%                 | 25%              | 71%             | 48%           | 46%          | 35%             | 32%            | 32%                   | 48%                  |
| Regularly helped people who are in need   | 44%                 | 30%              | 61%             | 43%           | 45%          | 46%             | 32%            | 30%                   | 54%                  |
| Showed love, compassion, or humility as a way of being spiritual  | 44%                 | 28%              | 63%             | 51%           | 43%          | 44%             | 33%            | 31%                   | 54%                  |
| Attended religious worship or prayer services   | 40%                 | 25%              | 67%             | 53%           | 36%          | 40%             | 26%            | 24%                   | 45%                  |
| Given money to someone in need  | 38%                 | 24%              | 57%             | 38%           | 39%          | 32%             | 31%            | 31%                   | 38%                  |
| Tried to practice a weekly day of rest  | 35%                 | 16%              | 55%             | 29%           | 29%          | 55%             | 33%            | 10%                   | 20%                  |
| Prayed or meditated with your family  | 33%                 | 15%              | 58%             | 34%           | 36%          | 29%             | 22%            | 10%                   | 24%                  |
| Listened to or told stories about something spiritual   | 33%                 | 19%              | 57%             | 30%           | 31%          | 32%             | 28%            | 18%                   | 27%                  |
| Read or studied sacred scripture (such as the Bible or Koran)   | 33%                 | 18%              | 64%             | 43%           | 23%          | 33%             | 27%            | 21%                   | 34%                  |
| Attended religious or spiritual classes or instruction  | 31%                 | 18%              | 60%             | 40%           | 20%          | 38%             | 23%            | 13%                   | 34%                  |
| Used meditation, contemplation, or mindfulness techniques   | 30%                 | 11%              | 53%             | 24%           | 30%          | 31%             | 24%            | 13%                   | 26%                  |
| Bowed or chanted as a regular practice  | 30%                 | 9%               | 52%             | 14%           | 34%          | 37%             | 20%            | 7%                    | 10%                  |
| Participated in a small group that focuses on helping people grow spiritually   | 28%                 | 14%              | 61%             | 25%           | 21%          | 27%             | 23%            | 14%                   | 29%                  |
| Burned candles or incense as part of a spiritual or religious ritual  | 28%                 | 12%              | 52%             | 14%           | 30%          | 28%             | 27%            | 5%                    | 14%                  |
| Listened to or watched religious or spiritual programs in the media (such as radio, television, CDs, or the Internet)                   | 28%                 | 14%              | 61%             | 26%           | 22%          | 29%             | 20%            | 13%                   | 24%                  |
| Worn jewelry or clothing that expresses religious or spiritual commitments  | 27%                 | 17%              | 49%             | 26%           | 22%          | 28%             | 22%            | 14%                   | 27%                  |
| Fasted or denied yourself something   | 27%                 | 15%              | 48%             | 26%           | 26%          | 25%             | 22%            | 11%                   | 16%                  |
| Attended a religious concert or festival  | 26%                 | 12%              | 51%             | 24%           | 29%          | 21%             | 16%            | 7%                    | 17%                  |
| Participated in sacred dance or movement  | 20%                 | 11%              | 45%             | 11%           | 20%          | 20%             | 16%            | 1%                    | 11%                  |
| Participated in online discussion groups, chat rooms, or social networking sites that focus on spirituality or religion                 | 19%                 | 7%               | 52%             | 11%           | 16%          | 14%             | 17%            | 3%                    | 8%                   |

## Many Young People Say Family and Friends Help Them Spiritually—But One in Five Say “No One” Does

*“We’re all connected to each other, . . . so each one plays a part in somebody else’s life. Maybe you can’t really sit somebody down and teach them to be spiritual, but you can affect them, you can influence them (Female, 16, India).”*

The survey specifically asked about what groups of people or institutions “most helps to support your spiritual life.” (Youth could only select one of six options, which included “no one.”) Not surprisingly, young people surveyed were most likely to point toward parents as the primary resource (Figure 13). Just 14% of youth indicated that their religious institution (church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other religious place) helps them the most. In addition, about one in five youth (18%) say that no one helps them regarding their spiritual lives.

### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Ryan M.

Age: 17

Country: United States

Tradition: Poly-religious (Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu)



Ryan is described by an observer as a “sensational, scene-stealing, slightly eccentric, extremely lovable extrovert who loves people, being involved, and performing.” Cutting jokes, doing monologues, and referencing a wealth of books, movies, literature, politicians, plays, and more, Ryan is a beacon of cultural knowledge. He describes himself, in fact, as a Renaissance man, acknowledging the arrogant sound of that label, but feeling it truly captures his nature.

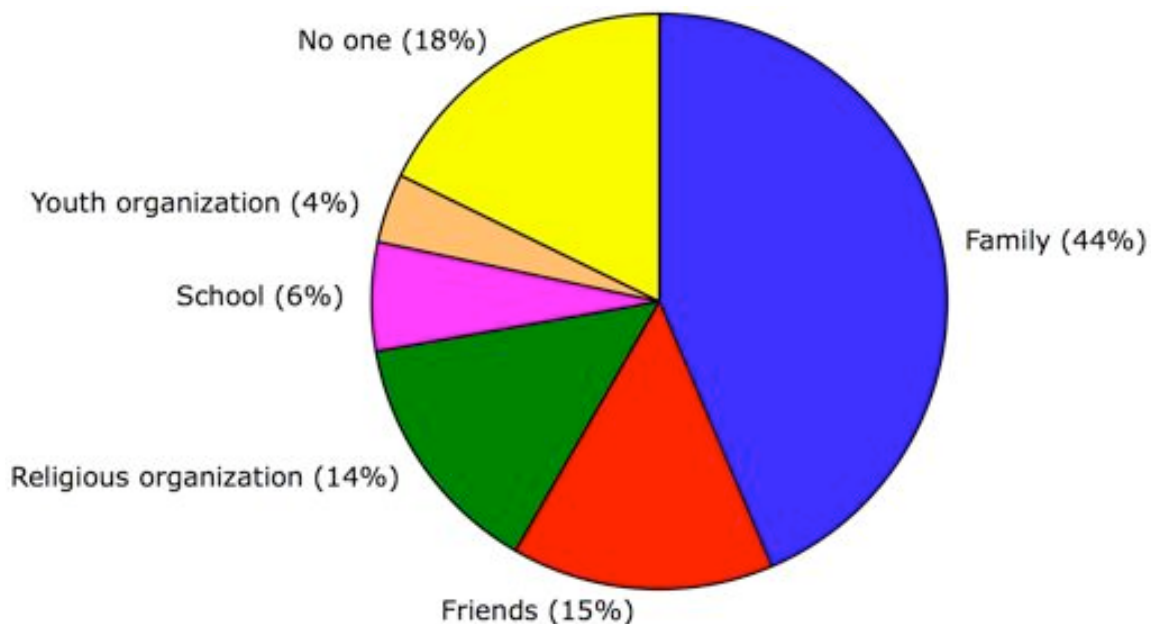
Ryan also has a profound sense of openness to all religions, going so far as to say that he is “the most eclectically spiritual person” he knows. He identifies himself as Jewish, Buddhist, and Taoist, having converted to Judaism and embracing the cultural as well as spiritual aspects of the religion. He places a high priority on community and human connection in general and deeply cherishes his Jewish heritage. He definitely says that he feels “at home” in temple because of the connection to “his people.” However, he is also always ready to listen to others’ beliefs and see if he can adopt something good or useful into his own personal worldview,

He has been most deeply impacted by the relationship with his grandfather—his role model—who profoundly shaped his life through his own grace and acceptance of Ryan. An avid reader and learner, Ryan cites three poets—Alan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder—as primary influences in the development of his spiritualities (plural intentional) from outside his extended family.

Simply stated, Ryan is a lover of people and a lover of peaceful, right living, whose greatest desire is to find meaning in the world while helping and inspiring others.

Across all countries, family was the most common source of support for young people (Table 6). Friends were second, with the exception of Cameroon, where religious organizations are seen as offering more support. Though generally low, the level of support from schools and youth organizations varied considerably as well.

**FIGURE 13 WHO HELPS YOU MOST IN YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE?**



**TABLE 6 WHO HELPS YOU MOST IN YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE, BY COUNTRY?**

|                | Family | Friends | Religious Organization | School | Youth Organization | No One |
|----------------|--------|---------|------------------------|--------|--------------------|--------|
| Total Sample   | 44%    | 15%     | 14%                    | 6%     | 4%                 | 18%    |
| Australia      | 30%    | 18%     | 7%                     | 5%     | 2%                 | 37%    |
| Cameroon       | 34%    | 19%     | 24%                    | 12%    | 7%                 | 4%     |
| Canada         | 40%    | 16%     | 10%                    | 7%     | 11%                | 17%    |
| India          | 54%    | 11%     | 10%                    | 4%     | 2%                 | 19%    |
| Thailand       | 52%    | 8%      | 18%                    | 6%     | 1%                 | 15%    |
| Ukraine        | 45%    | 17%     | 13%                    | 4%     | 4%                 | 18%    |
| United Kingdom | 28%    | 18%     | 12%                    | 2%     | 2%                 | 38%    |
| United States  | 33%    | 18%     | 17%                    | 2%     | 11%                | 20%    |

## Most Youth See Their Parents Modeling Religious or Spiritual Activities

*"If you're raised in a spiritual house, you're going to be spiritual, just by nature."  
(Female, 14, United States)*

Because of the pivotal role of family in child and adolescent development, it is not surprising that family rose to the top as a primary resource for spiritual development from young people's perspective. The survey sought to delve more deeply into some dynamics and practices in the family that may play a role in socialization around spiritual development and religious identity. We examined both what young people see (modeling) as well as practices that the family does together.

About one-third to one-half of the surveyed youth did not ever in the past year engage in various spiritual or religious activities with their parents or see their parents engage in these activities (Figure 14). However, up to two-thirds of youth saw their parents expressing their own religious or spiritual practices or beliefs at least a few times in the past 12 months.

Most common was seeing parents be joyful because of their religious faith (70%), seeing a parent pray or meditate by themselves (70%), talking with parents about religious beliefs (65%), and praying with a parent (66%). In general, the family practices seem least common in Australia and the United Kingdom and most common in Cameroon and India.

### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Sabrina\*  
Age: 17  
Country: Peru  
Tradition: Christian



*"My main goal for the long term...is to be a person that not simply passed through this world without leaving a mark."*

At 17, Sabrina has faced what seems like more than her fair share of significant life challenges: The demise of her parents' rocky relationship, many relocations, being ostracized by classmates and their parents after a teacher accused her of trying to negatively influence other students, her own suicidal feelings, and her mother having cancer...twice.

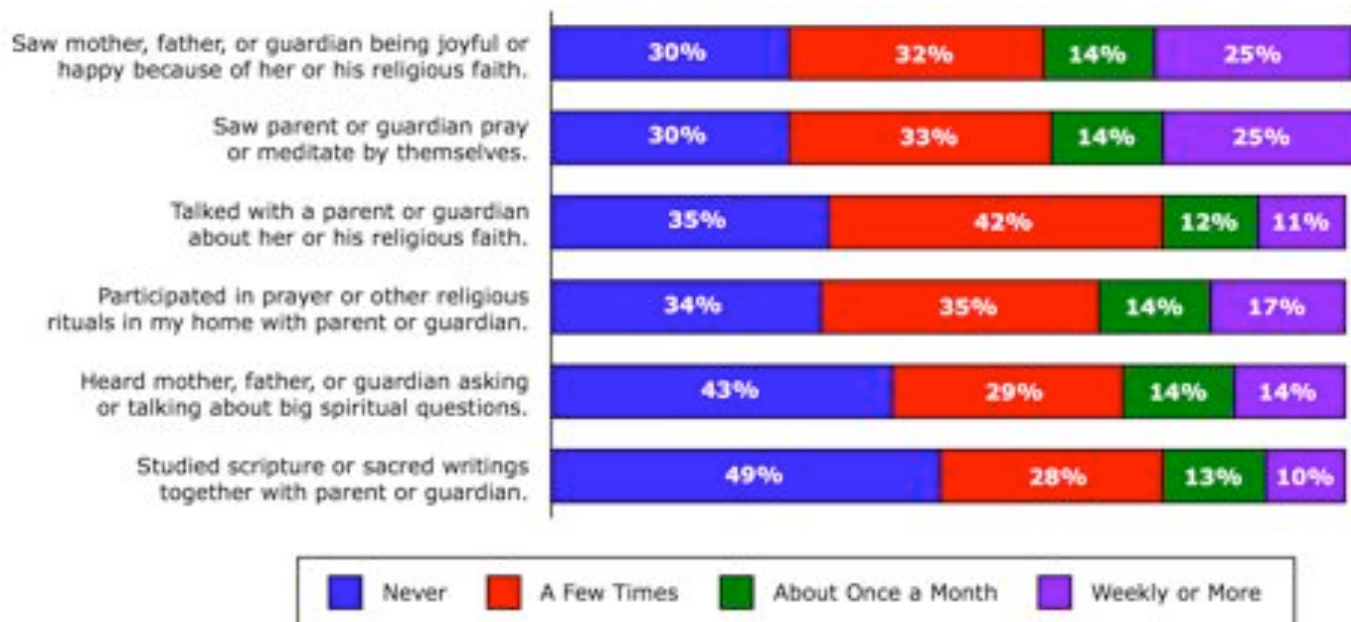
And yet this Peruvian teen is upbeat, quick to laugh, and focused solidly on leaving her mark as a positive presence in the world, guided by God's intentions for her and without pride or bravado. "I want to do something, yet I do not want everybody to know about it." It is her faith that God's will is the reason for everything, she says, that keeps her going in spite of a seemingly endless stream of hardships. "My reason for being here? It is not that I really understand or know...but I do know that God has a reason. He created me because He wanted to have a relationship with me...He has plans and I have seen them throughout my life."

Since consecrating herself to God at age 11, Sabrina has been a disciple of an older woman and has recently taken on a disciple of her own. She says that while she is very spiritual, she is not religious. "I think that a spiritual person understands or lives based on something it [sic] believes in," she says, explaining the difference. "For me, that thing is God. On the other hand, a religious person lives according to what its religion says; they live according to their religion."

Describing herself as a Christian Evangelist, she began going to church with her father, a Catholic. She was moved one day by a particular Bible story told in Sunday school. "The teacher was telling us the story about Joshua," she recalls, "about how he decided to follow Christ while his people were totally materialistic. And that's when I said, 'I too want to make that decision because I feel He will give me hope' and that's when I made my choice."

\* Pseudonym; requested that her real name not be used.

**FIGURE 14 FREQUENCY OF FAMILY SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES IN PAST 12 MONTHS**



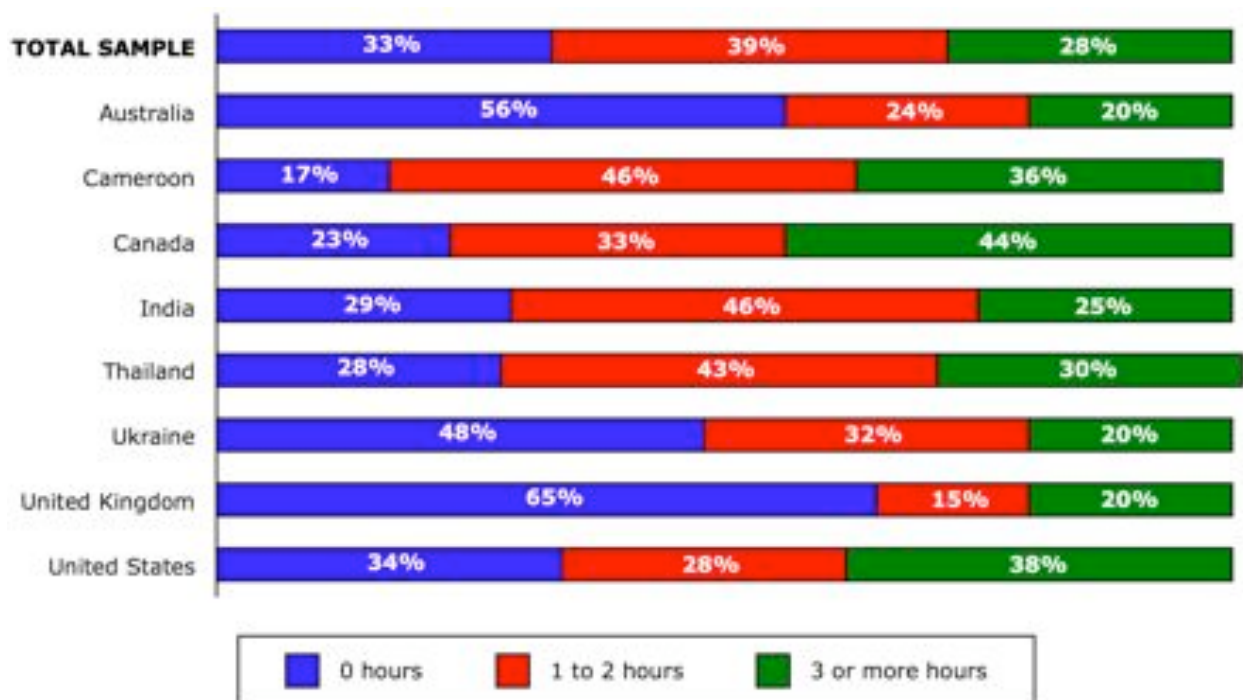
## Levels of Religious Involvement Vary Considerably Across Participating Countries

In many societies, religious institutions are positioned to play a major role in young people’s spiritual development, seeking to ground people in the beliefs, practices, narratives, and commitments of their particular religious tradition.

As we would expect, involvement in religious institutions varies significantly across different contexts and traditions (Figure 15). In our survey, we asked young people how many hours in an average week they spent attending “services, groups, or programs at a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other religious or spiritual place?” Overall, about one-third of the youth surveyed said that they spend no time in religious activities during a typical week.

Levels of involvement vary considerably among the young people surveyed in different countries. In Cameroon, 82% of youth surveyed indicated that they attended activities at least weekly. In the United Kingdom, 65% of those surveyed said they did not attend any religious services, groups, or programs during a typical week.

FIGURE 15 HOURS PER WEEK IN RELIGIOUS SERVICES, GROUPS, OR PROGRAMS





## **D. An Emerging Framework for Spiritual Development**

- 14. Introduction to the guiding framework
- 15. Connecting and belonging
- 16. Awareness or awakening
- 17. A way of living



## Introduction to the Guiding Framework

One of the challenges in studying young people's spiritual development is that there is no consensus on how to define spiritual development. Thus, the Center for Spiritual Development sought to create a framework for understanding spiritual development that would be widely affirmed across cultures, traditions, disciplines, and worldviews.

To do this, we reviewed existing research, analyzed focus group data, and engaged in a Web-based consensus-building process with our 100-plus distinguished, scientific, theological/philosophical, and practice advisors. The advisors identified key criteria for an appropriate definition (Display 2), then guided the identification of key dimensions of spiritual development. These priority dimensions were prioritized to identify those that most advisors across most disciplines, countries, and traditions affirmed were essential aspects of spiritual development. The resulting framework was utilized to create the field test survey. (Statistical tests will be conducted to determine whether and how the framework holds up psychometrically or how the analysis might suggest alternate structures.)

In this framework (Figure 16), we hypothesize that spiritual development involves a reciprocal dynamic between our human journey to look inward (experiencing awe, wonder, and mystery), and to look outward to connect with and link ourselves to community, nature, the world, and the universe. It is a constant, ongoing, and sometimes difficult interplay between three core developmental processes (which are emphasized differently in different cultures and traditions):

- **Connecting and belonging**—Seeking, accepting, or experiencing significance in relationships to and interdependence with others, the world, or one's sense of the transcendent (often including an understanding of God or a higher power); and linking to narratives, beliefs, and traditions that give meaning to human experience across time.
- **Becoming aware of or awakened to self and life**—Being or becoming aware of or awakening to one's self, others, and the universe (which may be understood as including the sacred or divine) in ways that cultivate identity, meaning, and purpose.
- **Developing a way of living**—Expressing one's identity, passions, values, and creativity through relationships, activities, and/or practices that shape bonds with oneself, family, community, humanity, the world, and/or that which one believes to be transcendent or sacred.

These dimensions are embedded in and interact with . . .

- Other aspects of development (physical, social, cognitive, emotional, moral, etc.);
- Personal, family, and community beliefs, values, and practices;
- Culture (language, customs, norms, symbols) and sociopolitical realities;
- Meta-narratives, traditions, myths, and interpretive frameworks (including religious traditions and sacred texts); and
- Other significant life events, experiences, and changes.

Spirituality, theology, art, philosophy, and religious and cultural narratives are systems of thought, feeling, practice, and action that are shaped by and feed the processes of spiritual development.

Surveys, focus groups, and interviews explored this terrain. As ongoing statistical analyses are conducted on survey data, we will refine the framework in ways that link the theory to the lived experiences of young people in different parts of the world.

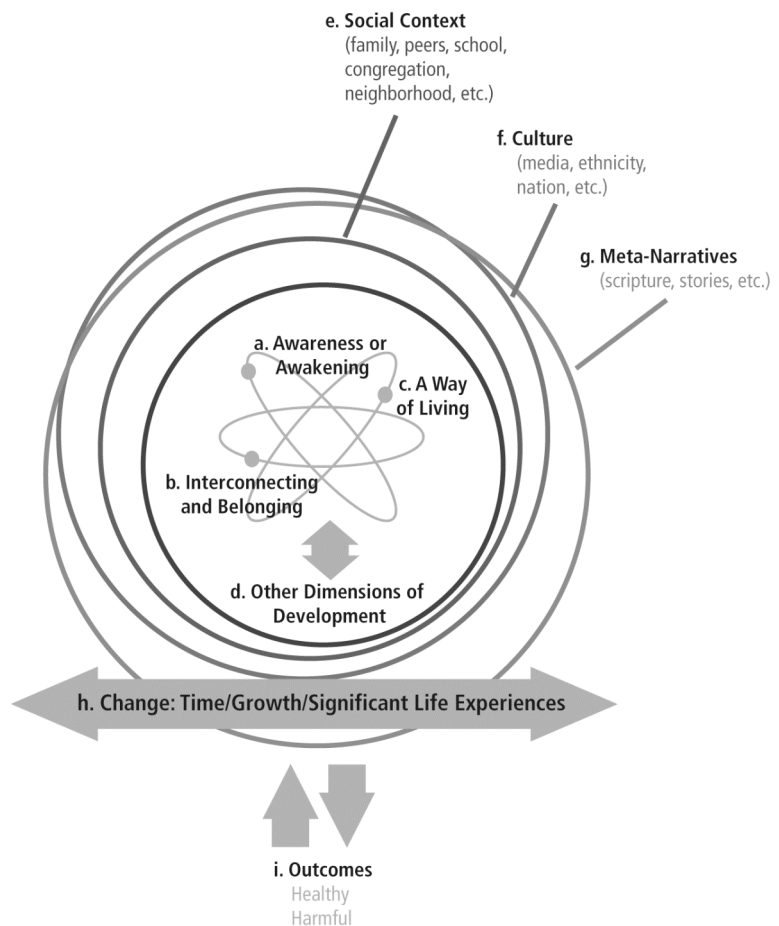


## DISPLAY 2 CRITERIA FOR DEFINING SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Below are the 10 criteria that most of the advisors for the Center for Spiritual Development said were essential for defining spiritual development as a core element of human development:

- Articulate that spiritual development, though a unique stream of human development, cannot be separated from other aspects of one's being.
- Be relevant (though not uniform) across gender, age, socioeconomic, and cultural and ethnic differences.
- Recognize that spiritual development involves both an inward journey (inner experiences and/or connections to the infinite or unseen) and an outward journey (being expressed in daily activities, relationships, and actions).
- Add conceptual value to how human development is currently understood by articulating what is unique about spiritual development and how it is connected to other areas of development.
- Recognize that spiritual development is a dynamic, nonlinear process that varies by individual and cultural differences.
- Highlight broad domains of spiritual development while recognizing that these are approached and manifested in many different ways among individuals, cultures, and traditions.
- Conceptually distinguish spiritual development from religious development or formation while also recognizing that they are integrally linked in the lived experiences of some people, traditions, and cultures.
- Recognize that spiritual development has the potential to contribute to the health and wellbeing of self and/or others or to harm self and/or others.
- Be understandable to people from many walks of life, including the general public.
- Avoid suggesting that the definition is final or comprehensive, thus inviting continued dialogue and exploration.

FIGURE 16 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT



## Connecting and Belonging

One of the three core processes that emerged from the consensus-building work with advisors focuses on “connecting and belonging.” This process focuses on being or becoming aware of or awakening to one’s self, others, and the universe in ways that cultivate identity, meaning, and purpose.

This theme emerged often in the focus groups. Though the words were difficult for them to find, young people described spiritual development as “being connected” to something or someone beyond oneself at a deep, mysterious level, sometimes as a connection to God or the divine.

*“There is something connected from your soul to something. And that “something” can be called God or whatever. So sometimes you feel a connection between you and someone else. “Someone else?” . . . We can’t define that, that connection.” (Male, 16, India)*

### Dimensions of “Connecting and Belonging” Identified by Advisors

- Experiencing a sense of empathy, responsibility, and/or love for others, for humanity, and for the world.
- Finding significance in relationships to others, the world, or one’s sense of the transcendent.
- Finding, accepting, or creating deeper significance and meaning in everyday experiences and relationships.
- Linking oneself to narratives, communities, mentors, beliefs, traditions, and/or practices that remain significant over time.

*“With spirituality, you have a sense of relationship.” (Female, Malta)*

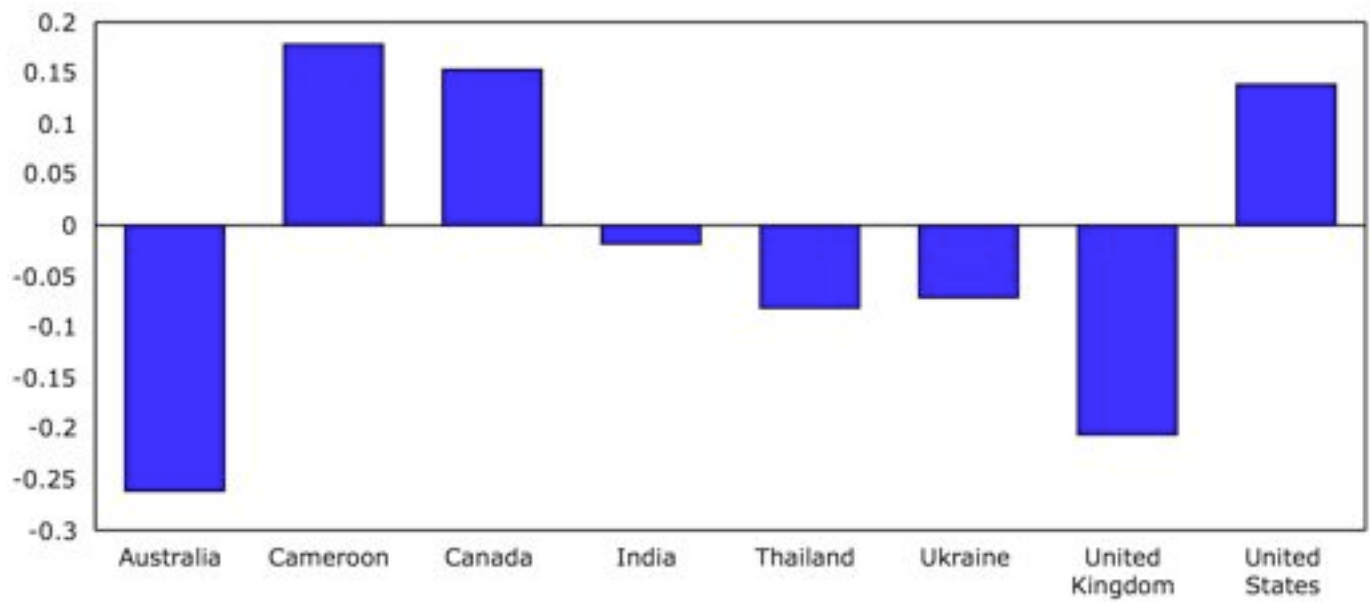
*“Being spiritual is when you have a connection, and you can feel how other people are feeling, and you understand their thoughts and their emotions.” (Female, 14, United States)*

*“Spirituality strengthens the bond between the members of society. . . . It also strengthens the relation between me and my Lord.” (Male, 18, Syria)*

Our network of advisors also assisted our theoretical work in suggesting various constructs, or subscales, for each of the 3 processes. Thus, “Connecting and Belonging” can be further disaggregated into smaller scales that all represent the larger dimension described in the box above. One of the more robust subscales<sup>2</sup> in the “Connecting and Belonging” dimension is an eight-item scale that we are tentatively calling “Sense of Connectedness”—which captures whether young people feel connected to a spiritual mentor, spiritual forces in the world, or God. As shown in Figure 17, youth surveyed in Cameroon, Canada, and the United States reported higher values on this scale than the average for the total sample. Youth in Australia, United Kingdom, Thailand, and Ukraine reported lower values.

<sup>2</sup> “Robustness” here and with respect to the subscales described in the following 5 pages of this section is defined by the degree to which each of these scales is “internally consistent.” Briefly, a scale that is internally consistent is said to be reliable, that is, that the items that comprise that scale seem to be measuring the same idea or experience. Reliability is often used as one index of the strength of a construct or subscale.

FIGURE 17 **SENSE OF CONNECTEDNESS SCALE**



## Awareness or Awakening

Many of the comments from young people in focus groups suggested that a sense of awakening or awareness is integral to their experiences of and perspectives on spiritual development. When asked to describe people they think of as spiritual, they responded in the following kinds of ways, each of which highlights the ways in which individuals express their sense of awareness of spiritual dimensions in life:

### Dimensions of “Awareness or Awakening” Identified by Advisors

- Accepting, seeking, creating, or experiencing a reason for being or a sense of meaning and purpose.
- Being present to oneself, others, the world, and/or one’s sense of transcendent reality.
- Forming a worldview regarding major life questions, such as the purpose of existence, life and death, and the existence or non-existence of the divine or God.
- Living in awareness of something beyond the immediate everyday of life.
- Experiencing enlightenment, awakening, liberation, salvation, or other experiences of transcendence or deepening.
- Accepting or discovering one’s potential to grow, contribute, and matter.

*“A person who vibrates positive energy, who teaches you how to stay calm and happy throughout all phases of life. That person is spiritual.” (Male, 16, India)*

*“This person [spiritual] would have a pure soul. He should have great self-confidence and be very close to Allah.” (Male, 16, Syria)*

*“I think I am pretty spiritual. But when I see my mom I don’t think that I’m that spiritual because I would like to have those kind of qualities she has—to be peaceful always, to be calm. I would love to develop that.” (Female, 17, India)*

*“Spirituality to me is finding meaning in life or finding beauty in the everyday.” (Male, 17, United States)*

*“I think spirituality is the way you look at something: the way you look at pictures, the way you look at nature, the way you read books, what kind of movies you like to look at.” (Male, 17, Israel)*

*“Spiritual people tend to see everything in everything – they will wonder about the smallest of things.” (Male, 18, South Africa)*

*“I feel spiritual when I’m attuned to what matters ... noticing little things... like, a sense of perspective. (Female, 17, United States)*

Figures 18 and 19 illustrate this dimension with two scales that were identified by our advisors and showed sufficient statistical reliability. (See footnote 2 on page 42.) Figure 18 shows results on a mindfulness scale, which includes four items that highlight young people’s ability to pay attention to what’s happening in the present moment and have a sense of their own essence. Youth in India, Canada, and the United States tended to report higher values on this scale than the total sample. Youth in Australia and Ukraine reported lower values. Figure 19, the spiritual experience in everyday life scale, addresses young people’s everyday experiences of spirituality, wonder, awe, and connection to nature and the world. Youth surveyed in Cameroon and Canada reported higher values on these scales, while youth in Australia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom reported lower values.

FIGURE 18 **MINDFULNESS SCALE**

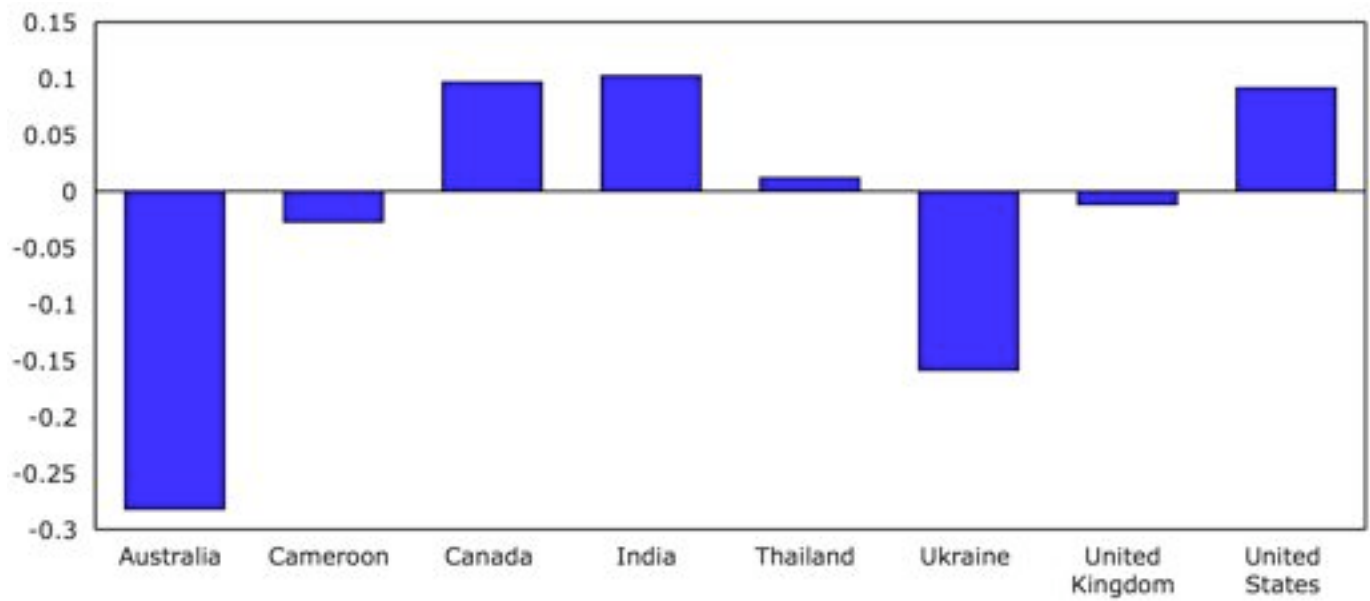
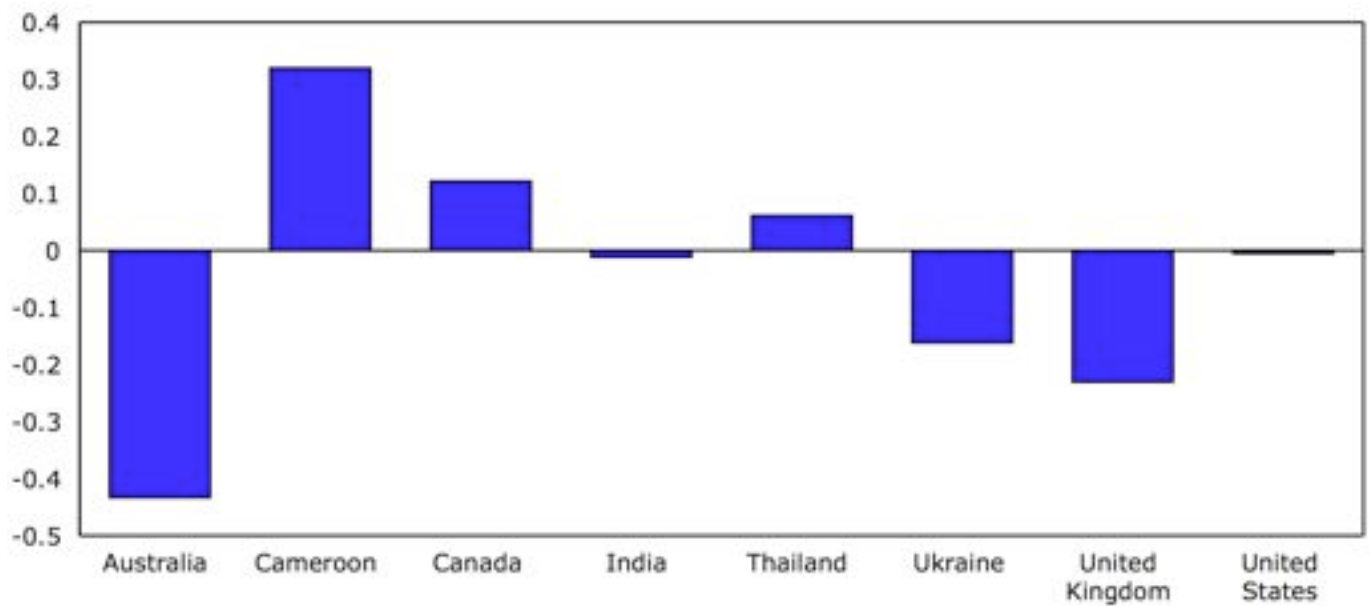


FIGURE 19 **SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE SCALE**



## A Way of Living

Many young people see clear connections between their own spiritual development and their actions in the world. About 75% of youth say their actions are at least “sometimes” guided by their spiritual beliefs, though only 29% indicate that they have done something because of their spiritual beliefs, even though other people don’t understand or approve. (Not shown in a figure.)

### Dimensions of “A Way of Living” Identified by Advisors

- Engaging in relationships, activities, and/or practices that shape bonds with oneself, family, community, humanity, the world, and/or that which one believes to be transcendent.
- Living out one’s beliefs, values, and commitments in daily life.
- Experiencing or cultivating hope, meaning, or resilience in the midst of hardship, conflict, confusion, or suffering.
- Living life in response to that which one perceives to be worthy of dedication and/or veneration.
- Attending to spiritual questions, challenges, and struggles.

The perceived connection between spiritual beliefs and values and life choices was also evident in the focus groups:

*“To be spiritual means to be an example.”  
(Male, 16, South Africa)*

*“Being spiritual is when you’re thinking of what’s good in life and when you’re doing what’s important, what’s really important, and not what’s going to satisfy you momentarily, but what will satisfy you eternally.” (Male, 17, Israel)*

*“To be spiritual you always have to follow the good path, with Christ.” (Female, 12, Peru)*

Figure 20 shows the mean scores on a 12-item scale we tentatively call “Living—Hopeful Purpose.” It includes a focus on gratitude, forgiveness,

happiness, joy, and purpose. Youth in Canada, India, United Kingdom, and United States reported higher than average values on this scale. In contrast, Cameroon and Ukraine reported lower values.

The four-item scale shown in Figure 21 focuses on what we tentatively call “Engaged in the World.” It highlights young people’s intention to make the world a better place, with an emphasis on environmental concerns. Youth surveyed in India and the United States reported higher values on this scale compared to the total sample. Youth in Australia and Ukraine reported lower values.

### Continuing Analyses and Exploration

These analyses set the stage for ongoing exploration of the dynamics within each of these theoretical processes of connecting and belonging, awareness and awakening, and a way of living. They begin to suggest the different pathways that young people may take as they develop spiritually through the first two decades of life. It is likely that we will discover through the data new ways of organizing and describing this territory, based on the lived experiences of young people. Then we will have the opportunity to examine whether and how these processes of spiritual development relate to life outcomes and whether they hold true across other differences (such as gender, age, and religious tradition).

FIGURE 20 **LIVING—HOPEFUL PURPOSE**

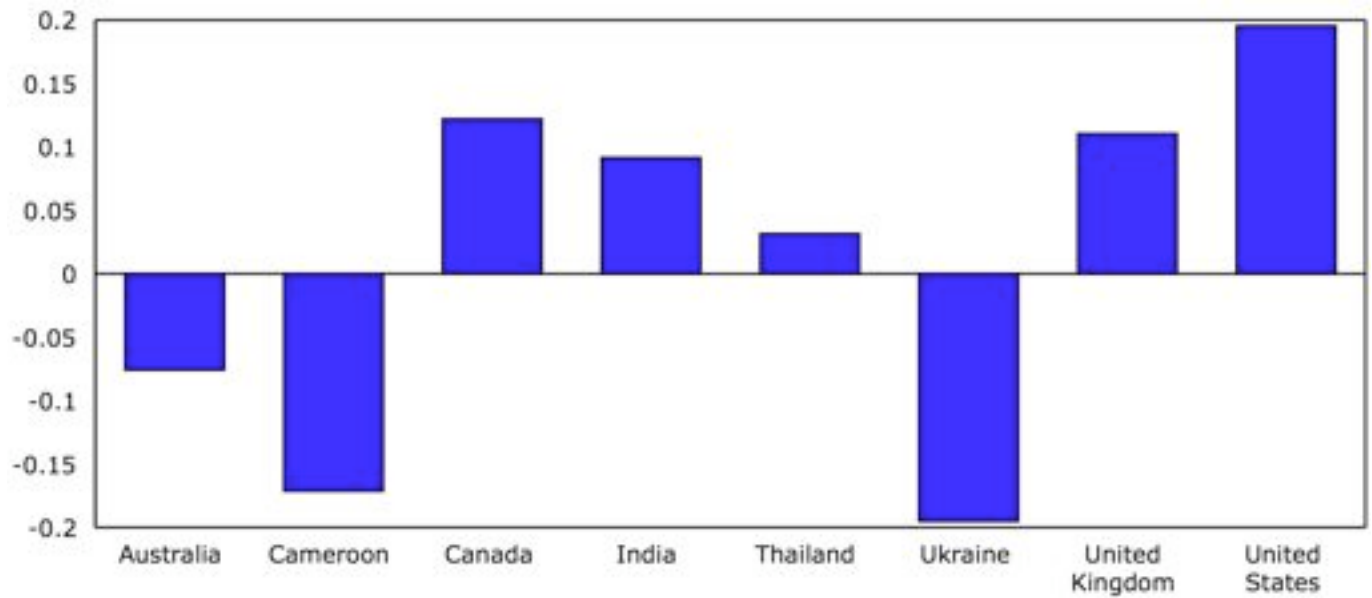
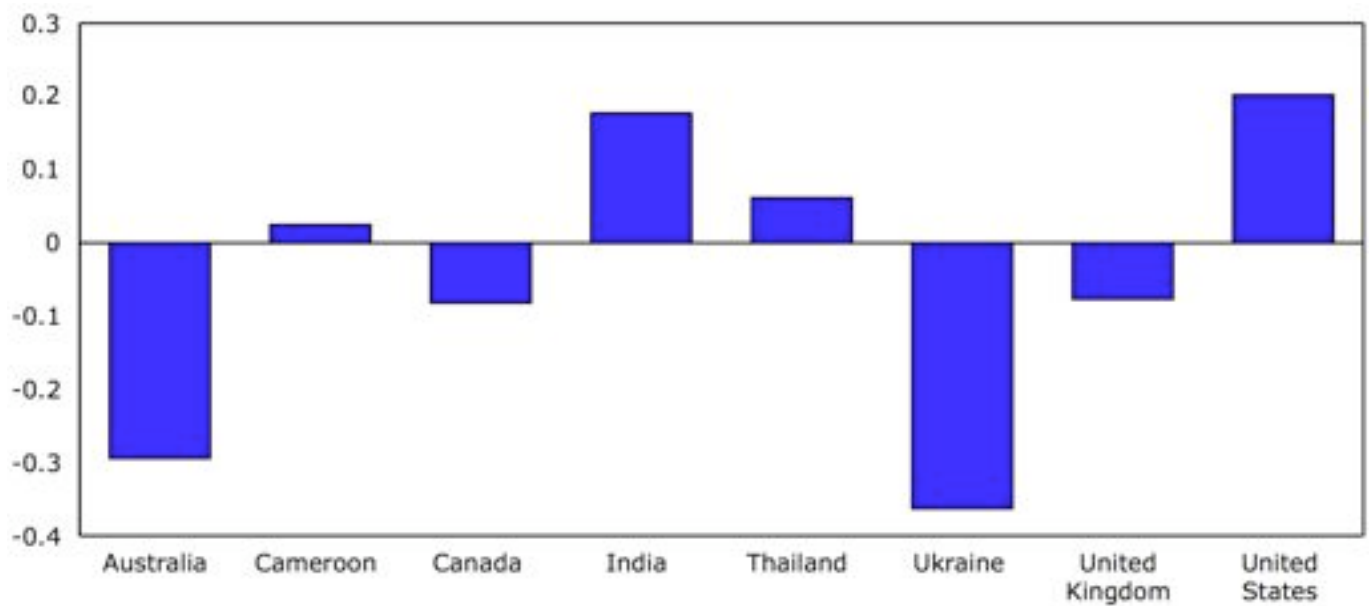


FIGURE 21 **ENGAGED IN THE WORLD SCALE**









## **5. Implications for Addressing Spiritual Development as Part of Youth Development**

# Addressing Spiritual Development as Part of Youth Development and Education

The fields of youth development and education struggle with how to address spiritual development. On the one hand, most youth workers and educators recognize that spiritual development is part of life for young people. Most research syntheses on youth development acknowledge (often briefly) that holistic development includes spiritual development.

But they are not quite sure what to do with it or whether it really matters or is part of their responsibility. It's a private matter, a family matter, or a religious matter. It's not something that many youth workers and educators are comfortable with or prepared to address. After highlighting key questions that need to be addressed to move the field forward, this section provides some starting-point ideas for youth, parents, and youth workers/educators to respond to the findings from this study.

## Practical Questions to Consider

Several practical questions, challenges, and opportunities need to be explored before spiritual development will be widely understood as an integral and essential priority for youth development.

**How do we create safe space for the dialogue?** These findings suggest that young people have open conversations about spiritual development rarely, at best. When they do occur, these conversations can be rich and meaningful. The question is whether leaders are equipped to help young people negotiate these questions in healthy, empowering, and respectful ways.

**How do we broaden the conversation?** One of the key insights in positive youth development is that all socializing systems affect all aspects of young people's development. So while families and religious institutions clearly have a role and stake in spiritual development, so do schools, youth organizations, social service agencies, and others. If diverse youth development organizations seek to become more intentional in spiritual development, it may open a dialogue that invigorates broad commitments to holistic development. At the same time, we must engage in honest dialogue about motivations, proselytizing, pluralism, and young people's capacities and rights to shape their own spiritual identities. These will be difficult conversations, and we do not yet have clear ground rules or guidelines. But it seems vital that people of good will find ways to engage in these issues with and on behalf of young people. Display 3 offers some questions to begin the conversation.

**How do we handle church-state issues?** What is the role of spiritual development in a secular or pluralistic society? Can—and should—schools, community-based public agencies, and other private institutions play any role? Do churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other religious institutions have any role beyond the socialization of the young people who are part of their tradition? To the extent that we view spiritual development as integral to human development, then broad engagement would likely be possible and constructive. If, however, the approach taken is de facto grounded in a majority religious tradition (such as Christianity in the United States, South Africa, or Brazil or Islam in Iran, Malaysia, or Egypt), then minority religious and secular groups in those countries have clear reasons for concern.

**How might youth work and education be different if we took spiritual development seriously?** For example, would the default of programmatic, didactic models of education ("teach them what they need to know") be recognized as inadequate, even counterproductive? Would we explore alternate approaches, such as the work of Maria Montessori, whose view of children as self-directed learners led her to design learning environments and experiences based on observing and listening to children, then encouraging them to take a lead in guiding their own growth and learning?

Display 4 suggests some of the possible needed shifts, presented here to prompt discussion and ongoing exploration.

### Ideas for Youth

- Talk with your friends or trusted adults about the findings of this study. What rings true with your own experiences? What doesn't make sense? What other questions would you ask?
- Create your own "spiritual autobiography." Remember where you've come from, where you are now, and where you hope to go. Reflect on the people and places that have shaped your journey. Share your story as you feel comfortable—with family, friends, trusted adults, or in video form on YouTube.
- Map your own neighborhood, village, or community for places that seem spiritual to you. Encourage friends and family to create their own maps, and compare them. Then spend time in those places.
- Identify people who are open to and supportive of your spiritual path. Ask them about their own spiritual journey. Share with them your own story, perspectives, and questions.
- Ask your parents and other adults about their own spiritual development? What made a difference for them when they were younger? What did they struggle with? How are they seeking to grow now?
- Keep a journal of things that happen during your day that help you grow spiritually.
- Create a "you lift my spirit" card and give it to a friend, family member, or mentor.
- Put time, energy, and focus into a creative activity, such as art, music, dance, theater, photography, or spoken word. Make a collage or an artistic representation of pictures that represent your dreams and hopes in the world.

### Ideas for Parents

This study reminds us, once again, that young people see their parents as a primary resource for their own spiritual development. Here are some ideas of what parents can do to nurture spiritual development. (More ideas can be found at: [www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org/Nurturing](http://www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org/Nurturing))

- Be intentional in listening to your child's wondering, questions, ideas, and perspectives related to spiritual development. Celebrate her or his insights, growth, and

### SPIRITUAL EXEMPLAR SNAPSHOT

Name: Akhil\*

Age: 17

Country: United States

Tradition: Hinduism

Marked by a deep sense of humility, Akhil has a keen sense of what an ideal spiritual exemplar should be and what he aspires to, and believes that he has a long journey ahead of him.

Though he practices rituals and traditions of Hinduism, Akhil characterizes himself as a modern spiritual person in that he holds to the teachings of the Vedanta Society, but mostly for their moral value and instruction. "The main creed that I like to refer to when I think of Vedanta is as Swami Vivekananda said," he explains, "If you're a Christian, be a good Christian. If you're a Muslim, be a good Muslim. And if you're a Hindu, be a good Hindu." Thus, for Akhil, morality and right living are central components of spirituality—regardless of faith background. Swamis have been influential in shaping this perspective, and in his life in general, for their wisdom, advice, teaching, and exemplary lifestyles.

Having seen extreme poverty in India, and having felt pain in this witnessing, Akhil considers the practical advantages and disadvantages of certain actions and how they promote humanity. He holds certain moral and ethical standards because they flow from reasonable and logical conclusions for the betterment of *society*. His decisions and philosophies are in accordance with his religion, but they do not comprise his worldview simply because they are prohibited or encouraged in his religion.

A firm believer in the power of logic and reason, he often uses these tools to reason through his actions to ensure that they align with his deeply held convictions and spiritual beliefs. Because for Akhil, it is extremely important that one's lifestyle is in accordance with his or her actions and beliefs – *that*, in his view, is authentic spirituality.

*\* Pseudonym; requested that his real name not be used.*

curiosity. Keep communication open, even if he or she says things that may scare you or disappoint you.

- Ask your child or teenager to tell you about the things that really matter to her or him. Share your own story and perspective about what's important to you.
- Model your own spiritual beliefs, practices, and commitments.
- Spend time in nature or other places that seem spiritual to you or your child.
- Support your child or teenager in expressing her or his own emerging sense of spirituality through journaling, music, or other creative expression.
- Find spiritual mentors you trust to connect with your child or teenager.
- Encourage your child or teenager to be part of positive peer groups that reinforce her or his spiritual commitments.
- Talk with other parents about what you're experiencing, including parents with older teenagers.
- Encourage your child or teenager to connect with peers and mentors who have deep spiritual commitments or practices—even if they are different from your own. Exposing a young person to different culture or belief system can trigger them to re-evaluate and reclaim their own.

### **Ideas for Educators and Youth Workers**

During sessions led by the Center for Spiritual Development at the Viva Cutting Edge Conference (July 2008), children's workers from around the world brainstormed ways that they can help nurture young people on their spiritual journeys. Here are some of their ideas.

- Take them seriously. Listen to them. Affirm, love, and encourage them in their own journeys.
- Build relationships with young people by cultivating intergenerational relationships and mentoring them.
- Create spiritually enriching "spaces" that give young people opportunities to reflect, be safe, and experience silence. Be present and patient with them. Ask good, open-ended questions.
- Use stories, art, films, and other media to stimulate thinking and reflection.
- Let them interpret their own experiences. Answer their questions honestly. Don't rush to correct them.
- Recognize and use their gifts. Encourage them to show care and compassion to each other and in the world. Give opportunities to serve others. Expect a lot of them. Let them teach us.

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### DISPLAY 3   **CONVERSATION STARTERS**

Use these questions to stimulate conversations about spiritual development with young people, parents, youth workers, and others.

- Tell me about a person you know who seems spiritual. What makes you see her or him that way?
- What does “being spiritual,” mean to you? How is “being spiritual” similar to or different from “being religious”?
- How do you see spirituality affecting other areas of your life (or the lives of young people you know), such as friendships, education, and physical development? How do those other areas affect spiritual development?
- When and how, if ever, do you talk about your own beliefs and commitments with others?
- What is most important in your life? What do you value most?
- What are your goals? What really excites you in life?
- What kind of contribution do you hope to make in this world—now and in the future?
- What people and places help to enrich your spiritual development? What do they offer that you most value and appreciate?
- How do you respond when other people’s spiritual beliefs, practices, traditions, and expressions are different from your own?
- Do you notice some times in life that are particularly important—either positively or negatively—to people’s spiritual development?
- What would help you in being more intentional and effective in nurturing spiritual development (for yourself or for others you care about)?

## DISPLAY 4 **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

This research is just beginning. But based on current research and theory, we can identify themes that have implications for youth work and education.

|                             | <b>Shift from . . .</b>                          | <b>Toward</b>                           | <b>Potential Implications for Practice</b>  |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| <b>Importance</b>           | Spiritual development is nice, but not necessary | Core to development                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend to all young people's spiritual development as part of a commitment to holistic development.</li> <li>• Develop practices and tools that equip educators and youth workers to address this dimension of life.</li> <li>• Recognize multiple expressions and experiences, including young people who do not see spirituality as part of their identity and worldview.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Primary goal</b>         | "Pass on" tradition                              | Nurture young people's intrinsic spirit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize learner-centered educational practices.</li> <li>• Cultivate a thinking climate and high expectations.</li> <li>• Value young people as active agents in their own development.</li> <li>• Offer opportunities to lead and serve.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>View of young people</b> | Recipients of programs and information           | Active agents in their own development  |   |
| <b>Emphasis</b>             | Programs   | Relationships                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a safe, warm, caring, and non-judgmental climate.</li> <li>• Foster intergenerational relationships and positive peer groups.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Responsibility</b>       | Religious institutions                           | All socializing systems in a community  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish community standards and expectations for respectful engagement in youth's spiritual development.</li> <li>• Listen to and learn from each other.</li> <li>• Acknowledge, celebrate, and support mutually reinforcing efforts across multiple community institutions.</li> <li>• Widen the web of engagement across organizations, families, and community.</li> </ul>        |
| <b>Scope</b>                | Programmatic or institutional focus              | Young people's whole world              |   |
| <b>Approach</b>             | Inevitable                                       | Intentional                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop programs and opportunities that are developmentally responsive</li> <li>• Link young people with environments, relationships, and opportunities that fit their own life path, gifts, and questions.</li> <li>• Seek to establish consistent norms and expectations.</li> <li>• Develop strategies that recognize and plan for growth and development.</li> </ul>               |
| <b>Perspective</b>          | Program year                                     | Ongoing growth and development          |   |



## Continuing the Exploration

This report offers a first look at the survey, focus group, and exemplar interview findings from the past three years of research by the Center for Spiritual Development. We have presented these descriptive findings with relatively little interpretation. Why? We wanted first to listen to young people's own experiences, perspectives, and voices. In addition, we hope that these initial findings spark dialogue and feedback both with us and in communities and organizations that engage young people. Through these conversations, we expect that our interpretation will be enriched, and we will also be guided to additional analyses of the voluminous data we have collected that will be most salient and meaningful to the field.

### The Danger of Over-Interpreting

Our intention in this research has been to open up new areas to explore through dialogue and further research, not to reach definitive conclusions about an elusive area of life and study. This work's primary purpose is to invite wider, more rigorous scholarship by building and testing instruments based in new theoretical approaches to understanding spiritual development as part of human development in childhood and adolescence.

Thus, for example, the survey data presented here show differences between the samples of young people in each country. That is useful and interesting, but only to a point. We cannot conclude, for example, that all Australian youth are lower in their levels of spiritual commitment or engagement than youth in Cameroon—a distinction that is fairly consistent in the data presented here. Though these patterns may reflect a broader social pattern (and, in fact, international studies consistently show levels of religious commitment are significantly higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in Westernized countries such as Australia), there may also be significant ways in which sample biases (such as levels of education, religiosity, or income) may be affecting the findings. Future analyses that account for age, gender, religious tradition and participation) will help to reduce these biases, and full confidence in these findings will require future studies using representative samples.

### Questions for Ongoing Exploration

The Center for Spiritual Development's research team is continuing analyses of the datasets that are introduced in this report. Among the **research questions** being examined with current data are:

- Aside from some of the differences across countries (as shown in this report), what important patterns will become evident through analyses of the survey data by gender, age, religious tradition and commitment levels, and other variables? How will these patterns add richness to the understanding of spiritual development?
- What patterns surface as additional statistical analyses are conducted on the survey data to show the relationship among items and concepts in the study? What scales can be created that uncover broader patterns within and across the samples in different countries?
- Will the three proposed core spiritual development processes hold true under additional statistical analyses, or will different patterns or clusters emerge?
- Is it possible to create a typology of spiritual development that recognizes that young people are all in the midst of spiritual development, but that their pathways vary on the basis of key variables in their worldviews and lives?
- What can we learn about the outcomes or correlates of spiritual development (using a refined theoretical framework) from this initial data?

Additional **research questions** are suggested by the findings from this study that will require further data collection. These include:

- What pathways of spiritual development emerge across the first two decades of life? How do these pathways vary by individual differences (gender, age, race/ethnicity, etc.), tradition, and culture?
- How do young people's life experiences (positive and negative) impact the trajectory of their spiritual life? How do early spiritual experiences and processes affect later development? Is there a cumulative effect across time and developmental contexts?
- To what extent is spiritual development inextricably linked to cognitive development and, more specifically, language acquisition? What about emotional, moral, or physical development?
- What are potential positive and negative outcomes of spiritual development? What variables predict these outcomes?
- How will the patterns that emerge from these preliminary studies be refined, confirmed, or challenged through additional research with representative samples of young people in the participating countries?
- How would these patterns be similar or different if appropriate methods were utilized to study these dynamics in younger children and/or with young adults? What continuity and discontinuity are evident in spiritual development across the first three decades of life?

Finally, there are a number of **practice-related questions** that are suggested by these preliminary findings. These include:

- How might youth work be different if it took more seriously some of young people's own experience and perspective on spiritual development?
- How are the young people in particular programs and settings similar to or different from the youth in these studies? How much opportunity have they had to give voice to their own perspectives?
- What new questions do these preliminary findings raise for practitioners? If confirmed, how would the findings from these preliminary studies reinforce or challenge current programs and practices in youth work?
- What would need to happen in programs and other forms of practice for some of the emerging themes and opportunities to take root in work with youth?

## **An Invitation to Dialogue**

There is a burgeoning body of research and professional interest in examining and understanding young people's spiritual development. This preliminary report on several exploratory studies seeks to advance this field by attending to young people's own perspectives on spiritual development and its place in their lives. The study is only a starting point. As suggested by the above questions, much more needs to be done in order to more fully understand the richness and complexity of this domain of life (recognizing that some aspects of it will likely always remain mysterious).

We invite you into this conversation, which crosses national boundaries, academic disciplines, religious traditions, and philosophical worldviews. In doing so, we hope that it enriches the commitment of both scholars and practitioners to each do their part to ensure that young people in all places and from all backgrounds have in their lives the critical resources, relationships, opportunities, and internal strengths that they need to thrive.

## Acknowledgments

The research introduced in this study is the product of tremendous effort by many colleagues at Search Institute and around the world. Below are the key people who have been engaged in this work, but we know there are many others who have been involved. We particularly thank the young people who participated in surveys, focus groups, and interviews, sharing their own stories and perspectives so that we might all learn from them.

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- **Deena Bartley**, project coordinator, Center for Spiritual Development
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- **Angela Hackel**, research assistant (coordinator and co-author of focus group and survey studies)
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- **Peter C. Scales, Ph.D.**, senior fellow (principal investigator, spiritual development survey)
- **Arturo Sesma, Jr., Ph.D.**, research scientist

### International Advisors

A network of almost 120 distinguished leaders, social scientists, theologians/philosophers, and practitioners from around the world have provided invaluable guidance as we have engaged in this research project. For a listing of all the advisors, visit [www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org/advisors](http://www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org/advisors).

### Survey Partners

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#### **Youth Spiritual Exemplar Interviews**

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- **Tania Hussian**, Questscope, Amman, Jordan
- **Sarah Sharma**, social worker, Mumbai, India
- **Colin Bennett**, Moorlands Bible College, Christchurch, United Kingdom

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## APPENDIX B

### Additional Resources

#### **New Directions for Youth Development:**

**Spiritual Development**, edited by Peter L. Benson, Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, and Kathryn L. Hong (Jossey-Bass, 2008). This volume explores ways to integrate spiritual development and youth development to strengthen theory, research, and practice.

#### **The Handbook of Spiritual Development in**

**Childhood and Adolescence**, edited by Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Pamela E. King, Linda M. Wagener, and Peter L. Benson (Sage, 2006). More than 75 scholars examine the current state of scientific theory and research on spiritual development, addressing its definition, relation to other domains of development, ecological contexts, outcomes, and implications for the future in research and practice.

#### **Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions**

, edited by Karen Marie Yust, Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy E. Sasso, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). More than 40 religious scholars examine how the spiritual lives of children and youth are understood and nurtured in the world's religious traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.

#### **Spiritual Development in Children and Adolescents: An Annotated Bibliography of an Emerging Theoretical Framework**

, compiled by Sandra Longfellow, Angela Hackel, Deena Bartley, Arturo Sesma Jr., and Anthony Vicino. (Search Institute, 2008). This report presents a summary of recent empirical studies, meta-analyses, and review articles focusing on various aspects of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence.

#### **Additional Articles**

Benson, P. L. (2008). Foreword. In R. M. Lerner, R. Roeser, and E. Phelps (Eds.). *Positive youth development and spirituality: From theory to research* (pp. vii-x). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Benson, P. L. (2007). Spiritual development and adolescence. *National Council on Family Relations Report*, 52(2), F3, F19.

Benson, P. L. (2004). Emerging themes in research on adolescent spiritual and religious development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 8(1), 47-50.

Benson, P. L., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Rude, S. P. (2003). Spiritual development in childhood and adolescence: Toward a field of inquiry. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 205-213.

Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Sesma, A., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2005). Adolescent spirituality. In K. A. Moore & L. H. Lippman (Eds.), *What do children need to flourish? Conceptualizing and measuring indicators of positive development* (pp. 25-40). New York: Springer.

Kimball, E. M. (in press). Developing spirituality in adolescents: Research-informed practice and practice-inspired research. *Critical Social Work*, Special Issue.

Kimball, E. M., Mannes, M., & Hackel, A. (in press). Voices of global youth on spirituality and spiritual development: Preliminary findings from a grounded theory study. In M. de Souza, L. Francis, J. O'Higgins-Norman, & D. Scott (Eds.). *International handbook of education for spirituality, care and wellbeing* (2 volumes). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

King, P. E. (2008). Spirituality as fertile ground for positive youth development. In R. M. Lerner, R. Roeser, and E. Phelps (Eds.). *Positive youth development and spirituality: From theory to research* (pp. 55-73). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

King, P. E. (2007). Adolescent spirituality and positive youth development: A look at religion, social capital, and moral functioning. In R. K. Silbereisen and R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Approaches to positive youth development* (pp. 227-242). London: Sage.

King, P. E., & Roeser, R. (in press). Adolescent religious and spiritual development. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.). *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (3rd Ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Benson, P. L. (in press). Children, religion, and spiritual development: Reframing a research agenda. In A. Ben-Arieh, J. Cashmore, G. S. Goodman, J. Kampmann, & G. B. Melton (Eds.). *Handbook of child research*. London: Sage.

The Center for Spiritual Development has compiled an online database of almost 2,000 scientific articles that address dimensions of spiritual development. To access the database and to recommend additional resources, visit [www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org](http://www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org).



**[www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org](http://www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org)**

Search Institute's Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence is a global initiative to advance the research and practice of this important and understudied domain of human development. The center seeks to:

- Advance the scientific study of spiritual development by conducting qualitative and quantitative cross-cultural research on the nature, processes, and outcomes of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence.
- Cultivate a broad network of scholars, leaders, practitioners, and others who are engaged in advancing this field around the world.
- Develop tools, resources, and partnerships to help youth workers, parents, educators, and others more effectively nurture the spiritual lives of children and adolescents.
- Communicate with the public to position spiritual development as an essential aspect of child and adolescent development.

#### **What Makes the Center Unique?**

- The center integrates current understandings of human development with spiritual development.
- The center is international, seeking to examine spiritual development in a global context.
- The center is multi-faith, multicultural, and interdisciplinary, bringing together perspectives from the social sciences, religious studies, and many fields of practice.
- The center integrates innovative theory and research with effective dissemination and engagement with practitioners in multiple sectors of society.
- The center recognizes spiritual development as linked to, but not the same as, religious development.

#### **About Search Institute**

Search Institute is an independent, nonsectarian, nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities.

Founded in 1958, the institute:

- Conducts research that deepens knowledge of young people, what they need, and how to care for and work with them more effectively.
- Provides tools, resources, and services to equip parents, educators, youth workers, policy makers, and other leaders to create a world where all young people are valued and thrive.
- Collaborates with partners to broaden and deepen commitments, capacity, and effectiveness in fostering healthy development and thriving among children and adolescents.

For more information and additional resources, visit [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org).