

Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development

Editors: Elizabeth M Dowling, W George Scarlett, 2006

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Reviewed by Stephen Bigger, University of Worcester,
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This is a large volume with around 300 entries and 130 contributors, most from the USA with Tufts University, its base, well represented by 23 contributors. The editors are child developmental psychologists. The conceptual home of the project is in applied psychology, and the Encyclopedia has been published alongside a *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (also SAGE, edited by Roehlkepartain and colleagues, 2006) which will be reviewed separately. 'Spiritual development' is taken to be "about becoming a whole person, someone who stands for something that defines and gives meaning to being human...There is religion without spirituality and spirituality without religion" (p.xxiii). Religion is viewed as one route to spirituality, but not the only route. Should 'being human' be viewed negatively as being violent and self-centred? normally a positive interpretation is put on this sentiment. The title throws up some other curiosities. The key word is *development* and assumes a developmental schema: thus if a person is not religious and not spiritual his/her development has been retarded or arrested as the 'normal' development has not taken place - much like a child who has never developed communication skills. A child *must* be less spiritually developed than an adult. This assumption I find weak and needs further careful investigation. In describing what spiritual and religious development might look like on the ground, the ghost of Piaget looms large, albeit filtered through James Fowler. The wording of the title suggests an historical interpretation also, so an attempt is made to trace historical development of religions, which is rather too ambitious.

Therefore some selection is to be expected. The editors say "our intent was not to achieve a perfectly balanced and representative sample of entries" but "to help the reader to become better informed about the complexity of factors involved in religious and spiritual development, so as to become better able to function in a pluralistic society and better able to support personal spiritual growth" -to "help point the reader in the right direction" (p.xxiv). We need to judge this volume therefore by its ability to achieve each of these. The encyclopedia is organised alphabetically with a thematic 'reader's guide' organised around: the arts; concepts (religious and spiritual); health; leading figures; scholars; nature; organizations; places; practices; supports/contexts; texts; theory; and traditions. This is helpful for people following a theme. By way of definition, the entry on 'Differences between religion and spirituality in children and adolescents' is a useful reminder that the two are not the same. It declares these 'overlapping': this may be right but it is by contiguity rather than causality: children are not spiritual because they are religious, or religious because they are spiritual; indeed they might fail to be spiritual because they are religious. They might happen to be religious and spiritual at the same time, but this is not a necessary relationship, and we hope that education and communal nurture can make a difference.

The balance is however curious. There are no entries for Sikhs or Bahais but in contrast around 1000 words on crop circles. Sikhs get two mentions in passing - the reader learns only that they worship in gurdwaras. Bahais get three mentions, two in lists, one of which incorrectly says that they worship in 'assemblies'; the reader learns only that "they consider excess speech a deadly poison", which means very little unless the reader knows that this is a condemnation of backbiting and self promotion, actively promoting amicable democratic consultation. In such a volume, this is disgraceful. The aim of helping people talk intelligently to Sikhs and Bahais is not met. Crop circles, in contrast (and this reviewer lives amongst them in Wiltshire, England) "always seems to be a place of peace, love, loyalty, mutual respect and friendship" where the people spend all day singing and dancing with fellow circle spotters (p.100). The contrast is bizarre: of course various interest groups generally come together on the basis of good will and have fun, and on this basis the Followers of Rupert may also deserve an entry. The entry on Buddhism comes across as a verbose prospectus of American self-improvement Buddhism such as fills popular web pages, and there are at least several items about history and scriptures. In defence of the entries, the beginner will see Buddhism as making common sense and not being esoteric. The Jain entry opens saying (wrongly) that the "Jain tradition stems from Buddhism" (p.225) but immediately goes on to say that Mahavira the founder "was a senior contemporary of Gautama Buddha". The rest is a brief historical theology. Entries on religious groups in America predominate. There is a Christian flavour to many entries, and Christian comparisons are given in entries on world faiths. The item on the 'Jewish Bible' presents a Christian (and somewhat outdated) view that some Jews would object to, particularly about the Torah: the reader would not begin to understand how Jewish faith is rooted in these books. Nevertheless there is some apology for the Christian bias, since psychological research has tended to be rooted in Christian studies.

The arts has an idiosyncratic and restricted selection of 'exemplars'. Why for example is the only dance festival described Latvian? Perhaps the editor had the same thought for although this appears in the contents, the entry is missing. The main section on dance (pp.106-8) contains nothing on the highly significant and symbolism-rich Hindu sacred dance forms, but a mighty section on belly dance in America. There is a good entry on children's literature - but why are C S Lewis and Madeleine Engle singled out for exemplar status? The exemplars under spiritual figures are a mix of the expected and the surprising, stemming probably from the enthusiasms of the writing team. Similarly the section on 'scholars': the origins of the encyclopedia in applied psychology explain several (and the John Dewey and William James entries are really useful), but it is not a list of the world's fifteen most influential figures. Some entries are of project members (Fowler, Benson). Thomas Aquinas is included, but not Averroes or al Ghazali; and there are no scholars of religious studies - Smart, Eliade and many others. From other entries that caught my eye, 'faith' as either a belief system ('a faith') or as a psychological construct (pp.159f) raises the broader question of what faith might mean in spirituality - that is, in good faith (e.g. trustworthiness, loyalty, honesty, authenticity) or in bad faith (signifying the opposites) - significant markers of what kind of people we are deep down. This would benefit from further exploration. However, the Faith Maturity Scale (p.162) centres on definitions of maturity such as "Trusts God's saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Jesus" - in other words acceptance of a dogma (some would say myth) and its exclusivistic implications - in my view this is the very *antithesis* of faith and spirituality. The

other seven items on the scale cover general personal and social maturity, given a distinctive exclusive flavour by this first criterion.

Using the volumes own aims, will this volume help readers to function in a pluralistic society? It will get the average social worker or primary teacher started in learning about religions, particularly on varieties of Christianity and Judaism. These are largely brief pen portraits. There are better encyclopedias of world religions that would serve them far better. Will it help the reader's personal spiritual quest? The entry on 'Biological and Cultural Perspectives' illustrates the problem. It starts: "Spirituality is present in every known culture; it plays a significant role in the lives of a great many humans...". It sounds like a tremendous claim, until we remember that being spiritual means becoming a whole person and seeing meaning in being human. So of course personal fulfilment has always been a human goal. The story then needs to continue, 'What helps people towards that goal, and what has hindered them?'. Repressive religion certainly hinders them: the aim is compliance and not fulfilment. This item generally bemoans the lack of empirical research (a general complaint in the Encyclopedia) but concludes that "The universal presence of spirituality attests to a rather peculiar power inherent in the human mind, one which materialists can not wholly deny and which sages, saints and seers have long known as a given of human nature" (p.47). Others have called this the "god spot" (so Zohar and Marshall 2000). I prefer the evolutionary rationalist argument of Wolpert (2006), that the great human cognitive leap was to understand the principles of causation, and so could make tools - but humans too easily applied causation where it did not belong and thus became susceptible of delusion. If something good or bad happened, something or someone must have caused it - a deity, a witch, a spirit or an angel. Nothing can be coincidental. Great fulfilled human beings can apply this new understanding of causality appropriately - Gautama Buddha, who did not advocate belief in God, saw wrong causal thinking as the source of all human suffering and unhappiness. However for others, the misuse of causality created the illusion (or delusion) of powerful supernatural agents that needed appeasing. This gullibility has been systematised into dogma, where symbols and metaphors are reified, i.e. interpreted as real. We need to be always on our guard in this matter. The nature and existence of higher beings is a conundrum of some significance. Can we uphold a concept of revelation without believing naively in God? What might 'truth' mean in a world free from delusion? In what can we have confidence when we cannot hide behind 'Because God says...'. There are deep feelings that we regard as real and as truth - holiness, love, trust, worth. Determining what truth actually means (phenomenological) in these contexts is important, albeit not simple and uncontroversial.

Is this volume worth buying? Its combination of psychology and study of religions has not worked. It contains many worthwhile articles of broad interest, the strongest relating to applied psychology. This earns it a place on a library shelf; but the general reader should wait for the revised second edition which does proper justice to the contributions to spiritual thinking and development that world religions have made. Equally it should problematize the concept of development, and should not be reticent about the potential of dogmatic religions to impede spirituality.

References.

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