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**To cite this article:** Ivo Jirásek (2023): Spiritual literacy: non-religious reconceptualisation for education in a secular environment, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, DOI: [10.1080/1364436X.2023.2166467](https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2023.2166467)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2023.2166467>



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Published online: 23 Jan 2023.

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# Spiritual literacy: non-religious reconceptualisation for education in a secular environment

Ivo Jirásek 

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to facilitate the transition from a religious definition of spiritual literacy to a non-religious, secular one. Philosophical anthropology emphasises the spiritual dimension as an anthropological constant. However, research in various fields frequently considers its intersection with religiousness. Non-religious spirituality cultivates experiences of transcendence but does not enter into the processes of *hierophany* (the sacred, the holy). The term 'spiritual literacy', which emphasises that the given mode of human experience is not constant but can be intentionally cultivated, proves optimal for education even in secular environment of public schools. A spiritually literate (cultivated) personality is an individual who reflects and cultivates skills of self-reflection, who can act in relation to other people in a mode characterised by prosocial orientation and altruism, who can experience environmental sensitivity and kinship with nature, and who is capable of astonishment and amazement at experiencing transcendence in relation to the wholeness.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 September 2021  
Accepted 2 January 2023

## KEYWORDS

Spirituality; holism;  
philosophy of education;  
hierophany; public schools

## Introduction

The semantic field defining the understanding of the topic of this paper is very blurred and imprecise. The specific delimitation of the meanings of basic terms is fundamentally dependent on the ideological grounding of individual researchers and experts publishing on spirituality in the educational environment. Conceptual ambiguity may therefore be the reason why spiritual development is perceived as a paradoxical ideal (Moulin-Stozek 2020). The unclear link is evident, for example, in the case of spiritual development and holistic education, although I can join the views that holistic education must not neglect the spiritual dimension of personality (Nyarko 2020; Miller 2016), for the whole of the human way of being is not complete without spirituality.

Since there is a model that sees spirituality as a concept broader than the religious and describes spiritual development also within the framework of

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religious education (O'Donnell 2020), I would like to emphasise an alternative conception. I will try to accent why it is possible to perceive spirituality without a religious dimension and how spirituality can be developed in a secular environment. For this definition I will use the concept of spiritual literacy. As I will try to explain in the following text, a spiritually literate (cultivated) personality is an individual who reflects and cultivates skills of self-reflection (Rohyatin et al. 2020; Ezealah 2019), who can act in relation to other people in a mode characterised by prosocial orientation and altruism (Fiona et al. 2018; Zarghi and Bolghan-Abadi 2021), who can experience environmental sensitivity and kinship with nature (Preston and Shin 2022; Suganthi 2019), and who is capable of astonishment and amazement at experiencing transcendence in relation to the wholeness (Jastrzebski 2021; Manuel-Morgan and Lomas 2021; Abernethy and Kim 2018).

I will try to prove that the spiritual qualities of life belong potentially to every human being, that it is a fundamental character of all human beings, but at the same time that without developing this potential, a person can – in the words of Jan Amos Komenský – fall into 'non-human' (Hábl, 2017). An underdeveloped spirituality manifests itself in a narcissistic overestimation of one's own importance and in an exaggerated self-admiration. Or (possibly simultaneously) in psychopathic arrogance in relation to other people's rights and feelings. In a lack of sensitivity to environmental issues and in irresponsible plundering of natural resources. In short, a life with undeveloped spirituality is a life without principles and peace, manifesting itself in the pursuit of mammon or in superficial preoccupation without asking deep questions. Therefore, it is appropriate to develop one's spiritual potential and the concept of spiritual literacy suggests the developmental dimension of this theme.

## Religious spirituality

It is clear that the understanding of the terms religion and spirituality, and their content, depends to a large extent on their cultural and social construction. One of the theses of this paper is that religion – unlike spirituality – is not part of everyone's life. As an example, consider the situation in Central Europe: while the Czech Republic might be the most secularised country in Europe,<sup>1</sup> such a characterisation does not apply at all to the nearest neighbouring countries, where religiosity reach about 80% religious population.<sup>2</sup> A certain hypersensitivity to terms such as 'religion', 'holy', 'sacred', etc. can be experienced in the Czech Republic. And, even more, the access of religious organisations to public education in this country is not fully equal, as churches based on Christianity in particular have a privileged position thanks to special rights guaranteed by the state (Havlíček 2018).

Does this mean that the people here cannot experience deeper states of existence? A low level of religion does not *eo ipso* mean a low level of spiritual

experiences. Perhaps surprisingly, the people living here are not religious, but they are highly spiritual and diverse spiritual practices belonging to various traditions are widely used and experienced here (Nešporová and Nešpor 2009). Therefore, it seems likely that efforts to name the essential specifics of non-religious spirituality may be more radical in a secular environment than in one where spirituality and religion are conceived of in a blurred connection between the intersections of both phenomena, including use in pedagogical contexts.

Because historically the development of spirituality has been associated primarily with a religious way of life and with fervent piety, the religious modus of spirituality has traditionally developed in a religious context. Thus, religious spirituality is perceived differently and specifically in different religious systems, with different emphases of theology such as Christian spirituality (Louw 2021; Scorgie 2022), Islamic spirituality (Ghorbani et al. 2018; Amiruddin, Qorib, and Zailani 2021), Jewish spirituality (Alex and Morgan 2016), etc. Due to theological differences in the understanding of religious spirituality, its development is carried out differently, i.e., with regard to religious faith. So religious spirituality 'is closely linked with religion or faith tradition' (Lee 2020), p. 1). Thus religion can be seen as one of the five dimensions of spirituality that a teacher can develop in children (Rogers and Hill 2002).

The current situation of religious diversity also requires interreligious dialogue in religious education (Pollefeyt and Richards 2020). Thus, in scientific schools, guided by the idea of pluralism and democracy of diverse religious systems, information from scientific studies of religions is used (Moe 2019), freedom of religion is emphasised, and there is no uniform or common educational policy on religious education in the countries' national systems (Llorent-Vaquero 2018).

If traditionally the term spirituality has been used mainly in religious contexts, since roughly the mid-20th century, in relation to the New Age movement, the wave of environmentalism and feminism, the term has come to refer to a broader range of spiritual experiences (Vliegenthart 2020) and nowadays the prevailing view is that spirituality can be realised both within and outside religious traditions (Vaughan 2002). Related to this is the increasingly popular self-labelling phrase 'spiritual but not religious', with which a relatively large part of the population of Western civilisation identifies. Yet even this definition remains varied and ambiguous in its use, and culturally contingent (Wixwat and Saucier 2021).

### **Non-religious spirituality**

The conceptual complexity and ambiguity of the basic concept, spirituality, is behind many of the difficulties in potentially defining its non-religious conception. Spirituality is perceived as part of health, or spiritual health is conceived as a holistic phenomenon (Zullig, Ward, and Horn 2006; Fisher 2011; Jirásek et al.

2021). Psychological research operates with the possibility of perceiving spirituality as an independent dimension of personality, e.g., as a sixth factor extending the 'Big Five' five-component model of personality (Henningsgaard and Arnau 2008; Piedmont 1999), or linking it to the four Jungian personality functions (Bunker 1991). Another concept presupposes spirituality to be an independent form of intelligence (Emmons 2000; Vaughan 2002). However, this is a highly debatable concept, as spiritual experience phenomenologically transcends the intellectual sphere (Gardner 2000).

The spirit, the basic constitutive element of the human way of being, includes not only intellect, but also thinking (in ideas), and a certain manner of perceiving the essential content, as well as a group of volitional and emotive acts such as love, respect, blissfulness, freedom, and so forth. The spirit, an exclusively human characteristic, is not an object or substance, but an event, a constant self-realisation and updating. The centre of the manifestations of the spirit is the person and his specific features of openness to the world, freedom, and existential detachment (Scheler 1981). Hence the assumption that it is possible to analyse spirituality without reference to religion and therefore that it is adequate to consider the phenomenon of non-religious, even atheist spirituality, yet this is not an entirely original theme (Jirásek 2013; Schnell 2012; Skurzak 2020; Manuel-Morgan and Lomas 2021; Walach 2017). Another premise is the hypothesis of the difference between spiritual (pneumatic) and mental (psychic) states, processes and experiences. The former are characterised by an emphasis on the existential dimension of life and its meaning (Frankl 2006), thus transcending not only physical grounding in the world but also psychic performances (i.e., reason, will, and emotion). The final premise is a characteristic of non-religious spirituality, evident in four distinct types of relationships: to self, to other people, to nature, and to transcendence (Jennifer, Haslip, and Schein 2019b; Rogers and Hill 2002; Walton 1996; Hay and Nye 1998, 1996).

Note that it is the latter relationship that is probably the main reason for the conflation of religious and non-religious modes of spirituality, that is, the distinction made by the category of the sacred, the basic element of religion, and the existentialist one that characterises spirituality. I believe that for adequate spiritual personal development, including experienced transcendence, basic understanding need not be anchored through religious terms denoting an ontologically different reality (God, Lord, Creator, higher power, divinity, etc.) and experiences presupposing a relationship to it (religious attitude, faith, prayer, etc.). This brings us back to the fundamental difference between religion and spirituality.

## Religious and spiritual experience

Typically, reference is made to the institutional foundations of religious life and personal experience of spirituality to distinguish the two (Nash 2002), yet I argue

that the relationship between the two domains of individual experience and social life is more complicated, including the distinction between religious and spiritual experiences. What used to be perceived as a religious mode of experience is now very often described as the spiritual dimension of experience, like peak experience (Maslow 1994), flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), or holotropic, i.e., oriented towards the whole (Grof 2003). All these types of experiences are not the result of religious saturation, but of knowledge based on personal experience. Thus, they are transcendent, spiritual experiences, but not necessarily religious ones. In connection with their potential for use in the pedagogical environment, they can be subsumed under the umbrella term 'transformative experiences', expanding a change in the horizon of understanding and life context (Jirásek, Parry, and Allison 2020).

In particular, the personal connections that exceed ordinary experience, that is, the relationship to transcendence, to overcoming empirically detectable reality, is the area where spirituality most closely meets (or crosses) religion. Religious experiences differ from the daily provision of needs in the absence of purposefulness and entering the realm of the sacred, the holy. Religious experiences are attainable only through faith, which is a very different cognitive approach to the world compared to other approaches such as rationality. Without faith, religious experiences and therefore religious forms of the spiritual dimension cannot be fully experienced.

Both spheres (religion and non-religious spirituality) intervene in both areas, i.e., the profane and the sacred. Religion is not only beliefs, rituals and commands, but also objects, buildings, organisations and other secular aspects belonging essentially to religion. Spirituality is characterised in particular by experiential states such as awe, beauty and love, which through extraordinary experiences merge into extraordinary states of consciousness. If the experiences reach into the sacred sphere, they acquire the character of mystical, religious experiences. We can imagine two directions of experiential expansion: *hierophany*, the penetration of the sacred (divine) into natural reality, so to speak, from the top down, is necessary for religious movement. Conversely, the spiritual dimension is characterised by *transcendence*, that is, the ascent from ordinary experience into extraordinary states of consciousness, as it were, from the bottom up. The intersection of these two processes is possible. I will focus on those aspects of the possible development of spirituality that are accessible to every person, regardless of their worldview or faith stance.

### **Non-religious spiritual literacy**

This paper intends to highlight the possibilities of a non-religious spirituality, it leans towards the spiritual development of children through fundamental questions, and a sense of self and non-material well-being (Wringe 2002), through a sense of awe and wonder, paradoxes and conflicts as parts of

human life (Miller and Drake 1997), by the effect of the personality of the teacher, who is always the most important factor: 'Whoever our students may be, whatever subject we teach, ultimately we teach who we are'. (Palmer 1999), p. 10).

Spiritual literacy, which can be developed in the secular environment of public schools, thus cultivates four basic relationships (to self, to others, to nature, and to transcendence), makes use of experiential relationships that go beyond the commonly realised personal identity, but does not enter the realm of the 'absolutely other', the sacred and holy, where spiritual experiences are already transformed into religious ones.

The term 'spiritual literacy' appears sporadically in the pedagogical literature, but it is an area that has not been much explored and clarified so far, and nor is it terminologically anchored. We encounter the concept especially in research on children's spirituality through visualisation methods (Binder 2011; Emma and Smalley 2013), where the idea of spiritual literacy is presented without sufficient theoretical definition and its intuitive clarity is assumed when specific activities in the school environment are being described. Also, a set of hundreds of short examples pointing to a spiritual perspective on things, the environment, leisure, relationships, and community uses the term 'spiritual literacy' (Brussat and Ann Brussat 1998), but without adequate conceptual analysis. Spiritual literacy, again without distinguishing between spirituality and religion, is also related to the possibilities of family therapy (Holmberg, Jensen, and Vetere 2021). With reference to the use of the term 'spiritual literacy' in the context of religious education, the term has been criticised as being inherently unstable (Taggart 2002). The most recent contribution to the scholarly debate (Anna and Da Silva 2022) summarises the literature on children's emerging spirituality, explains the importance of spiritual experience in children's lives, and evaluates the delineation of spirituality towards to, or placement in, religious education and reflects on the potential implementation in curriculum and the introduction of spiritual literacy into public education. Thus, it is a very close ideological affinity with this study, differing primarily in selected argumentative emphases and specific formulations.

The idea of the content fulfilment of spiritual literacy cannot be approached through a definition. However, some delimitation is provided by reference to experiences in the four types of relationships already mentioned. Of course, it is not possible to make a comprehensive list, so I will rather indicate the various aspects by selected illustrative examples:

- (1) Spirituality in relation to oneself is manifested in the skills of self-reflection (including listening to the voice of conscience), mindfulness, concentration on present states of being, and questioning the meaning of life. This area can be cultivated through calming and settling down, by limiting the perception of pressure and excessive sensations of the external world,

contemplation, meditation, breath work, active imagination (Koncz et al. 2021, Keating 2017; Van Gordon, Shonin, and Richardson 2018, Piotrowski, Binder, and Schwind 2017).

- (2) Spirituality in relation to other people presents itself in the horizontal transcendence of the self in prosocial orientation and altruism, in personal friendly and loving attitudes, in compassion towards others. Such a relationship cannot be conceived in a possessive mode, it is not based only on personal individual qualities, but is the building of a space 'between' two people (Tsabar 2017; Aslanian 2018).
- (3) Spirituality in relation to nature is evident in the environmental sensitivity and in the affinity with the natural world, in the possibilities of 'connection' to the landscape and the natural world. This area is well communicated by a well-developed tradition of environmental and outdoor education (Heintzman et al. 2008; 2010, Solomon 2003).
- (4) Spirituality in relation to the whole and to transcendence, which is evident in the vertical extension of the self, manifested in the capacity for wonder and amazement. The experience of overlap, deep connection, consonance or fusion, which approximate the descriptions of the extraordinary states of consciousness commented above (peak experience, flow, holotropic experience) and transformative experiences, but without the involvement of the process of *hierophany* and entering the realm of the sacred and holy. The experience of finding one's own place in the totality of reality and accepting the paradoxical nature of reality (Piff et al. 2015; Schinkel 2020; Yaden et al. 2017).

Therefore, I present a working definition of a spiritually literate personality as an individual who reflects and cultivates skills of self-reflection, mindfulness, and concentration in relation to themselves, who can act in relation to other people in a mode characterised by prosocial orientation and altruism, i.e., friendly and loving, who can experience environmental sensitivity and kinship with nature, and who is capable of astonishment and amazement at experiencing transcendence in relation to the whole and transcendence, for example, in the form of extraordinary states of consciousness and transformative experiences.

### **How to develop spiritual literacy**

Considering the reasonable scope of the text, I will only point out, by way of illustration, a few possibilities for the development of spiritual literacy with regard to the age of the personalities being developed.

Even at an early age, in the preschool setting, children can be spiritually cultivated through free play, creative expression, and by emphasising holistic educational opportunities in building interpersonal relationships, sensing



adventure, asking questions, and practicing virtues (Mata-McMahon 2019; Jennifer, Haslip, and Schein 2019a, 2020).

In primary education, picture books are proving to be appropriate vehicles for cultivating spiritual literacy, particularly as a basis for guided discussion between children and an adult facilitator to highlight spiritual issues (Kendall 1999), for interpreting associations between their own lives and mythological stories (Hyde 2005), or using art techniques, dramatisation and role-play (Gellel 2018). Similarly, reading stories without visual accompaniment can serve a similar purpose (Myers and Elaine Myers 1999).

For older school-aged children with more developed cognitive skills and abstract thinking, the pedagogical approach of Philosophy for Children (P4C) (Lipman 1984, 2011) has been shown to be a suitable tool for developing spiritual literacy. The goal of P4C is holistic thinking (Lipman 1993), or a form of 'full literacy' (Murriss 2016), hence it meets the quest to cultivate spiritual literacy in a holistic existence.

In adolescence, outdoor education also appears to be a suitable option for developing spiritual literacy, as life transformation through adventure and experiential programs radically changes relationships to self, others, nature, and the whole (Jirásek and Svoboda 2016; Quay 2013; Heintzman 2010). It seems that the essence of these particular educational activities can be understood in their ambivalence of attraction and concern as a principle of spiritual development or implicit religion (Jirásek 2020).

Spiritual literacy can also be developed in adulthood with adequate means and methods. As an example of the wonder and amazement of confronting what transcends our individual existence, let us mention the principles of systemic constellations (Hellinger 2002, 2003), used in psychotherapy, partner and family counselling, coaching and management, as well as in pedagogy. The diverse links and systemic connections are formed not only by visible hierarchical structures, but also by unconscious emotional saturations (Welford 2014; Pritzker and Duncan 2019).

Spiritual literacy, however, is a topic that escapes a clear description of the content of the curriculum and penetrates rather into the world beyond words, into the realm of imagination and symbolic archetypes.

## Conclusion

The re-conceptualised view of spiritual literacy as a pedagogical effort to develop those dimensions of the human way of life that can be left in seclusion in traditional education allows the educational use of various techniques, methods, means, and strategies without reference to a religious ideological background. To put it more clearly: such efforts are not directed against respectable religious traditions. It is a formulation of an effort to spiritually deepen the lives of people for whom religious life is inaccessible because they do not possess

faith and therefore cannot cross the boundary of the sacred. Spiritual literacy which is not tied to religious values, norms, and practices, rooted in philosophical anthropology that perceives the spirit as a specifically human way of being, opens up opportunities for spiritual development in a fully secularised environment. Unlike the terms sacred, holy, or divine, which characterise the sphere of religion, it prefers to anchor existence in four kinds of relationships to oneself, to other people, to nature, and to the whole, by which means the spiritual dimension is fully anchored in lived reality, without the need for ontological otherness of the 'absolutely different', without transcending the profane into the sacred. Thus defined, spiritual literacy does not require manifestations of *hierophany*, i.e., the manifestation of the sacred in the profane world through faith, rituals, and doctrines in a group of fellow-believers, but at the same time it preserves possibilities of transcendence, transcending the mode of animality into spiritual dimensions through transformative experiences of wonder, amazement, beauty, love, and feelings of unification or fusion.

If cultures and civilisations differ, among other things, from religious doctrines that find legitimate opportunities for education in church and religious schools, it would be difficult for public education in the era of globalisation and global migration to prefer one religious system over another. However, in order for the education system not to remain a dimension of dehumanised pragmatic usability and technical application, not only to pass on information and exploitable education but also to disseminate wisdom, it is necessary to develop not only the cognitive characteristics of children and other participants in pedagogical processes, but also feelings, imagery, and intuition. I am convinced that the spiritual literacy that this article defines conceptually offers such opportunities. The condition is the perception of a human being in their holistic understanding and in addition to the development of body and mind, it is necessary to develop four relationships: a relationship to oneself by cultivating skills of self-reflection, mindfulness, concentrating on the 'here and now', and asking questions about the meaning of life; a relationship to other people through a prosocial orientation, altruism, i.e., the meaning and practice of social self-transcendence, and a friendly and loving attitude; a relationship to nature through an interest in environmental sensitivity and affinity with the natural world and a relationship to the whole and transcendence, with a deliberate emphasis on the ability to feel astonishment and amazement, experiencing transcendence, deep connections, harmony, or merging, i.e., not omitting even extraordinary states of consciousness and transformative experiences from defining what each person should develop in their life.

## Notes

1. 18.7% of people declared they are believers identified with a church or religious society, while the answer 'without religious belief' made over two thirds (68.3%) of

the answers in last census in 2021. <https://www.czso.cz/csu/scitani2021/the-czso-presented-the-first-results-of-the-2021-census>.

2. 70% of the Slovak population declares a relationship to a church, religious society or religion in 2021. <https://www.scitanie.sk/en/roman-catholics-represents-56-percent-of-the-population>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

*Ivo Jirásek*, Ph.D. undertakes philosophical aspects of movement culture (sport), specializes in the field of experiential and outdoor education and the phenomenon of spiritual literacy. His education and publishing activities are at the border of the fields of pedagogy, philosophy and kinanthropology. He has recently published other articles on these topics in *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*; *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*; *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*; *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*; *History of Education*; *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* and others.

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