

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND SPIRITUALITY: FROM THEORY TO RESEARCH

By R. M. LERNER, R. W. ROESER, & E. PHELPS (Eds.)

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Reviewed by Elizabeth Tamez Méndez

Mention the word “teenager” and most people run for cover! Historically in society and academia, youth have been linked with rebellion and seen as either broken or heading in that direction (Lerner, 2005). What if teenagers could be seen as potential productive members of society and leaders among our communities and churches? The emerging scholarly discipline of positive youth development (PYD) proposes that although problems exist among teens, they can discover their life purpose and develop their assets by receiving proper guidance and thus become major positive contributors to society.

Within this developmental discourse, spirituality is a key factor for PYD. Smith and Denton (2005) report that most American teens view religious faith as an important part of their lives, yet the human development research literature is still deficient in its discourse and recognition of the spiritual aspects of human development. This book, edited by Lerner, Roeser, and Phelps, serves as an initial attempt to fill the gap via a collection of chapters resulting from the 2006 Conference on Positive Youth Development and Spirituality, held at Tufts University in 2006. This multidisciplinary collaboration from biologists, sociologists, and psychologists offers an array of examinations, centered within Developmental Systems Theory, that propose an overview of “concep-

tual/theoretical, definitional, and methodological issues that need to be addressed in understanding the connections between spirituality and [PYD]” (p. xi).

The chapters consist of contributions from thirty-three different authors, including some of the most prominent scholars in this field such as Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, William Damon, Jacquelynne S. Eccles, Pamela Ebstyn King, and Elena L. Grigorenko, as well as contributions from various faculty members and doctoral students at Tufts University. The material contained throughout the chapters covers a wide spectrum of topics related to spiritual development, which serves as a highly useful resource to obtain a panoramic understanding of the main aspects that pertain to this research discipline.

The book also offers a unique multicultural perspective as a good start to the conversation. Granted, this material is limited and does not include work from authors of Asia or Central and South America, where spirituality is a more integrated part of life. Some readers may perhaps not like the heavy emphasis of some chapters on separating spirituality from religion. Nevertheless, the material presented is highly valuable as it provides insight into the key theories and presents the most recent research in this discipline that can be applied to our work within the church.

To navigate the book and make the most of it, it is useful to know that it is organized into four sections: (1) conceptualization of the relationship, (2) biological covariates, (3) the individual as contributor to the link, and (4) practical implications within social and cultural level covariates. The contributions propose “new ways of using qualitative data, physiological and brain imaging data, and a variety of quantitative techniques to address this important aspect of human development” (p. xiii).

The main theoretical frameworks guiding PYD and spirituality are constructs related to deepening relationships: individual context relationships, generosity or contributions, vertical and horizontal transcendence, and thriving. The individual context relationships refer to the stage of development where the adolescent becomes aware of the mutually influential interaction between person and context that benefits both. As a result, the adolescent engages in the process of “changing the self to support the context and altering the context to support the self” (p. 5), which ultimately leads to the awareness of the sense of

self that moves the adolescent to make contributions to self, family, community and society. This makes leeway for a young person to move into the planes of transcendence where actions and contributions create impacting results on the horizontal plane (impact in the world) and the vertical plane (connection with the “infinite, eternal, personal creator”) (p. 8). The hypothesis of the book is that these factors are tied by spirituality as the emotional “fuel” that energizes the process.

The fourth chapter proved to be one of the most useful for ministerial application. Here Dr. Pamela E. King, assistant professor in the Center for Research and Child and Adolescent Development at Fuller Theological Seminary, proposes a practical theology and conceptual model “for understanding how spirituality may be a unique and robust catalyst for [PYD]” (p. 55). The model proposes a means by which to integrate spiritual experiences which can help youth ministries reach the foundational goal of leading adolescents to a personal encounter with Christ.

King’s model depicts three dimensions: the ideological context (religious values giving meaning to experiences), the social context (integrating with society), and the transcendent context (reality beyond oneself). These comprise spirituality as an underlying variable of influence on PYD. King highlights spirituality’s transcendent dimension, pointing out that “many youth programs and organizations offer ideology and rich social environments, but not many intentionally promote experiences of transcendence . . .” (p. 60).

It is within the aspect of transcendence that youth ministries can help their students embrace spirituality and PYD by providing opportunities that allow them to “experience [themselves] in relationship to God” (p. 60) and a personal relationship with Christ, especially in this era where

the postmodern mind-set has created a desire in the younger generation to experience things firsthand rather than simply be told what to believe and how to live. It is not enough for them to believe God exists, to learn about God, or to hear about other people’s encounters with God. They want to experience the presence of God and know God on a personal level. (Bergen, 2002, p. 19)

In everyday interactions with adolescents it is common to hear expressions of disappointment with the religious community and questioning the love of God. There is so much pain and confusion present in their lives that it just does not seem possible for God to exist, much less

to be personally present. It is only within the context of a personal and direct experience with Christ that a young person can embrace spirituality in a manner which promotes transcendence and a personal ownership of one's faith.

King offers us five practical suggestions for creating and facilitating these experiences of transcendence. First is transcendence experienced through a profound connection with the Divine, which may have profound implications for identity. This connection is catalyzed by the teachings that allow Christians to understand themselves as "sons or daughters of God" (Galatians 3:26) and also as being chosen by God (Ephesians 1:4).

Second is transcendence experienced through a connection with others by participation in religious congregations. By this, young people see "themselves as members of a historic tradition [and a religion that provides] both a past community of believers that has gone before them as well as a present body of believers that live along side of them" (p. 61).

Third is transcendence experienced through spiritual experiences in nature (e.g., outdoor experiences). When youth are sensually aroused through the aesthetics of nature, they are confronted with majesty which "may promote positive development by nurturing identity formation, a sense of purpose, and/or well-being" (p. 61).

Fourth is transcendence experienced through worship and religious rituals. Engaging in worship promotes one's awareness of the Divine, while engaging in rituals such as the Lord's Supper provides identification with believers past and present and union with Christ.

Fifth is transcendence experienced through spiritual practices or disciplines. For example, fasting from food "allows an individual to heighten his or her awareness and concentration on the spiritual" (p. 62), and praying and experiencing answered prayer may generate devotion to one's practice of spirituality. In addition, spiritual practices such as service to the poor allow fertile ground for young people to learn the intrinsic value of others, practice gratitude and self-sacrifice, and explore different competencies and skills (p. 62).

Intentionally promoting such spiritual experiences of transcendence within youth ministry has "a rich potential for promoting positive youth development in young people" (p. 60). But above all, these experiences provide a conduit by which adolescents can have the experi-

ences they demand in order to embrace as their own the Truth found in Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

As multiple and diverse disciplines continue the endeavour to conduct research and fill the spirituality gap, this book has skillfully achieved a first attempt at a comprehensive overview of thinking, theory, and initial research based on what is currently known about the study of spirituality as it relates to PYD within the Developmental Systems Theory.

Each chapter contains a wide array of recommendations for further study to continue the emergent progression from theory to research. Though there are knowledge gaps to fill, this field of study promises to provide an in-depth look at one of the characteristics unique to humans—spirituality—and apply it to PYD in the effort to ultimately see young people thrive. This is especially important for religious scholars, theologians, and spiritual leaders as we seek to build the intellectual and practical scaffolding for improving the life of adolescents and to lead them in spiritual experiences by which they can discover their life purpose, become positive contributors to society, and deepen their personal connection with Christ. This book also serves as a reminder and challenge for us to view young people in a different light and ask ourselves what we can do today to promote PYD in the lives of the young people within our circle of influence.

References

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