<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

What is above everything? : Conceptions of the sacred among Finnish youth

Ranta, Mette

Brill
2021

Ranta , M , Grönlund , H & Pessi , A B 2021 , What is above everything? Conceptions of the sacred among Finnish youth . in E Kuusisto , M Ubani , P Nokelainen & A Toom (eds) , Good Teachers for Tomorrow's Schools : Purpose, Values, and Talents in Education . Moral Development and Citizenship Education , vol. 16 , Brill , Leiden , pp. 111-128 . https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004465008_007

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/334117>

https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004465008_007

unspecified
acceptedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

What is Above Everything?

Conceptions of the Sacred among Finnish Youth

Mette Ranta¹, Henrietta Grönlund², and Anne Birgitta Pessi²

¹Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki

²Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki

Abstract

Individuals' conceptions and understandings of the sacred illustrate the deepest levels of their identity and spirituality. Our article presents the findings of our research based on representative data from Finnish youth (Ranta, Grönlund, & Pessi, 2016). We examine how understandings of the sacred are related to religiosity and non-religiosity, and how the definitions vary across gender. Interestingly, more than in older age groups, youth link elements of both individuality and togetherness to their understanding of the sacred. Our study reflects cultural interpretations of what the sacred means for Finnish youth. All in all, in order for teachers to understand young peoples' world view, sense of purpose, and values, exploration of these understandings is crucial. This will help the teachers of tomorrow's schools to support the wellbeing and identity construction of youth.

Keywords

Identity, individuality, religiosity, spirituality, the sacred, values, youth, young people

1 Introduction

What is most important to you? What do you value the most? In what do you want to invest most of your money? What about your time? The answers to such questions deeply illustrate our values.

Values provide an empirical window into the core of every individual's personal identity (Grönlund, 2011; Hitlin, 2007). Values, by definition, are trans-situational, relatively stable principles or desirable goals that guide individuals' actions (Schwartz, 2007). Among young people, values play a significant role in how individuals see themselves in the community (Lindh & Korhonen, 2010). As values are a pivotal element of everyone's identity, understanding their students' values is crucial for teachers to support these young people as they develop and construct their identities. That is, good teachers of tomorrow will understand the importance – and to some extent the content – of their students' values. Identity formation requires active identity work. While healthy psychological development occurs throughout the lifespan, according to the classic work of Erikson (1968), gaining a sense of identity is a core developmental task throughout adolescence. This is the case especially in individualized societies like the Western ones (Erikson, 1968), where individuals are expected to make significant decisions and find their life path on their own (Miles, 2000).

In this article, we argue that the concept of the sacred provides a similar window on the deepest – or even deeper – level of meaningful issues as values. As we illustrate in our theoretical framework, the sacred is something set aside and set above everything else. It is the most secured and important of all valued matters. There is plenty of research on the values of children, youth and young adults (Daniel et al., 2012; Döring, 2010; Lindh & Korhonen, 2010; Reeskens & Vandecasteele, 2017; Sortheix, Parker, Lechner, & Schwartz, 2019; Uzefovsky, Döring, & Knafo-Noam, 2016; Vecchione et al., 2016, 2020; Weber, 2017), as well as some research on the role of these values in identity formation (Andrews, 1973; Erentaitė, Vosylis, & Crocetti, 2019; Grönlund, 2011; Knafo & Schwartz, 2010). Much less empirical research has been done on young people's views and experiences on the sacred. Values and the sacred are not the same, and we discuss their relationship in this article. Religion and spirituality have been studied relatively extensively, also regarding younger age groups, but most quantitative studies have focused on institutionalized religion (Collins-Mayo & Dandelion, 2016; Sjöborg, 2013; Storm & Voas, 2012). Although a growing number of studies have emerged on the role of religion in youth development (Lerner, Roeser, &

Phelps, 2008), there has been a call for empirical studies concerning its relation to young adults' religiosity or spirituality (De Haan, Yonker, & Affholter, 2011). Research is crucial; As noted by Oser and Scarlett (1991) and Tamminen (1991), few phenomena may be as integral across human development as religious and spiritual concerns. As Tirri and Quinn (2010) have concluded, youth who engage in their quest for self within a spiritual context potentially have the advantages of inspirational ideology, community support and transcendent understanding in striving to achieve the authentic balance between care of self and care for others, both of which are crucial for sustained purpose.

As a concept, of course, the sacred intertwines with religion and with spirituality. Currently, the spirituality and religiosity of young people are in flux. In Finland, the religious landscape has changed from strong institutionalized Evangelical Lutheranism to an emphasis on globalism, secularism, and new religious movements; this is reflected in how students themselves see the role of religion in the school setting (Kuusisto, Poulter, & Kallioniemi, 2016). At the individual level, one significant change has been the shift from religious upbringing in the family to religiosity construction through one's own search (Niemelä, 2006). However, Finnish research shows that religious family upbringing is highly influential for determining the scope of religiousness among young people (Niemelä, 2006; Räsänen, 2010). This landscape underscores the need to explore the views and experiences of younger age groups related to religion. The sacred is one aspect of this.

As Paden (2003, 2009) has stated, the sacred continues to be observable whenever identities are challenged and at stake. The core motivation of this article is to understand young people's views on the sacred. We ask: what is sacred for young people, and how can understanding their concept and views of the sacred help in understanding their values and life stage? Such knowledge will allow the teachers of tomorrow to better understand and support young people and their identity formation.

2 **The sacred as a window on young people's values**

The sacred is a concept and phenomenon which can be understood and defined in many different ways. Our view of the sacred draws from a line of research that decouples it from religion. Although religion continues to be one central sphere of life, which defines, controls, and applies the sacred, the sacred can also be used as an analytic category separate from religion (Knott, 2013; Stausberg, 2017). In the Finnish language, "sacred" (*pyhä*) has been regarded as an old, pre-Christian liminal term that signifies something that has a special status. It distinguishes the untouchable or supernatural from the mundane and ordinary. The term has also carried meanings such as good, secure, pure and taken. (Anttonen, 2010; Saarikivi, 2017). The sacred is a line that sets aside issues that one is not willing or able to negotiate about. As such, sacred is not only a matter of religion. It resembles a wider logic of drawing boundaries that is typical for the human mind (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Anttonen, 2000, 277-281; Anttonen, 2010, 122-125). This viewpoint builds on the Durkheimian approach to the sacred as separated and protected from the profane, the realm of everyday activities, things, places, or activities of supreme value or ultimate significance (Knott, 2013).

As such, the sacred can be applied to secular contents, allowing it to be recognized and experienced by religious and non-religious people alike. In this, it resembles spirituality. As Hill et al. note (2000), not all conceptions of spirituality are linked to religion, though the use of the term spirituality apart from religion has a surprisingly short history (Sheldrake, 1992; Wulff, 1997).

How then do the concepts of the sacred and spirituality relate to each other? They are deeply intertwined. For Hill and colleagues (2000), for instance, spirituality refers to the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviours that arise from a search for the sacred. The term "search" here refers to attempts to identify, articulate, maintain, or transform, and the term "sacred" refers to a divine being, divine object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth as perceived by the individual. They note that term "spiritual" is often used in modern discourse as a substitute for words like "fulfilling" or "important"; but ideologies, activities, and lifestyles are not spiritual unless they involve considerations of the sacred. (Hill et al., 2000, p. 64, p. 66.) Not all definitions of spirituality explicate the sacred. Yet the concepts circle around the same phenomena; the sacred and spirituality are always beautifully entangled. For Reich (1998), spirituality involves transcendence or a commitment to ideas and/or institutions that go

beyond the self in time or place (cf. Lerner et al., 2008; Tirri & Quinn, 2010). Exploring the sacred thus furthers understanding of spirituality – and vice versa, research on spirituality enriches studies of the sacred.

Decoupling the sacred – and spirituality – from religion does not, however, indicate that the role of religion should be overlooked. Religions have been the predominant contexts that have coordinated and defined the sacred in most societies, also Finland. This continues to influence the ways in which the sacred is understood and the concept used. For example, Pargament and Mahoney (2005) and Pargament, Oman, Pomerleau, and Mahoney (2017) take a psychological approach to the sacred and the ways in which individuals can experience and perceive it. They view the sacred as having a core and a wider ring. At the core of the sacred are concepts that refer to a transcendent reality, and on a wider ring are aspects of life that are not transcendental but take on deeper meaning and value. The non-transcendental objects, issues, or places can be sanctified as illuminations of the transcendent in this world, but they can also be sanctified without presupposing a transcendental reality. In the latter case, qualities from the realm of the transcendent are nevertheless transferred to the object or issue. In this sense, even though secular objects and issues can be viewed as sacred without an idea of the transcendent, the qualities that originally refer to a transcendent reality, continue to influence the experience.

Although the above psychological viewpoint highlights the role of the individual, the sacred continues to be a question of community and context. Their roles cannot be overlooked when analysing the conceptions of individuals, and this includes the religious context. Durkheim (1912/1995) approached the sacred (and religion) essentially as something that binds a community together. Even if in individualistic (and in terms of religion, relatively secularized) contexts, (religious) communities have less direct power to define the sacred, and processes of group identification and commitment are increasingly fragmented and dynamic, individuals still negotiate with and position themselves in relation to different communities, or communal and societal discourses. Discourses displayed by the media, families, and religious traditions are utilized in individual negotiations and identifications with, as well as separations from, the sacred of religious and other communities or groups (Knott, 2013). Individual and communal conceptions of the sacred always interact, and influence one another. Thus, even if the sacred can be viewed as an utterly personal experience, emotion, or category of meaning, these experiences and conceptions always reflect their –

religious and broader – context (Knott, 2013; Pargament 2017; Taves, 2013).

The sacred is a window on issues and objects of the utmost importance, and thus comes close to the concept of values. Like the sacred, personal values are constructed in dynamic relationship with the relevant groups of people and within the cultural context. Values are normative and justified but they are often also emotional and to some extent unrecognized (Schwartz, 2007); just like our experiences of the sacred. Young people's values – by definition – demonstrate their beliefs, their desirable goals that guide their actions and decision-making, and what is important to them at an early stage (Schwartz, 2007, 2012).

Thus, to put it somewhat simply: Following the definition of the sacred as something set aside and above everything, values illustrate what is important to young people, and the sacred illustrates what is *most* important to them. The present article focuses on the latter by reviewing our previous research (Ranta, Grönlund, & Pessi, 2016) on young adults' conceptions of the sacred in Finland. In the following section, we re-examine our findings from this study, focusing on the importance of the sacred in the educational context, and then return to the distinction between values and the sacred in our discussion, particularly concerning future studies.

3 Bridging the individualized sacred with traditional and communal religion

3.1 Method

In our earlier research (Ranta et al., 2016), we examined how the sacred is interpreted and experienced by Finnish youth. Our data came from a self-report questionnaire collected in 2011 from young adults aged 19–35 ($N=334$), taken from an extensive and nationally representative population sample in Finland ($N=1,285$). The questionnaire concerned various issues ranging from wellbeing to values and to pro-sociality. We focused on the responses to the open-ended question: "Please tell us what the sacred, sacredness, means to you? Where and how can you experience it?" Relating to the multifaceted nature of the framework of

the sacred, our inquiry thus covered elements ranging from understandings to emotions, and from experiences to views on spaces and places.

This was the first time these personal understandings and experiences of the sacred had been studied with such extensive survey data in Finland. Internationally, empirical research on the views and experiences of the sacred are rare, and even more so, among youth. What is actually typical for the experiences, reflections, and understandings of the sacred by the Finnish youth, and how do their conceptions differ in comparison to the adult population? We also examined how the understandings of the sacred relate to the role of subjective religiosity, spirituality, and gender. How do sacred components in life differ between individuals, and groups, such as young men and women?

In the data-determined content analysis, the qualitative data were classified into 15 categories (Table 1). Then, the answers were categorized using a thematic analytical approach. The qualitative analyses portrayed how young adults show great heterogeneity in their conceptions of the sacred, as well as enthusiasm towards the topic in general with their – often lengthy – in-depth responses. The responses often included various intertwined elements and in these cases were placed in several categories.

3.2 Findings

TABLE 1. Total Distribution in Categories of Conceptions of the Sacred (adapted from Ranta, Pessi & Grönlund, 2016).

Category	Entire sample (<i>n</i> = 1,835)		19–35 years (<i>n</i> = 473)	
	%	% of cases	%	% of cases
Individual, myself, my opinions, thinking	9	21	14	28
Rest, peace, the home as a location	14	31	13	28
Location, church, institution	13	28	12	24
Nature	13	29	10	21

Love, close ones, home with family	9	21	11	22
Nothing, doubt, difficult to say, difficult	8	17	11	22
The 'sacred' as a concept	7	15	8	17
Belief, religion	9	20	8	16
Others, helping, contact	6	14	4	9
Ritual	3	7	3	6
Human dignity, new life, children	3	6	4	7
Finland, independence	0.7	2	0.2	0.4
Death, grave	3	6	2	3
Art, music, science	2	3	0.6	1
Health	0.1	0.2	0	0

Note. The *n* refers to the number of meaning categories of responses in the entire sample and the youth subsample, not the size of the sample (entire sample, *N*=1,285; youth aged 19–35, *N*=334), in reference to the Multiple Response Sets data used).

What did we find? As seen in Table 1, Finnish young people primarily highlight subjectivity and personal issues concerning the individual in their understanding of the sacred, including oneself, individuality, personal opinions, and thinking (28 percent of participants), as well as rest, peace and the home (28 percent of participants). For example (a direct quotation from the data):

The sacred is something big, respected, and a secret. To me, God is sacred. But also everyday personal things can be sacred and one does not want to share them with anyone other than close ones whom one trusts. The sacred can be experienced in everyday life, everywhere: at home and in different places such as the church, in nature, in one's own mind, and so on.

The meaning of the sacred is multifaceted, and this is clear in the thoughts of the young people who responded to the question. Even if the big picture illustrates individuality, more communal elements are evident. The church as a location or as an institution came to a close third place (24 percent of participants):

Sacred means quieting down at God's word, the Bible, and explaining it. The sacred and sacredness are religious concepts that are also present in everyday life, although one usually stops at them only on holidays. Sacred things (God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, etc.) bring peace, joy and freedom. It's almost too difficult to explain.

Another young person noted:

The sacred means becoming aware of the presence of God, in Christianity. I can experience it at church/congregational events, in the middle of nature, or together with others while praying. A leisurely ambiance is important for experiencing the sacred.

Interestingly, we did not find significant gender differences in the young people's conceptions of the sacred. The core is the same: individual responses were most prominent for both young men – "The sacred is a [...] very personal matter. One can experience it wherever and whenever one wishes." – and young women – "The sacred means peace and it is personal, my most own."

While the differences between age groups were minor, older respondents highlighted the themes of rest, peace, and the home as well as nature as sacred, and more so than young respondents. Another major age-related difference was the fact that Finnish young people showed more feelings of doubt related to the sacred in their responses, or felt that the question was difficult for them, even to the point that they felt that they had no actual experiences of the sacred:

Sacred is a swear word when it is used for something [...] beyond the real world that turns out to produce mainly negative energy in those who dare to examine it reasonably. A good thing may thus turn into a burden when it is not dared to be questioned or developed.

Interestingly, young people's conceptions of the sacred, which often related to subjectivity and individuality, were also often intertwined with togetherness, close social relationships, and solidarity;

To me, the sacred means understanding the fact that we are all connected to each other (the entire universe), and living with this truth every second. One can sense the sacred within oneself and in others, wherever and whenever.

The notion of combined subjectivity and close social relationships support previous research on healthy identity development in late adolescence, in particular. Campbell, Adams and Dobson (1984) showed this, emphasizing young people's individuality, connectedness, and emotional affection for the family. The individuating and reflective stage of faith emblematic of adolescence and young adulthood provides both an opportunity and a responsibility for questioning one's religious beliefs and moral issues in relation to those of others and institutionalized religion (Fowler, 2001). Thinking about teachers in both schools and higher education, it is crucial to acknowledge how multifaceted young people's contemplation of the sacred is.

It seems that young people see the self and individual rights as especially protected and untouchable. This is well in line with Finnish society's current emphases on authenticity and individual rights, which are especially adopted by young adults who have grown up in an individualist age. In our view, these results reflect the life phase these young people are currently experiencing, and the developmental tasks of finding one's own identity, values, and life path. The fact that young people also view social ties and solidarity as sacred highlights that holding individuality and subjectivity sacred does not mean selfishness or egoism.

Issues around values, spirituality, and the sacred are not easy ones, nor everyday concrete matters. The younger the participants, the more they reflected doubt and difficulty in their responses to the open-ended question. Moreover, 30 percent of young participants in the study did not respond to this question at all. Both non-response and the notions of bewilderment or doubt suggest an extended "identity crisis" characteristic for the prolonged youth phase of individualized contemporary society (Côté, 2000).

After categorizing the participants into four levels of religiosity based on their subjective religiosity, spirituality, and praying as a form of traditional religious practice, we found that the most religious participants expressed religious conceptions of the sacred and themes related to the church as an institution. While the most unreligious youth expressed more doubt and difficulty in their understanding of the sacred, the other prominent conceptions such as rest, peace and home, love and close ones, or individuality were important for all the young people irrespective of their level of religiosity.

4 Conclusions – and food for thought

Psychosocial development has traditionally (e.g. Brandtstädter, 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1977) been seen as following a specific path that is regulated by physical maturation, agency, and aspirations, as well as by societal and cultural values. In a societal context of identity exploration and instability, the search for not only individualistic sacredness but also togetherness and connection through social relationships is strong, which comes close to classical perceptions of religion and communal functions of the sacred. Societal change and increased heterogeneity among young people have resulted in a trend towards individualization, subjectivity, and a lifestyle of increased independence, self-determination and self-realization (Miles, 2000). This trend is not entirely positive since uncertainty and lack of social support are also on the rise. Such a landscape calls for studies on values and the sacred.

In our 2016 study (Ranta et al., 2016), young respondents emphasized different personal and individual conceptions of the sacred. The qualitative nature of our data made investigating this theme especially intriguing, as the participants responded with enthusiasm to portray their concepts of the sacred. Finnish young people clearly relate to the concept of the sacred, finding it interesting and meaningful. Our study shows that individual viewpoints and subjective experiences of the sacred were central to young people's concept of the sacred. Traditional viewpoints of the sacred as related to religion, beliefs, and the church as an institution were also strongly represented. These were often intertwined with personal pondering about the meaning of the sacred. The prominent conceptions of the sacred in our findings, related to subjectivity and individuality, were also very much intertwined with togetherness, close social relationships, and solidarity. Considering teachers, this overall finding underscores the conclusion by Tirri and Quinn (2010): Educators hit the mark when they are able to provide an optimal balance between commitment to the wellbeing of the self and others.

While our young respondents clearly expressed such subjectivity and individuality in their conceptions of the sacred, many expressed a sense of doubt or difficulty in responding to such a question. In this sense, the study portrays the significance of the sacred for young people's age-normative development and ongoing identity construction, key issues for this life phase. While our study focused on young adults aged 19–35, further research is needed on the ongoing developmental processes in this life stage, namely in terms of identity and faith development. Older

participants reflected more on themes of rest, peace, the home, and nature in their conceptions of the sacred. Major gender differences among youth were not found.

With rapid societal change, individualization increases in parallel with a need for community and belonging. In our 2016 study (Ranta et al., 2016), the psychological value of social relationships for Finnish youth was clearly evident. Young people long for a sense of community or belonging, which refers to the sum of social relationships that arise from social interaction and common experiences and lead to attachment between individuals (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). This experience of belonging is relevant for wellbeing and social identity (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Prezza, Amici, Roberti, & Tedeschi, 2001; Prezza & Constantini, 1998). Individuals need to have a sense of being part of a larger entity, whether it is a small personal social circle or a larger social network (Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2007; Kehily, 2007). Maintaining a sense of, or membership in, a community such as a circle of friends or a school class, creates an important source of trust and wellbeing through peer group conformity. For young people in today's society, this includes many means of communicating and connecting on social media that is not dependent on physically bounded interaction (Ellison, Stenfield & Lampe, 2007).

Religious identity, a self-definition of one's religious values and beliefs, is defined in late adolescence (Erikson, 1968). This identity based on personal characteristics sets the possibility of achieving a spiritual identity over the course of childhood and adolescence (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). For the young people in our study (Ranta et al., 2016), personal pondering, reflecting a sense of personal sacredness, individual viewpoints and subjective experiences were central, illustrating a subjective turn of values and religiosity. However, our study also found that traditional conceptions of the sacred as analysed by classical theorists of religion and sociology (e.g., Durkheim, 1912/1995) were also important. Aspects of transcendence and the church as an institution were strongly present in the young people's responses, reflecting their values and religiosity. Their emphasis on individuality gives way to underlining formal versions of religiosity in adulthood – young people did not focus on these so much.

5 Vistas for teachers and researchers

If teachers – and others – are to understand and support young people in their identity construction; it is essential that they explore and contemplate young people's values and conception of the sacred. While our study (Ranta et al., 2016) used data from Finnish young adults aged 19–35, it offers insight into conceptions of the sacred among younger school-aged Finns prior the critical transition to adulthood. The issues which young people underline as sacred play a vital role in their positive development, wellbeing, and sense of meaning. All this should be supported by teachers in discussions on the students' own beliefs, values, and identity beyond traditional religious education (in school). The symbolic status of the sacred can be a tool for promoting positive development – even more so during societal and religious change, as identified in Finnish society today. Religion as lived and experienced as a cultural resource enables personal orientation (Henriksen, 2016); understanding the sacred is a means for supporting young people's positive development and identity formation.

While Finnish young people strive for individualization, they use the concept of the sacred in relation to others, communities, and close social relationships. Concrete ideas about how to use our findings in the everyday context of schools will be much better designed by teachers than by us. Foremost, our findings encourage explanations and discussions on the sacred, and definitely not only in religious education classes. Our findings firmly illustrate that young people are not strangers to the concept of the sacred, but certainly have multifaceted thoughts and emotions about it.

The closer young people come to the verge of independence, the more instability they experience, especially in their transition towards adulthood, further education and work (Arnett, 2006). As post-industrial societies become more complex, psychological functioning becomes increasingly important (Heckhausen, 1999). The extensive review of Meeus, Iedema, Helsén, and Vollebergh (1999) shows how slow development of identity results in low psychological wellbeing. Self-worth and a notion of “who am I?” is set against a cultural standard. This question relates to identity formation, ponderation upon the meaning and purpose of life (Tirri & Quinn, 2010). Individuals construct their own life course by selecting, through individual agency, their own experiences, social relationships, and settings but within the opportunities and

constraints provided by historic, economic and political circumstances (Elder & Johnson, 2003; Settersten, 2003).

To what extent do our findings on their views of the sacred reflect young people's values? Does the sacred seem to be valued above all other valued matters? Our findings cohere with those of other researchers on the subject. Young Finns find values related to personal wellbeing and the rights of individuals, such as health, freedom, and human rights, important. They also find communities and social ties central as family, relationships, and love are among the most important things to them. (Haikkola & Myllyniemi, 2020; Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi, 2019.)

This being true, young people's values about the sacred differ from their experience of it; their relation fascinating and complex. Despite the similarities between these concepts, our recent representative research on more than 6,000 Finns (Pessi et al., 2018) showed that even though some connections are found, individuals' conceptions of the sacred are not explained by their values. In that study, respondents who held values directed to themselves (e.g. power, wealth, success) as important, considered issues related to themselves such as health and their own opinions as sacred more often than those who did not find such values important. Similarly, respondents who held universalistic, self-transcending values (e.g. egalitarianism, social justice, nature conservation) as important, considered human dignity, nature, and helping and communality more often than those who did not find such values important. However, this study found that the correlations between value directions and conceptions of the sacred were relatively low. In fact, values – even combined with gender, age, education, political orientation, living area, and language – only explained less than 20 percent of the conceptions of the sacred.

Even though the sacred and values resonate, and the sacred illustrates some of the most important issues for an individual, the sacred is not the same as values. The sacred sets apart the most particular and ultimate. We maintain that it reaches an even deeper layer of meaningful issues, objects, and values: the things that need to be protected not only because they are important or viewed as right and good, but because they have supreme value.

To conclude, the sacred is not the same values, religion, or spirituality, but it can illustrate their roles and importance in the identities of individuals, and in this case, Finnish young people. At the same time, the sacred is always a question of community and context, and individuals negotiate with and position themselves in relation to different communities, or communal and societal discourses. In relation to

religiosity, young adults want to adopt an independent and active role instead of seeing themselves as religious in a fixed or standardized way. (Sjöborg, 2013) This is true for the sacred in particular, and in general when young adults shape and reflect upon their identities, but the reflection happens in relation to existing discourses and contexts.

The sacred as a concept, which young people recognize and can use, opens a door to investigating, discussing, and understanding their most important values, spirituality, and life stage. For young people, spirituality is a means for understanding oneself and the world, in addition to speaking of experiences of transcendence (King, Clardy, & Ramos, 2014). Authenticity, morality, values, and the sacred are deeply intertwined, as illustrated by a quote from our data: “To me, my own moral conceptualizations are sacred, uppermost judgment.”

If teachers understand and ponder these issues – also with their students – they will be better equipped to support and promote not only young people’s identity development but also meaningfulness and sense of purpose, which in turn are crucial to wellbeing (Ivtzan, Chan, Gardner, & Prashar, 2011; Pessi, 2017). As Tirri and Quinn (2010) have concluded, by taking into account the range of spiritual sensitivities, those who wish to encourage a sense of purpose in young people are planting on fertile ground. The same is very much true for sensitivity to the sacred.

6 References

- Andrews, J. (1973). The relationship of values to identity achievement status. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 2(2), 133–138.
- Anttonen, V. (2000). Sacred. In W. Braun & R. T. McCutcheon (Eds.), *Guide to the study of religion* (pp. 271–282). London: Cassell.
- Arnett, J. J. (2006). Emerging adulthood in Europe: A response to Bynner. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(1), 111–123.
- Brandtstädter, J. (1998). Action theory in developmental psychology. In R. M. Lerner (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (5th Ed., pp. 807–863). New York: Wiley.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513–531.
- Campbell, E., Adams, G.R., & Dobson, W.R. (1984) Familial correlates of identity formation in late adolescence: A study of the predictive utility of

- connectedness and individuality in family relations. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 13(6), 509–525.
- Colclough, G., & Sitaraman, B. (2005). Community and social capital: What is the difference? *Sociological Inquiry*, 75(4), 474–496.
- Collins-Mayo, S., & Dandelion, P. (Eds.) (2016). *Religion and youth: Theology and religion in interdisciplinary series in association with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Côté, J. E. (2000). *Arrested adulthood: The changing nature of maturity and identity*. New York: NYU Press.
- Daniel, E., Schiefer, D., Möllering, A., Benish-Weisman, M., Boehnke, K., & Knafo, A. (2012). Value differentiation in adolescence: The role of age and cultural complexity. *Child Development*, 83(1), 322–336.
- Davidson, W. B., & Cotter, P. R. (1991). The relationship between sense of community and subjective wellbeing: A first look. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 19(3), 246–253.
- De Haan, L. G., Yonker, J. E., & Affholter, C. (2011). More than enjoying the sunset: Conceptualization and measurement of religiosity for adolescents and emerging adults and its implications for developmental inquiry. *Journal of Psychology & Christianity*, 30(3), 184–195.
- Durkheim, E. (1912/1995). *The elementary forms of religious life*. Translation Joseph Ward. New York: Free Press.
- Döring, A. K. (2010). Assessing children's values: An exploratory study. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 28(6), 564–577.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., & Johnson, M. K. (2003). The life course and aging: Challenges, lessons, and new directions. In R. A. Settersten, Jr. (Ed.), *Invitation to the life course. Toward new understandings of later life* (pp. 49–81). Amityville, NY: Baywood.
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143–1168.
- Erentaitė, R., Vosylis, R., & Crocetti, E. (2019). Longitudinal associations of identity processing styles with prodiversity and proequality values in adolescence. *Child Development*, 90(5), 1490–1502.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton Company.
- Fowler, James W. (2001). Faith development theory and the postmodern challenges. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11(3), 159–172.
- Grönlund, H. (2011). Identity and volunteering intertwined: Reflections from the values of young adults. *Voluntas*, 22(4), 852–874.

- Haikkola, L., & Myllyniemi, S. (2020) Nuorten arvot ja tyytyväisyys omaan elämään. In L. Haikkola & Myllyniemi, S. (Eds.), *Hyvää työtä! Nuorisobarometri 2019*. Valtion nuorisoneuvosto, Nuorisotutkimusseura, Nuorisotutkimusverkosto, Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö.
- Heckhausen, J. (1999). *Developmental regulation in adulthood. Age-normative and sociostructural constraints as adaptive challenges*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Henderson, S., Holland, J., McGrellis, S., Sharpe, S., & Thomson, R. (2007). *Inventing adulthoods. A biographical approach to youth transitions*. London: Sage.
- Henriksen, J.-O. (2016). Everyday religion as orientation and transformation: A challenge to theology. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 29(1), 36–51.
- Hill, P. C., Pargament, K. II., Hood, R. W., McCullough, M. E. Jr., Swyers, J. P., Larson, D. B., & Zinnbauer, B. J. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30(1), 51–77.
- Hitlin, S. (2007). Doing good, feeling good: Values and the self's moral center. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2(4), 249–259.
- Ivtzan, I., Chan, C. Gardner, H., & Prashar, K. (2011). Linking religion and spirituality with psychological well-being: Examining self-actualisation, meaning in life, and personal growth initiative. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 52(3), 915–929.
- Kehily, M. J. (Ed.). (2007). *Understanding youth: Perspectives, identities and practices*. London: Sage.
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014) Adolescent spiritual exemplars: Exploring spirituality in the lives of diverse youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 29(2), 186–212.
- Knafo, A., & Schwartz, S. H. (2010). Identity formation and parent-child value congruence in adolescence. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 22(3), 439–458.
- Knott, K. (2013). The secular sacred: In between or both/and? In A. Day, G. Vincett, & C. R. Cotter (Eds.), *Social identities between the sacred and the secular* (pp. 145–169). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Kuusisto, A., Poulter, S., & Kallioniemi, A. (2016). Finnish pupils' views on the place of religion in school. *Religious Education*, 112(2), 110–122.
- Lerner, R. M., Roeser, R. W., & Phelps, E. (2008). *Positive youth development and spirituality: From theory to research*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Lindh, K. & Korhonen, V. (2010). *Youth values and value changes from cultural and transnational perspective. Cross-cultural lifelong learning*. Tampere University Press.

- Meeus, W., Iedema, J., Helsen, M., & Vollebergh, W. (1999). Patterns of adolescent identity development: Review of literature and longitudinal analysis. *Developmental Review, 19*(4), 419–461.
- Miles, S. (2000). *Youth lifestyles in a changing world*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Niemelä, K. (2006). Does religious upbringing matter? The effect of religious upbringing on the religious and spiritual identity of urban young adults in Finland. In K. Tirri (Ed.), *Religion, spirituality & identity* (pp. 153–169). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Oser, F.K., & Scarlett, W.G. (Eds.). (1991). *Religious development in childhood and adolescence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Paden, W. (2009). Reappraising Durkheim for the study and teaching of religion. In P. Clark (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the sociology of religion* (pp. 941–961).
- Pargament, K. I., Oman, D., Pomerleau, J., & Mahoney, A. (2017). Some contributions of a psychological approach to the study of the sacred. *Religion, 47*(4), 718–744.
- Pargament, K. I., & Mahoney, A. (2005). Sacred matters: Sanctification as a vital topic for the psychology of religion. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 15*(3), 179–199.
- Pekkarinen, E., & Myllyniemi, S. (2019) Arvot. In E. Pekkarinen, & S. Myllyniemi (Eds.), *Vaikutusvaltaa Euroopan laidalla. Nuorisobarometri 2018*. Valtion nuorisoneuvosto, Nuorisotutkimusseura, Nuorisotutkimusverkosto, Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö.
- Pessi, A. B. (2017). Dazed and amazed by moonlight: Exploring sense of meaning as the mediator of the effects of religion, belonging, and benevolence on well-being. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society, 30*(1), 24–42.
- Pessi, A. B. & Pitkänen, V. & Westinen, J & Grönlund, H. (2018). *Pyhyyden ytimessä. Tutkimus suomalaisten arvoista ja pyhyyden kokemisesta*. Helsinki: E2 Tutkimus & Suomen Kulttuurirahasto.
- Prezza, M., Amici, M., Roberti, T., & Tedeschi, G. (2001). Sense of community referred to the whole town: Its relations with neighbouring, loneliness, life satisfaction and area of residence. *Journal of Community Psychology, 29*(1), 29–52.
- Prezza, M., & Constantini, S. (1998). Sense of community and life satisfaction: Investigation in three different territorial contexts. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 8*(3), 181–194.
- Ranta, M., Pessi, A. B. & Grönlund, H. (2016). Young adults' conceptions of the sacred in Finland today. *Young, 25*(1), 45–65.

- Reeskens, T., & Vandecasteele, L. (2017). Hard times and European youth. The effect of economic insecurity on human values, social attitudes and well-being. *International Journal of Psychology*, 52(1), 19–27.
- Reich, K. (1998). Psychology of religion: What one needs to know. *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 33(1) 113–120.
- Räsänen, A. (2010). Teenage religion – religiousness among Finnish 8th and 9th graders. *Education Inquiry*, 1(3), 143–156.
- Saarikivi, J. (2017). Pyhän käsitteestä ja alkuperästä. *Elore*, 24(1), 1–11.
- Schwartz, S. H. (2007). Universalism values and the inclusiveness of our moral universe. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 38(6), 711–728.
- Schwartz, S. (2012). An overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1).
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2003). Propositions and controversies in life-course scholarship. In R. A. Settersten, Jr. (Ed.), *Invitation to the life course: Toward new understandings of later life* (pp. 15–45). New York: Baywood.
- Sheldrake, P. (1992). *Spirituality and history: Questions of interpretation and method*. New York: Crossroads.
- Sjöborg, A. (2013). Mapping “religion”—or “something, I don’t know what”? Methodological challenges exploring young peoples’ relations with “religion”. In A. Day & G. Vincett (Eds.), *Social identities between the sacred and the secular* (pp. 191–200). Surrey: Ashgate.
- Sortheix, F. M., Parker, P. D., Lechner, C. M., & Schwartz, S. H. (2019). Changes in young Europeans’ values during the global financial crisis. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 10(1), 15–25.
- Stausberg, M. (2017). The sacred and the holy – from around 1917 to today. *Religion*, 47(4), 549–556.
- Storm, I., & Voas, D. (2012). The intergenerational transmission of religious service attendance. *Nordic Journal of Religion & Society*, 25(2), 131–150.
- Taves, A. (2013). Building blocks of sacralities. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 138–161). New York: Guilford Press.
- Tamminen, K. (1991). *Religious development in childhood and adolescence: An empirical study*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.
- Templeton, J. L., & Eccles, J. S. (2006). *The Relation Between Spiritual Development and Identity Processes*. In E. C. Roehlkepartain, P. E. King, L. Wagener, & P. L. Benson (Eds.), *The handbook of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence* (p. 252–265). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Tirri, K., & Quinn, B. (2010). Exploring the role of religion and spirituality in the development of purpose: case studies of purposeful youth. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 32(3), 201–214.

- Uzefovsky, F., Döring, A. K., & Knafo-Noam, A. (2016). Values in middle childhood: Social and genetic contributions. *Social Development, 25*(3), 482–502.
- Vecchione, M., Schwartz, S., Alessandri, G., Döring, A. K., Castellani, V., & Caprara, M. G. (2016). Stability and change of basic personal values in early adulthood: An 8-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Research in Personality, 63*, 111–122.
- Vecchione, M., Schwartz, S. H., Davidov, E., Cieciuch, J., Alessandri, G., & Marsicano, G. (2020). Stability and change of basic personal values in early adolescence: A 2-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Personality, 88*(3), 447–463.
- Weber, J. (2017). Discovering the millennials' personal values orientation: A comparison to two managerial populations. *Journal of Business Ethics, 143*(3), 517–529.
- Wulff, D.M. (1997). *Psychology of religion: Classic and contemporary* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley & Sons.