



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Helda

---

## Spirituality and Giftedness

Tirri, Kirsi

SAGE Publications Ltd

2023-01-01

---

Tirri, K 2023, 'Spirituality and Giftedness', *Gifted education international.*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 73-79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02614294221129394>

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/357169>

10.1177/02614294221129394

---

cc\_by

publishedVersion

---

*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.*

# Spirituality and giftedness

**Kirsi Tirri** 

University of Helsinki - City Centre Campus, Helsinki, Finland

Gifted Education International  
2023, Vol. 39(1) 73–79  
© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/02614294221129394

[journals.sagepub.com/home/gei](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/gei)



## Abstract

Spirituality is an important domain in the holistic education of gifted students. The definition of transformational giftedness makes it possible to emphasize spiritual domain in student development. Spirituality provides possibilities to reflect on the values and meanings of life that could provide purpose for gifted students in their studies and for their future lives. The concepts of religion and spirituality are defined, and their different roles clarified in the context of education. Spiritual sensitivity is introduced as a human capacity that can be measured scientifically with the spiritual sensitivity questionnaire instrument. Research findings among young generation and gifted students indicate that mystery-sensing, contemplation, and search for meaning in life are important aspects in spirituality of our generation.

## Keywords

religion, spiritual sensitivity, spiritual intelligence, purpose in life, transformational giftedness, spirituality

In this topical discussion, I will discuss the term ‘spirituality’ in the context of Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1983, 1999) and Sternberg’s concept of transformational giftedness (Sternberg, 2020a, 2020b). I will review theoretical and empirical research on these topics and argue that spirituality is an important domain in the holistic education of gifted students. I will use the findings from empirical studies to provide evidence of the importance of spirituality in gifted students’ lives. Spirituality and giftedness are both terms that can be understood in multiple ways and in educational contexts and teacher education we need to clarify these terms to avoid misconceptions. In this paper I will use the recent definition by Sternberg to define giftedness with transformational nature as “exceptional ability or talent that can enable or has enabled an

---

## Corresponding author:

Kirsi Tirri, University of Helsinki - City Centre Campus, P.O. Box 9, 00014 University of Helsinki, Helsinki 00014, Finland.

Email: [kirsi.tirri@helsinki.fi](mailto:kirsi.tirri@helsinki.fi)

individual to make one or more extraordinary and meaningful contributions that help to make the world a better place” (Sternberg, 2020a, p. 205). In this definition giftedness include developmental and domain-specific quality that can be educated. Transformational nature of giftedness makes it possible to emphasize social, moral and spiritual aspects in giftedness. The wider spectrum in definition also provides teachers wider perspectives to identify gifted students.

The aspiration to contribute to making the world a better place, the beyond-the-self orientation, is similar in Sternberg’s definition of transformational giftedness than in the definition of purpose presented by Damon. He defines purpose in life as follows: “Purpose is a stable intention to accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and of consequence beyond the self over time” (Damon, 2008; Damon et al., 2003, p. 212). Our recent studies among Finnish secondary school students ( $N=386$ ) indicate that most of them (29%) are *dreamers* according to the purpose profiles based on Damon’s (2008) conceptualization, meaning that they have a life purpose and are interested in helping others, but also that they lack clear personal goals that could be actualized in their studies and in their lives to benefit others. Almost 25% of students are *self-oriented*, meaning that they have personal life goals that they want to actualize in their learning and in their lives, but they are not interested in contributing beyond themselves to help others. Only 25% of the Finnish students are *purposeful*, with a beyond-the-self orientation and an interest in helping others, whereas 13% are *disengaged*, without any interest in finding a life purpose (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022). In American study of purposeful youth, religion and spirituality had helped adolescents in finding purpose for their lives (Tirri & Quinn, 2010). Religion and spirituality provide possibilities to reflect on the values and meanings of life that could provide purpose for gifted students in their studies and for their future lives.

It is important to clarify the different meanings given to the concepts of religion and spirituality. In the classical definition by William James (1902, p. 32) he defined religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude”. Today, the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ are often applied interchangeably to add linguistic variety to the terminology. However, many researchers define spirituality in contrast to religion (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Ubani & Tirri, 2006). These definitions usually define religion as the organizational, the ritual, and the ideological. The spiritual then refers to the personal, the affective, the experiential, and the thoughtful. The idea that an individual can be spiritual without being religious or religious without being spiritual, has become a standard part of many papers on spirituality (Pargament, 1999). Clearly then, spirituality ought to be seen as a wider concept than religion. Such an understanding of these concepts indicates that religion and spirituality not only share some common areas but also have their own areas of interests (Stifoss-Hanssen, 1999).

Spiritual intelligence has been suggested as a new intelligence type that includes skills to reflect on the meaning in life and create values in new circumstances (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Gardner has discussed three possible domains of spiritual intelligence. First, he attributes the “concern with cosmic or existential issues” to the sphere of spiritual intelligence. In fact, Gardner (1999, 60) has considered whether it would be more appropriate to consider spiritual intelligence as a form of existential intelligence. Second, he emphasizes the “spiritual as achievement of a state of being” which represents the

psychological states and phenomenal experiences that are called spiritual. The third domain is “spiritual as it affects others”, a social aspect, which also coincides with the term charisma and is an important ingredient of bringing other people towards fulfillment of the first two domains in their lives. Spiritual intelligence and its measurability are a widely debated topic (Emmons, 2000; Gardner, 2000; Mayer, 2000) and in their instrument development Tirri and Nokelainen (2011) have used the term ‘spiritual sensitivity’ to be able to better measure this phenomenon. In their work they have used David Hay’s (1998) research on spirituality to conceptualize spiritual sensitivity. Hay has identified three categories of spiritual sensitivity. *Awareness sensing* refers to an experience of a deeper level of consciousness when we choose to be aware by ‘paying attention’ to what is happening. The second category of spiritual sensitivity is *mystery sensing* which is connected to our capacity to transcend everyday experience and to use our imagination. The third category of spiritual sensitivity is *value sensing*. This category emphasizes the importance of feelings as a measure of what we value. Among such things are the issues that touch our existential questions and meaning seeking (Hay, 1998, p. 70–74). In the study by Tirri et al. (2006), a social dimension was added to Hay’s three categories of spiritual sensitivity. The fourth sub-scale of spiritual sensitivity is called *community sensing* and is based on the work of Bradford (1995).

Tirri’s studies with young Finnish adults confirm other empirical studies in which more and more people call themselves spiritual rather than religious (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Mikkola et al., 2007). British researchers Heelas and Woodhead argue that people do so because they are reluctant to commit themselves to hierarchies and would rather grow and develop as their own unique selves rather than going to churches and submitting themselves to their teaching. The Swedish researcher Alden (2006) has analyzed the current religiosity as highly individualistic, experiential, non-authoritarian and non-dogmatic. In Finland, preadolescents also perceived the concept of spirituality as more connected to these qualities than the concept of religion (Ubani & Tirri, 2006). Today religion cannot be poured over the people from outside as habits or rituals. It is something to be experienced within the person. Traditional religion is bound to tradition and institutions, whereas spirituality is contemplation of the self, inner existentialism, and concentration on experiences. Compared to previous generations the new generations are trying to more actively search for meaning and are making sense of life themselves without ready answers given by the church. Spirituality refers now to what was referred to earlier as religion in the broadest and non-traditional sense (Mikkola et al., 2007).

Tirri (2008) has explored spiritual sensitivity among Finnish young adults ( $N=500$ ) with a spiritual sensitivity questionnaire (SSQ) that includes awareness sensing, value sensing, mystery sensing and community sensing dimensions (Tirri et al., 2006). According to the results, spiritual sensitivity is also important for young urban adults who are not actively religious. They need quiet moments during their everyday lives, as well as spiritual and aesthetic experiences to complete rational thinking, and they are searching for meaning and values in life. Young adults also want to promote peace with their actions. In general, young adults were quite individualistic in their preferences. However, those young adults who belonged to the church valued more community-oriented ways to

practice spirituality. Those young adults who did not belong to the church valued mysticism, beauty, and aesthetics (Tirri, 2008).

Studies among Finnish theology students also indicate that the community-sensing dimension of spirituality is related to a spiritual calling and a helping orientation (Hirsto & Tirri, 2009; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2019). On the other hand, the spiritual calling of Finnish theology students was related to the value-sensing dimension of spirituality. Some of the community-sensing items in the spirituality sensitivity scale are operationalized in a way that clearly refers to spiritual community, and according to Hirsto and Tirri (2009) it is not surprising that a spiritual calling and community-sensing are related. However, it seems that the former is seen from a somewhat more communal perspective among these students. This sheds light on the thoughts behind studying theology: Hirsto and Tirri (2009) assume that students who have a spiritual calling gladly see themselves working as priests or other active participants in spiritual communities. This interpretation is in alignment with the findings of Lips-Wiersma (2002), who demonstrated that spirituality may inspire “unity with others” (Hirsto & Tirri, 2009; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2019).

Tirri et al. (2006) have discussed the possibility that the concepts of spiritual intelligence and spiritual sensitivity could be synonyms. In their study they found that academically gifted students rated their spiritual sensitivity higher than average ability students. With this observation they asked whether gifted students have spiritual intelligence (Tirri et al., 2007) In their book, Tirri and Nokelainen (2011) explored the concepts of spiritual intelligence and spiritual sensitivity and developed an instrument to measure spiritual sensitivity (SSQ).

In empirical studies among gifted Tirri (2005) and Ubani (2010) identified their strength in the mystery-sensing dimension of spirituality. Mystery sensing is connected to our capacity to transcend everyday experience and to use our imagination. Gifted pre-adolescents looked for mystery and wanted to use their imagination in addition to logical and scientific thinking practiced in schools. In the studies by (Tirri & Ubani, 2005) and Ubani (2007) with gifted pre-adolescents, spirituality was very much concerned with the meaning of life. According to academically gifted students they needed help and mentoring in their decisions on who they want to become and what they would like to do in the future with their studies and life in general.

In a recent study among Finnish upper-secondary students gifted students in physics rated their multiple intelligences with the MIPQ-instrument developed by Tirri and Nokelainen (2011). The instrument included spiritual and environmental sensitivities (Makkonen et al., 2022). In this study upper-secondary students rated environmental sensitivity and spiritual sensitivity very high. The highest rating in environmental sensitivity may indicate transformational giftedness that reflect concerns related to climate change we all should be worried about. In Finland the national core curriculum strongly emphasizes environmental awareness and global responsibility, and sustainability issues are in the core of all subjects studied (FNAE, 2019). The high rating of spiritual sensitivity focused on curiosity about everyday life and appreciation of quiet moments. We also found an association between sensitivity to nature and the spiritual dimension that could be explained with personal values both domains emphasize. According to authors, the students’ high scores for self-evaluated spiritual and environmental sensitivity have

implications to physics teaching (Makkonen et al., 2022). The emphases on curiosity and imagination related to everyday phenomena that spirituality includes with contemplation may benefit the learning of gifted students in all the subjects taught at school.

In this discussion I have argued that spirituality is an important domain in gifted education to educate the whole person of the student. Transformational giftedness includes a goal to make a world a better place with one's gifts and talents. The goal of education is to help the gifted students to find a purpose in life that would be meaningful to themselves and contribute beyond-the-self at the same time. Empirical studies among purposeful youth indicate that religion and spirituality can provide grounds in the search for communities where young people can manifest their values and callings. I have reflected the different meanings people give to religion and spirituality and shown that spirituality provides wider possibilities in education than religiosity to reflect on the personal meaning of life including values, personal commitments, and career choices. I have presented empirical research findings on the importance of spirituality for the young generation and gifted students with their desire to contemplate and look for mystery in life in addition to scientific knowledge. In the global transition with environmental crises, we need spirituality to discern what are our values and priorities that would give us personal purpose in life and to make our world a better place for the next generations.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **ORCID iD**

Kirsi Tirri  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5847-344X>

### **References**

- Alden A. (2006). *Religion in dialogue with late modern society: A constructive contribution to a christian spirituality informed by buddhist-christian encounters*. Peter Lang.
- Bradford J. (1995) *Caring for the whole child: a holistic approach to spirituality*. London: The children's society.
- Damon W. (2008). *The path to purpose. Helping our children find their calling in life*. Simon & Schuster.
- Damon W., Menon J. and Bronk K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 119–128. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_2)

- Emmons R. (2000). Is spirituality an intelligence? Motivation, cognition, and the psychology of ultimate concern. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10(3), 26. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001_2)
- Finnish National Agency for Education Finnish National Agency for Education (2019). Lukion opetusuunnitelman perusteet 2019 [National core curriculum for general upper secondary schools 2019]. [https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/lukion\\_opetusuunnitelman\\_perusteet\\_2019.pdf](https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/lukion_opetusuunnitelman_perusteet_2019.pdf)
- Gardner H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. Basic Books.
- Gardner H. (1999). *Intelligence reframed: Multiple intelligences for the 21st century*. Basic Books.
- Gardner H. (2000). A case against spiritual intelligence. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10(3), 27–34. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001_3)
- Hay D. (1998). *The spirit of the child*. Fount.
- Heelas P. and Woodhead L. (2005). *The spiritual revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Blackwell.
- Hirsto L. and Tirri K. (2009). Motivational approaches to the study of theology in relation to spirituality. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 22(1), 88–102. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157092509X437233>
- James W. (1902/2003). *The varieties of religious experience*. Signet Classic.
- Lips-Wiersma M. (2002). The influence of spiritual ‘meaning making’ on career behavior. *Journal of Management Development*, 21(7), 497–520. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710210434638>
- Makkonen T., Lavonen J. and Tirri K. (2022). Self-evaluated multiple intelligences of gifted upper-secondary-school physics students in Finland. *Roeper Review*, 44(1), 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2021.2005205>
- Mayer J. (2000). Spiritual intelligence or spiritual consciousness? *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10(3), 46–47. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001_5)
- Mikkola T., Niemelä K. and Petterson J. (2007). *The questioning mind. Faith and values of the new generation*. Church Research Institute.
- Pargament K. (1999) The psychology of religion and spirituality? Yes and no. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 9(1): 3–16.
- Sternberg R. J. (2020a). Transformational giftedness: Rethinking our paradigm for gifted education. *Roeper Review*, 42(4), 230–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2020.1815266>
- Sternberg R. J. (2020b). Transformational giftedness. In Cross T. L. and Olszewski-Kubilius P. (Eds.), *Conceptual frameworks for giftedness and talent development* (pp. 203–234). Prufrock Press.
- Stifoss-Hanssen H. (1999). Religion and spirituality: What a European ear hears. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 9(1), 25–33.
- Tirri K. (2005). Spiritual sensitivity of the academically gifted. *The proceedings of the 4th international conference “developmental distinctiveness and potential realization of gifted children”*. Bratislava.
- Tirri K. (2008). Spirituality as an expression of post secular religiosity. In Ziebertz H.-G. and Riegel U. (Eds.), *Europe as a post secular society (EPOS). Reflections on religion and societal cohesion. Empirical studies and theoretical reflections* (pp. 155–166). Lit Publisher.

- Tirri K. and Kuusisto E. (2019). What is purpose in life among Finnish theology students? In Riegel U., Heil S., Kalbheim B. and Unser A. (Eds.), *Understanding religion: Empirical perspectives in practical theology: Essays in honour of hans-georg ziebertz* (pp. 97–108). Waxmann.
- Tirri K. and Kuusisto E. (2022). Purposeful learning and teaching in Finland. In Hung D. (Ed.), *Purposeful learning (studies in Singapore education: Research, innovation & practice)*. Springer.
- Tirri K. and Nokelainen P. (2011). *Measuring multiple intelligences and moral sensitivities in education*. Brill.
- Tirri K., Nokelainen P. and Ubani M. (2006). Conceptual definition and empirical validation of a spiritual sensitivity scale. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 19(1), 37–62. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157092506776901870>
- Tirri K., Nokelainen P. and Ubani M. (2007). Do gifted students have spiritual intelligence? In Bern K. Tirri. (Ed.), *Values and foundations in gifted education*. Peter Lang.
- Tirri K. and 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), 189–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2010.498607>
- Tirri K. and Ubani M. (2005). How do gifted girls perceive the meaning of life? *Gifted Education International*, 19(3), 266–274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261429405019003>
- Ubani M. (2007). *Young, gifted and spiritual -The case of Finnish sixth-grade pupils*. Department of Applied Sciences of Education. University of Helsinki. Diss. Research report 278.
- Ubani M. (2010). Malehood, giftedness and spirituality. An empirical study of Finnish gifted boys. *Religious Education Journal of Australia*, 25(1), 7–13.
- Ubani M. and Tirri K. (2006). How do Finnish preadolescents perceive religion and spirituality? *International Journal on Children's Spirituality*, 11(3), 357–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13644360601014106>
- Zohar D. and Marshall I. (2000). *SQ: Connecting with our spiritual intelligence*. Bloomsbury.

## Author Biography

Kirsi Tirri is a Professor of Education at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Helsinki, Finland and a visiting Professor at St. John's University, New York, USA. Her research interests include school pedagogy, moral and religious education, gifted education, teacher education and cross-cultural studies. She has published widely on gifted education in international journals and book chapters.