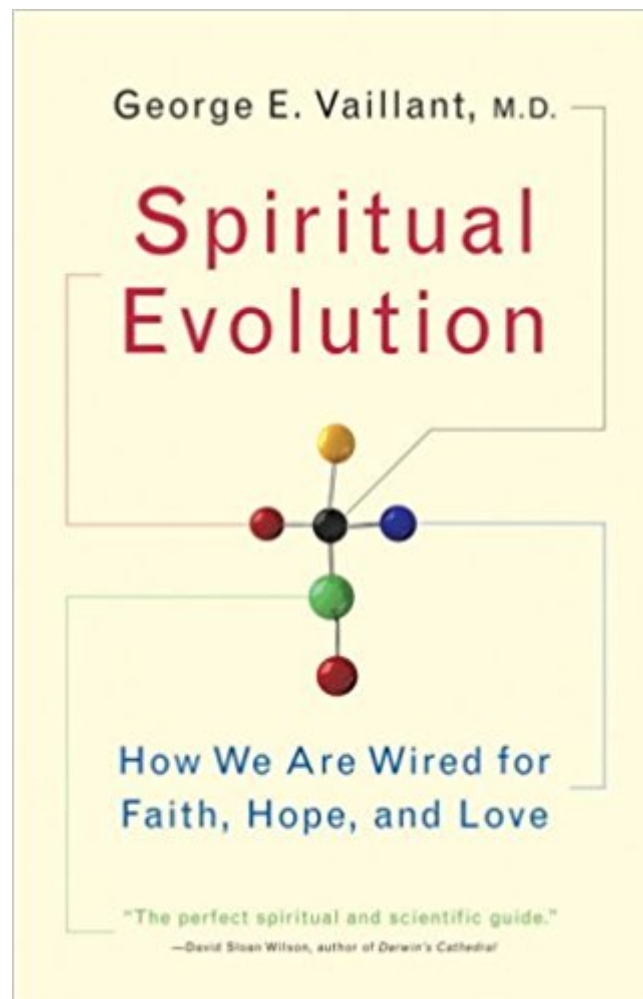




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# Spiritual Evolution: How We Are Wired For Faith, Hope, And Love



## Synopsis

In our current era of holy terror, passionate faith has come to seem like a present danger. Writers such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens have been happy to throw the baby out with the bathwater and declare that the danger is in religion itself. God, Hitchens writes, is not great. But man, according to George E. Vaillant, M.D., is great. In *Spiritual Evolution*, Dr. Vaillant lays out a brilliant defense not of organized religion but of man's inherent spirituality. Our spirituality, he shows, resides in our uniquely human brain design and in our innate capacity for emotions like love, hope, joy, forgiveness, and compassion, which are selected for by evolution and located in a different part of the brain than dogmatic religious belief. Evolution has made us spiritual creatures over time, he argues, and we are destined to become even more so. *Spiritual Evolution* makes the scientific case for spirituality as a positive force in human evolution, and he predicts for our species an even more loving future. Vaillant traces this positive force in three different kinds of "evolution": the natural selection of genes over millennia, of course, but also the cultural evolution within recorded history of ideas about the value of human life, and the development of spirituality within the lifetime of each individual. For thirty-five years, Dr. Vaillant directed Harvard's famous longitudinal study of adult development, which has followed hundreds of men over seven decades of life. The study has yielded important insights into human spirituality, and Dr. Vaillant has drawn on these and on a range of psychological research, behavioral studies, and neuroscience, and on history, anecdote, and quotation to produce a book that is at once a work of scientific argument and a lyrical meditation on what it means to be human. *Spiritual Evolution* is a life's work, and it will restore our belief in faith as an essential human striving.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Vaillant believes that humans are hardwired for positive emotions and that those emotions are essential to survival as a species. Defining spirituality as a combination of love, hope, joy, forgiveness, compassion, faith, awe, and gratitude that binds people together (â€œSpirituality is more about us than meâ€•), he argues that it has a biological basis. Inspired by the â€œrelatively newâ€• scientific disciplines of ethology (animal behavior) and neuroscience and using prayers, poetry, and song lyrics to illustrate his points, Vaillant explores the evolution of language and the development of human brain function, discusses the differences between right and left brain hemispheres, and examines the mammalian limbic system. He comments on the often exceedingly slow maturation of human culture and in the last chapter discusses the differences between religion and spirituality. Written in an accessible, jargon-free style, this is a thoughtful, compassionate, and hopeful survey of how far humanity has come and how far it still has to go on the cultural-spiritual continuum. --June Sawyers --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Praise for *Spiritual Evolution*â€œGeorge Vaillant is a poet, a visionary, and a scientist. This book is the culmination of a fifty-year project that revolutionized our view of human development and now may revolutionize our view of religion and spirituality.â€•â€• "Martin E. P. Seligman, Ph.D., author of *Authentic Happiness* and *Learned Optimism*â€œAt lastâ€• an explanation of spirituality from an evolutionary perspective that does justice to both. With his tremendous breadth of experience and personal wisdom, George Vaillant is the perfect spiritual and scientific guide.â€•â€• "David Sloan Wilson, author of *Darwin's Cathedral*"More than a scientific defense of faith, George Vaillant's book is a moving account of his own intellectual quest, through science, for a spiritual view of human evolution and experience. Clearly a labor of love and a needed antidote to recent attacks on religion. An important book."â€• "Melvin Konner, M.D., Ph.D., author of *The Tangled Wing*â€œ*Spiritual Evolution* is a truly outstanding book, an exquisite weaving of science and spirituality focused on the positive emotions. The result is a wonderful synthesis of material leading to a compassionate and empowering conclusion about the future of humanity. A must-read for everyone who has considered the intersection between spirituality and the human person.â€•â€• "Andrew Newberg, coauthor of *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*â€œIn this inspirational and scientifically brilliant essay on human nature, Dr. Vaillant defends the love, hope, joy, compassion,

awe, forgiveness, and faith that together form our naturally evolved spiritual essenceâ€”an essence enlivened by religion at its best, and distorted by religion at its worst. He draws on a lifetime of heralded literary, scientific, spiritual, and medical insight to write the one prescription that can dispel our shadows of confusion and help heal the world.â€”Stephen G. Post, Ph.D., coauthor of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*â€œWith uncommon lucidity, balance, and scholarship, George Vaillant draws brilliantly from neurobiology, social science, human developmental psychology, and the wisdom of the great writers and thinkers to clarify and illuminate the positive emotions such as love, compassion, and altruism that elevate humankind and may yet save it.â€”Irvin Yalom, M.D., author of *Love's Executioner*

Difficult reading, befitting a psychiatrist who is writing a defense of Spirituality (as opposed to religion). It's good enough I am re-reading it, this time highlighting the noteworthy text. There's a lot of noteworthy text. Highly recommended for thinkers.

If you want to read just one good book about spirituality, I highly recommend George Vaillant's (2008) *Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defense of Faith*. Vaillant is a research psychiatrist (which means the book is crammed with neurobiology) and directed Harvard's Study of Adult Development for 35 years. His conception of spirituality revolves around the eight positive emotions that involve human connection. He argues throughout that prosocial behavior is part and parcel of natural selection, that positive emotions both promote and follow prosocial behavior, and that this process occurs in the limbic and parasympathetic systems and the amygdala (rather than in conscious, cognitive thought processes), and that humanity is moving (from an evolutionary perspective) in the direction of greater spiritual (prosocial) interaction. Vaillant would argue that spirituality defies rational, cognitive description. Vaillant's final chapter, entitled "The Difference Between Religion and Spirituality", is primarily a fascinating discussion of Alcoholics Anonymous ("AA"), which he concludes is mostly a spiritual rather than a religious program. AA certainly has its detractors, but it has also helped an awful lot of people to maintain sobriety, and Vaillant's discussion of the spiritual aspect of the program was most interesting. Given my emphasis on the importance of humor, I was also pleased to note his comment that AA meetings tend to be filled with laughter and humor (although, beneath it all there is a "deadly seriousness"). Excellent book.

As a "Buddhist/atheist/humanist I have strong suspicions and negative experiences with organized religions. This man looks the the ineffable, non-verbalizable experience of "connectedness" through

the portholes of neuroscience, socialization and personal intuition. I read slowly and reread which is not like me. I found much of myself and my thinking concretized in there. A+

Wow - a great book from a legend in the field of psychological and well being research. Vaillant has really outdone himself with this book. Using data from the last 80+ years (much of it from the Harvard men's study), he talks about love, joy, passion, faith and other elements of our spiritual lives in easy-to-understand, yet impactful ways.

excellent copy

It is difficult to bring clarity to the difference between religion and spirituality, but he has done it. Simple yet powerful concepts in this book fill each page and help us to understand ourselves better. A good example of one of these concepts is that normal human development is actually a spiritual progression. He shows with great success how religion harnesses our positive emotions and how cults abuse them. After reading his book I have renewed hope that we can all coexist, and that we can put the nonsense to rest.

I have never read anything by this author that I didn't like. This book arises out of his experience with a longitudinal study on the natural history of mental illness. Within this study was around 180 alcoholics that he followed through most of their life. His finding that Alcoholics Anonymous was superior to professional treatment led him to consider how spirituality contributed to his process. I have been dealing in these issues for 30 years and find his book breathtakingly to the point. It is a must read for Ministry and Professional's involved in recovery.

This book is groundbreaking and key to understanding one's faith.

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