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Book Reviews

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Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice

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Discerning the Spirit: Teaching Spirituality in the Religious Education Classroom

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The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches

Reviewer: Ken Badley (p.90)

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Handbook of Planning in Religious Education

Reviewer: Leona M. English (p.91)

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Teaching Right and Wrong: Moral Education in the Balance

Reviewer: Ruth Deakin Crick (p.93)

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Editorial: Spirituality – Not about Religion?

IT IS COMMONLY pointed out, whether in defence or complaint, that discussions of spirituality in education tend to be vague and ill-defined. A positive reason put forward for this is the elusive nature of spirituality itself, and certainly trying to gain a clear grasp of our deepest convictions, experiences and yearnings can be somewhat like trying to get a clear glimpse of the back of our own eyeballs. There is, however, a less defensible slipperiness in at least some discussion of spiritual development, deriving more from rhetorical drift than the mystery at the heart of things.

Take a recent article by Sokanovic and Muller which discusses data from interviews with teachers and inspectors relating to their understanding of spiritual development (M. Sokanovic and D. Muller, 'Professional and Educational Perspectives on Spirituality in Young Children' in *Pastoral Care in Education*, 17:1, 1999, pp.9-16). The authors start out accurately enough by pointing out that the National Curriculum Council and OFSTED both 'declared early on that "spiritual" was not synonymous with "religious", but neither defined what connection there may be between the two, nor offered a concise definition' (p.9). This would seem to leave the possibility of a strong positive connection between spirituality and religion open - indeed, the relevant OFSTED document is accused of displaying 'an obviously religious bias' (p.9). A few pages later, however, an odd slippage has occurred. We are alerted to the 'inability of two teachers to detach spirituality from a religious base in any way, despite the fact that OFSTED (1994) and the National Curriculum Council (1993) and the Schools Curriculum Assessment Authority (1996) all state that spirituality is not about religion' (p.14). The rewording is only slight, and it would be easy to read over this as a simple repetition of the earlier point, but the change is far reaching. Now it is alleged not merely that the relevant government documents do not regard spirituality as *synonymous* with religion, but that they clearly state (despite their religious bias?) that spiritual development is *not about* religion.

This is simply not true. To say that two things are not synonymous, and should therefore not be straightforwardly identified, in no way implies that the one is not concerned with the other. Economics is not the same as mathematics, but it would be odd to say the least to see them as unconnected. Spirituality and religion may be different yet intimately interconnected, even if the task of figuring out the nature of that connection still lies before us.

This could easily be passed off as an instance of clumsy wording if it were not for the fact that it goes together with a pattern of rhetoric which is not uncommon in the spiritual development literature. The wording of the comment on the two hapless teachers' 'inability' to 'detach' spirituality from religion clearly implies some measure of ignorance and inadequacy. Religious belief is presented more than once as a form of 'bias' (pp.9, 12). Rather than being told that the teachers interviewed hold diverse views, with some espousing a particular theological perspective upon spirituality, we are offered the suggestion that some teachers just don't get it - perhaps they have not managed to mature sufficiently to leave their religious perspective behind. Given the presence in the current debate concerning spiritual development of substantial contributions (such as the work of Andrew Wright - see the reviews section of this issue - or Adrian Thatcher) which insist on the importance of the relationship between spirituality in schools and traditions of faith, to insinuate to teachers that if they hold similar views they are simply not up to date is condescending and inappropriate.

What seems to be the basis for at least some of this rhetoric is the assumption that whereas 'religious' ideas concerning healthy spiritual development are narrow, partial and 'exclusively religious', 'non-religious' conceptions are broad and 'inclusively humanistic' (Bert Cadmore, 'Developing and Implementing a Whole-School Policy for Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development' in *Pastoral Care in Education* 15:4, 1997, pp.8-13, (p.8)). Focussing on the spiritual experience of the many, it is assumed, is more inclusive and impartial than taking into account the doctrines of the few. Clearly, at a very simple level, it is true that the more generic the description of spirituality we offer, the

more different people and varieties of spirituality it will refer to and the more the appearance of partisanship, bias or indoctrination recedes. Before being drawn along by the implicitly asserted virtue of non-religious accounts, however, we might do well to ponder whether any avowedly non-religious approach to an area where many of the significant differences are between those who hold different religious beliefs or reject those beliefs is necessarily inclusive. If spirituality is now 'not about' religion, and those who think it is exhibit a failure of perception, in what sense is the non-religious approach 'inclusive' in relation to believers? To be sure, it can include them in the sense that it can offer its own account of their belief, but then accounts of secular spirituality can equally be offered from the standpoint of faith.

If the intention is to give serious attention to spiritual experience, issues of belief and differences in belief cannot be sidestepped. Consider the following three examples. The first is taken from a recent article offering advice to primary school teachers (Neil Hawkes, 'A Toolkit for Teaching Spirituality' in *Primary Practice* 18, 1999, pp.20-22). In it, Neil Hawkes suggests the following approach to spiritual development:

'Have a clear understanding of what spirituality means. Begin to develop an understanding of your own inner world of thoughts, feelings and emotions. This is your spiritual world ... Get to know your spiritual self. Quiet reflection is the route to this destination. Give yourself time to be with yourself, and begin to explore your spiritual self by sitting quietly in a positive way focussing on aspects of yourself which create good feelings. Make sure to create thoughts and images which do not lead to a critical frame of mind. If negative thoughts occur to you, acknowledge them and ask them to move on so that you can concentrate on positive ones.'

This resonates strongly with a great deal of contemporary spirituality, and it makes no reference to doctrines of any kind or the need to subscribe to any particular creed. It is not, however, neutral. For Christians, confession, repentance and the struggle against sin are centrally important elements of spiritual experience, and spiritual growth has to do with loving God and loving one's neighbour and not with self-absorption. To base teaching as a whole on this kind of approach to spiritual experience, which centres on the self and excludes the negative, is therefore far from impartial - it is controversial and exclusive in relationship to Christian belief.

The second example is taken from David Hay's important and extensive studies of religious and spiritual experience. Hay contrasts interviews with two very different people carried out on the same day:

'a member of a Marxist revolutionary group illustrated the effects of commitment to a belief system which rejects religion as a false consciousness. His refusal of even the possibility of religious experience is based on a moral revulsion:

"At times of selfishness, I stumble into otherworldliness, when I feel the need to lean on some emotional peg (I suppose some people would call it prayer). But when I catch myself, I stop it by saying 'There is no power that can help me' ... The aspect of subservience disgusts me."

It so happened that on the day this interview took place I also spoke to a deeply committed member of the Church of England. His reflections on his religious experience show a striking contrast in value judgement:

"It's something that is there all the time. One's awareness is limited by one's willingness to submit to it. Very often it demands an unconditional giving which is not as easy as shutting ourselves off. This experience is the true end of man." ' (David Hay, *Exploring Inner Space: Scientists and Religious Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, p.156).

These markedly different responses to what may well have been a similar experience highlight clearly the importance of belief in shaping the ways in which spiritual experience becomes integrated into our daily life. If religious perspectives on spirituality are regarded as dated and somehow beside the point, what other frameworks will children be offered within which to make sense of their experience? And in what sense will those frameworks be less partial and controversial than religious alternatives?

The third example is taken from another empirical study, this time carried out in Scandinavia. Antoon Geels gathered accounts from people who had experienced visions (Antoon Geels, 'Chaos Lives Next to God: Religious Visions and the Integration of Personality' in *Studies in Spirituality* 2, 1992, pp. 223-236). One of them came from Reidar, a Norwegian who had for many years been in and out of prison and

addicted to heroin. Seriously ill from his addiction and vomiting blood, he visited his doctor, who gave him a month to live. He decided to inject a final dose of heroin, climb the highest bridge in Gothenburg, Sweden, and jump off. As he stood on the bridge ready to jump he saw a face topped by a crown of thorns, and two wounded hands stretched towards him, and heard a voice telling him 'Put what is left of your life in my hands and I will heal and save you' (p.228). Somehow he climbed down from the bridge; his life from that point on was radically changed. Eighteen months later he married, and was serving as a pastor when Geels interviewed him two decades later.

According to Geels, incidents such as this demonstrate the remarkable resilience of the ego's defence mechanisms in situations of duress. The basic idea is that faced with extinction or extreme stress, religious visions are triggered by the ego in order to establish order in the midst of chaos - in Geels's words, 'it could be a sort of adaptive process, similar to physiological processes such as sweating when the body is too warm and shivering when it is too cold' (p.234).

The point of mentioning this here is not to enter into debate concerning the viability of Geels's interpretation, or its reconcilability with religious accounts of the same experiences, but to ask a more immediate question: If Reidar could have been presented at the time with Geels's interpretation, and if he had come to believe that the vision was nothing more than the last ditch attempt of his psyche to restore equilibrium, would he have jumped?

Examples such as this suggest that the question of how particular beliefs relate to spiritual experience is far from being simply a matter for academic discussion. The beliefs which become associated with spiritual experience can have a profound impact on the ways in which we respond to our experience and the shape which our lives take. This need not imply that cognitive matters and conscious beliefs are the most basic element of spirituality or that they are primary, only that they cannot be evaded. If this is so, then to suggest to teachers (let alone students) that they need to learn that spirituality is not about religion is woefully inadequate. 'Spiritual development' as currently discussed by educators may be in various respects distinct from religious education, but the interconnections between spirituality and religion remain too profound for them to be so straightforwardly uncoupled.

* * * * *

The relationship between particular beliefs and spiritual experience is to the fore in Andrew Wright's article on New Age spirituality in this issue. He argues that, in areas where culture is incompatible with the integrity of the Christian faith, we need to supplement a relational hermeneutic with a hermeneutic of resistance.

Susanna Hookway is into resistance too, resistance to the colonisation of education for citizenship by values which are based on consensus alone. She proposes that religious education has much to contribute to citizenship education by giving pupils points of reference beyond consensus and an understanding of worldviews and a moral motivation which it would otherwise lack.

Lindsay Paterson's article proposes a new role for Catholic schools in Scotland, an old country with a new parliament. In a highly secular society, he says, Catholic education can be a 'laboratory of experience' providing ideas on how we can live together which could be of value to the society as a whole.

Living together and journeying together are among the many issues Adrian Brown weaves together in his fable from the land of the Torusians and the Monocloptics. We who have ears to hear, let us hear!

Parker Palmer is a writer whose books have been proving very helpful to Christians who are seeking to integrate their faith with their thinking about education. John Van Dyk's review article on Palmer's latest book, *The Courage to Teach*, helpfully identifies a number of themes which are significant for Christian educators.

Harriet Harris and John Shortt discuss how helpful or otherwise Reformed epistemology in considering whether and under what circumstances children can be justified in believing in God.

The reviews section again covers a range of books dealing with Christian/religious/spiritual/moral education and other issues of relevance to Christians in education.

John Shortt & David I. Smith