

A PEDAGOGY OF THE SPIRIT: SITUATING PRIMARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION WITHIN THE GREATER AMBIT OF SPIRITUALITY

Abstract

A review of the literature in an Australian context has indicated little emphasis on the pedagogical dimension of learning in religious education (Hackett, 1995; White, 2003). This article seeks to address and to contribute to this area by suggesting the possibility of a pedagogical approach to primary religious education in which religious education is situated within the larger sphere of spirituality. It discusses four interrelated pedagogical principles that underlie such a consideration. An exploration of two particular forms of awareness common to young children that may contribute a conscious spirituality then follows to illustrate how these might be drawn upon in planning a religious education curriculum that begins from the common base of spirituality, and which situates religious education within this wider sphere.

At a recent forum investigating the nature of the religious development and spiritual identity of young children in Catholic primary schools, participants expressed their concern for the necessity of a common base for religious education curriculum design. They noted that in addition to the multicultural and multi-faith composition of children in Catholic classrooms, issues pertaining to the children's lack of connection with the parish church community, lack of religious literacy, and an apparent absence of family 'religious experience' made it increasingly difficult to locate a common starting point for planning in religious education. These are genuine issues of concern. If curriculum planners and religious educators are to design programs that are meaningful and relevant for students, then matters such as these need to be seriously addressed.

This article contends that spirituality, as an innate and natural human predisposition may provide one such common base that is being sought in the designing of religious education curriculum for primary school children. It discusses four interrelated pedagogical principles that underlie the consideration of spirituality as a common base from which to engage in religious education with a view to situating this activity within the larger domain of spirituality. An exploration of two particular forms of awareness common to young children that may contribute a conscious spirituality – *flow* and *the felt sense* – is undertaken to illustrate how these might be drawn upon in planning a religious education curriculum that begins from the common base of spirituality, and which situates religious education within this wider sphere.

Four Interrelated Pedagogical Principles

There are four interrelated pedagogical principles that underlie the consideration of spirituality as a common base from which to begin in the planning of a religious education curriculum. Together they provide justification for situating religious

education within the larger realm of spirituality. Attention is now turned to each of these.

1. *Spirituality is Ontological*

Described in the literature in terms of relationality and connectedness with the self, the Other in community, the Other in creation, and with a Transcendent Other (Bosacki, 2001; de Souza, 2003; Elton-Chalcraft, 2002; Fisher, 1997; Harris & Moran, 1998; Hay & Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2003; O'Murchu, 1997, 2000; Tacey, 2000, 2003), spirituality is understood to be an inherent and fundamental quality of what it means to be human (O'Murchu, 1997, Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Groome (1998) has stated that "spirituality is ontological – it belongs to every humankind's 'being'. It is more accurate to call ourselves spiritual beings who have a human life than human beings who have a spiritual life" (p. 332).

Similarly, O'Murchu (1997) has maintained that spirituality is a foundational characteristic of human life. Spirituality is "an innate quality of human life and existence. It is something we are born with, something essentially dynamic that forever seeks articulation and expression in human living" (p. 37). In other words, all people possess a spiritual dimension to their lives.

2. *Spirituality Has Biological Foundations*

Supporting the notion that spirituality is ontological, several studies have indicated that spirituality is an attribute that has been selected in the evolution of the human species. Hardy (1966) proposed that what he called 'religious experience' (more commonly termed spirituality today) has evolved through the process of natural selection because it has survival value for the individual. In other words, spirituality is potentially present in all human beings and has a positive function in enabling individuals to survive in their natural environments. More recently, and as the result of extensive research, Newberg and d'Aquili (2001) have argued that there are structures within the

human brain, which they have dubbed “association areas” that become active in producing the mind’s spiritual potential. These have evolved over millions of years to enable individuals to address problems of meaning and value in their immediate environment. While acknowledging that these structures developed initially from simpler neurological processes that evolved to address basic survival needs, Newberg and d’Aquili have argued that the process of natural selection favoured their potential for spiritual experience and usefulness. In other words, spirituality has biological foundations. It is “rooted in life itself, and thus has biological and evolutionary origins” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 88).

Because spirituality is so primal, Hay and Nye (1998) have argued that it is something that can be seen particularly in children. These scholars have also argued that although children emerge with a spiritual dimension to their lives that is richly open and aware, the western world particularly, through its socially constructed processes, is often destructive of their spirituality. While the potential for human spirituality is natural, the discarding or repression of spiritual awareness is a social construction of western culture that needs to be counteracted (Hay, 2001).

3. All People Potentially Apperceive Spiritual Experience

The literature exploring spirituality indicates that almost all people are capable of apperceiving spiritual experience (see for example Hyde, 2004; Robinson, 1977; Tacey, 2000, 2003). It was William James who first proposed in *The varieties of religious experience* that what he termed ‘personal religion’ (which has today more commonly become known as spirituality) is apperceived in a variety of ways by different people. James (1977, original work published 1902) argued that different people experience different spiritual experiences that function so as to lead them to act upon them to seek solutions to problems of meaning and value in different ways, each according to their particular life situation.

Malsow (1970) also recognised the validity of an individual’s spiritual experience. Coining the phrase ‘peak-experiences’ to describe these revelations, or mystical experiences, Maslow maintained that they were common to all, or almost people. He recognised, however, that many people repress or suppress such experiences, and so do not use them as a source of “personal therapy, personal growth, or personal fulfilment” (p. 29).

Further to this, Robinson’s (1977) study at the Religious Experience Research unit in Oxford discovered and reported that spiritual experiences are common to a significant number of people. An

extensive body of correspondence had been built up in relation to particular experiences of people, in which they felt that their lives had been affected by some power beyond themselves. Robinson noticed that a substantial number of them, which were written by adults, described profound experiences from childhood. They had remained vivid memories of the correspondents for their whole lives, and held great significance for them when contemplating questions relating to identity and meaning. While these accounts may have become embellished over time, Robinson argued that it was difficult to ignore the impact of these experiences, which in some way generated reflection in the individual.

More recently, Zohar and Marshall (2000) have maintained that experiences like these whether explicitly religious or otherwise, are quite common. They have claimed that in western cultures, between 30% and 40% of the population are recorded as having undergone such experiences on at least one occasion. Such experiences are described as being accompanied by feeling of great euphoria and well being, and result in “deep insight that brings new perspective to life” (p. 99).

4. Construing the Relationship between Spirituality and Religion

Given that spirituality is ontological, and is an attribute of all human beings, it is not the exclusive property of any one religious tradition. Contemporary scholarship has distinguished between institutional religion and spirituality (see for example, James, 1902/1977; Hay & Nye, 1998; Maslow, 1970; O’Murchu, 1997, 2000; Priestly, 2002; Scott, 2001, Tacey, 2003). Spirituality is much larger and predates any form of organised formal religion. O’Murchu (1997) has maintained that the spiritual history of the human species is at least 70, 000 years old, by comparison with which organised religions have been in existence for 4, 500 years. While formal religions encompasses the organised structures, rituals and beliefs belonging to the official religious systems, spirituality concerns that “ancient and primal search for meaning that is as old as humanity itself ... and ... belongs to the evolutionary unfolding of creation itself” (p. vii).

However, although religion and spirituality are not one and the same entity, a person’s spirituality may nonetheless be given expression through an organised religious belief system. For example, Ranson (2002) has suggested that a religious tradition, such as Catholicism, may provide the context and shared value system needed to depth and give voice to an individual’s spiritual experience. However, such a view could be perceived as considering institutional religion to be

the larger sphere in which an individual's spirituality might be nurtured. For example, Thatcher (1996, 1999) has maintained that such an understanding is necessary to nurture spirituality, and that to speak of spirituality outside of a mainstream religious tradition is meaningless. Thatcher has argued that any articulation of spirituality requires first and foremostly, a theology. He has remained deeply suspicious of so called secular and modernist treatments of spirituality that have broken "the conceptual connection between spirituality and belief in God" (Thatcher, 1996, p. 122).

However, this article argues that spirituality can be conceived of as the greater domain in which it is possible to situate the activity of religious education. Specifically in terms of Christian religious education, Griffith (2003) has argued that situating religious education within the larger expanse of spirituality leads to a more holistic understanding of the nature of religious education, and offers a more enhanced sense of the purpose of this activity. Griffith has maintained that knowledge of the content of the Christian faith is important, but that by itself is insufficient. The fulness of Christian life "requires embracing one's spiritual potential, integrating one's heart and intellect in a stance of lived faith, and being committed to embodying gospel values in the world" (p. 58).

Griffith (2003) has further argued that when religious education is situated within the larger ambit of spirituality, educating for spiritual maturity becomes the primary goal. The identification of spiritual maturity as the purpose of religious education is to focus primarily on relational life with self, others, the environment, and with God. Being intentional about this will entail religious educators including the practice of discernment, contemplation and self-knowledge in their learning and teaching:

If the practice of discernment is central in coming to spiritual maturity, then one's pedagogical approach ... should allow for a careful discernment of the full subject matter being taught, and a built-in discernment of one's lived experience. If spiritual maturity requires a habit of contemplation, enabling one to become what it is he or she holds, then the teaching/learning event should include time for gazing, for beholding ... if self-knowledge is a constitutive dimension of spiritual maturity, then inviting participants...to pause before their own experience, to reflect on it, to pay attention to the movements within ...

becomes a key role of the (religious educator) (pp. 58-59).

In Griffin's (2003) work can be seen the potential of spirituality as a common base in the designing of religious education curricula for primary school children. All children are spiritual beings. When the above principles are taken into consideration – that spirituality is ontological, biological, that all people can apperceive spiritual experience, and that religious education can be situated within the larger expanse of spirituality – there exists the possibility of planning a program that has as its aim not simply a knowledge of the content of the faith tradition, but rather spiritual maturity. Such a program would recognise the pluralism and diversity of the students' backgrounds and draw upon these, thereby enabling them to construct meaning within a holistic framework.

What might such an approach look like in practice? Several writers have outlined considerations and possible activities for nurturing spirituality within the classroom context (e.g., Bowness & Carter, 1999; Kessler, 2000; Ramsey, 1999), although few have articulated a pedagogy that explicitly situates religious education within the greater realm of spirituality. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to outline an entire curriculum in religious education, the following considerations are offered as a way forward.

Although there are at least three aspects of spiritual sensitivity that provide possible starting points (Hay & Nye, 1998), the following will focus on the category of awareness sensing, particularly given that this has been offered as a possible pedagogical structure for methods of teaching religious education elsewhere, although with a focus on secondary education (Hay, 2000). The following categories have a particular focus on young children in their first formal years of schooling, although they are certainly not limited to those years. They also emanate from the author's research into the characteristics of children's spirituality.

Awareness and Flow

Awareness, as a category of spiritual sensitivity, has been identified in the research of Hay and Nye (1998) as being characteristic of an individual's spirituality. The reflexive process of "being aware of one's awareness" (p. 60) is of great importance in the spiritual practices of both Eastern and Western traditions, for example, *vipassana* (awareness meditation) in Theravada Buddhism, or certain traditions of contemplative prayer in Christianity.

A particular type of awareness that can be understood as potentially spiritual has been

described by the American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990) as *flow*. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) has portrayed this state of consciousness called flow as the feeling one might have when, for example, one reads a compelling book, or becomes lost in a fascinating conversation. It involves the experience of concentrated attention giving way to a liberating feeling of the activity being managed by itself, or by some outside influence. The action of the activity in which one is involved and the awareness of that activity become merged. Flow is:

a holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement...action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between past, present and future (p. 36).

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) have provided an excerpt from the account of a skilled rock climber as a typical example of flow:

One tends to get immersed in what's going on around him, in the rock, in the moves that are involved...search for footholds...proper position of the body – so involved that he might lose consciousness of his own identity and melt into the rock (p. vii).

Typical activities that might result in an experience of flow include music, art, yoga, the martial arts, games, rock climbing, and even a person's work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Importantly, religious ritual can also be a source of flow for an individual. For example, the Jesuit Rule and the spiritual exercises devised by Ignatius of Loyola can be understood as an attempt to generate the experience of flow. Such exercises "provided an optimal set of conditions by which young men could live the entirety of their lives as a single flow experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, cited in Hay & Nye, 1998, p. 65).

The lives of young children abound with activities that potentially generate experiences of flow – playing, running, skipping, reading, writing, painting, drawing, singing, dancing, concentrating, learning a new skill, and so forth. While not all moments of flow contribute to a conscious spirituality, some might. Potentially, any of these activities could be experienced by children as special in this way (Hay & Nye, 1998).

The following example of hermeneutic phenomenological writing, taken from the author's own research into the characteristics of children's spirituality, is indicative of a small group of children experiencing an ordinary activity as a state of flow¹:

The children proceeded to their selected activity. Adam headed for the seed planting, the materials of which were located on one of the tables. Alicia, John and Cameron made their way to the table containing the materials for the bead creations. Although the three children sat next to one another, there was no interaction between them. They could well have been physically situated in separate countries, or at opposite ends of the earth, for there appeared no dealings between them. Each was engaged and focused on her/his own activity. Each seemed content and, although they were seated within close proximity to one another, each seemed to be oblivious to the presence of her/his peers.

Adam carefully and skilfully engaged in the tactile experience of placing potting mix into the seed boxes. He patted the soil into each of the sockets. Then, delicately, placed one or two of the seeds into each of the sockets, and gently compressed them into the potting mixture. In a way that could almost be described as lovingly, he added a little water to each. Adam too seemed to be oblivious to the presence of his peers at the adjacent table.

Except for the sounds of the beads being placed onto the templates, and the occasional trickle of water from the seed planting, there was almost silence. A pin would have been heard to drop. Their focus and engagement in their chosen activities were at once intense, yet also relaxing. None of the children appeared anxious or stressed. They appeared to be calm, even tranquil, lost in the activity to which each was attending.

Awareness and the Felt Sense

Following on from the notion of flow is the idea of attending to *the felt sense*. This is a concept developed by Gendlin's (1962, 1981). It entails the attending to the bodily awareness of situations, persons, or events. Bodily awareness, as Gendlin (1981) has maintained, is not a mental experience, but a *physical* one:

¹ All names of children in this article are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

A felt sense doesn't come to you in the form of thoughts or words or other separate units, but as a single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling....Since a felt sense doesn't communicate itself in words it isn't easy to describe in words. It is an unfamiliar, deep-down level of awareness (p. 33).

Gendlin (1981) has maintained that individuals encounter and act upon the world with the whole of their bodies. An individual's corporeality is then a primary source of knowledge, although as Gendlin has noted, it is a source that western cultural history tempts people to ignore in favour of intellectual detachment. Attending to the felt sense may enable a person to draw upon the wisdom of the body in assisting with personal difficulties and in being sensitively aware in relationships. In other words, it may enable an individual to get in touch with the felt sense of a particular situation.

The seeds of the felt sense can be seen in the following example of hermeneutic phenomenological writing, again taken from the author's own research into the characteristics of children's spirituality:

Eagerly, the children moved to select their activity. Marco headed straight for the bead creations activity. He selected his stencil and began to choose beads to place on it. "I'm going to finish this," he murmured almost to himself as he settled and began to engage in this activity. His focus was almost immediate. Carefully and skilfully, he manipulated the beads, selecting his colours and moving them into position. His actions and awareness seemed to merge as a look of delight came across his face.

Soon, he was joined by Tran, who had been planting seeds. His arrival was unacknowledged by Marco, and so Tran too began to engage in this activity. Quite consciously and gently, Tran ran his fingers across the pile of beads, acknowledging their texture and shape. He selected his beads with thought and care.

"Oh no," whispered Marco. He had accidentally knocked some of the beads from their position on the stencil. Painstakingly, he set about restoring his work. There were one or two short exchanges of whispers between the two boys at this point about which colour beads to select. Yet, quiet prevailed. One might intuit a reverence – almost a sense

of the sacred in this activity. It was as though both children desired to maintain the silence and tranquillity of the space in which this activity was undertaken, and which this activity seemed to deserve.

It was interesting to observe these two boys and their absorption in this activity. It was fascinating to see these children, who, as I had observed in the classroom context, could often be quite active and boisterous, now consumed in the concentration and the quiet that this task demanded.

In the above example, the felt sense to which these children were attending was a natural way of knowing. They relied on their bodies, a primary and fundamental source of knowledge, and were attending to a type of awareness that was beyond thoughts and words. Because children, especially those in their first formal years of schooling, have not been (fully) inducted into the intellectualism that is the inheritance of western culture, the felt sense is an area of experience with which they are readily and easily in touch. If awareness of the felt sense contributes to a conscious spirituality, it may accord with Berryman's (2001) contention that spirituality is primarily non-verbal in nature, and can be expressed bodily.

Since experiences of flow and attending to the felt sense are natural ways of knowing that are potentially common to all children, and may contribute to a conscious spirituality, it would make sense to include and to draw upon such experiences as a starting point in religious education. The following example briefly outlines one possible and intentional means of planning in religious education by locating it with the greater sphere of spirituality, beginning with some potentially spiritual experiences of flow and the felt sense, and then moving to an introduction of the other dimensions of learning, such as the affective and cognitive domains.

A Practical Example

Suppose that students were undertaking a unit of work with a focus on Creation. The following three interrelated phases could be drawn upon.

1. Attending to Awareness (the Spiritual)

In this phase, the religious educator would intentionally plan activities that may enable the students enter an experience of flow, to attend to their own felt sense, thereby allowing them to draw upon their own bodies as a primal and legitimate source of knowledge. In a unit of work focusing on Creation, the educator might set the ambience with quiet music and plan a series of sensory and tactile

activities in which the students could engage in the very act of creating. Such activities might include painting, sculpting with clay, and building with materials such as LEGO. In this instance, these activities may enable the body, as a source of knowledge, to experience and name the act of creating, and of what it means to create something beautiful and unique.

2. Attending to the Affect

Sound educational practice acknowledges the interrelatedness of all dimensions of knowing (de Souza, 2001, 2004; Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964; Macdonald, 1995). Any well-founded curriculum will present opportunities for addressing the spiritual, affective and cognitive dimensions of learning. Therefore in this phase of a unit focusing on Creation, the educator will provide opportunities for students to explore how it felt to create and how it feels to have created. This may be undertaken creatively through discussion, through journal writing/drawing, or by calling upon Berryman's (1991) notion of group wondering, for example, "I wonder how you felt when you were creating..."

3. Attending to the Cognitive

Having established some common experiences of creating and perhaps of what it feels like to create, the educator can now present and explore the cognitive content of the Catholic faith tradition. In this instance, and in drawing upon what it felt like to create, the educator might present and explore initially with students the first account of Creation from the Book of Genesis, focusing particularly upon the repeated phrase "And God saw that it was good." From here, the notion of humankind as being cocreators with God might also be investigated, stressing the integration of heart and intellect, with a focus on relational life with self, others, the environment, and God.

The three phases outlined above do not demand any one specific learning and teaching methodology. They represent a construction that intentionally begins with the spiritual dimension as a starting point in recognition of the four interrelated pedagogical principles that underlie the consideration of spirituality as a common base from which to begin in the planning of a religious education curriculum – that situates religious education within the larger realm of spirituality. They have their origin in a spiral, rather than linear model of learning (Wright, 2000). In spiralling learning, the students may continually circle around a theme, or topic, beginning with and attending to the spiritual and moving to the affective and cognitive dimensions, returning to the spiritual with new understandings and moving again to the

affective and cognitive thereby building upon their new learning and understandings.

For example, in the unit focused on Creation, the religious educator might return to the spiritual, by planning opportunities for students to view a series of art works or photographs depicting the grandeur of God's creation. This might be followed an exploration of humankind's general attitude towards the natural world, and some of the ways in which people have and have not cared for creation. This could lead to a study of some key phrases from Psalm 148 (Cosmic Hymn of Praise) and of the ways in which they can act as stewards or carers of God's creation. Such an exploration of this unit then maintains a relational focus on the self, others, the environment, and God.

Conclusion

The example presented above is by no means exhaustive, and is one of many possibilities. As well, there are other categories of spiritual sensitivity besides that of awareness sensing that may provide appropriate starting points, which, because of space, have not been considered in this article. For example, the categories of mystery sensing and value sensing (Hay & Nye, 1998) could equally be drawn upon as intentional points of entry for planning a unit of work in religious education. What has been presented here indicates a need for further exploration into the ways in which religious education might be situated within the larger ambit of spirituality, and of the practical ways in which religious educators might plan their curriculum accordingly. The result of such an effort may be a religious education that has, as its purpose, spiritual maturity with a clear focus primarily on relational life with self, others, the environment and with God.

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