

# Spirituality as a Process within the School Curriculum \*

Dr Stephen Bigger  
University College, Worcester

## Abstract.

Spiritual education concerns the quality of our thinking about ourselves, our relationships, our sense of worth and identity, and our sense of well-being. All curriculum subjects can contribute to this search for meaning. Religious education and the act of worship can contribute but are in practice very problematic if dogma inhibits open reflection. No one tradition of spirituality should be promoted since spirituality is a process. The world faiths provide starting points, but life provides more. The human spirit may be finite or eternal; but we are concerned with the here and now and education should promote open qualitative questioning.

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## Introduction

Spiritual education is required across the school curriculum. OFSTED inspectors frequently say they cannot find it but are not sure always what they are looking for. OFSTED have attempted a definition:

“Spiritual development is to be judged by how well the school promotes opportunities for pupils to reflect on aspects of their lives and the human condition through, for example, literature, music, art, science, religious education and collective worship, and how well the pupils respond” (OFSTED 1994).

Such an expression of spirituality would need to have relevance to the broad range of beliefs and world-views in society – atheistic as well as theistic – and be educational and not instructional or indoctrinatory. I have elsewhere attempted, with others, to see how this might be done (Bigger & Brown, 1999). Our concern here is whether and how the word ‘spirituality’ can be interpreted in secular educational contexts.

## Definitions

Spirituality is a contested word (see especially Best, 1996; Leicester et al. 2000). It has a long history of being associated with religion, and in particular with the profound personal responses to religious impulses and feelings. The term has been applied to all religious traditions; and bookshops also include the esoteric, the occult, and new age religions in their spirituality sections. In the case of the Hindu *Upanishads* (the product of philosophical rather than devotional Hinduism) and Buddhism, the discussion is not essentially theistic but seeks to explore the mysteries of human existence and experience. Christian teachings sacralise ‘the spirit’ – notably the apostle Paul’s dualistic contrast between ‘the flesh’ (sinful physical impulses) and ‘the spirit’ (divinely inspired right and insightful living). This dualism divides the mortal body from the eternal spirit, the spirit becoming an entity in itself capable of independent existence apart from the body. The extreme of this is Spiritualism, fashionable from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, which assumes that spirits are real and can be summoned up. To some, a close connection with religion diminishes the usefulness of the term ‘spirituality’ within education (e.g. Carr, 1996). However, to be ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ are not synonymous – a practising religious person might well be very unaware spiritually – so the phrase ‘spiritual education’ needs further clarification.

The Latin *spirare*, from which ‘spiritual’ is derived, means ‘to breathe’. The parallel Greek word that Paul used was *pneuma* meaning breath, wind, and spirit; so does the Hebrew *ruah* – which it means the human spirit, or ‘disposition’ which includes qualities, emotions and enthusiasms, in addition to ‘wind’. The ‘spirit of God’ is God’s personality, generally anthropomorphised in the

Hebrew Bible (I explore this fully in Bigger 1989, 73-79). We *beings* are called 'creatures' (created things); that we have a 'spirit' or disposition, an interior life, is a natural rather than supernatural claim. The Apostle Paul ascribed theological significance to this: as a Pharisee, theological teaching had drawn on the good *versus* evil, light *versus* darkness dualism of Persian Zoroastrianism; the nickname 'Pharisee' may have been a nickname meaning 'Persianiser'<sup>1</sup>. For Paul, the war between light and darkness is fought deep in our souls, in society and in the universe. Reifying good and especially evil continues to be profitable theme of film and popular novel.

Across religions however, spirituality charts the inner dimensions of personal experience and awareness. The Hindu *Upanishads* and Buddhist scriptures (around 6<sup>th</sup> century BC) both explore issues of purpose, of the consequences of actions, and of the self. Icons of deity are have a symbolic function, highlighting inner strengths: e.g. Ganesh to solve problems, Saraswati to develop wisdom, Lakshmi to achieve true success. Whatever the nature of deity for Hindus (Brahman) it is beyond personalisation. For Buddhists, there is not even a reified 'self', only a bundle of contradictory impulses from which we construct our identity, a construction which is a delusion that we have to see through in order to achieve enlightenment. The life forces within us are reborn, but our 'selves' are not, for they are held not to exist. The Buddhist path is to eliminate attachments and desires as these prevent our ultimate well-being. Even with Mahayana Buddhism with its complex realms of deities such as the Chinese (Chan Buddhist) goddess Quan Yin and Tibetan Green Tara we Westerners read superstition too easily into their symbolism. Spirituality here is a human search for deep inner meaning.

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God is personalised, although Islam insists on the non-anthropomorphic language of disposition and qualities. Each faith has a spiritual or mystical tradition which has been at times a threat to doctrinal orthodoxy. Some 'spirituality' is bizarre, with stigmata and mental states akin to mental disorder. In medieval Judaism, the Kabbalah developed esoteric symbolism, with magical claims to form a barely comprehensible theology that still influences orthodox Judaism<sup>2</sup>. In Islam, Sufi spirituality has had a distinguished history, based on an indefinable God and an openness to personal reflection. Since al Ghazali (13<sup>th</sup> century) it tends no longer to challenge authority (Zaehner, 1960). The Sufism of Iran produced from the 1840s onwards the very forward and western looking Bahai Faith with a social teaching based around the unity of humanity and equality of worth of all individuals, and the acceptance of all religions as authentic for their ages.

So we see within religion a clash between views of the spirit as reified, against a definition of spirit as disposition and inner well-being. David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* developed the view that religious concepts grew out of people's anxieties and attempt to explain their world. This offered an explanation of animism and superstition. Post-Darwinian evolutionists agreed, such as Sir James Frazer's massive 15 volume *Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion* (1890 onwards), Andrew Lang, (1887) and sociologists like Emile Durkheim (1915). This view presents formal religions as systems of defining and declaring meaning, offering explanations about the incomprehensible world that people inhabited. Orthodoxy is the declaration that there is only one right way of explaining things, generally policed by powerful priests. This inhibits creative and far sighted reflection since new ideas clash with orthodox traditions. A scientific

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<sup>1</sup> The view is first suggested by the biblical scholar T.W. Manson.

<sup>2</sup> Note for example the interest orthodox Judaism has taken in Drogin's *The Bible Code* as an example of the Torah providing esoteric guidance for future generations. The arguments of this book are now generally rejected on the grounds that any lengthy piece of writing is capable of producing such accidental letter sequences if they are subjected to computer search through all letter intervals. Also the current text of the Hebrew Bible was fixed not by the writers but editors around 1000 years ago, on whose manuscripts the current critical Hebrew text is based. Changes of even a few letters would throw out the letter intervals, and there are many thousand changes.

evolutionist view of spirituality was taken up by the biologist Sir Alister Hardy (1975, 1979) seeking to examine the biological basis of spiritual experience through scientific data (generally interviews and questionnaires), work continued by the Alister Hardy Research Centre.

### **Death and loss**

The concept of the human soul or spirit has hugely influenced theology and philosophy. Its existential and historical origins are related. Archaeological evidence shows that early humans ritualised death through burial, grave goods, embalming and mummification. Interpretation is problematic: this may reflect a belief in an afterlife or a respect for the dead; the general view is that grave goods were buried for the spirit to use in the spirit life. Historic written texts reveal descriptions of an underworld and afterlife. Ancestor worship might appease the spirits of ancestors, or value their memory. Reflection on death focuses on our loss of a loved one, leading to natural speculation on their continuing location and on the possibility of continued influence, for good or ill. We should not presume that all pre-scientific people were superstitious, or that post-scientific people are not. Charles Darwin's family miseries suggested to him that illness and death were not deliberate planned acts by God but nature in action: he maintained a Unitarian belief in a remote creator. His wife Emma found comfort in the belief that her family would be re-united in eternity (Keynes 2001). The Latter Day Saints (Mormons) emphasise the eternal unity of the family through prayers for the dead, even the long dead. The practice of researching family trees is to locate our entire eternal family and baptise the dead into the faith.

Humans reflect on our mortality. Myths emphasise continuing existence after death; this replaces human transitoriness with everlasting permanence, asserting that heaven, paradise, purgatory and hell are real states or places. Doctrinal and ethical agendas are overlaid: the quality of one's future experience is said to depend on how devout and good we are now. These terms are not synonyms: someone who is doctrinally devout need not be ethically good and *vice versa*. The former may be comfortable with the notion of entering paradise after murder and mayhem. Evil deeds are claimed to be eternally forgiven through deathbed repentance. A lifetime of good deeds might be viewed as cancelled by wrong belief. Such a world-view looks forward to personal benefit; it evaluates current attitudes and behaviour through future advantage. Life on earth is viewed as a preparation for the next. It insists that our conscious sense of identity will survive our physical bodies.

The Hindu concept of reincarnation assumes that an individual consciousness will be re-attached to the body of a new-born. There is not usually a search except in high profile cases such as Sai Baba (Hindu) and the Tibetan Lamas (Buddhist). An individual, on this model, might live through many thousands of incarnations throughout mythic eternity before 'release' or 'liberation' (*moksha*). This concept has now become tied in with two other concepts, that of *karma* (the balance between cause and its balancing consequence); and *samsara*, the ladder of being, the journey towards liberation, either by behaving well or badly (ethical), or by offering atonement or gaining spiritual *tapas* or credit (religious). Only at the top of this ladder, at a point when no causes remain, so that there can be no consequences after death, can release come.

Buddhism takes a different view of rebirth, which links with the concept of *anatta* or 'not self' in which the concept of oneself as individual is not real but artificially constructed. The individual soul cannot transmigrate to another body since it is not an entity. Life energy continues after death, since energy does not just disappear. Our life force goes into the melting pot from which new life is fashioned. It is true that the Jataka tales of Buddha's previous incarnations do not sound like this, but these are told as popular mythology rather than considered philosophy. For Buddhists liberation can break through at any time regardless of the great ladder of progress. We can through meditation eliminate causes which stem from desires and attachments. The 'enlightened' can elect to remain on earth to help others – a Bodhisattva, a Buddha in waiting.

Death brings the enlightened into *nirvana*, absorption into the infinite and undifferentiated energy.

Death is a problem to those who remain. Reflection on death examines the consequences of mortality on our everyday thoughts, relationships and actions. We respond spiritually to death either with a belief in continuing non-material life; or with a qualitative view of treasuring the memory. If death is not a portal elsewhere, this life is all we have and we have to value it. Reflection on our mortality is really a contemplation of our values and the direction of our lives. Spirituality lies in the quality of inner reflection leading to psychological, emotional, social and moral well-being. Children in school need to face and cope with loss and fear and reflect on mortality. If we only offer myths, or worse, dogmatic certainty, this will inhibit their understanding and development.

### **Spirituality in the School Curriculum**

In the school curriculum, spiritual does not mean 'promoting Christian values'. To be fair, OFSTED stress this and encourage inspectors and schools to develop spiritual aspects of all subjects. School planning however can start and finish with religious education and the act of worship. Indeed it is hard for school worship to be educational if it presupposes and promotes specific religious beliefs unquestioningly. The assertion of the 1988 Act that religious education should be multi-faith is a great advance on post 1944 syllabuses which were instruments of Christian evangelism (Bigger, 2000).

Any discussion about spirituality in schools needs to recognise that there are religious expressions of spirituality whilst not privileging these as most important. We can be open to the possibilities of pupils being subjects of spiritual reflection – that is, personal reflection on meaning, self, relationships, worth, human nature and disposition. Equally, religious studies needs to come to terms with the fact that not all religious expressions are spiritual or moral, and some are personally and socially damaging. Religion is a mythic system, a story supporting given doctrines which must unconditionally be accepted. Analysis and doubt challenges the given assumptions and stories and may be discouraged within the faith; however pupils need to be encouraged to develop critical awareness. Spirituality as a search for inner sense in contrast promotes reflection and self analysis. Religion, and confessional education may inhibit spiritual growth, if it stresses acceptance rather than questioning.

The term 'implicit religion' widens the scope of religion to other aspects of life that people use to bring meaning to their lives. Sociologically, it has been used to describe secular devotion which has rituals, beliefs and inner convictions – from ideologues to football fans. The influential 'implicit religious education' movement came from the Schools' Council Lancaster Project in the 1970s and influenced school RE syllabuses, starting with Hampshire (1978). The Schools Council used the terms 'seeking, conveying and celebrating meaning'; Hampshire preferred 'paths to understanding'. To understand religious ideas, they argued, children have first to understand themselves, their relationships and their responses to the wider world – in other words spirituality at their own level. Second, they have to understand the layers of meaning that words and symbols express. One aspect is conceptual, linked with thinking skills. Personal responses are emphasised by emotional literacy. There is also a growing concern for well-being in which the physical, emotional, psychological (and perhaps spiritual) come together holistically (for example Best, 1996, 2000). My main problem with implicit religious education was in considering it *religious*. It was certainly good education, about understanding generally; and deep inner aspects of it are what today is defined as *spiritual*, part of the real educational agenda of every teacher in every subject.

## **The self**

Self esteem and self worth are promoted across education as essential motivators, constituents of well-being, which help pupils develop a greater understanding of their role in society. What I am worth is viewed alongside what others are worth, promoting balanced attitudes and relationships. This exploration might come through story and drama; and it grows when knowledge becomes personally relevant.

The question 'who am I?' starts with a name, within a context such as the family, to help children locate themselves. Concern for quality asks 'what kind of being or person am I?'. Reflecting on relationships and attitudes focuses on our personal qualities; children early become conscious of relative abilities; they fit into pecking orders based on status or power. Authority figures and bullies determine what they can do and can't do. Our body image might be positive or negative – too big, too small, too fat even if we are slim. Being comfortable with difference leads to questions of gender, race, colour, nationality. We begin to understand that we will die. What we love, appreciate, hope, despair. These have a great deal to do with how we perceive ourselves to be individuals.

Our sense of self is fragile. Drugs, a violent attack, a breakdown and brain damage can modify the way we construct our inner picture of who we are. This brings us to question whether there is a real soul underneath this changeable depiction. Our 'paradigms' or mental frameworks limit our range of thought because they draw boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable ideas. Nevertheless, thought can cross boundaries and create new paradigms. Our brain processes our self concept, which will be neither objective nor accurate. If I have Alzheimer's, or depression, my thinking will be unreliable.

Promoting 'well-being' to include physical, psychological, and emotional aspects is currently popular as a balance to academic achievement only (Goleman, 1995). Well-being needs careful construction as so many things impact on it; it draws on our interior world, our mental and emotional health, our sense of fulfilment and self realisation. Our 'spirit', our inner self, may have an eternity to sort itself out, or only a lifetime. We who are living it can only deal with the present, and education should enhance the quality of our reflection on it.

## **Wonder**

Standard guidance on teaching spirituality (and implicit religious education) is to promote a sense of awe and wonder. This has various origins. A teleological wonder at the immensity and complexity of life and the universe ('creation') for some leads to belief in a creator. Without a creator, that might tumble. Rudolph Otto's sense (1923) of the 'numinous' points to a mysterious feeling of majesty and creatureliness. This could be the majesty of God, or of nature. This sense for some might come a cathedral, for others a mountain, or a garden. This sense of majesty exists when there is no myth to explain it and is not incompatible with secularity. In school it is sometimes called the 'wow factor'. It is clearly educationally helpful to inspire enthusiasm and curiosity to motivate pupils, to open their eyes to insights which could transform their way of viewing themselves and their world. Some of this excitement may be conceptual rather than spiritual, a sudden realisation of how knowledge fits into the whole. Some is a deep personal response to mystery, atmosphere, the unknown and incomprehensible, which may now fuel a sense of connectedness and inter-relationship. We now are more likely to understand what people once feared – earthquakes, volcanoes, eclipses, but we still sense their awe and wonder. Familiarity can breed contempt, and it can be hard to conquer cynicism. Yet if done well wonder can fuel people's lifelong interests and passions.

Aesthetic responses to beauty, art, music, and literature, or to nature and physical features are examples of inner personal response. Beauty defies definition and analysis, and views differ. Growing knowledge and experience can affect how children view the world. Beauty and wonder

need to be explicit educational agenda, part of thinking skills and part of spiritual education. This is not to give easy answers but to start a process of thought, experience and analysis. Wonder and beauty cannot be taught but can be discussed and maybe 'caught' - that is, appreciated, recognised as significant and fostered.

### **Conclusion:**

Spiritual and religious education have to be separated in our thinking about the curriculum. The concept of spirituality is broader and links with thinking skills, personal reflection, and well-being. 'Spiritual' is not the most unambiguous term, but it is the term currently used and no alternative has won acceptance. No one version or tradition of spirituality should be privileged since spirituality is a process that can profitably apply to all cultures and curriculum areas, and is not dependent on a belief in God. World faiths can provide starting points, but life provides more. Spiritual education raises qualitative questions about ourselves, our virtues and disposition, and our sense of worth. The human spirit may be finite or eternal; but we are concerned with the here and now and should promote open questioning rather than passing on particular doctrinal or mythic statements as the whole and only truth.

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