Secular spiritual education?

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Abstract

Spiritual education and spiritual development are both hotly debated. This conceptual discussion presents spiritual education as referring to personal understanding at its deepest level. It examines and critiques the broad definitions of spiritual education currently proposed, including such aspects as awe and wonder, emotional intelligence, creativity and spiritual intelligence. The article raises concerns about the imposition of doctrinal 'certainties' in an education system aspiring to ethical rational inquiry. A new secular model of rational spiritual education is described in which deep personal growth is viewed as the core process of not only spiritual education, but also of general education at its finest.

The Problem of Spiritual Education

Spiritual education is a much used but problematic term. Historical religions have colonised the term even though the religious establishment have on occasions feared and persecuted free spiritual thinking. Roger Marples (2006) argues against using the term spiritual education at all as there is no cognitive content that is not better described in other ways – either through religion or through psychological well-being. However, it is a prime aim of the school curriculum according to the 1988 Education Reform Act, so curriculum guidance and OFSTED have tried to offer an educational definition. There is some confusion as spirituality has traditionally been used to describe religious worship, and today it is a label for self-help transformational books. These often refer to the supernatural – prayer to 'God'; guardian angels to solve personal problems; 'our demons' to explain despair. As a non-religious rationalist, I seek to determine whether secular spiritual development still has existential and psychological meaning.

Guidance and position papers for schools were offered by National Curriculum Council (NCC, 1993), OFSTED (1994) and the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA, 1996) around the cluster of "spiritual, moral, social and cultural education". The implications of this for the curriculum I and colleagues have discussed at length elsewhere (Bigger and Brown, 1999) where spiritual education is taken as the understanding of one's self at the deepest level. We were clear that spiritual education is holistic, focusing on the whole curriculum and the whole child, and therefore the proper concern of every teacher. In practice, neither teachers nor inspectors have been particularly clear about what good practice might look like. In this paper I wish to emphasise the potential of secular and rational approaches to spiritual education.

In 1902 the philosopher/ psychologist William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience,* subtitled *A Study in Human Nature* gave a focus to personal (rather than institutional) religion and of "enthusiastic" but "solemn emotions". He sought explanations in psychology rather than theology. Rationalism, he observed, does not inspire deep loyalty and

conviction: "our inarticulate feelings of reality" (1982:88) have already persuaded us. The divine is defined as "that which prompts solemn reactions". Spiritual feelings come from the unconscious and provide the backdrop for the conscious rational mind. We need to ask however whether informed and articulate feelings of reality are possible. The British school curriculum developed this into "implicit religious education" (Schools Council, 1972) focusing on questions such as *who am I deep down? How do I relate to others? How should I respond to the world? How should I use language and symbols to express deep meaning?*

Personal religion, or in modern terminology *spirituality* is quite separate from *religiosity* where this means *being a pious and faithful member of a religious community*. The term *spirituality* cannot be reduced to *piety* or *religiosity*. A person is not spiritual because they adhere to a particular form of worship. A pious or religious person can be ruthless, greedy, unethical and immoral. The category *pious* does not rule out unvirtuous characteristics. Religious people may be self-centred pious bigots: what extra do they need to be recognised as spiritual? *Spiritual* is generally defined as the opposite of such characteristics so one cannot be spiritual and callous, one must be virtuous to be spiritual. Using the word spiritual as a value judgement of approval, or as a demand for authority, is an inauthentic reduction.

The scientific study of spiritual development is now a significant field in developmental psychology linked with personal well-being. Sage's *Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006) seeks to establish spiritual development empirically as part of normal human development. It was published alongside a companion *Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development* (see Bigger, 2007, 2008 for reviews). It allows the existence of secular spirituality but fails to define or illumine it. Despite its title, much of this sizable document is about religious development. The assumption of most chapters is that spiritual and religious development are related. Most research on spiritual development discussed here draws data from religious (mostly Christian) groups so the conclusions are valid only with respect to religious piety and not at all for general spirituality. I strongly disagree with this link. The relationship between belief systems and spirituality has to be problematised.

The title assumes that spiritual *development* is a meaningful concept. Carr has contested this (Carr, 2002, 2004). Alexander and Carr (in Roehlkepartain et al., 2006) press for philosophical clarity, noting that current definitions of spirituality in research widely differ in assumptions between:

- confessional (religious) or non-confessional (phenomenological);
- religiously tethered or religiously untethered;
- theologically objectivist (a real God), or subjectivist (God as a symbolic concept);
- independent of morality, or reducible to morality;
- culturally thick or culturally thin (context driven or universal);
- pedagogically cognitive or pedagogically affective (the head and/or the heart).

The Handbook provides a comprehensive collection of new studies on spirituality and religiosity as viewed from the standpoint of largely American developmental psychology. This said the claim to be 'scientific' does not give the conclusions privileged status. Most chapters research Christian religiosity. Although the editors have insisted on a multifaith focus, and include secular spirituality, the gaps are very obvious. There is in general a theistic bias: to be spiritual is taken to assume belief in God. "Religious and spiritual development" often appear as a phrase: chapter 28 even says "RS factors", a fundamental

category error. The relationship between spiritual and religious development is described as contiguous in chap. 4 (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006) but is impeded by their crucial scoping decision:

> *To make this task manageable, we focus primarily on forms of spirituality that have a referent shared with traditional religion.* (2006:46).

This is an illustration of the theistic mind-set. Chapters 6, 12, 29-34 are more balanced. Concluding comments express the need to include 'atheistic spirituality' (p.475) citing Robert Coles' work (1990), who is credited with inspiring the move away from religious development to spirituality. Whether we achieve "a psychological measure of spiritual thriving" (p.493) I doubt (since measuring instruments are so problematic), but understanding the principles will be profitable. The phrase – *spiritual thriving as an active process* – is a worthy one. This needs to be the basis of future study focussing on spirituality as a general psychological construct, whose benefits and pathology need to be understood. That spirituality is inbuilt in the human species – presumably a product of evolutionary biology, as Alister Hardy (1975, 1979) believed – is a useful starting point. Of course, not all evolutionary vestiges remain useful, and some, like blood-lust, are socially damaging. For the evolutionary biologist, Wolpert (2006), belief in the supernatural is a result of humans misunderstanding the concept of causality. My own stance is to study spirituality non-theistically as a dimension of human experience, and only when this is well understood to apply these insights to religiosity:

> *We need to regard spirituality inclusively as a quest for personal meaning at the highest level, which includes intellectual, ethical, social, political, aesthetic and other such dimensions. It marks a quality of reflection which is holistic in scope, transcends material needs and ambitions, and transforms the personality in positive ways.* (Bigger, 2000:23).

We need some way of labelling our deep personal meaning-making, the holistic development of human potential and the human spirit in its totality based on individual autonomy within a relational and ethical engagement with the world, our "personal togetherness" (Bigger, 1999:6). Wagener and Malony give one strong definition in the *Handbook*:

> *Spirituality …is the essential potentiality for addressing the ultimate questions that are intrinsic to the experience of being human.* (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006:139)

It is personal, experiential and integrative including transcendence, morality, belonging, connectedness, meaning and purpose. The 'sacred' are those precious things beyond negotiation, on which people base their lives. Past references to God need not constrain the future. A pacifist vegetarian bases attitudes and actions on a secular personal ground which is no less sacred. We need to research how an atheist or agnostic can express human potential, values and integrated holistic thinking, and how we can educate children in the light of this. Templeton and Eccles in the *Handbook*, writing on identity, hold the "personally sacred" (p.255) to be relevant to us as those principles that we hold dear as central to our thinking and action, as markers of good faith. 'Self transcendence' (p.255), is described as a search for meaning beyond our personal agenda, seeing our personal needs as part of a much larger whole or holistic vision. Spirituality does not require an external referent – a theology, deity, prophet or teacher as a purveyor of truth. That produces heteronomy (following rules laid by others) and not personal integration and autonomy. The spiritual

quest is for inner personal wisdom, or insight. 'Self-transcendence' may mean only that we are not selfish in seeking a broader-based wisdom. In schools, learning should be life transforming:

> *The formation of caring, morally and spiritually committed young people who reject selfishness, disregard for others, and injustice.* (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006:87).

Tobin Hart, through a survey of university students (chapter 12), emphasises the importance of early spiritual experiences for children:

> *Spiritual moments are direct, personal, and often have the effect, if only for a moment, of waking us up and expanding our understanding of who we are and what our place is in the universe. They can serve as benchmarks and catalysts for spiritual growth.* (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006:164).

This chapter supports the non-religious view of children's spirituality by focusing on *wonder, wondering, wisdom* and r*elational spirituality (between you and me).* Children "already have a spiritual life; they have access to wisdom and wonder, struggle with questions of meaning and morality, and have a deep sense of compassion" (p.175). Awe and wonder focuses on overwhelming moments of insight and intuition, or peak experiences, not the pale imitations encouraged in the school curriculum. 'Wondering' is philosophical curiosity; 'wisdom' is about integrating knowledge and being; and relational spirituality is about care and compassion. His 'spiritual' bottom line about being caring humans is in fact *moral*, an ethic of compassion.

The theory that there are stages of faith is an application of Piaget's cognitive development theories, further developed by Kohlberg and Fowler using data from religious retreats. This assumes that a baby and a saint are at each end of the developmental line. We should be hesitant in accepting this: like many evolutionary schemes, the pinnacle stage is a projection of the researcher's own aspirations. Indeed, Kohlberg's late severe bi-polar mystical experiences caused him prior to his suicide (Dowling and Scarlett, 2006:252) finally to suggest a mystical top stage. Measuring such development through performance indicators, targets, levels and testing should be regarded as problematic, as should any definition of what we are measuring. For Fowler, the highest criterion was universalism.

Future research will need to integrate with modern neuroscientific studies of the brain, a field which has barely begun. That such scientific work "may be deadly for spiritual development" (p.54) I am not convinced: rather, like Goleman (2003) I see this as an important next step. Future research needs to explore spiritual development as a thing in itself, not as a by-product of religion and not as necessarily beneficial. The use of EEC and functional MRI scans are proving helpful in the scientific study of the brain activity of people on a meditation programme (Goleman with The Dalai Lama, 2003:334). Attempts to *measure* spiritual development using questionnaires (Gorsuch, Walker, chapter 7 in Roehlkepartain et al., 2006) are problematic. How should we score the strength of a firm but dubious belief? Should a strong naïve belief in God score high or low, and be any different from a strong belief in Santa Claus? Should *doubt* score high or low? There is a constant danger of circular argument, where high scoring criteria are selected, and *what is not asked* may be important.

The *Handbook* chapter on Personality (Kneezel and Emmons, chap.19 in Roehlkepartain et al. 2006) is dominated by the Self Determination Theory (SDT, Deci and Ryan, 1985) that

people strive towards integration and differentiation of the self. In school, adults set the agenda; nevertheless a degree of personal identification with the topic discussed is possible. Intrinsic motivation is a self-drive. Five factor personality trait continua are explored: introversion/extroversion is a matter of nature; one's degree of openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism are matters of nurture and development. Whether we are extrovert or introvert is non-judgemental; the other four aspire to becoming well-balanced – being open to experience, conscientious, agreeable and emotionally stable. Spirituality may be this aspiration. Far from being fixed and stable over time, they are all things we can work on.

The "spiritual" is described in government guidance and curriculum documents using a range of terms which are set out in Table 1 below. The terms are placed in four clusters for ease and clarity and others, better defined as moral/ethical, are omitted as belonging to a separate category. No single term sums up 'spiritual education' *in toto*, but each is said to contribute to our broader understanding. That these terms are not unproblematic is explored below.

Emotion	Creativity	Within ourselves	Beyond ourselves
Emotionally moving	Imagine	Inner strength	Transcend
Inspire	Dream	Insight, inner light, meaning	Transform
Grandeur, awe, wonder, reverence	The Muse, creative inspiration	The inner voice	Moments of clarity, certainty
Ineffable, beyond words	Create	Inner peace, Well-being	Peak experiences, mysticism
To treasure, value	Inner worlds	Self belief, self esteem,	Quality relationships
Relationships, anger management, conflict resolution	Empathise	Empowerment	Holistic vision, beyond description, ineffable
Emotional Intelligence	Visualising	Spiritual well-being,	Religious experience

Table 1 Spiritual terms

Emotion

The affective domain describes the process of handling our emotions and feelings positively. Anger management and conflict resolution fall into this camp. Emotional understanding is clearly important for well-being, alongside other abilities. It is also called 'emotional literacy' (Weare, 2008) and 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1996). "Intelligences" are currently a popular metaphor for the complexity of the human mind. Multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993), seeks to show that general intelligence is broader than the narrow cognitive tests generally employed. Emotional Intelligence produced a hyped bandwagon when it set out to provide a better alternative to general intelligence. Kevin Murphy has edited a powerful scientific analysis showing only tentative progress with EQ tests, concluding that a degree of emotional *competence* alone might be measurable. The drive towards profound emotional

maturity is viewed as part of the spiritual path. A balanced emotional life links head with heart and respects the emotional needs and journeys of others, leading to conflict resolution and transformational aspirations.

Awe and wonder has always been given a significant place in spirituality, almost the place for curriculum planners to start. This is a natural response to overwhelming experiences – when viewing the earth from the top of a mountain or from space. In Bigger and Brown (1999) our colleagues found awe and wonder in science, maths, languages and other curriculum subjects. This meets new ideas and new knowledge, and encourages curiosity. The more children understand a phenomenon, the more awe and wonder diminishes, replaced by curiosity, openness to new ideas, excitement and respect. Rudloph Otto in *Das Heilige* in 1918, coined the word "numinous" for feelings of powerlessness (i.e. awe) to be part of human experience, but his examples are drawn from pre-modern religion, with awe or fear in the presence of God, and wonder at his creation. Awe and wonder in the school curriculum are not unimportant, but should lead quickly to curiosity and intellectual excitement.

Creativity

Ambrose, Cohen and Tannenbaum (2003), using the phrase 'creative intelligence', define creativity as the ability to make unexpected connections, viewing creativity as a marker of high intelligence. To be creative is to be gifted, to imagine new situations and new worlds, and produce novel and profound outputs. It has acquired a specialist use in the arts but can apply to any human endeavour. Creative inspiration is not essentially 'spiritual' – rather it is a new way of presenting or juggling ideas, a technical brilliance. Creativity is morally neutral. There are many things in which children can imagine, pretend and play out to strengthen their connecting processes and their cognitive skills as part of their normal intellectual development. There is a depth to this process where sculptors for example are at one with their stone, artists with paints, poets with words, where the muse 'flows' to produce profound works from their inner depth (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). It is at this profound level that the label 'spiritual' may become appropriate.

Within Ourselves

Inner strength, peace, light, self-belief and power are all central to our well-being and can be agents of personal understanding and transformation. Spiritual development must be located here, and here spiritual education needs to focus. Of course our self concept might be self-centred, selfish and arrogant. Our self concept is socially constructed, our experiences and relationships contributing to our assessment of who we think we are and what value we place on ourselves. Self belief need not imply the absence of doubt – reasonable scepticism is healthy. Unreasonable self-doubt affects confidence and well-being and inhibits initiative; unreasonable delusional self belief is also possible. Self esteem is the overall process of self estimation in which self worthwhileness and personal competence have a combined effect, as in the self esteem model of Chris Mruk (1999). Mruk distinguishes between real and defensive self esteem (the latter an ego defence covering up low esteem and exhibiting for example as anger or arrogance); and between authentic, narcissistic, antisocial and depressed self esteem, measured through scores on a +10 to -10 scale for feelings of worthwhileness and competence (p.165). Self advocacy suggests the ability to state our case against opposition, especially where this means swimming against the tide. Personality does not easily change but elation or trauma can suddenly transform people. The inner voice has both good and bad connotations, either a healthy conscience, (viz. responsible social

values), or a guilt complex, or 'auditions' (hearing inner voices as real, even divine or demonic).

Beyond Ourselves

Possible self-centredness is balanced by a focus on others as we look beyond ourselves to get to grips with the perspectives of others. There may be moments of deep personal significance and transformation which make us view the world in new ways and behave differently. A friend or mentor may move us forward dramatically in our thinking, what Vygotsky (1978, 1986) calls the 'zone of proximal development'. This cluster points to transcending experiences - glimpses of wholeness, mystical experiences, meditation, relationship with God. Humans have used various visualising devices – story, myth, drama, dance – to bring to bear on their views of self. Transcendent experiences can refer to a broad spectrum of brain responses, including visions, auditions and out of body experiences, each with rational explanations. A rational approach to transcendence is to look beyond ourselves to find inspiration for personal transformation from a range of rational natural (i.e. not supernatural) sources. Spiritual guides who bring us new insights about life are likely to be human and not necessarily religious.

Towards Secular Spiritual Development

Using the emotions and creativity, we humans seek insight into ourselves and our world. This insight is what is currently referred to as spiritual development and spiritual education. We might express this as seeking meaning in life. The psychologist Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor working with other survivors, emphasised *meaning* as a central human concern, as a dynamic moral force in personal growth which affect behaviour:

> *It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.* (1963:122)

Meaning is different from knowledge, which has to be constantly revised. Whether human life *per se* is meaningful or meaningless, each individual is engaged on a personal search for meaning. "Off-the-peg" solutions are attractive and may be helpful so long as they do not stop the quest for greater and deeper understanding.

Humans use mental pictures, symbols, images, stories and dramas as aids to understanding. 'God' symbolises the summit, the apex, the goal. My contention is that concepts of God are symbolic pictures of personal values and vision. Regarded as true, the picture is naively reified, i.e. treated as referring to a real non-physical figure. Cultures depict God in various ways, as a creator, king, judge, shepherd, destroyer). Some provide colourful icons, as in Hinduism; others reject iconic representation (Jews, Muslims, Bahais). Psychological conditions may be visualised as angels or demons. Understanding metaphor and symbol is an important critical skill, including the fundamental understanding that metaphors *are only metaphors* and not objective descriptions of real things. In Hinduism for example, the deity Ganesh is a teaching aid. His image represents human inner strength to solve our own problems. This is to say that 'God' is a process of deep self-understanding, emphasising that we should use our inner strengths.

A visualisation is a metaphor. It can be taken 'as true', either in the existential sense of "that really sums up life", or in an objective sense ("angels really exist"; "evil as a force really exists"). That a book is 'inspired' can mean that it draws on deep ideas, is moving, and greatly helps the reader's personal growth; someone might regard it however as having divine authorship. Global conflicts have been underpinned by different choices of divine mouthpiece. Such reifications came under scrutiny by Paul Tillich, (1962) for whom "deep" and "depth" mean 'God':

> *The depth of thought is a part of the depth of life. Most of our life continues on the surface. We are enslaved by the routine of our daily lives, in work and pleasure, in business and recreation. We are conquered by innumerable hazards, both good and evil. We are more driven than driving. We do not stop to look at the height above us, or to the depth below us. We are always moving forward, although usually in a circle, which finally brings us back to the place from which we first moved. We are in constant motion and never stop to plunge into the depth. We talk and talk and never listen to the voices speaking to our depth and from our depth. We accept ourselves as we appear to ourselves, and do not care what we really are. Like hit-and-run drivers, we injure our souls by the speed with which we move on the surface; and then we rush away, leaving our bleeding souls alone. We miss, therefore, our depth and our true life. And it is only when the picture that we have of ourselves breaks down completely, only when we find ourselves acting against all the expectations we had derived from that picture, and only when an earthquake shakes and disrupts the surface of our self- knowledge, that we are willing to look into a deeper level of our being.* (1962:63)

Hinduism similarly views the human 'self' (atman) as being a part of the great universal 'Self' (Atman), the essence of deity.

Spirituality is often defined in terms of becoming whole and beginning to see things in a holistic way (Zohar and Marshall, 2004). Peter Reason (1994, 1998) talks of a spiritual dimension in participative action research:

To heal means to make whole: we can only understand our world as a whole if we are part of it; as soon as we attempt to stand outside, we divide and separate. In contrast, making whole necessarily implies participation: one characteristic of a participative worldview is that the individual person is restored to the circle of community and the human community to the context of the wider natural world. To make whole also means to make holy: another characteristic of a participatory worldview is that meaning and mystery are restored to human experience, so that the world is once again experienced as a sacred place. (Reason, 1994: 10)

Valuing the process of thinking, reflecting, feeling and responding makes whole and reveals the spiritual in life.

Two major paradigms of spirituality are in conflict – the naturalistic/rational; and the supernaturalistic/mystical. Adherents of either will reject the work of the other. In dispute is whether there are spiritual beings and a spiritual world with which humans can objectively react or whether this belief system is subjective and symbolic. Rational spiritual development is an aspiration in the Sage *Handbook* in an academic field which has assumed a connection with religious faith. There is a fundamental ambiguity in concepts of spirituality, with many

assuming the existence of a spirit world, and others defining the spiritual as a holistic integration of intellect and emotions (head and heart). The 'spiritual quotient' and 'spiritual intelligence' in some management literature takes this secular path, as do OFSTED and QCA on spiritual education. The tendency to reify the supernatural interferes at a popular level.

What might secular spirituality look like? Life is experienced on a continuum of shallow to deep. For the deepest levels the term 'spiritual' comes into use. For Paul Tillich, this "ground of our being", that deepest unfathomably part of our soul and personality which determines what kind of people we are, is the demythologised God. Love, joy and creativity are all here:

> *The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation.* (1962:63)

'God' is viewed as a visualisation. Children need in education to explore and understand metaphor. We need to help them not to treat the visualisation of the insight as the reality itself. Then the visualisation ceases to be existential, symbolic and dynamic and becomes frozen into an effigy, a delusion rather than an expression of insight, or in religious terms an idol.

Spiritual development is a secular, holistic, deep rooted yet dynamic form of consciousness, deep personal growth integrating our understanding. Spiritual education is in a real sense education done properly, embracing the whole being of the learner. Religion can be a helpful staging post but also can become a prison which by dogmatism inhibits personal growth. Today we need deep and dynamic integrative thinking as food for new growth and renewal. Global as well as personal well-being depends upon it.

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