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The Spirit of Religious Education

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Abstract

As an educational researcher I began researching spirituality because in the UK, 'spiritual development' is a statutory requirement for all state schools, and I wanted to explore whether this was appropriate and what it might therefore mean. This led to my researching relational spirituality (as also described by David Hay), both in the UK and Hong Kong, and the idea of the 'spirit of the school' emerged. This was subsequently applied to research on assessment, boys schools, and computing. In this article, it is applied it to religious education. An approach to researching the spirit of religious education is presented, along with an invitation to join such a research project.

Keywords religious education; dualism; relational; dualism; David Hay; John Macmurray; Martin Buber.

Introduction

I am an educational researcher with an interest in how schools work as learning communities (Stern 2001, 2018a), and with longstanding interests in how religion (Stern 2007) and spirituality (Stern 2009) relate to schooling. This has involved research on religious education as a school subject (alongside work on many other school subjects), and on spiritual development in school settings. In the tradition well represented in this journal, 'religion' and 'spirituality' are treated as distinct concepts, each with contested definitions and with contested relationships between them. Here, I am bringing the two together, or, rather, bringing together my interest in researching spirituality with my interest in researching religious education. This article is therefore *invitational*: I propose bringing together an approach to researching spiritual development in schools, with the complex and changeable subject known as religious education. My hope is that the two will illuminate each other, and illuminate wider debates on spirituality in other professional contexts – such as health care.

I began researching spirituality because in the UK, 'spiritual development' had been a statutory requirement for all state schools since 1944. The requirement continues to this day. My initial question was whether this could be an appropriate requirement for state schools, especially those without any religious foundation, and I was quite prepared to come to the conclusion that spiritual development was – like the UK statutory requirement for every school day to begin with an act of collective worship (also established in 1944) – entirely inappropriate. However, my more optimistic hopes – that a requirement for schools to promote spiritual development might prove not only appropriate but a rich source of potential school development – were fulfilled. This was largely thanks to the approach to spirituality promoted by David Hay (Hay with Nye 2006, Hay 2006, 2007), and thanks to an open-ended form of research carried out in schools in the UK and Hong Kong from which the idea of the 'spirit of the school' (an expansion of Hay's 'spirit of the child') emerged (Stern 2009). I subsequently applied this approach to school-based research on issues as diverse as assessment (Stern and Backhouse 2011, Stern 2017), boys schools (Stern 2011), solitude (Stern 2016), and computing (Stern 2003). In this brief paper, I begin the process of applying it to religious education.

My previous reluctance to apply to religious education the research techniques developed to explore spirituality was not only based on the conceptual distinction between the terms spirituality and religion. It was also a recognition of how religious education varies between different countries (Stern 2018b, chapter 4, Davis and Miroshnikova 2013, Jackson et al. 2007,

Kuyk et al. 2007), and even between different schools in any one country (Conroy et al. 2013). The variation in the school subject is not simply a matter of teaching styles, but fundamental beliefs about the purposes of the subject – generally grouped into 'education *into* religion, education *about* religion or education *from* religion', with the first being an introduction 'into one specific faith tradition', the second involving 'learning about the beliefs, values and practices of a religion' or religions, and the third using religious and moral issues in order that children and young people 'may develop own views in a reflective way' (Schreiner, in Kuyk et al 2007, p 9). Notwithstanding this variation, my own experience of religious education in a number of countries (experience gained through observation as well as literature-based research) suggests that the value of religious education to the school curriculum is not sufficiently captured by such descriptions of the subject. Exploring how religious education contributes to children's spiritual development may, instead, provide a means of evaluating the subject in itself and alongside other school subjects. My own – very provisional – hypothesis is that religious education (of any of the types described by Schreiner) contributes distinctively (although not uniquely) to the existential, holistic education of children and young people. This contribution is well described by O'Grady, in a study of the *students* (not teachers) of the subject:

> Religious education pupils are motivated by four related factors: chances to have a *dialogue with difference* (e.g. in encounters with unfamiliar religious traditions), to explore issues of *existential interest* (e.g. philosophical questions over life's meaning), to consider matters of *personal significance* (e.g. to think about the people or events that are most important in their lives) and *ethical interest* (e.g. contemporary social and moral questions). (O'Grady, in Avest et al. 2009, p 42.)

It is such reframing of the subject's place in the curriculum that suggests to me the current invitation – an invitation to research religious education using the research tools developed to evaluate the 'spirit of the school'.

Spirituality in Education: Overcoming Contingent Dualisms

In my monograph on spirituality (and elsewhere), I describe two broad groups of theories of spirituality. One set of theories constructs spirituality as a substance, as that which is 'other than the material' (Chichester Diocesan Board of Education 2006, p 21). This is a broadly dualist approach, based on the idea of two wholly distinct substances. It goes back at least to ancient Greek philosophy. Plato's cave allegory (in *The Republic*, Plato 1997) presents two distinct worlds, and later philosophers (notably Descartes 1912) provide additional dualist approaches. The second construction of spirituality is relational and moving. Aristotle writes of the 'soul' as characterised by 'Movement, Sensation', although he sidesteps the dualist/non-dualist argument by saying 'we have no light on the problem whether the soul may not be the actuality of its body' (Aristotle 1984, p 646 and p 657, from *On The Soul*). More recent non-dualist approaches include those of Spinoza, who went as far as to concatenate 'God' and 'nature', in the phrase 'God or in other words Nature' (Spinoza 2000, p 226). In the twentieth century, non-dualist accounts also appear in Buber (1958) and Macmurray (attacking 'the dualism of mind and matter' in 1935, in Macmurray 2004, p 13). For Buber, spirituality is embedded in his dialogic, I-Thou, philosophy: '[s]pirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou', so '[o]nly in virtue of his power to enter into relation is he able to live in the spirit' (Buber 1958, p 57-58).

Although both dualist and non-dualist accounts of spirituality are of relevance to education and other professional contexts, my own interest (and my own research) has focused on non-dualist, 'monist' or 'post-dualist', accounts (Stern 2009, p 7-10). I refer to accounts as 'monist' if they suggest only one substance – as with Spinoza's one substance viewed from different aspects (as mind and body) or the explicitly materialist account of the British Humanist Association (BHA 2002) or the explicitly idealist account of Berkeley (1977). 'Post-dualist' accounts are those which have some sense of different substances but with those substances 'connected' in various ways through the overcoming of the (apparent) dualism. Hay's approach

at times seems to be monist and materialist (in his writing on biology, for example, in Hay 2006) but post-dualist in its emphasis on relationality (Hay with Nye 2006) – the approach that has been most influential in UK educational policy-making. Palmer and Noddings are amongst the most high-profile post-dualist writers on spirituality, influential in various professional (and philosophical) contexts in the USA and other English-speaking jurisdictions. Noddings writes of 'spirituality' alongside 'character' as central to schooling (Noddings 2003, chapter 8), whilst Palmer provides an explicit attempt to overcome dualism, to live 'divided-no-more' (Palmer, in Lantieri 2001, p 1). I have described the post-dualist relational spirituality as the overcoming of a 'contingent dualism' (Stern 2009, p 11). That is, where there is apparent division (e.g. between mind and body, person and person, the sacred and the profane), 'spirit' can be the description of how that division is overcome. This might be described as a form of transcendence (going from one to another), as in Buber's I-Thou dialogue (Buber 1958). However, philosophers dispute the extent to which this relational approach involves transcendence in its fullest sense, with Yovel, for example, saying that transcendence implies dualism – i.e. leaving one realm altogether – in contrast to the relational spirituality of immanence (Yovel 1989, p 27).

I ended up researching different aspects of post-dualist spirituality in schools in the UK and Hong Kong, China. This was an emergent research process, exploring relationships, dialogue, community, and learning within and beyond the school, in order to explore how relationality was lived in schools, or what the 'spirit of the school' might be. (All the research tools are published, along with the methodology, in Stern 2009, p 165-189.) The definition that emerged of the 'spirit of the school' was:

> an inclusive (bringing in from past times and local and distant places) community (people treating each other as ends in the themselves) with magnanimous leadership (aiming for the good of the led) that enables (but does not insist on) friendship (by overcoming fear and loneliness and allowing for solitude) through dialogue (not monologue) in order to create and evaluate valuable or beautiful meanings, valuable or beautiful things (including the environment), and good (real) people. (Stern 2009, p 160-161.)

This definition implied six questions that could be asked of schools or any aspect of schools, and these were clarified in later research (Stern and Backhouse 2011, p 332):

1 Who do you bring in?
2 How do you treat people as ends in themselves?
3 In what ways are you magnanimous?
4 How do you enable friendship to thrive?
5 Are you in dialogue?
6 How do you take part in creating meanings, things, and people?

The first four questions connect to the community theory of Macmurray (1991, 1992), whilst the fifth and sixth questions are focused on dialogue and learning, connected to Buber's theorising of dialogue and of creative learning (Buber 2002, chapters 1 and 3, respectively). Questions five and six relate to O'Grady's *dialogue with difference* and issues of *existential interest*, whilst questions two, three and four relate to O'Grady's matters of *personal significance* and *ethical interest* (O'Grady, in Avest et al. 2009, p 42, quoted above). I would suggest that the first five of my questions could also be applied to other professional settings, and to other communities (including religious communities), and that the sixth question might be adapted to suit other settings too. However, in this article I want, first, to apply the six questions to the school subject known as religious education.

Researching Religious Education and Spirituality

Here, I will unpack what each of the questions might mean for religious education, and I will speculate on what might be found – as a researcher – in answer to those questions. As I hope is

made clear earlier in the article, this is not the *result* of empirical research in schools, but a *starting point* and an invitation to participate in such research.

1 **Who do you bring in?** Within religious education, who is brought in to the lessons? Are 'real people' brought in to the classroom, to discuss their views? For those at a distance, are videos and other recordings of people 'brought in' to the classroom, and are email exchanges (for example) made possible? For people long dead, are artefacts and texts written by such people brought in to the classroom, and are they engaged with by the students? Is there a wide variety of people brought in to the classroom – men and women, young and old, from different religious and nonreligious positions, and from different positions within each religious traditions? In all these ways, a form of inclusion is practiced: it is bringing people together. Signs that religious education is *not* bringing people in to the classroom include the over-use of textbooks (at least, textbooks that do not quote original sources), the over-use of teacher interpretations of what people think (rather than asking people what they think), and the over-use of religious education as a purely intellectual exercise (as a set of competing 'worldviews' or 'philosophies' independent of the people living with those views or philosophies).

2 **How do you treat people as ends in themselves?** Following on from the previous point, if people are treated merely as carriers of theories or theologies, they are not being treated as ends in themselves. If religious education lessons explore how people live with their beliefs and practices, what they mean to them, then the students and teachers will be treating people as ends in themselves. One of the dangers of religious education is treating students themselves merely as 'carriers' of a belief system. Students from a particular tradition may be expected to be held responsible for the whole tradition – often to the embarrassment of the student. We should also ask how religious education 'content' (including its texts and other media) presents people. Are we finding out about this person because we want to get to know them, in themselves, or are they being used a little like exhibition pieces – there for educational or entertainment purposes, but not of interest in themselves? 'Humanising' religious education is not about humanism (or not, at least, about ethical humanism), but about being in dialogue with *persons*, and treating them as of value in themselves, not just of value to us as students.

3 **In what ways are you magnanimous?** Magnanimity is a virtue going back at least to Aristotle, for whom it was the 'crown of the virtues' (Aristotle 1976, p 154). Meaning 'great-souled' or in a modern form perhaps 'big-hearted', it represents the ability to be generous in the face of challenges – to face challenges with courage, and with appropriate kindness and moderation. That is why it 'crowns' the virtues, as it can be practiced by those with other virtues, but not on its own. Within religious education, teachers and students alike can be magnanimous. This can mean facing complex or strange aspects of religious and nonreligious traditions with courage and kindness. It can mean treating those with beliefs or practices other than your own as worthy of understanding, even if you will not change your own beliefs or practices. A generous, magnanimous, approach to religious education assumes that there is something of value in what is studied. The opposite of magnanimity in religious education would be being 'small-hearted' or 'petty', sticking to what you know and being willing to look down on those with other approaches. Oddly, for a virtue described by some Aristotle scholars as a 'very upper-class Greek virtue' (translators' note in Aristotle 1976, p 153), being magnanimous can be closely associated with the virtue of humility.

4 **How do you enable friendship to thrive?** Understanding people – a non-controversial aim of any religious education syllabus – is appropriately framed as a way of enabling friendship. If we understand people merely in order to insult them better, or bully them, then the aim is of little value. Religious education that enables understanding people (people like us, and people unlike us), understanding how they live their lives, and understanding ourselves,

contributes significantly to the possibility of friendship. A 'friendly' curriculum is one that creates opportunities for dialogue, and for conflict *and the resolution of conflict*. Religious education that is 'unfriendly' either avoids dialogue altogether (perhaps practising Buber's 'monologue disguised as dialogue', Buber 2002, p 22), or concentrates only on 'technical' dialogue (the exchange of information, as in Prothero's version of 'religious literacy', Prothero 2007). This leads directly to the following question.

5 **Are you in dialogue?** Does religious education involve what Buber calls 'genuine' dialogue, 'where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them' (Buber 2002, p 22)? Within religious education, this is a development of the approaches described in answer to the earlier questions in this list. A key characteristic of a 'dialogic' religious education lesson is the necessary presence of *surprise*. A 'real lesson', in contrast to 'a routine repetition … [or] a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts' is 'one which develops in mutual surprises' (Buber 2002, p 241). This is not an attack on good lesson planning (by teachers and students), but a promotion of the possibility for surprise.

6 **How do you take part in creating meanings, things, and people?** Is religious education a creative subject – not in the sense of splashing paint around (although that can be wonderful too), but in the sense of being a place where meaning-making takes place, where, in one sense or another, the world can become a better place, and where people are enabled and encouraged to become more 'real', to achieve self-realisation? The idea of self-realisation (in this account) comes from the philosophy of Macmurray, for whom '[w]e are all more or less unreal', but '[o]ur business is to make ourselves a little more real than we are' (Macmurray 1992, p 143). He continues, saying that '[s]elf-realization is the true moral ideal', but 'to realize ourselves we have to be ourselves, to make ourselves real' and '[t]hat means thinking and feeling really, for ourselves, and expressing our own reality in word and action' (Macmurray 1992, p 150). He concludes that 'this is freedom, and the secret of it lies in our capacity for friendship' (Macmurray 1992, p 150). If religious education is not creative in these senses, it is not spirited.

By asking these six questions of religious education, it is, I suggest, possible to evaluate the school subject in many different contexts – whether the subject is attempting to bring people in to a particular faith tradition, or to learning about religions, or to use religions to help people develop their own views (as described by Schreiner, above). Such research might end up being able to evaluate those three approaches to the school subject. (The value of religious education to the whole school curriculum may also be explored using this form of research.) I can speculate that attempting to bring people to a particular faith tradition might be more limited with respect to question 1 and perhaps question 5, but stronger with respect to questions 4 and 6; learning about religions might do better with questions 1 and 3 but might be more limited with respect to question 2; using religions to help people develop their own views might be limited with respect to question 2, but particularly strong with respect to question 6. Of course the results of research may be quite different: that is why I am suggesting research of this form.

Conclusion

Having worked on spirituality, and on religious education, for many years, I find it strange that I have not – as yet – completed systematic empirical research on the ways in which religious education contributes to (this understanding of) spirituality. But I am hoping that this paper might be a starting point for such research. The philosophical and educational underpinnings of my approach to spirituality are much the same as the philosophical underpinnings of my approach to religious education, of course. This points to two further important issues. For me, arguments about spiritual development in schools, or about religious education as a school

subject, are primarily valuable as part of a wider discussion of what schooling is for – the wider argument comprehensively presented in my most recent book on the philosophy of schooling (Stern 2018a), and exemplified (I hope) in my recent edition of *Teaching Religious Education: Researchers in the Classroom* (Stern 2018b, including chapter 8 on spirituality). And there is a broader issue: the extent to which this approach to researching spirituality might also apply to other professional contexts. There are links between the 'spiritual development' required of UK schools and the need to meet 'spiritual needs' in UK nurse training (Stern and James 2006), for example, but further research in that and other contexts would also be welcome. Relational spirituality, researched in the ways indicated in this article, can – it is hoped – cross religious and professional boundaries.

I would welcome further discussion.

Notes on Contributor

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