

Spirituality of the Child: an Overview

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When I first thought about the idea of having a meeting on the Spirituality of the Child, I was overwhelmed with the question as to where we would begin. Did we begin with a review of the development of spirituality in the home or the views expressed by the various circulars from the Education Department? Or did we begin by trying to define what spirituality meant to the child himself or herself.

In the end three things seemed to stand out. Firstly, that spirituality had to be seen to be universal. Secondly, it had to cover birth to eighteen or at any rate that age of sexual and developmental maturity when young men and women were ready to create the next generation. Thirdly, it had to give life to those underpinning values that were important to the individual and to society. Talking of values reminded me that an earlier meeting of this Special Interest Group was informed that people statistically associated spirituality mainly with three things, value, relationships and some form of transcendental experience. I think this was an adult perspective and as I will hope to show, transcendental experiences may not be necessary for the spiritual life but might certainly add to it.

The first observation that helped was one by Stephen Sykes¹ that we should not define spirituality too tightly, as the need to discover an inclusive word that covered all this area of human life might be lost if we attempted definitions that finished up excluding some ideas or some people as over against others. He felt that like music we should just try and see how something we all seemed to recognise developed in our understanding as time went along. I was helped in this at a Sea of Faith Conference² on spirituality when we learnt that not only people like St John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila could be said to have a spiritual life but that it was true also of many people, including Adolf Hitler and Madonna. In the end it might be better to include everyone rather than risk alienating some. The interesting thing about this perspective is that it recognises individuality as well as universality in the concept of spirituality. It also requires us to think of negative as well as positive spirituality as in the case of Hitler. So how was a child to discover the spiritual life?

The next recognition was the realisation that spirituality might be seen to exist and in some ways might even start in the depths of our relationships with each other. Now in saying this I am not thinking primarily of the sharing of common experiences as we do with adults - as we are doing now for example. I am thinking more of experiences that we discover for the very first time through our relationship with someone else. The first amorous encounter is one such experience when something that we knew about intellectually and may to some extent have discovered in our emotional life through poetry and the arts, for example the 'soaps', suddenly becomes an intense individual experience which is shared. We start to discover closeness in a new way, the art of giving and receiving at an emotional level, the skills of action and control harmonised in a relationship with another. It is a moment of emotional creation and the cementing of values, a moment of spiritual development.

The life of a child is punctuated by this kind of experience - the feeling of nurture in mother's arms, the lessons learnt in the first few years when children learn to play together, to share, to compromise, to recognise each other's claims over property and

then to lend and to borrow. In fact it is amazing how many basic spiritual concepts have developed before the age of ten; kindness and unkindness; saying sorry and making up (repentance and forgiveness) and recognition of right and wrong. All these will develop later into a basic moral consciousness with concepts like honesty and fairness and the golden rule. Anyone close to children will recognise those moments when new experiences and new values are borne or strengthened. One hopes that maturity will continue as the years pass because basic emotive values will have been laid down in early life. And each child may recognise things differently even though there may be a common ground to these experiences.

A most vivid reinforcement of all this took place in the Philosophy Special Interest Group last year. It is impossible to summarise a three-day conference in a few sentences but the conference was dealing with the concept of the essential nature of a human being as distinct for example from the higher animals. What was the effect on our humanity of the impact of old age, including such conditions as Alzheimer's disease? Two extreme positions were postulated. The aging person could be seen as retaining those psychological functions that were essential to the human consciousness until the very end, even though many faculties were weakened, like increasing sensory failure, memory loss and the impairment of mobility. The other position was that the failing faculties represented a gradual cessation of the essential human consciousness. The conference was overwhelmingly in favour of the former hypothesis.

While the aged were being discussed, I was reflecting on the dawning of the consciousness of the child and its distortion in such conditions as autism, learning difficulties and delinquency.

I venture to suggest, although it is an area needing further research and reflection, that the child, however young, is a spiritually responsive human being. Spirituality goes to the very core of what it is to be human, and this holds true even if a child is burdened by psychological problems of a serious nature. Having worked with young people with learning difficulties, I would say this about them unreservedly. I have discovered that even delinquent children, children who sometimes give the appearance of lacking any real empathy, recognise with almost unerring accuracy those care staff who are really concerned for them, and those for whom it is just a job.

But what is perhaps even more important was that the Philosophy Special Interest Group emphasised that with advancing years, the spiritual life of the aged depended on being surrounded by a spiritual atmosphere that they recognised. Hymns that they knew, having someone to pray with or a bible read to them was important for them. And, of course, these days with increasing secularisation and the needs of people with faiths other than Christianity, meeting these needs is an increasing skill. But it also gave a clue as to how children's spiritual development should be supported. First we must learn to recognise spirituality in children and how to strengthen it, share it, and help it to grow. Following the traditional educational approach could be dangerous if for example the emphasis on 'awe' and 'wonder' was pushed to the point where children started to be divided up into those who had and those who had not experienced awe and wonder. It is imperative that spiritual development be seen as being individual and as social; that it is intensely personal and intensely part of community life at one and the same time. Perhaps the task of education is to recognise and label it in all children. It means an emphasis on valuing all children and emphasising their positive contribution to their own development, to the life of others and ultimately to spirituality in general.

An example might help to emphasise this point. The recognition of beauty takes many forms. A girl of six might with a big smile say that something is 'pretty', but what we may ask about the youth of fifteen in a school for the emotionally and behaviourally disturbed? Would an adolescent prone to theft, truancy and vandalism have an aesthetic

consciousness? I can tell you that the head of one such school told me that if a broken window is not repaired promptly, the likelihood of several windows being broken in the next few days is greatly increased. It is an amazing thing that vandalism diminishes the more aesthetically pleasing the surroundings. Spirituality can be stronger and more pervasive than seems to be the case on the surface.

To generalise from this, the spirituality of the child must be supported by the spirituality of the environment. There is no point in expecting fairness if children are treated unfairly. If we want to inculcate good behaviour, we must see that love and nurture as well as control are essential. Values must always be supported and communicated in a manner that the child understands - a hard task perhaps for those engaged in the management of juvenile aggression. But then our task is not to just take an interest in pleasant beatitudes but to define the spiritual way forward in difficult situations.

Regrettably but inevitably, children will face many difficult situations. Take the bully for example. It is difficult to create situations that will cope with bullying while at the same time maintaining positive values in our management of it. It's no use bullying the bully for example. Bullying and many similar forms of destructive behaviour might be called negative spirituality. This could well do with exploring further but for now let us consider that any parent and any educational system must try to deal with dishonesty and callousness, contempt and conceit. Children also have more personal setbacks like failure and loss. All these are experiences could wound a child creating paranoia, superficiality and bitterness. It is important to reinforce the spiritually positive as a way of overcoming setback. It is also important not to forget to reinforce the positive when children do well. Finding the spiritually positive in all situations is really quite a challenge when a group of children in close proximity are individually experiencing happiness and success, misery and failure, or are even proving to be cheats and bullies.

Avoiding mixed messages is another hurdle. More overt abuse is easily recognised by adults but the child might be confused. Remember that the abuser will often aim to gain an addictive attachment by simultaneously offering love but also injury and blame. Anyone who wants to possess the child rather than aid maturity into independence will use this strategy. A teacher I knew who was responsible for teaching children who had specific problems learning to read told me that her supervisor once commented about one little girl, 'look, its your job to improve her reading age no matter if it demoralises her in the process'. Knowing the teacher, I doubt that she would and maybe it wasn't meant in earnest, but the point is that such ideas often permeate a system and can be picked up unawares, damaging the child's morale, not only demotivating her educationally but confusing her spirituality. One could go on; how often before we reach the stage of overt abuse children are burdened with the blame for the failure of the system as a whole, often without it being apparent. An example of this is the handling of juvenile delinquency in the American legal system³. There is a place in our thinking for therapeutic help in the realm of spirituality.

Finally I wish to be a challenge and to suggest that overwhelming children with ideas that they cannot handle may do more harm than good. I suggest, for example, that expecting children at least below the age of twelve to believe in God, teaching them to pray or telling them that the bible is the Word of God, might not be helpful. I am not saying that some stories in the bible (for example) are not intrinsically good and right in their own way, but that creating an atmosphere in which one book is not to be the subject of criticism in the same way as any other book could, in the end, stultify rather than help. Or it can backfire, as when a not very bright nine-year old told me that 'all that religion is nonsense, rubbish about a man walking on water'. The head of the school for the emotionally and behaviourally disturbed I mentioned above also suggested that if we

tell children about religion in the same way that we tell them about Father Christmas, they are likely to jettison religion when they jettison Father Christmas. He also told me that he had succeeded in getting his school excused from religious education (this was some time ago now) because they had enough to do with problems of their own. He was himself a religious man and I thought it odd that a school that very much needed spirituality in its own way could not find it in the national curriculum of the time. A better view was one I heard from an old vicar who said, 'the true task of educating children in spiritual matters is to help them to cope with what we do not know and to handle experiences that we do not understand'. Perhaps one could add, thinking of the child in that school, 'and to develop a way of life one has hardly started to imagine'.

Nevertheless many children will be brought up to know about traditional religion and some will be from atheistic, humanist or secular backgrounds. Often these days they will come from backgrounds in which all belief is given a nod but not taken seriously. It is important to respect this, but if my argument has been correct, then a close analysis of religion and in fact the outworking of atheistic and humanist thinking as it affects our daily lives will reveal that beneath them all may be discovered the same fundamental values. Regrettably, not all will be positive, yet it will provide a basis for keeping various religious traditions in perspective and form the basis for cross-cultural communication. There are many arguments in favour of thinking that this is one of the principal responsibilities of education in schools - or should be.

Towards the end of childhood, two major changes seem to take place. Firstly, the individual adolescent child takes spirituality into himself or herself so, for example, the young man or woman who seventeen years earlier was borne with only a potential for spirituality might be preparing to go to a theological college. Secondly, it is the age of intense individual spiritual experiences that must be respected, as something the individual young person might be very sensitive about. If you will permit a personal example, when I was about fifteen, we studied in an English class a piece by a writer who thought that the 'awful rainbow' disappeared when the scientists discovered that it was caused through the refraction of light through droplets of water. I disagreed, since the idea of refraction, of light being composed of many colours, and of the ability of human being to discover this, all seemed wonderful to me.

Spirituality is intensely personal and intensely public, but the young man or woman should leave childhood ready to support the spirituality of others, including that of the next generation. This is of further significance when one of the major problems of today is the fracturing of society down the lines of racial and cultural divides. It is less now than it was, but at one time there were similar cleavages between different branches of the Christian church. It is a major tragedy if the expression of spirituality causes the fracturing of society rather than helping it cherish what we all have in common, but it can be overcome, as with the various Christian denominations. The development of consciousness of those powerfully charged emotional values that lie at the depths of our humanity and which inspires our ethics and many aspect of human life is important for us all. And we should be able to reason about them and to share them with each other. I know homes and schools, as well as individuals, like that and on the whole they are homes in which children are happy and in which discipline is easy and constructive.

Remember, however, that it can all go tragically wrong. I recently read of a quiet, well-behaved, hard working and devout sixteen-year old who took herself off to Palestine and turned herself into a suicide bomber.

I will end with the story of a young woman of twelve who had been sexually abused. Her therapist was telling her that she should not blame herself when she suddenly turned to her, looked her fully in the face and said 'You must do something

about him doctor, after all there must be something wrong with him for him to have treated a girl like me like that'.

We must be prepared to learn spiritually from children and not just expect only to teach them.

References

The Right Reverend Professor Stephen Sykes is Principal of St John's College, Durham and previously Bishop of Ely

Sea of Faith Network, exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation.

See, for example: *Youth on Trial* Thomas Grisso & Robert G. Schwartz. University of Chicago Press ISBN 0226309126

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