

Andrew Marfleet

Whose Spirituality?

The spiritual is recognised as an essential part of the school curriculum. It is one of the nine areas of learning and experience that HMI outlined in *The Curriculum from 5 to 16*,¹ and has been acknowledged in most subsequent documents from the DES and LEAs. The HMI paper clearly sets out what the spiritual area contains:

‘This area of learning and experience points at its most general to feelings and convictions about the significance of human life and the world as a whole which pupils may experience within themselves and meet at second hand in their study of the works and the way of life of other people.’²

The paper is clear that although R.E. is ‘contained within this area’, it ‘is not identical with it’ and ‘awe at the natural world or an aesthetic rather than an explicitly religious experience’ might lie behind ‘this insight, or sense of disclosure’.³

It is made clear that we are dealing with ‘a side of human nature and experience which can be only partially explained in rational or intellectual terms’.⁴ It is stressed that ‘there are few parts of the curriculum’ which do not ‘witness to the element of mystery in human experience across the centuries and in every culture’, and the arts – dance, drama, music, art, literature – are specifically cited.⁵ Rather than ignoring or avoiding the ‘mystery’, the statement urges that experiences that lead to such an awareness ‘be acknowledged, reflected upon and valued’. And why? ‘For pupils’ understanding of human aspiration and for personal growth’.⁶

The cross-curricular implications of this are very interesting. One suspects that, in most schools, the time allocated for R.E. does not allow for much exploration of subjective experience, though we now have the materials for it to be done effectively.⁷

1 *The Curriculum from 5 to 16* (Curriculum Matters 2) DES, 1985.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 See for example *New Methods in R.E. Teaching: An Experiential Approach* by Hammond, John et al (Oliver & Boyd, 1990).

Education for personal growth has long been recognised as a feature of education in the arts. Witkin (1974) saw the individual's 'knowing his being in the world' as central to educational activity.⁸ He unashamedly advocates subjectivity. He writes:-

'There is another world ... a world that exists only because the individual exists. It is the world of his own sensations and feelings.'

He believes that 'the creative arts have an especial significance in respect of the world within the individual, in respect of his subjectivity'. His whole educational theory rests on the idea that 'it is the integrity of the world within the individual that is the source of his motivation, his enthusiasm, his feeling response to life'. For Witkin, the need is to encourage creativity, in response to 'the sensate impulse', in order to achieve 'an intelligence of feeling'.⁹ Others too, have followed this approach. Holbrook (1977) argued for 'creativity in a phenomenological way'.¹⁰ He is referring to the teaching of English which he sees as 'a question of drawing out from each child his own voice, his own dynamic engagement with the world, and his existential search for his own sense of identity, and his life-role'.¹¹ Most English teachers would flinch at such a challenge. Yet Holbrook (1980) continued to elaborate on his ideas, further attacking 'the retreat to utilitarian approaches' and arguing for teaching that creates 'a sense of existential being'.¹² This is the language of many writers on the arts in education in recent decades, going back to such as Slade (1954) who, in discussing drama, said 'spiritual experiences take place because of emotional training and aesthetic encounter... discovery may be made of who you really are'.¹³

Various objections might be made to these humanist approaches. It seems, from the perspective of an English teacher, to be treating the arts as entirely instrumental. It is implied that what really matters in education in the arts is 'personal and moral growth', even though some writers have attacked this position. For instance, Cope (1978) argues against claims for moral growth via the study of literature:

'Claims for the instrumental value of literary study in the form of messianic assertions

8 Witkin, R. W.: *The Intelligence of Feeling* (Heinemann, 1974).

9 Ibid.

10 Holbrook, D.: 'An Unmitigated Disaster' in *The Use of English* (Vol. 28:2, Spring, 1977).

11 Ibid.

12 Holbrook, D.: *English for Meaning* (NFER, 1980).

13 Slade, P.: *Child Drama* (University of London Press, 1954).

(which suggest that this happens through some natural process) should be examined closely. The aesthetic experience and the making of aesthetic appraisals lead at some stage to all manner of practical, social and moral questions, but unless the implicit value judgements are uncovered in some way, the instrumental value of literary study must remain a matter of some speculation.¹⁴

What can be argued for literature surely applies *a fortiori* to the other arts. But the instrumental claims for literature have held sway for a considerable time. David Barratt (1985) sees them as 'idolatrous', because they 'claim essential religious values and esteem'.¹⁵ He is surely correct in tracing these views back to the Romantics and 'from Wordsworth and Coleridge, through Matthew Arnold, to I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and then to people like David Holbrook, Fred Inglis and Peter Abbs'. He quotes Richards who wrote that 'Poetry is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos'.¹⁶ Arnold's view that poetry, in a scientific age, replaces religion is a logical extension of the belief that the poet is a kind of prophet: Wordsworth and Coleridge, Keats and Shelley all expound this idea, which follows from their beliefs about nature and inspiration. God is immanent in nature (major premise). The poet is the human being most able to articulate the messages of nature (minor premise). Therefore the poet is the mouthpiece of God, the 'trumpet of a prophecy'.¹⁷

This, I would argue, is the metaphysical background to the emphasis on the spiritual in education in the arts. It becomes a kind of humanism in Leavis and Holbrook, but in the Romantic poets is surely a kind of pantheism. 'Growth' images – which Coleridge and Keats both used in their critical theory – imply beliefs about God, man and nature that can be traced back via Rousseau to the Enlightenment. They will differ from a Christian position in their rejection of the fallenness of man and nature and of any idea of a God who is 'out there'. There is no room for a transcendent God. Hence the importance of subjectivity in the quest for spiritual growth. If our concept of spiritual education is that it involves experience within', then it will follow that it must introduce children to a subjective world, whether through religious education, the arts, or through

14 Cope, B.G.: 'Aesthetic Knowledge and Educational Aims' (M.Ed. dissertation, Nottingham University, 1978).

15 Barratt, D.: 'The continuing Value of Studying and Teaching Literature in our Time' in *Spectrum* (Vol. 17:2, Spring, 1985).

16 Richards, I. A.: *Science and Poetry* (1926).

17 Shelley, P. B.: *Ode to the West Wind*.

wonder at the world of nature.

One of course has to recognise that we must, in education, go beyond the purely material world. But what do we mean when we say that pupils are entitled to 'a spiritual education'? It is not the same as an exploration of aesthetic or moral areas (as, indeed, all the curriculum documents acknowledge). Phenix (1964) pointed out the danger of confusing personal knowledge with aesthetic recognition:

'In contrast to the realm of personal knowledge, symbolic, empirical and aesthetic meanings are impersonal. Language is for everybody's use, science is public knowledge, and art is presented for all to behold. Personal knowledge, on the other hand, is always on a one-to-one basis. ... Language, science, and art are concerned with *essences*, while personal knowledge is *existential*.'

Although some would query the objectivity that Phenix sees in language, science and the arts, he is surely correct in distinguishing existential and aesthetic responses. As he goes on to say, 'while the arts can aid in the deepening of personal knowledge, the distinction between personal and aesthetic meanings still holds'.¹⁸

Nor need spiritual education be moral. Priestley (1985) argues that 'the spirit itself is a-moral',¹⁹ though it is hardly moral, he shows, for teachers to inhibit a child's spiritual growth. What seems clear is that we must not confuse the spiritual with the ethical or aesthetic, or the ethical with the aesthetic for that matter: it was Kierkegaard who defined the aesthetic way of life as the attempt to lose the self in the immediacy of present experience, whereas the ethical way of life recognises the past and the future with the commitments and obligations that flow from this recognition. What is sometimes referred to as 'the spiritual' in education in the arts may in fact be an aesthetic experience, which in its immediacy may have no moral significance whatsoever. It is not 'spiritual' unless one's definition of spirituality is limited to subjective recognitions of artistic form and feeling. For some, whose concept of the spiritual stems from Rousseau and Romanticism, this may be all that one can hope for. Christians hope for more than this.

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of the Christian concept of

18 Phenix, P. H.: *Realms of Meaning* (McGraw Hill, 1964).

19 Priestley, J. G.: 'Towards finding the hidden curriculum: a consideration of the spiritual dimension of experience in curriculum planning' in *British Journal of Religious Education* (Summer, 1985).

spirituality.²⁰ Much has been written of value, for instance in the Grove Spirituality series. Dr. Heather Ward calls for a vision of selfhood that differs in a 'radical way from our current psychological model', in that our spiritual nature is actualised, 'bringing our psycho-spiritual being into harmony with God'.²¹ We only have this completeness through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The *Holy Spirit*, one notes. A true Christian spirituality is really all about holiness. The Bible has little or nothing to say about spirituality as such, but much about holy living, about sanctification and the fruit of the Spirit.

The question is then posed, can there be any worthwhile spirituality outside Christian experience? If there cannot, then has 'spiritual education' any meaning outside the discipling of Christian believers? Current curriculum theory says it has, but would agree with the Christian that spiritual education cannot in itself be the vehicle for establishing a life of religious commitment. Perhaps the intention is that spiritual education should increase the size of the vessel that can subsequently be filled by spiritual experience. It should not aim at commitment, though it now seems agreed that it should create an awareness of what commitment to a belief system is, and perhaps a taste of what it is like to be committed: 'to develop understanding, empathy and respect', as Hammond *et als* put it.²²

At least one danger is already implied by the 'empty vessel' image. There is a possibility that it might be filled with harmful spiritual experience – Jesus' parable of the evil spirits and the cleaned house seems relevant here.²³ However in education one is always taking risks. All knowledge and skills, possibly, can be used ultimately for good or evil. But even the person who has sinned much can, potentially, become one who loves more, because 'many sins have been forgiven'.²⁴ So risks have to be taken – God Himself risked much in giving us free choice – and it would seem morally reprehensible to deny a spiritual education to the young. It is just that the risks are higher than in any other area of education.

I am not advocating a 'hands-off' approach to all experiential approaches to spiritual education. Some very perceptive and balanced comments have been made about

20 Such an analysis would need to consider amongst other things the significance of man's creation (Genesis 2:7) and his fall, the role of the Holy Spirit in convicting the sinner (John 16:8) and in the life of the believer (Romans 8 and Galatians 5:16-26).

21 Ward, H.: *Giving Yourself Away* (Grove Books, 1988).

22 Hammond et als., op. cit., p. 198.

23 Luke 11:24-26.

24 Luke 7:36-50.

New Methods in R.E Teaching in a review by Trevor Cooling²⁵ and in an article by Penny Thompson.²⁶ The latter sees 'some subtle undercurrents'. The phenomenological approach in fact undermines faith, because of its relativism: it raises the plurality of truth-claims, but will not discuss their relative merits. She also sounds warnings about the exercises in self-awareness which are 'introduced to the pupils without any specific direction'. They might end up in 'the more unhealthy branches of the mystical art'. Fantasy journeys can be journeys into dangerous territory. And she makes a telling point at the end of her article when she notes that the awareness approach 'enables a particular view of spirituality to be advocated, one that tends towards the practice of Zen' so that 'on the one hand, an appearance of neutrality is maintained whilst in reality a preference for a particular view is conveyed'. I would agree that this preference 'undermines traditional Christian faith' and I agree with her cause for concern.

Fantasy journeys, awareness exercises and other experiential approaches to spiritual education could well, then, be fraught with risk. At the very least we may be indoctrinating relativism into our pupils. At worst, we could be opening them up to spiritual influences that could be positively harmful: children are already being drawn into rituals – in dance, drama and literature work, as well as in R.E. – that invite contact with spiritual forces that probably neither they nor their teachers fully recognise the power of. Where are we going to draw the line? Do we stop at oriental mysticism, New Age awareness, spiritualism, wicca or Satanism? Who decides what kind of spiritual empathising is allowable? And does not the decision where to stop involve the importation of some moral or religious principles? The neutral educator can have no answer, nowhere to draw lines.

Being practical, there are no means by which we can wish spiritual education' away. So what can Christians do about it? First, we must pray. Ephesians 6:10-18 is highly relevant here, especially the concluding verse: Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests ... be alert and always keep on praying for the saints'.²⁷ Whether for ourselves or for other teachers, we must be vigilant in prayer. We must be armed 'against the devil's schemes', in 'the full armour of God'.²⁸ All can pray; some can get involved: in teaching, in preparing materials, in sounding warnings. In our

25 Cooling, T.: Review of Hammond et als. (1990) in *British Journal of Religious Education* (Vol. 13:2, Spring, 1991).

26 Thompson, P.: 'Spirituality and an Experiential Approach to R.E.' in *Spectrum* (Vol. 23:2, Summer 1991).

27 Ephesians 6:18.

28 Ephesians 6:11

churches, Christian education must be thorough enough to correct any wrong teaching which is instilled at school. Sadly, for many outside the life of the church there will be no such corrective. We must accept the fact that weeds are sown amongst the wheat. In Jesus' parable, the farmer, when asked where the weeds came from, replies 'an enemy did this',²⁹ and advises against pulling up the weeds before the day of harvest. Both weeds and wheat are allowed to grow, but nothing prevents the ultimate gathering in of the wheat into the owner's barn.