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EDITORIAL

AN OBVIOUS PAIRING OF DANCING PARTNERS, OR STRANGE BED-FELLOWS? CHILDREN’S SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Some years ago now, the well known scholar, member of the Children and Worldviews Project, and recently retired County Inspector of Religious Education in Hampshire UK, Clive Erricker wrote an intriguing article titled Shall we dance? Authority, representation and voice: The place of spirituality in religious education (Erricker, 2001). In this deliberately provocative paper, Erricker argued that religions, as institutional structures that conserve and maintain tradition, act as political bodies that are concerned with matters beyond the faith of individuals, and rather have their focus on the construction of social values and conceptual representations of the world (according to that particular religious tradition). Equally, he argued, education as an institutionalised system of schooling, is not concerned with the individual’s sense of meaning as derived from their own experiences so much as the dissemination of inherited bodies of knowledge and skills that relate to professional utility and values that are socially cohesive. His thesis argued that subsequently, when these two institutionalized forms come together – as religious education – there is a mutual reinforcement of aims within which spiritual and moral development may be included, but (and herein lies the punch) actually mean little more than the summation of what is required for economic development and the maintenance of national identity and social stability.

In other words, Erricker questioned the extent to which religious education can actually nurture children’s spirituality, since religions and education both have their own (and interestingly aligned to some degree) agendas which seek to promote and maintain particular well-defined worldviews at the expense of the more experiential domain of the student’s spirituality. According to Erricker, for religious education to promote and develop students’ spirituality “would [be to] awaken a radical, critical, and experiential interest that would be difficult to contain and direct – and yet, it is the basis of what we may call spirituality” (p. 34).

Erricker did, however, offer a way forward. Rather than being the sole arbiter and interpreter of experience, religious education ought, he argued, to be diatactical. Such a conception, according to Erricker, involves the person in seeking to engage with the complexity of interpretation that arises out of the relationship between the individual and the many factors which impact upon the individual. Certainly, such an exercise is both imaginative and provisional. Yet, it is essential in addressing the problematic domains of experience, in which an individual’s spirituality is to be found.

While renowned for his ability to question authority and to provoke a reaction (of which this particular article of his received much, especially from critical realist Andrew Wright), Erricker (2001) nonetheless raised a series of highly pertinent questions for religious educators to consider – does religious education necessarily nurture spirituality? Can religious education, with its concern for maintaining and promoting a particular tradition, act so as to effectually stifle a person’s spiritual voice? Are the concepts of spirituality and religious education really mutual partners? Are they an obvious “pairing of dancing partners” (p. 20), or are they rather strange bed-fellows?

Some time has passed now since Erricker’s provocative expose. Yet the questions posed remain just as relevant for religious educators today as they did at the dawning of the new millennium. Can religious education – particularly as it is conceived in faith based contexts – nurture the spiritual dimension of children’s lives without acting to stifle their spiritual voices?
Religion and spirituality are not one and the same entity – a point to which the contemporary literature clearly attests (see for example, Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; de Souza, 2009; Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Tacey, 2003). Nonetheless – and as the contributions in this issue of the journal suggest – children’s spirituality can (and some would argue should) be nurtured through a religious tradition. Hence, and notwithstanding the salient points to which Erricker’s (2001) thesis draws attention, religious education can have an important role to play in nurturing children’s spirituality. Religions provide a shared communal language which may enable children to give voice to their spirituality (Berryman, 2005). This is especially effective when the religious education classroom scaffolds the learning by providing the language, structures, “rules” and boundaries with which children can play in their quest to make meaning and confront existential issues, albeit that challenges are presented for religious educators when many children come to school with little knowledge of the language of their faith tradition (Grajczonek, 2004). Further, religious education presents children with the rituals, signs, gestures and sacred texts by which those who practice particular religious traditions have, for centuries, used to give expression to their own spirituality. Such wisdom has literally stood the test of time, and may make a positive contribution to the spiritual development of the child.

The danger to which Erricker (2001) rightly alludes is one in which religious education loses sight of the learners – children who, while they may not have a language to express it, come to school with a deep and profound spirituality – and instead becomes concerned only with the transmission of its own sets of belief and values. This is a very real danger. The influence of the outcomes based approach to religious education potentially reduces the learning to a set of demonstrable skills and competencies at the expense of the children’s own experience. This type of presentation of the religious worldview may do violence to the spiritual voices of children (Hyde, 2008). At play here are two quite different frames meaning which, somehow, need to be brought into harmony. On the one hand there is the spiritual voice and of the child, often emanating from a range of experiences, possibly including the religious, but typically deriving from the secular world. This forms a kind of postmodern, or, to use Erricker’s term, a diatactical framework in which children are free to engage with the complexity of interpretation which they might give to their own experiences. On the other hand is the religious frame, in which learning may involve coming to see the “truth” of the received and authoritative wisdom of the particular religious tradition. These two different frames of meaning then create a tension which, for many, is irresolvable.

But there are ways forward (the contributions of Berryman and Hyde, Gellel, Power, and Gross in this issue address this theme in different ways). Ota (2001) notes that two such frames of meaning could be drawn upon in a constructive way, involving religious education and children in a process referred to as a responsible partners. While acknowledging that such a terms requires further unpacking, for religious education to contribute in a meaningful way to children’s spiritual growth may require it to “engage with pupils, allowing them to share their stories and to contribute to the community’s story” (p. 271). However, this is not without its own challenges, since it requires that religious educators are aware of both the wisdom of the faith tradition, and the many and varied aspects and expressions of children’s spirituality, and that they can, through an appropriate pedagogy, bring these two different frames into dialogue.

Although this provides a significant challenge for religious educators, particularly those working in faith based contexts, the contributions contained in this issue have, each in their own way addressed the issue of nurturing children’s spirituality in religious education. The scope of these contributions ranges from proposing a re-orientation of Australian Catholic school religious education in the light of contemporary spirituality to narrative fiction and the ethical imagination of the child. As well, the contributions reflect a range of contexts, including children’s spiritual development through religious education in faith schools, the early childhood context in New Zealand, and analysing how Jewish children construct the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath. Far from being final arbiters on this subject, these contributions provide a much needed impetus for further thought and discussion among religious educators. They demonstrate some ways in which religious education and spirituality might be conceived of as an obvious pairing of dancing partners. But the dance involved here is far from that of a traditional waltz or an evening three-step. Its rhythm is far more outlandish, and perhaps more daring than that which is seen in the conventional
ballroom. Rather, its choreography is creative, alluring and exciting. Its routine is thrilling and exhilarating. As Erricker (2001) so eloquently puts it, “...while at present, we dance something akin to the rhythm of a military two step, we might consider learning to tango or go to a rave, if we wish; and consider it educationally justified” (p. 34).

References


Brendan Hyde
Guest Editor
A CASE FOR A ‘BIG PICTURE’ RE-ORIENTATION OF K-12 AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

Abstract

This is the second of two articles that argue a case for a ‘big picture’ re-orientation of Australian Catholic school K-12 religion curricula. The first article (Rossiter, 2010) considered that there has been such a great change in the landscape of contemporary spirituality that the traditional framework of religious meanings within which Catholic school religion curricula are written is out of sync with the meanings that inform contemporary spiritualities. A proposed responsive change in orientation suggests that more prominence needs to be given to the critical interpretation and evaluation of cultural meanings, while not neglecting the more traditional aim of giving young Catholics meaningful access to their religious heritage. The apparently different estimates of spirituality for children and adolescents also need to be taken into account. If many of the pupils in Catholic schools will never become actively involved in parishes when they grow up, then religious education needs to offer more than familiarising them with Catholic theology and religious practice; it also needs to skill them in addressing the spiritual and moral issues they will encounter in life. Attention is given to what this entails in both content and pedagogy, at primary and secondary levels.

Introduction

Because of significant change in the landscape of spirituality (Rossiter, 2010; Mason et al. 2007; Tacey, 2000, 2003) religious educators in Australian Catholic schools face a challenging dilemma; in all likelihood this same situation applies to Catholic schools in some other Westernised countries. They set out to educate young people in the Catholic tradition, through a religion curriculum framed within traditional Catholic cultural-religious meanings. However, most of their students have little identification with this authoritative view. Rather, in tune with the very different cultural meanings that frame their thinking, they tend to regard religion as an optional resource for living, like potentially useful infrastructure – but very much in the background (Hughes, 2007, p. 11; Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 128). (Note: While it is beyond the scope of this article to give a detailed account of research on youth spirituality, some key points will be signposted to highlight the difference from traditional religious spirituality c/f Rossiter, 2010). While many youth accept that religion may be attractive and useful for the religiously inclined, they have little doubt that it is largely irrelevant to their own needs, interests and lifestyles. Most young people say they still believe in God, as a kind of benign ‘therapist-in-the-sky’ who can be asked for help when it is really needed (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 162; Mason et al., p. 82; Maroney, 2008, p. 184); and they retain a nominal religious identification – they are not anti-religious. They accept religious education without antipathy because they see it as an established part of their Catholic schooling which they value highly. But usually for senior students, there is not much serious engagement with religious education because they feel it is not relevant to their lives, and in any case, it is hardly a subject with the same academic credentials as those that ‘count’ like English, Maths etc (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 307).

However, this challenging account of spirituality refers specifically to adolescents and young adults. At first sight, this does not seem to be congruent with what is said about the spirituality of children, where there is a much more optimistic account of their openness to the spiritual and to religion – with interest, enthusiasm and ready engagement (E.g. Hay & Nye, 1998; Adams et al. 2008; Hyde, 2008).

For secondary school religion teachers, with a hiatus between expectations and the reality of teenage spirituality, teaching religion in Catholic schools can feel like a ‘health hazard’ (Kenyon, 2010, p. 234). Much of their diocesan support for religion teachers encourages them to try harder to make the religious package more attractive, to
ignite students’ interest and participation in the Church (e.g. Catholic Bishops of NSW and ACT, 2007); but this formula does not adequately identify the problem, let alone address it effectively.

On the contrary, anecdotal evidence suggests that many Catholic primary school teachers (and some junior secondary teachers) feel that teaching religion is ‘a breeze’ – successful, effective and enjoyable with responsive pupils. One might get the impression that they are teaching a ‘different species’ from the adolescents taught in senior secondary classes.

Following up the interpretation of fundamental historical changes in contemporary spirituality in terms of shifts in cultural meanings (Rossiter, 2010), the following will propose some broad, general implications for the K-12 Catholic school religion curriculum, mainly from this perspective of the more adolescent/adult spirituality; and then it will address briefly the differences needed at primary school / junior secondary levels, that are related to children’s spirituality. The argument begins with the claim by Rossiter (2010, p.26) that a successful Catholic school religious education in the traditional sense is no longer adequate, nor even possible, in Australia (and this is probably also the case in some other countries). Aiming relatively exclusively at reproducing what is currently considered a traditional Catholic spirituality is not relevant to most pupils (Note: is this the same as the typical spirituality of most religion teachers?). There is a need to re-orient Catholic school religious education more in the direction of trying to enhance the basic human spirituality of young people, whether or not they engage with a parish.

However, the radical change in contemporary spirituality does not require a radical change in religion curricula, but rather a subtle one. There needs to be a greater emphasis on critical/interpretive/evaluative activity. In the classroom, religion needs to be treated more as a valuable but contentious area to investigate, than as a set of beliefs that the students should accept and adopt. This does not mean abandoning the teaching of traditions because good access to one’s historical religious tradition is not only a birthright, but a spiritual resource that serves as a starting point in a lifelong search for meaning, purpose and value in life.

How a religiously sponsored education might enhance a relatively secular youth spirituality – probing the relationships between the spiritual and the religious

A Catholic religious education that can enhance youth spirituality needs a way of understanding the relationships between the spiritual and the religious, and between spirituality and religiosity. The word and phrases ‘faith’, ‘faith development’ and ‘education in faith’, while always important in Catholic religious education, have not been included in this analysis because their relationship with spirituality needs substantial attention that is beyond the scope of this article. While faith has belief, emotional and commitment dimensions, it is the ‘trusting relationship with God’ that is central to the Christian understanding of faith. This makes faith like the long-term, ‘hoped for’, very personal outcome of Catholic religious education. Spirituality, as an intermediate construct that is intimately related to faith, can be useful when dealing more directly with content and pedagogy – as explained in more detail elsewhere (Crawford & Rossiter 2006). They argued that the construct spirituality is a useful one for contemporary theory and practice of religious education, while also having currency with respect to the more general spiritual / moral dimension to the whole school curriculum. The notion of a ‘basic human spirituality’ will be used, rather than ‘human faith’ as described by Fowler (1981), even though there is a significant overlap between the two; it is interesting to note that the subtitle to Fowler’s book on faith development was “The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning”.

Table one gives a brief account of each of the selected constructs in broad outline. There is an extensive literature that discusses spirituality and the relationship between the spiritual and the religious. Some example references are:- Crawford & Rossiter (2006), Fuller (2001), Otto (1950), Tacey (2000, 2003.)
Table 1.  Summary of relationships between the constructs spiritual, religious, spirituality and religiosity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Religious</th>
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<td>The spiritual is the natural dimension to life that includes: thinking and feelings about transcendence; ideas about a creator or creative force in the cosmos; human values; sense of meaning and purpose to life; love and care for self and others; sense of stewardship for the earth and its flora and fauna; the aesthetic.</td>
<td>Being religious means being spiritual in a particular way as informed by the beliefs, practices and traditions of a religious group. It usually includes a sense of personal relationship with god, belief in an afterlife and identification with, and participation in a local religious community. The religious is usually informed by a theology; and it participates in a ritual life and prayer, as well as relating to religious symbols, art and music.</td>
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Spirituality  
Spirituality is the way in which a spiritual/moral dimension enters into, or is implied in, the thinking and behaviour of individuals.

Religiosity (or religious spirituality)  
Religiosity is a religious spirituality with engagement in religious activities and thinking; personal and communal prayer and participation in religious rituals in a community of faith are prominent. Religiosity is a spirituality that is clearly referenced to religion.

Drawing on the argument developed in Rossiter (2010), a scheme relating basic human spirituality and religious spirituality is proposed to suggest why a change of emphasis is needed in Catholic religious education. This will imply a simplification that masks the complexity and mystery in people’s spirituality, but nevertheless is useful educationally. A religious spirituality is considered to be a basic human spirituality that has an overlay of cultural religious meanings. These meanings can motivate, inspire, and enhance human spirituality – while it may be difficult for individuals to discern the precise level of influence that religion has on them. Religious people can report that spirituality is the driving force in their lives; nevertheless, in some instances, one can observe individuals who maintain they are religious, but their religion appears to be relatively nominal and superficial because other human motivations seem to dominate their behaviour.  
Care is needed not to be too judgmental. Expecting religious people to be perfect psychologically is unrealistic. All people are flawed and handicapped to some extent; being religious – as well as being courageous, committed, faithful, creative or psychologically healthy – is not incompatible with having lifelong psychological problems. This is the human condition. However, people tend to be quick to see hypocrisy where those who publicly proclaim they are religious behave in ways that contradict the values professed in their religious stance.  

The focus here is not on trying to unravel the mysterious relationship between psychological and religious influences on individuals; it tries to highlight the prominence of cultural meanings in spirituality – it will be religious or not depending on what cultural meanings serve as dominant reference points. How cultural meanings can be identified and studied then becomes a central component of religious education. A healthy spirituality (whether religious or not) may depend on which cultural meanings inform people’s thoughts and actions and on the extent of their influence on lifestyle and wellbeing; hence these meanings need to be evaluated in the light of community values to get some indication of how they might enhance or harm the quality of people’s lives (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 198).

One might ask: would young people make sense of this differentiation between the spiritual and the religious? If they are not formally religious, young people tend to think they have no spirituality at all; for many, the religious and the spiritual are much the same (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 78). This view is often held by religious people who use the word ‘unchurched’ to describe such youth (Fuller, 2001). This apparent identification of the spiritual and the religious remains common even though there is a growing interest in the notion of a spirituality not necessarily connected with religion (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 179; Coles, 1992; Tacey, 2003). From the analytical perspective taken here, many young people are spiritual but not religious as they retain a spiritual dimension in their values. This needs to be distinguished from the way the term ‘spiritual but not religious’ is used by researchers like Smith & Denton (2005, p. 78) and Fuller (2001), where it described individuals who were
active ‘spiritual seekers’, trying to purposefully construct a spirituality that was independent of religion. Most young people are not like this; they just appear disinterested in religion; what they are interested in is feel-good experience and lifestyle.

The style and pace of life in contemporary, westernised, industrialised societies has changed the way that many people (including youth) relate to religious meanings; for many, they get by without much reference to them. People may remain nominally identified with a denomination or religion; nevertheless, they pay little attention to it because its meanings seem to have little connection with their everyday living. While previously ‘obedience to God’ was prominent, now this is eclipsed by concerns to ‘live one’s life to the full’ – and little thought would be given to the potential overlap between these two ideas. Hence there has been a significant change in the locus of spirituality. It appears to have moved away from religiosity, where it was relatively easily identified in formal religious activities including prayer and liturgy. But where has it gone? Some judge that it has disappeared, and where this happens there is no spirituality. Others suggest that it has moved into the personal lives of individuals, becoming more subjective and individualistic. However, the idea of conscious ‘movement’ does not seem to describe meaningfully what has happened. The decline in engagement with religious meanings simply leaves human spirituality in its ‘raw’ state, \textit{de facto}. It has not gone anywhere; it has just lost its cultural religious overlay – for better or for worse.

This interpretation sees spirituality as always embedded in people’s thoughts and actions; but without a religious overlay, it is more implied than overt; it is therefore difficult to identify because it is rooted in the psychology of the individual which is not fully open to public scrutiny. Determining what is ‘spirituality’ in people’s lives is therefore naturally problematic, and this needs to be addressed in religious education; it means giving attention to the personal, subjective, psychological aspects of spirituality – and not just to the communal. Also needed is scrutiny of the cultural meanings that appear to influence people: Can they be identified? Are they healthy or harmful, depending on the extent of their influence? Hence a religious education that is beneficial to contemporary spirituality would need to include a search for the spiritual and moral dimensions in experience and events – this implies a \textit{search} for spirituality followed by \textit{evaluation}.

**General implications for religious education in the changed landscape of spirituality**

For many people, including youth, the fading of the cultural-religious overlay that informed a more overt religious spirituality left them with a residual, basic human spirituality. The words ‘basic’ and ‘residual’ should not be interpreted pejoratively as if this indicated little if any spirituality. Still, it remains difficult to pin down human spirituality because this involves a sort of ‘mind reading’ – theorising about which spiritual/moral meanings, if any, are affecting the individual. Hence it is necessary to acknowledge the natural uncertainty that goes with identification of human spirituality. This problem in interpreting what is the ultimate \textit{operative spirituality} applies both to religious and non-religious people. For religious people, whether or not religion was a dominant influence, they could readily point to their religious cultural system as articulating the values and virtues that should be at the core of their behaviour. It is thus easier to identify someone’s being religious than it is just being spiritual. Following the line of thinking in this paragraph has limited potential for religious education because it is so personal and subjective. It remains important for personal reflection and review of life, but religious education would do better to concentrate on the cultural meanings part of the equation, with the hope that this more objective focus may in turn prompt personal reflection.

Before leaving the area of personal/subjective spirituality, one further observation is pertinent. For religiosity, there was often a consciousness of the religious obligation or challenge to try to enhance and develop one’s spirituality; this was one of the main purposes of prayer, worship and religious rituals. This makes a statement about the importance of a spiritual dimension to life; and it postulates that this spiritual dimension needs \textit{practice} and active enhancement. There would be considerable variation in the extent to which individuals consciously took steps in personal reflection or in social action to enhance and practice their religious spirituality. This same variability would apply in a non-religious, human spirituality. However, in the latter, the implied spirituality might not often be articulated by the individual; and this could easily lead to a neglect of the spiritual/moral dimension to life. Hence, the overt reminder to ‘attend to the spiritual’ within religious spirituality is a lesson that would be valuable for any human spirituality. Even for non-religious people, review of life,
clarification of personal values and taking steps to foster a spiritual/moral viewpoint would be beneficial for them personally.

In re-orienting Catholic school religious education, two principal strategies will now be considered.

1. Access to the individual’s inheritance of cultural religious meanings;
2. Critical interpretation and evaluation of culture

1. **Access to young people’s inheritance of cultural religious meanings: Studying the religious tradition**

Given the emphasis on basic human spirituality here and in Rossiter (2010), it may seem surprising that the first strategy refers explicitly to the teaching of religious traditions. But there is a good reason for this.

In terms of their lifelong search for meaning and purpose in life, children need to learn some basic familiarity with their own religious tradition, whether or not they will embrace this actively as adults. Children have a birthright to access their religious tradition; it is their cultural religious inheritance. It can give them some sense of the core spiritual meanings in the tradition – even if their parents or guardians have only a nominal religious identification. This gives children a starting cultural reference point for meaning in life that they can develop and change as they grow older and more capable of thinking for themselves. For children whose parents are atheist or agnostic, this principle still applies. While it could be expected that such parents would communicate to their children their particular views about the existence of god and about religion, nevertheless, they would be remiss if they did not help their children see that religion was intended to help people find meaning and value in life, even if they as parents consciously wanted no association with religion. Some knowledge of the place of religions in culture and of their function in individuals’ lives is a valuable part of the education of any citizen, religious or not. Without any initial religious meanings, children could grow up with a cultural deficit, like being raised in a partial vacuum of meaning (with a *tabula rasa* of spiritual resources). In effect, this would leave them to construct their own system of beliefs at an age when they are naturally more dependent on ready-made meanings (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 230). No doubt they would already have familiarity with the values in the parental lifestyle, as well as exposure to the plurality of values implicit in the media and the social groups in which they participate.

Catholic school religious education contributes to pupils’ cultural exposure to Catholicism; it can extend their cultural horizons beyond what they might absorb from their immediate home and community environment. This should also include knowledge of other religious traditions in the culture. Young people need some familiarity with their own tradition and knowledge of religions generally, even if at the time they may think this has little relevance for them.

Similarly, young people’s identity development needs to be resourced by their religious tradition. Religious education can contribute to the communication of a basic sense of religious identity to children; this informs their initial self-understanding and interpretation of society. Later, when more mature, they would have their own say in determining their sense of identity and the extent to which any religious identification might apply.

While affirming the important place for the study of religious traditions, this strategy is not saying that the Catholic school religion curriculum is therefore adequate and should be left unchanged. The approach to teaching religious traditions needs to be modified – it needs more problem-posing content and a critical, student-centred, research-oriented pedagogy. More will be said about this in a later section.

2. **Critical interpretation and evaluation of culture**

Crawford & Rossiter (2006) showed how the phrase ‘search for meaning’ has become more prominent in psychology and education since Viktor Frankl’s book *Man’s search for meaning* was published in English in 1964 (De Lors, 1996; Wong & Fry, 1998). There was said to be a contemporary ‘crisis’ in meaning, and education was considered to have some role in helping young people in their quest for meaning and purpose in life. But whatever this crisis might entail, it should not be interpreted as a lack of cultural meanings. As never before, there is a multiplicity of cultural meanings – all looking for adherents. And this in itself creates a problem for the individual’s search for meaning. How to judge the appropriateness of cultural meanings and what criteria might be used therefore become important in education generally and in religious education in particular.
It is not enough for religious education to be concerned relatively exclusively with the handing on of Catholic cultural meanings. Because for many young people religion is no longer a major source of meaning, there is a need for their Catholic school religious education to look more critically at wide ranging cultural meanings. For example: conflicting meanings from different groups can be a root cause of prejudice and racism; frameworks of meaning can be sources of liberation or of domination; and the dissemination of meanings can insinuate the causes of particular economic and political interests. Learning how meanings are assigned and how they may need to be uncovered and appraised is a part of becoming wise. What young people need is not so much new cultural meanings but the capacity to evaluate them carefully, and this skill, practiced in religious education, can become a part of their lifelong learning. It can not only help them in any dialogue with traditional religious meanings, but also with seeing where they stand with respect to various ideologies, political views and messages coming from different quarters, especially the commercial and entertainment worlds. Understanding cultural dynamics is a prerequisite for making judgments and considering possible social action.

Critical evaluation of culture has long been a concern of Catholic religious education. It was stressed in the encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi* (Evangelisation in the modern world) by Pope Paul VI in 1976, and was regarded as important for youth ministry, adult education, missiology and theological education. Nevertheless, it has not been as prominent as it should be in the content of Catholic school religion curricula.

Much has been written about education itself as a process of critical interpretation of culture. Critical theory and hermeneutics, including philosophical and sociological perspectives, have stressed the need for interpreting what is going on in culture; and in turn, this is proposed as a task to which public education can contribute (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 264). Hill (1990, p. 3) described this role as the “interrogation of one’s cultural conditioning”. Young people are naturally very critical, but are often naive as regards the political, manipulative and exploitative aspects of culture; or if they are aware of exploitation, many may not worry too much as long as it does not affect their lifestyle.

Critical interpretation and evaluation of culture addresses the following:

- exploration of the shaping influence of culture on people’s thinking and behaviour; appraisal of healthy and unhealthy effects;
- investigation of a range of contemporary social issues;
- identification of the influences on decisions and events; uncovering the historical, ideological and political forces at work, identifying who stands to gain or lose;
- deconstructing the components of writings so that they can be understood within their original contexts; this will inform potential meanings in different contexts;
- searching for the underlying economic and commercial interests that affect a situation;
- highlighting justice and environmental issues;
- calling ideologies to account.

This critical approach has also been referred to as an ‘issues-oriented’ religious education (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Nipkow, 1991). Crawford & Rossiter (2006, p. 394) advocated this approach with examples of topics for the secondary religion curriculum. They considered that it needed to enter into classroom practice across all year levels, while content and method need to be adapted to suit the maturity of pupils; a balance with other content was essential. They judged that this approach would enhance the perceived personal relevance of religious education. Generally, many Catholic youth and adults felt that the Catholic Church – and consequently its theology and religious education – had little relevance to life. They will quietly ignore Catholicism – and its religious education – unless they sense that something serious is being said about issues in personal, social, and political life. If there is not sufficient engagement with the real spiritual and moral issues of the day, they will get used to the expectation that their religion remains only marginally relevant to their lives. While religious education cannot be expected to resolve the problem – it cannot make the Catholic Church itself more relevant – it can endeavour to make the study of religion a more life-enhancing experience for pupils. And this requires an approach – in content, language and pedagogy – that realistically addresses young people’s spirituality. This means identifying the ways they construct meaning, and helping them to critically appraise the principal cultural
sources of that meaning; it sets out to alert them to the spiritual and moral aspects of life which can often be obscured beneath the all-engrossing contemporary concerns for personal wellbeing and happiness in a consumer oriented society. And it is within this context that the religious wisdom of Christianity can be effectively drawn into the educational process.

Making judgments about situations in the light of values, and the consideration of potential action to address social problems, are part of the process. In Catholic terminology, this is what is meant by the phrase ‘evaluation from a gospel perspective’. Religion teachers should help pupils learn these evaluative skills, while at the same time modelling the process.

This approach has also been described in Catholic religious education as ‘raising critical consciousness’ or ‘conscientisation’ (Rossiter, 1981, p. 117) – words that were prominent in the discussions of catechesis by South American Catholic bishops in the 1960s and 1970s. Their documents had a wide influence within ministry and religious education (Warren, 1983). It paralleled the impact on education by Paulo Freire’s ideas on praxis (shared reflection and action) and the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1971, 1980). It was also prominent in the area of critical pedagogy – the pedagogical application of critical theory (Darder et al. 2003). These themes were reflected in Thomas Groome’s approach to religious education – Shared Christian Praxis (Groome, 1980, 1991, 1998). Catholic religious education today retains prominent motifs of liberation and social justice. But this is judged to not be prominent enough in current Australian Catholic diocesan religion curricula.

Critical interpretation is a starting point for what the Warren (1992; c/f Williams, 1980) has called cultural agency. He proposed that one of the aims for religious education is to encourage and skill young people to go beyond being passive consumers of culture to become active constructors of culture. This acknowledges that cultural meanings are socially constructed and open to evaluation, not something that is a given, and hard to identify and change.

A part of critical interpretation and evaluation of culture needs a religious viewpoint; this can show how Catholicism, and religions generally, provide important values reference points for questioning the authenticity of media-conditioned imaginations of the world and of human development that have such a strong influence on young people. This challenge for religious educators was evident in the exhortation of Pope John Paul II:

> to develop your culture with wisdom and prudence, retaining the freedom to criticise what may be called the ‘cultural industry’ remaining all the while deeply concerned with truth … faith will ask culture what values it promotes, what destiny it offers to life, what place it makes for the poor and the disinherited with whom the Son of Man is identified, how it conceives of sharing, forgiveness and love (Pope John Paul II, 1984, p. 324).

What is written here about critical interpretation and evaluation of culture in Catholic religious education is not new. It has a long history. It was prominent in the period of rapid change in religious education after the Second Vatican Council, especially in the quest for personalism and relevance in class discussions of personal and social issues (Rossiter, 1999; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 391). The discussion of issues was also evident in British state school religious education in the mid-1960s as influenced by the writings of Loukes (1961, 1965, 1973; see also Crawford & Rossiter, 1996). But what proved problematic in both contexts at the time was the pedagogy. Uninformed discussion often amounted to little more than sharing ignorant opinions. And usually this could not sustain student interest for too long. Also, this approach was perceived by students as a low grade pedagogy in a subject that had little academic status; and, as explained by Crawford & Rossiter (2006, pp. 307-309) its potential educational value was subverted by what they called the “psychology of the learning environment”. The crucial missing ingredient was a high grade pedagogy – a serious study of the issues, in the light of up-to-date expert information. Here discussion was one useful part of the whole study exercise – like an informed debate – and not like a time-filling, non-directed, relatively purposeless activity.

Specific attention will now be given to pedagogy.
Implications for pedagogy and content

If religious education is to be a credible subject in the curriculum, then it needs to engage students with nothing less than the same sort of intellectual challenges that they accept as normal in other key learning areas. In other words, it needs to be academically challenging from Year 1 to Year 12, acknowledging that what ‘academic’ means at different levels needs to be determined. In primary and junior secondary classes, academic can well include experiential, hands-on learning methods (like scripted dramas, role plays, cartoon summaries, student audio-visual productions, group work, etc.).

For students who may readily tend to perceive religion lessons as extended sermons, in a pejorative sense, there is an even greater need than in other subjects / learning areas to demonstrate that the study of religion is open and inquiring – concerned with exploring the content and issues – and not with the ‘getting of Catholicism’: hence the need for a content-rich, student-centred, research-oriented pedagogy. Such a pedagogy can be applied to both the content areas referred to above: Catholic traditions and critical interpretation/evaluation of culture.

A critical pedagogy is understandably appropriate for the interpretation and evaluation of cultural meanings. Personal and social issues can become topics for investigation. It is easier for the students to explore social issues which are more ‘out there’; hopefully, this can prompt them to reflect on personal implications.

Both individual and group research methods can be used. Here the students have the power as investigators. This approach is clearly different from a didactic one where the teacher usually provided the information. This sort of critical, inquiring pedagogy is consistent with what students are experiencing elsewhere in the curriculum; and this is a good thing for religious education.

Careful attention needs to be given to the selection of issues to be investigated, and how these might be spread across the school religion curriculum. Firstly, it is appropriate to give more attention to the study of social issues at secondary level, especially in senior classes; however, a simpler critical approach is also needed at primary level. Students need to learn the skill of scrutinising cultural meanings through example investigations. If too many issues were studied, this would result in an unbalanced curriculum; it might also depress the students by giving too much attention to problems.

The critical interpretation and evaluation of social issues should not be limited to religious education; it should enter into learning areas across the whole curriculum as in a scheme proposed by Crawford & Rossiter (2006, pp. 304-315) where three integrated approaches were used:

- **Explicit**, with both whole subjects – like religion, philosophy or ethics; and as parts of study units in regular subjects;
- **Contextual**, where issues are touched on briefly in different learning areas or subjects without compromising the integrity of the principal subject matter; this approach postulates that values issues are often there in regular curriculum content, often just below the surface – they do not have to be introduced from outside; and
- **General skills and consciousness-raising** where all subjects contribute to the development of learning skills that carry over into personal learning for life.

While the author has no ready example of the results of school students’ research on social issues, readers can examine a website with the presentations of classes of teachers in the Master of Religious Education program. They worked in groups investigating social issues in the same way they expected their students to conduct group mini-research projects. (The presentations reporting the results of religion teachers’ group research projects on social issues can be viewed on the site [http://rel-ed.acu.edu.au/mre/636/research.html](http://rel-ed.acu.edu.au/mre/636/research.html))

Problem posing content topics can also be used in the study of religious traditions, especially at secondary level. A practical example is given in Crawford & Rossiter (1985, pp. 80-81). Different approaches to teaching the topic the Rosary were described – some considered appropriate and others inappropriate. The recommended approach engaged junior secondary students in a research oriented class project entitled “Investigating the place of the Rosary in Catholic spirituality”. The sub-questions were:– What is the Catholic rosary? When was it
invented? How did it develop over the centuries? How was it used in prayer, both historically and in modern times? Why is the rosary apparently dying out? If it dies out, will something valuable be lost—a place for meditative, repetitive prayers? After examining material on the origins, history and development of the rosary, the students conducted a limited survey of Catholics they knew, particularly from the older generation, to see how the rosary was prayed and to find out how it contributed to spirituality. Further comparative information about Buddhist and Muslim rosaries was accessed before the class discussed its conclusions. In addition, there was an experiential component to the study where the students prayed the rosary together; and there was an optional rosary prayer session in the chapel in free time. This example showed that an open, inquiring approach often ended up with more content than could be handled in the time available; and while being informative, it did not come across as an exhortation to improve the rosary saying performance of pupils.

Other examples of issue and problem-oriented topics for studying religious content are provided in Crawford & Rossiter (2006, p. 395). The topic on the rosary was not controversial; however, if this approach was extended to include topics like women priests, new Christian interpretation of sexuality and contemporary interpretations of doctrines like original sin, atonement, salvation, the virgin birth, the immaculate conception etc., then it would be likely to prove unacceptable to a number of clergy and bishops. Here the approach would run into difficulty. Hence it is important to determine an appropriate level and extent of critical topics that could be a valuable part of the Catholic school religion curriculum. A systematic and critical study of theology is an adult task. And Catholic schools are not seminaries or theological colleges; their role is to introduce young people to theology and not to train them as theologians. Hence, the extent of controversial theological topics needs to be limited; still, a healthy, inquiring, critical approach can still be used appropriately throughout the religion curriculum.

Another related difficulty for religion teachers to negotiate is where the students themselves raise theological questions—their readiness to do this can be disconcerting for teachers who are unprepared. Here, teachers need to show an awareness of contentious theological issues, so that they are able to articulate briefly the various viewpoints, and direct students to some pertinent resources, even if it is beyond their scope to conduct an informative study of such topics. No matter what view religious authorities might take on trying to limit the scope of a critical approach in religious education, nothing will stop the students from questioning; not to acknowledge their questions or trying to ‘fob’ them off, would be counterproductive. Often they ask genuinely challenging questions about the logic and the meaning of religious teachings that need to be addressed. The issues raised in this paragraph require considerable further attention by Catholic religious educators.

While some religion teachers have made good use of a critical inquiring pedagogy in religious education, whether Catholic school and ecclesiastical authorities are ready to endorse its wider use in normative documents remains a crucial question. At times, religious authorities are afraid to do this because they feel it will encourage too much questioning by students, which might turn them away from the faith. On the contrary, it is considered that trying to eliminate questioning would be more off-putting for young people who find their cultural experience and education naturally saturated with questioning. A critical pedagogy that explores the evolution and change in theological doctrines can help students understand religious meanings in their original cultural context and how they have been reinterpreted in later times. This can engage them in some initial ‘theologising’. Not to do this can leave them with simplistic and often literal interpretations of Catholic doctrines that they acquired when they were very young; and these teachings become eminently disposable in the students’ eyes—or they become reasons for dismissing religion because the feel they have been deceived. Trying to develop some understanding of the changing meaning and function of doctrines within the Catholic theological system is an important aim for religious education.

The approach described above is not new to Catholic school religious education and can be observed in the practice of particular religion teachers; but how extensive it might be across the system remains unknown. The point that this article is trying to make is that this view of the role of the Catholic religion curriculum should be much more prominent than it is; and it should be focused on trying to enhance the human spirituality of pupils. A critical approach can be implied in social justice topics. Nevertheless, the main curriculum emphasis still remains on conserving the religious tradition—as if all will be well as ‘good’ theology and scripture are taught.
Catholic diocesan religion curricula are basically conservative in the good sense of ‘conserving’ the tradition; hence the content topics cover all traditional theological content. But given contemporary youth spirituality, such curricula are just too ‘tame’ to attract much interest from young people. State based religion studies courses in Australia are also considered to be too tame, but for different reasons (Rossiter, 1999). It may well be that diocesan authorities will not make any moves to encourage a critical approach in content and pedagogy. If this is the case, then the only way that the recommended re-orientation might occur would be when teachers at the school level make adjustments in the way they implement religious education.

Relationships between primary and secondary school religious education

The argument in this article is based principally on the spirituality of youth and adults. Only limited attention will be given to children’s spirituality; but it is hoped that this section will at least raise issues that prompt a more systematic response from primary school religious educators. While acknowledging significant differences between primary and secondary school religious education, which should be linked to differences between the spiritualities of children and adolescents, there is a need to avoid creating an unrealistic divide between the two. What is important is to see how the change between children’s and adolescents’ spirituality is gradual and nuanced.

As far as the religion curriculum in Catholic primary schools is concerned, this author judges that there is no need to change the basic content and pedagogy, which are directed to a hands-on, experiential approach which helps socialise children into the teachings and religious practices of Catholicism. There is scope for elements in a scaled down critical approach, but there is no need to develop this extensively at primary school level. However, religious education in the primary school needs to keep pace with the level of critical pedagogy and critical content that pupils normally experience in other learning areas. The emerging intellectual and critical faculties of children should not be ignored but enhanced. Children at this level can still ask challenging questions about the meaning of religious teachings that would have been unheard of from the older generations when they were that age. One simple example of critical interpretation of culture in a junior primary class was evident where the teacher had groups of students run a regular Friday short session on ‘Commenting on what is happening in the world news this week’.

The theory for Catholic primary school religious education, as well as anecdotal reports from teachers suggest that children are often very responsive in religious education at this level – they are a delight to teach (Berryman & Strong, 2007; Catholic Education Archdiocese of Brisbane, 2007; Healy, Hyde & Rymarz, 2004; Hyde & Rymarz, 2008; Ryan & Grajczonek, 2007). They enjoy religious education and are enthusiastic about religious activities. In the light of adolescent spirituality, where there is a prominent disinterest in religion (Mason, et al. 2007), this raises a number of questions about the relationship between primary and secondary religious education, for example:

- How does the apparent responsive religiosity of children square with the disinterest in religion and religious education often shown by teenagers? (Crawford & Rossiter, 1988; Flynn & Mok, 2002)
- Is religious education successful at primary level but failing in secondary classes?
- Is there something missing in primary religious education because as children mature they lose interest?

Very young children are open, impressionable and trusting; usually they go along with whatever their teachers tell them or ask of them. No matter what view of religion prevails in their homes, they may happily enter into the religious world view created at school, and their participation suggests that they are engaging effectively in their religious socialisation. At this stage of development, their overt religious spirituality at school is vicarious and imitative (Fowler, 1981) – they can readily assimilate the religious meanings and practices in the Catholic primary school. This is not implying that their spirituality is not personal and authentic. At school, they seem to accommodate readily to a different view of religion from that which prevails at home. Religion / religious education at school is like a ‘second language’ to that spoken at home. And, from the children’s point of view, mostly there appears to be no significant conflict. Inevitably, the spectrum of their responses changes as they get older. The transition from a child’s to adolescent spirituality remains a significant topic that needs much further consideration and research. Nevertheless, research studies do suggest that most children will eventually end up
with the same sort of spirituality / religiosity that is evident in their parents (Smith & Denton, 2005; Mason et al. 2007). As summarised on the back cover of Smith & Denton’s (2005) report on the US national survey of youth and religion “young people from every corner of the culture...echo their parents' religiosity to an astonishing degree”.

As children mature through adolescence, for many of them, their cultural religious meanings seem to fade into the background as they become more autonomous in their thinking and more self-reliant in their behaviour. They may then identify more readily with negative views of religion in the culture. But it is not that they are consciously putting their religion aside or even becoming anti-religious. Rather, religious meanings are just eclipsed by more immediate cultural meanings about lifestyle, feel-good, looks, friendship and entertainment. As Smith & Denton (2005) noted:

In the ecology of...adolescents’ lives, religion clearly operates in a social-structurally weaker position, competing for time, energy, and attention and often losing against other, more dominant demands and commitments, particularly school, sports, television, and other electronic media. . . Religion simply occupies a largely losing structural position when it comes to most adolescents’ obligations, schedules, routines and habits. When it comes to institutions possessing opportunities to form the lives of youth, religion is not among the more advantaged players. (p. 161)

At a time when life seems to be opening up explosively for them, religion appears to have little to say that is relevant to their concerns.

This decline in religiosity does not mean that primary school religious education has failed – neither should blame be attributed to the secondary school. There are cultural and developmental influences at work that cannot be superseded and neutralised by school religious education. What was done in primary school in the way of acquainting children with their religious tradition was valuable in its own right; and it may well leave an enduring imprint in their human spirituality. Similarly, secondary religious education is not at fault for undoing the good work done in the primary school. Here too, even where there may be little interest in studying religion, there could be a valuable, but not necessarily identifiable, contribution to young people’s spiritual development.

It is worth considering that children may build up an attractive experience and image of what religion is like for a child, and if this is not updated as they grow older, they may gradually detach from their childlike view of religion just as they naturally leave childhood behind. Religion might then remain like a pleasant childhood relic – while not relevant to the world of the adolescent and the adult. This interpretation needs further investigation. If this is true to some extent, then their ultimate view of religion (and the Church) will be influenced mainly by their perception of religion itself and not of religious education.

Conclusion

This article proposed that, in the light of significant change in the landscape of contemporary spirituality, there is need for a ‘big picture’ re-orientation of Catholic school religious education to be more relevant to young people’s spirituality, whether or not they become active in Catholic parish life. Teaching to hand on the Catholic tradition should retain its prominent place because, for all young Catholics, access to the spiritual resources of the Church is a birthright. However, especially at secondary level, religious traditions should be taught with more problemposing, student-centred, research-oriented content and pedagogy.

The component that needs strengthening both in normative Catholic religious education documents and in classroom practice is the critical interpretation and evaluation of cultural meanings – helping young people become more discerning of the shaping influence that cultural meanings have on thinking and behaviour. This can help them probe the spiritual and moral dimension to life in times when it can easily be obscured in a society preoccupied with lifestyle and individual well-being, where the dominant, and relatively unquestioned mood is that this can be achieved happily through excessive consumerism.

In this way, Catholic schools can offer their students unconditionally a religious education that enhances their
spirituality. It can help them develop skills that will assist in charting their way meaningfully through the maze of cultural meanings in society. In addition, this approach may be the best way of presenting the option of a more formal and ongoing engagement with the Church.

This critical approach is consistent with developments in the general curriculum where increasingly there are opportunities for pupils to study values related issues.

A critical evaluative approach is not new to Catholic religious education; it has had a long history in evangelisation and Catholic social teaching – but this was applied mainly in adult education. It now needs more prominence in school religious education. A more human focus is not necessarily replacing or neglecting the religious dimension. It actually has a strong New Testament basis. The Gospel accounts show that the historical Jesus was specially concerned with the lives and social situation of the ‘little people’ – the marginalised and the poor. Central to Jesus’ praxis was addressing the social and religious problems that people faced. If anything, he is pictured as more concerned about people’s basic welfare and human spirituality than with formal religiosity. It would seem incongruous to think of Jesus concentrating a lot of attention on how to improve on the poor synagogue attendance of the Jewish youth of his time! His overriding concern for people’s human spirituality was reflected in John’s gospel as follows “I have come that they may have life, and life to the full” (John, 10:10).

Finally, it is helpful to see that the proposed re-orientation of religious education is consistent with the constitution of Australian catholic schools. In this country, Catholic schools are not like seminaries that are totally owned and controlled by the Catholic Church (even though some have expectations of the schools as if they were exclusively ecclesiastical institutions). Because they are supported mainly by Government funding, they are semi-state schools, constituted as a state-private joint venture in education – comparable with state involvement in the funding of church-sponsored hospitals, social service and aged care facilities. Australian Catholic schools reflect a partnership between the Catholic Church, Government and parents. They therefore have a civic responsibility and accountability to the wider community to educate young citizens. This constitution makes it appropriate that Catholic schools be ‘open-to-all’ and not just for Catholics. The proposed approach to religious education is congruent with an open-to-all mission. It is basically an open, inquiring study of the spiritual and moral dimension to life, with an understandable emphasis on Catholicism appropriate for a school sponsored by the Catholic Church. This view challenges thinking that considers that Catholic schools should only enrol students from regular mass-going families. While the schools were originally designed to cater for Catholics, they now include children who are nominally Catholic as well as some who are not Catholic. It is envisaged that some modification could readily be made in content to take into account the presence of children who are not Catholic. While this question needs considerable further attention, it is proposed that most of what should be done in the religion curriculum would be of value for the spirituality of religious and non-religious Catholics, as well as for religious and non-religious young people from other traditions, including non-Christian religions. In studying religious traditions, there could be scope for students who were not Catholic to do their study/research on their own tradition. The components of critical interpretation of culture should be applicable to all students no matter what their religious affiliation. Initial work on these questions has been done in Australia by Welbourne (2003) and Chambers, Grajczonek & Ryan (2006).

The idea of Catholic religious education enhancing young people’s human spirituality is a valuable expression of the way Catholic schools might contribute to Australian education generally; it provides young Australians with an education that seeks to give special attention to the spiritual/moral dimension. This thinking is a practical example of Catholic schooling making a valued contribution to the common good. Hence, the writings about Catholic schools and the common good are particularly pertinent to the arguments advanced here (Bryk et al. 1993; McLaughlin et al., 1996; Hollenbach, 1996; Conroy, 1999; Donlevy, 2008.).

There is no guarantee that the proposals here will solve the problems completely; there is no formula that will automatically engage students in religious education and transform their spirituality; and how successful the recommended approach might be could not be measured in the short term. Nevertheless, the re-orientation has tried to take serious account of contemporary youth spirituality.

Catholic schools ought to be centres of Catholic culture for the benefit of their staff, students and families. And a
prominent part of this Catholic culture should be concerned with the critical interpretation and evaluation of the wider cultural meanings that have a conditioning influence on personal, social life and political life.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM FOR CATHOLIC EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

He aha te mea nui o tēnei o? Māku e kīi atu
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata!
You may ask, ‘What is the greatest thing in this world? I will answer, ‘It is people, it is people, it is people!’

Abstract

This paper outlines the development and content of the recently published Religious Education Curriculum Statement for Catholic Early Childhood Services in Aotearoa New Zealand and its relationship to Te Whāriki Early Childhood Curriculum, the normative document for early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. It also explores educators’ understandings of the concept of spirituality in the context of a Catholic early childhood service.

Introduction

The National Centre for Religious Studies (NCRS) in close collaboration with Catholic early childhood services, diocesan education offices and the New Zealand Catholic Education Office (NZCEO) has developed a curriculum statement to assist services in the provision of Religious Education. This document builds on Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum (1996) to enhance the Catholic character of services.

Types of early childhood services in Aotearoa New Zealand

In Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education refers to the provision of education and care for infants and young children before they begin school at five years of age. For a small country Aotearoa New Zealand has a complex range of early childhood services. Services are offered by a range of providers, for example, early childhood education and care centres, playcentres, kindergartens, kōhanga reo, tagata pasifika centres and playgroups. One classification is to distinguish between teacher-led and parent-led services (Education Review Office, 2007a, pp. 5-9).

Teacher-led services comprise:

- Kindergartens: employ qualified and registered teachers, are sessional (morning or afternoon) and cater for children between two-and-a-half and five years.
- Education and Care Centres: the operator must be a qualified and registered teacher with other qualified staff as required. They provide all-day or part day care for infants, toddlers and young children up to five years of age.

Parent-led services comprise:

- Play Centres: are licensed parent co-operatives. Parents are responsible for the running of the sessions.
- Ngā Te Kōhanga Reo: are whānau (extended family) co-operatives. The aim of the programme is to foster te reo Māori (language) and tikanga Māori (culture) among the children.
- Playgroups: are licence-exempt parent attended programmes. At least half of the children present must have a parent attending. The duration must be less than three hours a day.
- Ngā Puna Kōhungahunga: are whānau and parent run with a programme in te reo Māori and English.
- Tagata Pasifika early childhood groups: are often church or community based. The programme aims to
develop children’s knowledge and understanding of their particular Pasifika language and culture. These are from countries such as the Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau and Tonga.

Catholic early childhood services
The 18 Catholic early childhood services comprise 0.4% of all licensed services in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ten are located in the Auckland diocese, five in the archdiocese of Wellington and one in each of the Hamilton, Palmerston North and Christchurch dioceses. The licensed roll of the services ranges from 19 to 50 children. The total enrolments by ethnic group in 2006 was Pākehā (New Zealand European) 42%; Pasifika, comprising six nationalities 39%; Māori 10%; and other, comprising 12 ethnicities 9%. Of the 18 services, eight are ethnic-language based (Education Review Office, 2007b, pp. 2-3).

Te Whāriki curriculum

When Te Whāriki was launched in 1996, it was the first national curriculum statement for the early childhood sector. It was also the first bicultural curriculum statement developed in Aotearoa New Zealand and it contained a curriculum specifically developed for Māori immersion services (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Two foundational pillars can be identified in Te Whāriki. The first is the importance of social context. This is located in the broader area of a socio-cultural theory of education that espouses that early childhood education needs to move beyond the concept of the child exploring his or her world and recognise that the individual child can only be understood in relation to the socio-cultural context in which the child lives (Richie, 2002, p. 32). The second pillar was the holistic education of the child that encompassed all aspects of the child, including spirituality.

The curriculum acknowledges that the relationships and the environments that the child experienced have a direct impact on learning and development. There is an emphasis on “the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and of the reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Te Whāriki is designed around four principles:
- Empowerment: Whakamana - of children to learn and grow.
- Holistic Development: Kotahitanga - reflects the way children learn and grow.
- Family and Community: Whānau Tangata - are integral to the curriculum.
- Relationships: Ngā Hononga - children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships.

These principles are expanded into five strands and eighteen goals. The strands are:
- Well-being - Mana Atua
- Belonging - Mana Whenua
- Contribution - Mana Tangata
- Communication - Mana Reo
- Exploration - Mana Aotūroa

Multicultural early childhood education

Te Whāriki curriculum acknowledges the increasing diversity within the population particularly as a result of recent migration. While Aotearoa New Zealand has become more culturally and ethnically diverse, the curriculum aims first at developing a partnership between both signatories to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi). The Treaty was signed by the British Crown and Māori on 6 February 1840. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context bicultural relationships derive from two key concepts: 1) Te Tangata Whenua (people of the land) and 2) the relationship established by Te Tiriti o Waitangi between Te Tangata Whenua, the original inhabitants and the later migrants whether of European, Polynesian, Asian or other ethnic origin.

The document also acknowledges that there are distinctive patterns among services. These include cultural perspectives, for example Māori or Samoan, and philosophical emphases, for example, Catholic, Montessori or...
The Māori immersion curriculum emerged from the Kōhanga Reo (language nests). Kōhanga Reo were started in 1982 as a response to the need to provide a structure that would pass on the language and culture to future generations of Māori children. In addition to Māori immersion services, some migrant groups from the Pacific had established early childhood services in order to maintain and enhance their language and culture. The bicultural and holistic nature of the curriculum, which acknowledges all aspects of the child’s development, including their culture and spirituality, made the curriculum easy to adapt to other cultures.

*Te Whāriki* was influenced in its development by the principles of the Kohanga Reo philosophy. It has a strong bicultural foundation that recognises and honours culture. *Te Whāriki* affirms the child’s cultural context and gives all children the opportunity to have positive experiences of other cultures in a way that reflects the increasing cultural diversity of the country. This is clearly articulated in the curriculum statement,

> The early childhood curriculum supports the cultural identity of all children, affirms and celebrates cultural differences, and aims to help children gain a positive awareness of their own and other cultures (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 18).

Such programmes needed to emerge from the children and their families-whānau. The important role of the family-whānau in fostering the well-being of the child is a key strand in *Te Whāriki*. The development of strong relationships between the service and family-whānau would hopefully contribute to the building up of the child’s identity and increase their knowledge and awareness of other cultures.

Children’s learning and development are fostered if the well-being of their family and community is supported; if their family, culture, knowledge and community are respected; and if there is a strong connection and consistency among all aspects of the child’s world. The curriculum builds on what the children bring to it and makes links with everyday activities and special events of families, whānau, local communities, and cultures. Different cultures have different child-rearing patterns, beliefs, and traditions and may place value on different knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Culturally appropriate ways of communicating should be fostered, and participation in the early childhood education programme by whānau, parents, extended family, and elders in the community should be encouraged (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42).

*Te Whāriki* adopts an emergent curriculum model. The emergent curriculum approach was described by Jones and Nimmo in their book of the same title (1994). This approach is child-centred and requires a programme that relates to the child’s life and enables the child to question, explore and investigate in a meaningful way. The emergent curriculum is responsive to, and extends and develops the interests and ideas that are raised by the children, either individually or collectively (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2008, p. 234).

As the two foundational principles of *Te Whāriki* curriculum, the socio-cultural context in which the child lives and the holistic nature of early childhood education, both acknowledge the spiritual dimension of the child, which enables Religious Education to be well integrated in a Catholic services programme.

### Spirituality and Catholic early childhood services

The principle Holistic Development: Kotahitanga, states that learning and development is to be integrated through a “recognition of the spiritual dimension of children’s lives in culturally, socially, and individually appropriate ways” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 41). *Te Whāriki* acknowledges that spirituality is a core expression of a child’s identity and an important dimension in many cultures, particularly Māori and Pasifika. *Te Whāriki* is unique in curriculum development in Aotearoa New Zealand in that it is the first curriculum to acknowledge that spirituality has a role in the education of a child. Aotearoa New Zealand has had a secular school system that excluded spirituality from the compulsory classroom since 1877.

Strand One: Well-being – Mana Atua, is based on the concept of hauroa, the Māori philosophy of well-being. This is an ancient concept in Te Ao Māori (the Māori world view). Hauroa comprises four elements: taha tinana (physical well-being), taha hinengaro (mental and emotional well-being), taha whānau (social well-being), and
taha wairua (spiritual well-being). Durie (1994) developed Te Whare Tapa Wha model of hauroa, in which the four elements are compared to the four walls of a whare (house), each supports and influences the other. All four elements are necessary for the structural integrity of the building and by analogy, the person.

**The development of the Catholic early childhood religious education curriculum statement**

One criterion the Education Review Office (ERO) uses to evaluate services is the Chain of Quality. This comprises two pillars, 1) a clear philosophy and 2) parental and community involvement. Between these pillars there are four interlinked indicators, 1) effective management, 2) high quality educators, professional leadership, 3) high quality programmes, environments, interactions, and 4) positive outcomes for children (Education Review Office, 2007a, p. 17).

When reviewing a Catholic early childhood service, ERO looks for evidence that the Catholic character as expressed in the philosophy is being developed and nurtured through the policies, the curriculum, the interactions and the daily life of the service. As part of the process of identifying and articulating their philosophy, a number of services had requested the development of resources to support and enhance the Catholic philosophy. As a result, a number of working groups were formed under the auspices of the National Centre for Religious Studies (NCRS) and the New Zealand Catholic Education Office (NZCEO) to identify the issues and to conceptualise the support required. These groups consisted of managers and educators in Catholic services from around the country. As a result of these meetings a draft Catholic Early Childhood Religious Education Curriculum Statement was developed in 2008. The document was distributed to Catholic services for discussion among the staff and their communities. A series of feedback workshops to review the draft were held in 2009 and the document was prepared for publication in 2010.

**The philosophical basis of the religious education curriculum statement**

The first principle of the curriculum statement is the recognition that the parents, and the family-whānau, are the first educators in faith and that the Catholic early childhood services support this process. A second principle is the recognition that the environment in which a child is educated is an important component of early childhood education. Catholic early childhood services must pay particular attention to the development of a Christian atmosphere as well as to particular characteristics of Catholic spirituality.

There are a number of approaches to Catholic Religious Education. These fall into two main categories that emphasise either the religious or the educational dimension. The particular emphasis depends also to some extent on the locale and the age of the participants. In the case of Catholic early childhood services, the approach is aimed at the faith formation of the children and will tend to emphasise the religious dimension. The curriculum statement has a number of influences. It recognises that young children will be at a particular stage of faith formation and that the learning experiences must be appropriate for the children. The characteristics of faith formation for children at this age are derived from the works of Westerhoff (2000) and Fowler (1995).

**The structure of the religious education curriculum statement**

The Catholic Early Childhood Religious Education Curriculum Statement is divided into five sections. Section one positions Catholic early childhood services within the wider context of Catholic education. Section two outlines Christian attitudes, relationships and the environment of a Catholic service. Section three outlines the aspects of faith development appropriate to children at various ages. This section also outlines the role of the family-whānau, educators, parish and diocese regarding faith formation.

Section four identifies a number of aims for Religious Education in Catholic early childhood services:
- develop a sense of wonder and awe at the world around them;
- become sensitive to the spiritual;
- come to know God’s unconditional love for them;
- develop an awareness that God is present in them, in others, and in all things;
- appreciate that they are a gift from God;

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- have a sense of belonging to the Catholic community;
- experience joy and ease in spontaneous prayer;
- become aware of the attitudes and elements of celebration, ritual and worship.

(National Centre for Religious Studies, 2008, p. 10)

Section five outlines planning, evaluation and assessment of Religious Education. Section six links the Catholic perspective with the principles of *Te Whāriki*. A Catholic perspective is integrated into each strand and goal with examples of possible experiences that could help to meet the learning outcomes identified in each goal. An example is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Te Whāriki*: Strand Two: A Catholic Perspective

| Strand Two: Belonging – Mana Whenua |  
|-----------------------------------|---
| **Te Whāriki** | **Catholic Curriculum** |
| Strand statement | Children and their families feel a sense of belonging. | Children and their families in a Catholic Early Childhood Service should experience a welcoming, inclusive community that respects and values the mana, dignity and culture of each person, where a Catholic perspective on life helps them to grow in understanding of their world, and where connecting links with the wider Church community are affirmed and extended. |
| Goal 1 | Children and their families experience an environment where connecting links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended. | Children experience an environment where connecting links with the family and the wider church community are affirmed and extended. |
| Goal 2 | Children and their families experience an environment where they know that they have a place. | Children experience an environment where they know they have a place in the Catholic community. |
| Goal 3 | Children and their families experience an environment where they feel comfortable with the routines, customs, and regular events. | Children experience an environment where they feel comfortable with routines, customs and regular events within the Catholic community. |
| Goal 4 | Children and their families experience an environment where they know the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour. | Children experience an environment where they know the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour which arise from treating people according to Christian values and beliefs. |

An example of an experience that could help to meet the outcome for goal 2 (see Table 1 above) is for the service to ‘Welcome all family-whānau and encourage them to be part of prayer times.’

**What do educators in Catholic early childhood services understand by spirituality?**

At a workshop in 2008, educators from five Catholic early childhood services were asked to respond in a small group exercise to the question, “What does spirituality mean in the context of early childhood education?” From an analysis of the responses, five broad themes emerged:

- A belief in God
- Religious expression
- A sense of wonder
- Love
Identity

Three of these themes, Belief in God, Religious Expression and a Sense of Wonder are included in the Religious Education curriculum. This would aim at assisting the process of faith formation, opportunities for experiencing and expressing wonder and awe and the use of appropriate prayers, hymns and Bible stories.

The themes of Love and Identity related to the environment of the service. These are broad aspects of spirituality that are related to the individual experience of the children at the service. To a degree, they are less concrete than the other themes and are at the heart of the relationships, policies and organisation of the service. The statements in quotation marks were written by the participants.

A belief in God. This theme relates to an awareness of the transcendent and is expressed in statements like, “Something beyond yourself” or “Children show an awareness of the beyond.” This is also related to an awareness of God, a “Simple understanding of God”. Children learn that they are special and unique because God created them. This understanding is developed in Strand One: Well-Being – Mana Atua.

A sense of wonder. This aspect of spirituality captures the sense of awe and wonder about the beauty of creation and openness to the natural world. Children at this age have a seemingly insatiable quest for knowledge, “Wondering and questioning, an openness to the world around them.” It also relates to the existential questions, the “Unanswered questions, the big questions. The stars, the cosmos, the bottom of the sea.” This theme aligns well with Strand Five: Exploration – Mana Aotūroa Strand which provides opportunities for the children to experience God through active exploration of their world. A sense of wonder is also a basic disposition required for an emergent curriculum that seeks to develop the ideas and questions emerging from the children.

Religious expression. There is recognition that the expression of spirituality is closely tied to religion. The educators recognise that for many children, particularly from Māori and Pasifika families-whānau, spirituality and religion are not separated as they are in secular culture. Spirituality is part of ‘who’ you are, it is a natural part of life and of being for example, Samoan. This also relates well to the Catholic concept of sacramentality and an awareness of the sacred. The expression of spirituality is essentially religious and is expressed through prayer, “Prayer is spirituality for a child” or through hymns and Bible stories, and “Prayer, Bible stories, hymns.” It is to be expected that in a Catholic early childhood the expression of spirituality would be mediated through the religious culture. Strand Four: Communication – Mana Reo seeks to provide opportunities for the children to experience an environment where their spiritual well-being is nurtured through stories, symbols and rituals of the Church community and to develop verbal and non-verbal communication skills to get in touch with their spiritual selves. The use of prayer, hymns, art, music and Bible stories as well as gestures and movement enhance the child’s spiritual formation.

Love. While Te Whāriki does not use the word ‘love’, the comments are consistent with Strand One: Well-being – Mana Atua that promotes the emotional well-being of the child. Spirituality involves an experience of “Being loved” and of “Feeling that they are loved by all, (parents, teachers).” This occurs through “Experiencing love and learning what it is” and by having opportunities to be “Loving and caring” toward others.

Identity. Spirituality is integral to a sense of our identity as human beings. It is at the core of who someone is as a person. One of the foundational principals of Te Whāriki is the importance of culture in assisting the child in the development of personal identity. Educators identified two ways in which spirituality forms part of the identity of the child. The first relates to the contribution that the child’s social and cultural context makes to the formation of identity, “Customs and culture”, “Our place in the world, the family, the Centre, the parish.” The second relates to the development of the child’s personal identity, “It has to do with your identity, who you are” and who they are as people, your “Beliefs and values.” This is also congruent with Strand Two: Belonging – Mana Whenua that recognises the need for children to experience an environment where they feel and know they are valued and have a place.
Conclusion

*Te Whāriki* recognised the place of spirituality in the holistic education of a child. The foundational principles of the document were consistent with Catholic values and beliefs about the education of children. Many Catholic early childhood services had engaged in an ongoing process of articulating their vision of a Catholic service. As a response to this process, the need emerged for a document that outlines the identity of a Catholic early childhood service. A Religious Education curriculum statement was developed in consultation with services to assist them in their task of faith formation. This has resulted in on-going professional development for educators in order to provide an opportunity for them to reflect on their praxis and to explore different pedagogical methods.

The primary purpose of a Catholic Early Childhood Service as stated in the curriculum document “should be to provide an all-encompassing Catholic family atmosphere that supports the awakening and nurturing of faith in the child, bringing them to an awareness of God, Gospel values and their place in the world” (National Centre for Religious Studies, 2010). The Religious Education Curriculum will assist Early Childhood educators to provide this all-encompassing Catholic environment that supports the religious development of young children.

References


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SPIRITUALITY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: ‘BELONGING, BEING AND BECOMING’ AT A MIDWINTER FESTIVAL

Early childhood education is at an interesting place in Australia and as always a particular time and space is reflected in changes of policy and direction. Currently there is a strong political focus on early childhood education (Sumsion, Cheeseman, Kennedy, Barnes, Harrison & Stonehouse, 2009) and this coincides with a growing demand for more kindergartens and preschools and more choice for parents. Along with this there is the increasing professionalisation of the childcare ‘industry’ and a shift in focus from care to education. A new national curriculum framework for early childhood education (DEEWR, 2009) been introduced. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, referred to in this article as the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), is called Belonging, Being & Becoming. For the first time in Australia the document refers to spirituality and there is an emphasis on holistic approaches that include the spiritual dimension. The spiritual is defined in the EYLF as “a range of human experiences including a sense of awe and wonder, and an exploration of being and knowing” (DEEWR, 2009, p.46). For proponents of the inclusion of spirituality in education in contemporary Australia this is a step forward (de Souza, 2010; Hyde, 2005; Tacey, 2004).

In this article I am presenting research carried out in New Zealand that explored the spiritual experience of young children. In this context the inclusion of the spiritual in education is an affirmation of indigenous (Māori) knowledges and worldviews (Pere, 1991; Smith, 1999). Taking a narrative approach, a particular ritual that I attended in a kindergarten is described. My work is represented as a ‘messy’ text (or bricolage) because this gives me an opportunity to introduce diverse elements into the discussion and to analyse the EYLF in some detail as it relates to spirituality in early childhood education. The position I take here is as a Pākehā (not Māori) researcher from Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa – land of the long white cloud), now living and working in Australia. This perspective carries no assumption that indigenous understandings are “generic” (Martin, 2005, p.28) in New Zealand, Australia or elsewhere.

Definition

My (working) definition of spirituality (Ratcliffe & Nye, 2006) is that it:

connects people to each other, to all living things, to nature and the universe. Spirituality is a way of appreciating the wonder and mystery of everyday life. It alerts me to the possibility for love, happiness, goodness, peace and compassion in the world.

(Bone, 2007, p.12)

This definition was influenced by being in a context where the spiritual is acknowledged and is included in the influential and internationally recognised curriculum for early childhood education in New Zealand, Te Whariki (Ministry of Education, 1996). Te Whariki can be translated to mean ‘the woven mat’ and this metaphor recognises weaving as important to the peoples of the Pacific. This curriculum has clearly influenced The National Early Years framework in Australia and the definition of curriculum that underpins the EYLF is adapted from Te Whariki (Ministry of Education,1996). Thus curriculum is “all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (DEEWR, 2009, p.9). This definition of curriculum leaves a wide field for exploration and discovery.

Research

My qualitative case study research explored spirituality in three early childhood settings, a Montessori casa
(preschool), a Rudolf Steiner kindergarten, and a private preschool. Teachers, children and families were invited to take part in the research. I took the role of participant observer with the children over a ten week period in each place. Teachers were interviewed and parents and family members attended focus groups to discuss spirituality. Visual data were generated in the form of photographs and videos made by the teachers who were invited to share what they thought spirituality might look like in their particular environment. The resulting notes, interviews, voices and visual data were analysed thematically and through writing as a means of discovery (Richardson, 2000).

Findings

The main finding from my research was the concept of ‘everyday spirituality’ (Bone, Cullen & Loveridge, 2007) and everyday spirituality is a means of including spirituality in the preschool as an aspect of daily practice. It is a way to reduce some of the fear and mystique that often surrounds discussion of the spiritual. Everyday spirituality recognises that spirituality is often conceptualised as a way of life. Spirituality may reflect the values and beliefs of a person or community in a way that is implicit rather than overt. For example, I am rarely asked to explain my spiritual orientation as the spiritual is often deemed a personal and private aspect of life. However, the fact that certain aspects of spirituality are ‘lived’ in everyday life can be obvious and this was confirmed by parents and teachers who I spoke to. They felt that the spiritual was in what they did and how they behaved rather than in what they said.

The research revealed three spaces of ‘everyday spirituality’. I describe these spaces as transformative and they are not literal but conceptualised as spaces whereby the spiritual is present in the preschool. It is possible in these spaces for the spiritual to be visible, to make itself felt. The notion of spirituality as ‘lived experience’ can be linked to the phenomenological approach described by van Manen (1990) in terms of space, time, body and place.

The spaces that emerged and that are described here and elsewhere (Bone, 2008) were those of spiritual withness, the spiritual in-between and the spiritual elsewhere. To be spiritually with someone is to be in a space of intersubjectivity, closeness and shared attention, a space where a sense of connection is obvious. This happened with children and teachers, with children and myself as researcher, and with parents. Sometimes it was unexpected and momentary. The second space, the spiritual in-between, is an ambiguous space, a ritual space, a space of uncertainty and discovery. The spiritual elsewhere is a space of dreams and imagination, play and creativity. This space is easily inhabited by the children and can be more challenging for adults. Parents articulated that it was a space that was harder for them to enter. These spaces will be identified in the following account that is layered, and complex: a bricolage.

Bricolage

I took the role of bricoleur in the research, combing through evidence and conversations, incidents and photographs, in an attempt to create something new from this highly involving and creative process (Bone, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The following discussion is presented as a bricolage, comprising narratives, memories and comments. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia is added into a mix and so is a superimposed layer that enables me to think about my original narrative differently. This reworking is intended to provoke discussion about spirituality in the early childhood educational context and to bring out some of the dilemmas and differences that may disrupt educational contexts. The following bricolage is constructed as a ‘messy’ text with interjections and annotations throughout. My original narrative is indicated by the use of italic font. It is based on my experience as a participant in a ritual in the Rudolf Steiner kindergarten.

The Midwinter Festival

Sylvia tells me that there is going to be a surprise. I am really touched that she is including me in this...
and that she wants me to experience the surprise. There seems to be some talking when parents collect their children but I really don’t know what is going to happen. On the morning of the 21st June she asks me to come early and I promise to do this. It will be Matariki, midwinter, the shortest day of the year in this part of the world.

Sylvia is the kindergarten teacher in the Steiner kindergarten and she amazes me with her dedication and knowledge. Her planning is meticulous and she is always conscious of the spiritual in her work with young children. My narrative reflects her achievement because there was nothing accidental about the ritual she planned for Midwinter. The account also shows a teacher prepared to move beyond tokenism in her work (Myers & Myers, 2001).

I am conscious that as I write this article the festival of Winter Solstice is approaching but this will be celebrated by a handful of preschools. This time of year, the 21st June, is the shortest day in the Southern hemisphere. It is the time of Matariki in New Zealand, the New Year on the Māori calendar: Mata – ariki, the ‘eyes of god’ (Hakaraia, 2004). This local and appropriate New Year is increasingly being celebrated by Pākehā (New Zealanders who are not Māori) and by many Māori New Zealanders. It is the time when the stars called the Pleiades are high in the sky. There are also traditional indigenous stories connected to this in Australia (Bhathal, 2006). However, for many religious people a celebration of this sort will be problematic. I do not wish to connote the word ‘religious’ with Christian, so, more specifically from a Christian perspective it may be seen as pre-Christian with connotations of paganism and nature worship. This ritual then becomes a site of potential controversy.

**Belonging**

In terms of belonging surely it is important to celebrate the part of the world, the actual context where the preschool is situated? There are no questions asked about Christmas in the summer and Easter in the autumn despite the inappropriate weather and season that then becomes the focus of celebration. I ask myself if there is something about the continual process of colonisation that permanently infiltrated the calendar and still constructs the year and decides what is celebrated in Australia.

Meanwhile, educators are urged in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 27) to “explore the diversity of culture, heritage, background and tradition” of others and themselves. Deciding what may and may not be a festive occasion is part of the learning outcome described in the curriculum as a way that children are “connected with and contribute to their world” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 19). It seems that it might be useful to start by looking at the year in Australia in terms of rituals and celebrations. Many are now introduced into preschools despite being arguably inappropriate (Valentine’s Day) or simply seem to have become another marketing opportunity (Mother’s Day). Children will of course be aware of festivals and each family will have certain rituals that they keep but in the preschool perhaps celebrating something that acknowledges the place of Australia in the Southern hemisphere could constitute an act of “minor politics” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Minor politics address concerns related to everyday life rather than concerns that are distant and removed from reality.

> On that day I feel a real sense of anticipation as I wait outside the kindergarten with the other parents and children. It is a cold but clear winter morning. No-one is allowed into the kindergarten but we leave coats and the fruit we have brought along in the hallway. I know Sylvia and the parents gathered last night to prepare something – there is excitement in the air. One of the parents reads out our names and we all sit on the bench and wait.

This ritual really involves parents, they are completely going along with this and I am amazed at their commitment to this festive occasion. Of course, I realise that while it is new to me that in this kindergarten the Midwinter ritual happens every year. There are always parents who know what will happen and who can support newer families to take part. One of the children tells me with obvious enjoyment that it is a
“great day” and that he looks forward to it every year. I am reminded of this when noting that the new curriculum urges educators to promote learning by providing “continuity in experiences” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14).

From the perspective of spirituality as wellbeing (de Souza, 2010) it is so refreshing to celebrate with fruits of the season. It is troubling to think about the avalanche of confectionary, of sugary and salty food that contribute to many special days in early childhood settings. Some parents must find providing so much ‘stuff’ stressful sometimes. I reflect that what we (children, family members and teachers) are experiencing is a wonderful way to be together in a way that is “happy, healthy, safe and connected to others” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 32).

Sylvia appears at the doorway to lead us, she beckons and we go into the kindergarten. It is quite dark inside because most of the windows have been covered. The children gasp. Eyes wide, we gaze at the room that has been completely transformed. The furniture has been pushed back and it seems as if the entire floor is covered in a spiral of greenery. The spiral starts at the edge of the room and is made of dark green leaves and branches. There is a scattering of pink camellia flowers and berries. In the centre of the spiral there is a swirl of dark blue cloth with a really large golden candle in the middle and only this candle is alight. The benches are placed so that we can sit down on the outer edge of the spiral. We walk around and then sit down in silence and look…and look. There are dark yellow beeswax candles all around the edge of the spiral in star shaped holders on golden paper.

At the time, and it still does, seem to me that this ritual is a celebration of the natural world. The glories of nature in winter are on display with a major emphasis on the aesthetic that is so often recognised as a gateway to the spiritual. It is a sensory moment that closes that gap so often felt between things of the spirit and the body. The physical reaction of the children reminds me that we are holistic beings, and as noted in the EYLF “an integrated, holistic approach to teaching and learning also focuses on connections to the natural world” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 4). In the context of this curriculum the term holistic refers to “the connectedness of mind, body and spirit” (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, cited in DEEWR, 2009, p. 4).

**Being**

I realise that this has all been carefully organised. Sylvia is engaged in intentional teaching, defined in the Australian curriculum as “deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). None of this happened without effort and this event is obviously something that Sylvia intends to have far reaching consequences for the learning of the children. Sylvia tells me in her interview that she knows that what she does will stay with children for ever and may influence their lives. She takes a powerful stance as an educator. I reflect that this is obvious in her practice.

In this ritual she constructs what I call ‘spiritual in-betweeness’, in this space there is a crossing over between the outside and inside. Materials from the garden are here in the kindergarten and there is a noticeable blurring of the usual inside/outside boundaries. Sylvia uses natural materials, the branches of greenery, flowers, and beeswax candles, in a way that enhances the spirit and closes the body/spirit divide. In the curriculum it is noted that the use of certain materials “can foster hope, wonder and knowledge about the natural world” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16) and this is obvious when I see the children’s eyes open wide. The sense of awe and wonder is palpable as the children enter the room, there is a hush as they look around and go to their seat.

When everyone is settled, Sylvia picks up one of the candles in front of her and begins, very slowly, to walk the spiral. She walks into the centre of the spiral and lights her candle from the one in the middle. She walks back, puts her candle down and sits in her place. She then gestures to Katie, a child next to her, who picks up her own candle and begins her walk. Every child, the parent helpers
and me, the researcher, walk the spiral, one by one. When the children return Sylvia holds her arms out but does not touch the child. She gestures to them to walk around and go back to their place and beckons the next child forward so that there is continual flowing movement.

All religions have rituals but I have specific memories about the potency of candles. I remember attending my first Catholic mass and also going to High Church Anglican services with my aunt: the candles were a revelation, the flickers of light, the incense, the choir and chanting. However, this kind of observance varies between different religions. I come from the city of Bristol, the city where the Methodist religion of John Wesley is strong, with the emphasis on plainness, on lack of decoration, and on nothing standing between oneself and God. The use of certain symbols in religious observance can cause contention. Some religions emphasize the differences between the mystical and everyday observance. For some religions the power of the ordained and knowledge of sacred texts and the rules is important. In an interview the philosopher Nel Noddings (cited in Halford, 1998/9, p.29) stated that religion is linked to institutionalisation. She differentiates religion and spirituality, saying that “spirituality is an attitude or a way of life that recognizes something we might call spirit. Religion is a specific way of exercising that spirituality and usually requires an institutional affiliation. Spirituality does not require an institutional connection”.

Even when perceived as free from institutionalisation, spirituality is maybe not so ‘free-flowing’ as people like to think; there are often deep threads and connections that bind and differentiate. There is, on a deep level, a shared symbolism that is very potent. The use of the candle itself is a signifier of hope, of remembrance, of light and it represents the energy of fire. This is obvious in the Midwinter Festival as light and fire is needed in the winter season. Sometimes this is less obvious, for example, at the local Hindu temple candles are lit and the priest passes his finger through the flame and then over the closed eyes of the person in front of him to signify the possibility for enlightenment, for the eyes of the soul to be opened. While I know very little about Hinduism per se, on the esoteric level I can understand and appreciate this highly symbolic action.

The spiral, such a feature of this ritual, is an important symbol in the West, and the spiral form is also found in the great Eastern churches; the Sophia in Istanbul, for example. It is a metaphor for finding the beloved, a reminder that the way toward enlightenment and salvation may not be straight, a caution to approach the ‘centre’ however that is conceptualised, slowly, with circumspection. If the centre of the spiral is also a symbol of the true self then finding that centre is also for most people a lifelong journey, always circling around what is more obvious to onlookers. In this ritual the children focus so carefully on their journey in the spiral of greenery. It is humbling to realise that they are at the beginning of their journey. There are parents and teachers along the way to help if necessary but each child walks alone, carefully lighting their own candle when in the middle of the spiral. The symbolism is obvious, we walk in the dark, we need a light to take us through the darkness of winter, the light may be held inside, we need this ‘fire’ to take us through tribulations and times that might be harder.

When everyone has walked and the candles are all lit we sit in the circle quietly until Sylvia stands. She begins to sing very softly, the children join in and then we begin to move back outside. The children go outside to play in the garden. The adults inside tidy up, shifting the leaves and branches nearer to the middle of the room so they take up less floor space. They are moving quickly and working hard. The candles are put at each child’s place on the table. Each parent has baked a box of home made biscuits in the shape of stars. They are different sizes and dusted with icing sugar. Sylvia stipulates that they go on white plates next to colourful plates of oranges. Instead of the usual bowls the children have pretty china today and cranberry juice instead of water. When everything is ready the children are called in for the feast.

In nearly every culture the inclusion of the feast is an important marker of a significant occasion. In New Zealand the movement on the marae shows this. The marae is the meeting house and leaving this space to go and eat marks a move from tapu (sacred) to noa (profane) (Pere, 1991) and the separation of food from other activity is accepted in Aotearoa. On this occasion in the kindergarten children are being made aware that attention to detail can construct something special and they are also learning that “different places
and spaces have their own purposes, expectations and ways of doing things” (DEEWR, 2009, p.16).

After the session we put the leaves from the spiral straight onto the compost. Everything is cleared away although Sylvia tells me that the effects of the ritual will be felt for a few weeks and that she will do calm things with the children.

There is a requirement in the Early Years Learning Framework that children show respect for the environment and that educators promote this when they “embed sustainability in daily routines and practices” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 29). In the context of this ritual experience the concept of sustainability is included in the whole process and the cycle of life is repeated when the greenery is put on the compost. The children and parents are all involved in these processes.

There is a link between spirituality and ecological principles and practices. Current understandings of ‘greenness’ as a way of life is an undeniable aspect of the secularisation of spirituality that is so attractive to many people today. Despite an international forum like the most recent Parliament of the World’s Religions where there was a focus on healing the earth, many people do not feel that world religions are playing a vocal and noticeable part in arguments that support care of the planet. Meanwhile, children are required to “explore relationships with other living and non-living things and observe, notice and respond to change” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 29).

The whole community contributed to the creation of this ritual. They brought leaves, flowers, made the candle holders, paper shapes and star biscuits. The space was completely transformed.

In terms of transformation the spiritually transforming spaces of withness, in-betweenness and the elsewhere are all present in this ritual. There was an amazing sense of concentration in the room where it took place and everyone focused and was truly ‘with’ each child as they walked in the spiral. The entire Midwinter celebratory event followed the ‘rules’ of ritual. A liminal space (Turner, 1969) of spiritual in-betweenness was constructed as we entered the room. The kindergarten had been transformed and we entered in darkness that gradually became lighter as the candles were lit. This created a sense of difference from the world outside, the boundaries were blurred and there was a sense that time stood still. The ritual ended with a feast and this facilitated our re-entry to ordinary life. This Midwinter Festival was a space for being spiritually in-between on many levels. Finally, the children, as I did, entered willingly into the spiritual elsewhere. Sylvia, and the families who helped her, had created a magical dreamspace, a dramatic and beautiful environment that the children remember from year to year.

**Becoming**

It is important that children grow up knowing that change and transformation is possible. This is, to me, a spiritual aspect of education that goes beyond the instrumental. Something of this is expressed in the Early Years Learning Framework as “over time children engage with increasingly complex ideas and learning experiences, which are transferable to other situations” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 19). However, this does not articulate fully what is played out on this occasion. If children learn at a deep level that transformation is possible *holistically* then that in itself means that the Midwinter festival is a significant piece of learning and supports my contention that such rituals and spiritual events are curriculum.

**Beyond binaries**

The Midwinter ritual moved between oppositions as we went from the light into darkness and back to light as the candles were lit one by one. Then there was the movement from inside to outside and the sense that the outside had been brought inside when we saw the green spiral on the floor of the kindergarten. These binaries were effectively exploited by the Midwinter festival. In terms of religion and spirituality there are also binaries. For example, religion is often seen as a site of patriarchal practice as opposed to the spiritual
that in Western ecological perspectives is perceived as closer to ‘Mother Nature’ and what is often
identified as ‘feminine’. These binaries are often embedded in how people see the world. Bateson (1994,
p. 235) challenges the binaries that pertain in certain belief systems. She suggests that “the self is
constructed from continuing uncertainty, but it can include or reflect a community or even the entire
biosphere, can be both fluid and stable, can be fulfilled in learning rather than in control”. Perhaps
spirituality as a means of connection, to refer back to my working definition, moves between the binaries,
can be conceptualised as a fluid concept that challenges too much certainty.

An orientation toward pluralism is embedded in my life. I grew up in the Church of England and was
educated at a Roman Catholic convent school, as an adult I sometimes go to a Buddhist temple and
mediate at an Ashram. In this I am fairly typical of the average Western person who sees belief and faith of
something of a pick and mix. This is deeply problematic for people who interpret religion and/or spirituality
as faith and it may challenge those who believe that they have the ‘truth’. As someone who researches and
writes from a feminist postructuralist position I know that I have been constructed in certain ways from my
own childhood to know how to ‘perform’ religion or spirituality when it is expected of me. In the Midwinter
ritual I was wholeheartedly performing spirituality and at the same time remembering celebrations like the
Harvest Festival and other powerful ritual occasions from the past. From this perspective, spirituality and
religion are sometimes far apart, sometimes they inform each other, sometimes they are the same thing. I
did not have the intention in this article of constructing another binary. Rather I have connected thoughts
and research, comments from the Early Years Curriculum Framework and my own interpretations, to
construct this *bricolage* of the Midwinter Festival.

Implications for those who educate in a specific religious context can be drawn from this account. It will be
noted that I have questioned the automatic transfer of rituals and festivals from one place and time to
another without recognising changes in context. However, all religions have ritual aspects and there is
richness to be found everywhere. In all celebrations there is an opportunity for sharing. My argument here
is that these occasions can be an opportunity to move beyond a tokenistic display to become more
meaningful in particular environments. Each preschool builds its own culture and everyday rites and special
rituals contribute to that culture and are part of what is expected and enjoyed.

Educators everywhere may be encouraged by the requirements of their curriculum to focus on involvement
and parental and community partnerships. In New Zealand the curriculum strand of contribution or mana
tangata (Ministry of Education, 1996) supports these initiatives. Teachers and families can choose to be
creative in their approach to important events. The success of this was obvious to me in the Midwinter
Festival because of the wholehearted participation from families and the enjoyment of the children and the
planning and care taken by teachers; everyone completely accepted this construction of a very different
day in the kindergarten. Thomas and Lockwood (2009, p. 13) note that it is important to remember that
“nurturing the spirit is also the responsibility of early childhood educators”.

In educational contexts and in the pedagogical relationship there are always elements of who we are
(being), where we come from and where we are now (belonging), and future possibilities are always
present (becoming). The Early Years Learning Framework states that it is important for children to “express
ideas and feelings and understand and respect the perspectives of others” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 40). This is not
something that only children learn to do, it is something teachers also pay attention to in a time when
understanding and respect is essential in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

**Conclusion**

I suggest here that this ritual is curriculum and illustrates what might be achieved when a spiritual approach
to educating young children is taken. In this context (the Rudolf Steiner kindergarten) the spiritual is
embedded in all activity and is not seen as unusual. Planning revolves around the seasons of the year. This
planning involves families and constructs continuity in the kindergarten. In the other case studies explored
in the research there were similar but different rituals. In the private preschool there was an emphasis on
the usual festivals of Christmas and birthdays. I chose this particular ritual because it made a definite impression on me and was a spiritual experience that I remember vividly, especially when writing in Midwinter. My thoughts about what might be a spiritual experience for young children, their teachers and their families are contained in my commentary inserted into the narrative, this bricolage of The Midwinter Festival.

References


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Abstract

This paper argues for the centrality and necessity of play in religious education for both children and adults as a means to learn and teach the art of using the Christian language system to create existential meaning. Play involves games which, in some form or other require structure and rules. In religious education these rules and structures provide the scaffolding needed for mastering and using the art of the Christian language system. This paper proceeds by describing play and games generally, noting the necessity of guiding rules and structure. It then explores the two fundamental types of games which may be involved in the Church and in religious education. The suggestion of “playful orthodoxy” as a way forward in religious education is then posited. Such a notion recognizes both the playful and discovering nature of the participant as well as the need to teach for closure and orthodoxy. In this way both the opening and closing tendencies of the creative process are honoured and the tradition taught is grounded but creative. The paper concludes by suggesting some ways in which religious education can be centred around play.

A game to be played: play and authority in religious education

If [Tom Sawyer] had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. (Mark Twain, 2002, p. 21; original work published 1876, italics and capitalization in the original).

Play

Tom Sawyer’s efforts to make the laborious task of white-washing Aunt Polly’s fence seem so playful that Ben Rogers and several other boys of the village pay in kind for the privilege of engaging in this activity. Mark Twain’s subsequent philosophical reflection on play, as quoted above, provides a definition which seems very clear and straightforward. Yet those who have observed both children and adults in play would argue that it is difficult, if not impossible to formulate a succinct definition of play, and most modern scholars in the field have resisted the temptation to do so (see for example, Brown, 2009; Chudacoff, 2007; Garvey, 1977; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Some, such as Johnston (1983) maintain that those who have attempted to define the meaning of play have “consistently been guilty of reducing it to something other than play in its fullness” (p. 32). In an attempt to avoid such a reductionist approach, this section briefly explores some pertinent elements of play, and how these might be understood within this paper.

Perhaps one of the most important elements to note about play, and one which is consistent with Twain’s view above, is the lack of compulsion, or obligation, to engage in play. Play is voluntary and spontaneous; it is pleasurable and played for itself. It involves a deep engagement on the part of the players. These descriptions are emphasized by Garvey (1977) and affirmed by other contemporary theorists (for example, Brown, 2009; Chudacoff, 2007). However, such elements provide only one insight into play. Others are needed to present a more robust description of this phenomenon.

In his seminal work *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1955, original work published in 1938) maintained that the various descriptions of play offered by his contemporaries dealt only incidentally with the question of what play actually is “in itself” (p. 5, italics in the original) and what it means for the player. He argued that his contemporaries associated play directly with the quantitative methods of experimental science without first paying attention to the profoundly aesthetic quality of play.
Huizinga proceeded to argue that even in its simplest forms, play involves more than a physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It has a significant function in enabling all who engage in it to transcend the immediate needs of life and impart meaning to the action. Therefore, all play “means something” (p. 1). In essence, he described play in terms of a voluntary activity, absorbing to the player and yet also existing outside of the scope of everyday life. In extending such a notion, other scholars similarly note that the many play patterns in which human beings engage are an integral part of their culture because, they mean something (see for example Ackerman, 2006; Brewster, 1971).

However, a key insight from Huizinga (1955) for religious educators and scholars is the idea that, because play always means something to those who engage in it, there is the possibility of a close relationship between play and religious experience, specifically between play and sacred ritual as a means by which human beings create meaning in relation to the holy. For Huizinga, the concept of play merges quite naturally with the concept of holiness:

In play as we conceive it the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down...archaic ritual is thus sacred play, indispensible for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development but always play in the sense Plato gave it – an action accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life (pp. 25-26).

In more recent times, also drawing upon the work of Huizinga, Ackerman (2006) introduces the notion of “deep play”. Deep play is the ecstatic form of play. Ackerman maintains that in deep play, all the play elements are visible, but they are taken to intense and transcendent heights. Deep play always involves the sacred and the holy in some form. For Ackerman, deep play is central to the life of all people. It “reveals our need to seek a special brand of transcendence” (p. 17). Ackerman maintains that a close examination of religious rites and festivals reveals the many and various play elements which are present. These include dance, worship, music, and symbol. However, in religious ritual, these various play elements attain great depth. As Ackerman says, “they swallow time. They are ecstatic, absorbing, rejuvenating” (p. 17).

This resonates with the thinking of Romano Guardini. In his work The Spirit of the Liturgy, Guardini (1953, original work published in 1937) posits the case for the playfulness of the liturgy. Using the image of the play of the child and the creation of the artist, Guardini maintains that the essence of the liturgy involves not work, but play – “To be at play, or to fashion a work of art in God’s sight – not to create, but to exist – such is the essence of the liturgy” (p. 181). This is the deep play to which Ackerman (2006), and before her, Huizinga (1955) allude. Rahner (1965) also expressed this notion, positing that the Catholic liturgy “is itself very like a single solemn piece of playing or miming” (p. 79) and that “a sacral dance, carried out by both clergy and laity, has been woven around the austere core of the liturgy” (p. 80).

Guardini (1953) further suggests that the many aspects of the liturgy, such as the quality of language, gestures, colours, garments and instruments employed can only really be understood by those who are able to take art and play seriously. Its forms become the rules of the game, or as Guardini says, “the serious rules of the sacred game which the soul plays before God” (pp. 182-183).

The idea that play has rules, then, is crucial for playing. Although play is spontaneous, freely chosen, absorbing and pleasurable, those who play inevitably devise rules and structures to guide their play, even if those rules are changed or are made up as the play progresses. When rules and structures are introduced to the play, the play becomes a game.

Games

It may be problematic to separate play from games, since the two usually occur simultaneously. However, constructive analysis requires that this be done. What makes a game a game? As soon as one begins to play, one inevitably begins to devise some type of structure to guide the play, even if one is playing alone with one’s alter ego, or with God as in contemplation. Huizinga (1955) notes that, “All play has its rules. They determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play” (p. 11). Brewster supports this
view, maintaining through his observations of children that “although the games are spontaneous and unsupervised, there are certain rigid rules, learned from elders or formulated by the children themselves, to which they conscientiously adhere” (p. 16). Similarly, other contemporary writers such as Abt (1970), Garvey (1977), Schaefer (1993), Sutton-Smith (1997), and Ackerman (2006) contend that all types of play behaviour, at some point, are guided by rules and structures.

When play is guided by rules and structures, the play becomes a game. Nonetheless, the fact that the rules and structures of the game are freely accepted by the players is crucial. In his work *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois (1961, original work published in 1958) stresses this particular point. He notes that any game in which one is forced to play would effectually cease to be play. It would become constraint, drudgery from which one would strive to be freed. As an obligation...it would lose one of its basic characteristics: the fact that the player devotes himself spontaneously to the game, of his free will and for his pleasure, each time completely free to choose retreat, silence, meditation, idle solitude, or creative activity (p. 6).

The rules and structures, then, ought not stifle the autonomy of the players. Caillois (1961) further contends that, although the game proceeds within certain agreed boundaries, the players’ action and response to the various twists and turns of the game “is free within the limits set by the rules” (p. 8, italics in the original). The rules of the game, then, do not specify action, but rather limit the alternatives about what action can take place.

In exploring the concept of games, Carse (1986) argues that there are two fundamental types of games which can be played. Firstly, there are finite games. These are the familiar contests of everyday life. They are played in order to be won, and when there is a winner, such games come to an end. Secondly, there are infinite games. These games are more mysterious. According to Carse, the object of such a game is not winning, but rather to ensure the continuation of the play. In infinite games the rules and boundaries may change. Even the participants may change – as long as the game is never allowed to come to an end. For instance, the rules may change when the players of an infinite game agree that the play is imperilled by a finite outcome – that is, by the victory of some players and the defeat of others. The rules of an infinite game “are changed to prevent anyone from winning the game and to bring as many persons as possible into the play” (p. 9).

Infinite games then have quite a different status from finite games. Carse (1986) describes the rules of infinite games to be like “the grammar of a living language, where those of a finite game are like the rules of a debate. In the former case we observe rules as a way of continuing discourse with each other; in the latter we observe rules as a way of bringing the speech of another person to an end” (p. 9). He further maintains that the rules, or grammar, of a living language “are always evolving to guarantee the meaningfulness of discourse, while the rules of debate must remain constant” (pp. 9-10). However, while the rules of an infinite game may be changed by agreement at any point in the course of play, it does not follow that any rule will suffice. Carse argues that the rules are designed, and if necessary changed, in order to deal with specific threats to the continuation of play. “Infinite players use the rules to regulate the ways they will take the boundaries or limits being forced against their play into the game itself” (p. 10), even when death is one of the limits. Put another way, “Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries” (p. 10).

The concept of an infinite game resonates with play and sacred ritual as referred to by Huizinga (1955) and Ackerman (2006), and the playfulness of the liturgy referred to by Guardini (1953) and Rahner (1965). It also resonates with religious education, particularly the Godly Play approach to religious education. While this will be discussed later in this paper, it is important to note briefly here that in Godly Play, the players use religious language to play at the boundaries, at the edges, of being and knowing (Berryman, 1991, p. 149).
Since infinite games are involved with ultimate concerns and playing at the edges of experience, and since they may incorporate the deep play of sacred ritual and liturgy, they could be conceived of as the type of game which the Church (in its broadest and ideal conception) plays.

**Games played in religious education**

Games played in the Church, and subsequently in religious education, are intended as infinite games. In drawing upon the work of Romano Guardini, Lang (1997) classifies six sacred games which are played out in Christian worship: praise, prayer, sermon, sacrifice, sacrament, and spiritual ecstasy. These games are essentially infinite games since they are played at the edges of knowing and being. They incorporate the boundaries or limits into the game itself, enabling the players to play with boundaries. This reflects Hugo Rahner’s (1965) understanding of religion as *theologia ludens*, an interpretation of traditional religion as play. Rahner further posits that religion as play recovers the forgotten virtue of *eutrapelia*, a Greek word which attempts to express a mean between “gravity and playfulness, crying and laughing” (p. 92) in religion. Put another way, it may also be translated as “play for the sake of seriousness” (Rahner, 1965, p. 95).

In reviewing Rahner’s contribution to play-theory, Miller (1973) notes that *theologia ludens* views God as a player, human beings as players, the Church as the community of play, and salvation as play. In other words, *theologia ludens* is “a theology of play, by play, and for play; it must wittingly incarnate its content” (p. 159, italics in the original).

However, during the two thousand years of Christian history, the infinite game often collapses. The boundaries – death, the threat of freedom, aloneness, and the need for meaning (Berryman, 1991, p. 57) – have not been taken into the game. Instead, they have become the limits *within which* people come to play, rather than boundaries *with which* the participants play and incorporate into the game. The game thus becomes a finite game. This has led to the rules and structure of the game becoming fixed and constant so that a sense of absolute orthodoxy prevails. Rather than the “grammar of a living language” (Carse, 1986, p. 9), the rules of this finite game serve to preserve language in a series of propositional or doctrinal statements, thereby bringing the discourse to an end. Game over!

But a sense of orthodoxy is needed and it is right that orthodoxy be insisted upon. As FitzSimons Allison (1994) notes, orthodoxy provides the acceptable limits within which the “profound mysteries of the Trinity” (p. 20) should be approached. That is, orthodoxy provides the creeds and guiding structures for the game. However when the finite game of absolute orthodoxy demands an “assent to the creeds rather than ‘yes’ to the God to whom the creeds point” (p. 20), heresy ensues.

When the Church engages in this finite game, it influences religious education to do the same. When the finite game of orthodoxy prevails the players are no longer free to play at the edges of their knowing and being, but are restricted by a set of rules and structures which require them to learn “the right words,” as agreed to by the leadership of church organizations. The religious education curricula, no matter what its rationale may state, and no matter what pedagogical approach is espoused, becomes limited in such a social system to furnishing participants with the desired language as an end in itself, which teaches idolatry, not communion with God and one’s neighbour.

In his book *Games People Play*, Berne (1967) outlines a number of “life games” which appear to parallel what might happen in religious education when the participants are restricted by rules which require them to learn and adhere to propositional statements. An example of such a game is “Debtor” (pp. 81-84) – a plan for a whole lifetime – in which the players are in-debt to one another for a good deed performed. The players then spend the rest of their lives seeking to pay off the debt. For example, Jesus Christ died for the sins of humankind, therefore humankind performs works of sacrifice, almsgiving and prayer as a means by which to pay off the debt and ensure salvation. The individual then becomes trapped in a finite pattern of behaviour that is destructive rather than life-giving.
The art of being able to use religious language to find life-giving salvation is a crucial goal of religious education. So, the way such language is used must be carefully considered. Is the purpose to enable participants to learn such a language as an end in itself? If so, this becomes a finite game which ends in a series of finite statements, and becomes words about words. Writers such as Miller (1973) warn that this is potentially idolatrous. Or, is the purpose of being able to use such language to enable participants to play at the edges of knowing and being so as to discern meaning from sacred stories, parables, liturgical actions and contemplative silence? If so, then this reflects *theologia ludens* in which the ultimate concern is “not so much the articulation and understanding of the faith of the church...as it is to articulate and understand the articulation and the understanding” (Miller, 1973, p. 159). This reflects a more infinite game which seeks meaning and purpose.

Those who rightly insist upon orthodoxy may then perhaps ask, “How can we be sure that such a game won’t teach the wrong thing?” Abt (1970) would argue that one can’t be sure, any more than one could be sure that a book or a lecture doesn’t teach the wrong thing by implication or accident, as well as by intent. But, taken to its logical extreme, Abt argues, undue concern about teaching the wrong thing “leads to a preference for the very least effective teaching methods, since these offer the least threat of corrupting the young” (p. 115, italics in the original). It is therefore dangerous to dismiss an infinite game solely for fear that it might “teach the wrong thing” because it results in teaching poorly or even destructively. Is this really what teachers want for religious education?

Perhaps the way forward may be to consider religious education as an infinite game in which both playing at the edges of knowing and being (that is, playing with the boundaries), as well as the closure of orthodoxy, are possible and honoured. Although these two elements seem to move in opposite directions, both are actually parts of a larger whole, the creative process (Berryman, 2005).

**A way forward: playful orthodoxy – the opening and closing tendencies of the creative process**

Religious practices and rituals throughout the evolution of the human species have served as ways to cope through tradition and creativity with existential issues and situations of danger as well as celebration (Berryman, 2005). Through the rules and structures of the religious game, rituals conserve ways for enacting fundamental stories. They also provide a safe place in which the creative process can flourish in order to craft personal narratives. This section of the paper discusses creativity and the creative process with a view to grounding religious education, as an infinite game, in the creative process so that both parts of this larger whole – orthodoxy and playing at the edges of knowing and being – are acknowledged and honoured.

*Creativity flow*

American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has researched and written in the area of creativity for more than thirty years. He posited that the experience of *flow* which is related to the concept of deep play, as discussed earlier, makes creativity pleasurable, and thus self-reinforcing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). But further, he argues that human beings are born...

...with two contradictory sets of instructions: a conservative tendency, made up of instincts for self preservation, self-aggrandizement, and saving energy, and an expansive tendency made up of instincts for exploring, for enjoying novelty and risk – the curiosity that leads to creativity belongs to this set (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 11).

Both of these tendencies are necessary for human beings, and both parallel the notions of orthodoxy, the conservative tendency, and playing at the edges of knowing and being, the expansive tendency.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) further develops the notion of creativity by arguing that it occurs “in the interaction between a person’s thought and a sociocultural context” (p. 23) and is made up of three components: the
domain (such as mathematics, or indeed religion); a field (consisting of people who act as gatekeepers to the domain, such as teachers, critics, or administrators, all of whom act so as to decide whether a new idea should be included in the domain); and the individual person who uses the symbols of a given domain to develop a new idea.

Arguing that religion is a domain of creativity, Berryman (1991) describes the creative process as a movement with an opening (expansive tendency) and closing (conserving) phase. In taking his initial impetus from the work of Loder (1979; 1981), Berryman envisages the whole movement consists of five steps, the first consisting of a disruption of one’s circle of meaning, wherein an established idea or meaning is broken in some way, for instance, by being challenged. The second step in the creative process involves the scanning for a new frame of meaning to cope with the disruption, and to restore cohesion. This step could last for hours, days, or even years, and may occur either consciously or unconscious (Berryman, 2005). The third step is insight. A new and more adequate pattern is formed and becomes a new frame of meaning, using the symbols of the given domain to develop the idea. Until this point the process has been largely nonverbal. The fourth step – the point at which closure begins – involves the new insight being articulated, verbalized and evaluated by the rules and structure of the particular domain in which it was discovered until there is closure. The gatekeepers are involved at this point, deciding whether or not the new idea should be included in the domain. Closure is the fifth step.

Berryman (2005) notes that different people tend to enter the creative process at different points. Those with more playful and expansive tendencies will engage thoroughly with the first three stages of the process. Conservative people tend to enter the process after the insight, around step four. According to Berryman, steps four and five are most attractive to the hierarchical structures of religious traditions, whose tendency is to insist upon orthodoxy. It is critical to note, however, that all parts of the creative process are necessary and need to be emphasized when playing the religious language game. The rules and structures, which particularly come into play in steps four and five, provide the scaffolding for the opening and more playful tendencies represented in steps one to three. Herein lies the notion of playful orthodoxy, in which both the opening and closing tendencies are honoured.

Creativity styles

The styles of creativity also provide further clarity to the creative process. Although his work has been the subject of academic critique for its reliance upon cognitive developmental theory, the work of Howard Gardner is drawn upon here for its significant contribution to the concept of creativity and its styles.

Gardner (1983) was among the first to propose the plurality of the intellect, arguing initially the case for the existence of seven “relatively autonomous human intellectual competencies...[or] ‘frames of mind’” (p. 8, italics in the original) which can be fashioned and combined in different ways by individuals to address and solve problems. Some ten years later, Gardner (1993) applied the theory of multiple intelligences to creativity, which gave rise to his notion of styles of creativity. In this work, he identified the different ways in which people create, aligned to his original notion of multiple intelligences. For instance, Igor Stravinsky is Gardner’s exemplar for musical-rhythmic intelligence. T.S Eliot typified the way in which an individual’s creativity might be expressed through a verbal-linguistic frame.

In his later work Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century, Gardner (1999) proposed an additional frame of knowing. It was represented by a person who was especially attracted to patterns in nature. Gardner also discussed the existential, spiritual and moral sensitivities a person might display in relation to any one of the specific frames of knowing.

The relevance of Gardner’s work to this discussion lies in his assertion of the needs for educators to be aware of the multiple ways of knowing, and of the particular ways in which their students demonstrate a preference for learning and expressing their creativity. However, he cautions against simply running students through all the ways of knowing for a particular lesson:
MI theory is in no way an educational prescription...In particular, I am leery of implementations such as...Attempting to teach all concepts of a subject using all of the intelligences. To be sure, most topics can be taught in a variety of ways, but applying a scattershot approach to each topic is a waste of time and effort (Gardner, 1999, pp. 89-90).

An awareness of the different ways of knowing is better used to help understand and resolve communication and learning difficulties as they arise so that children can constructively begin to manage them by becoming aware of their own particular talents.

**Grounding religious education in the creative process centering around play**

As has been established, all games, both finite and infinite, have rules and structures to guide the play. The game of religious education is no different. The rules and structures in this game should provide a safe place in which playing at the edges of knowing and being, and the closure of orthodoxy – both of which are parts of the creative process – are made possible. The question of how best to ground the game of religious education in the creative process remains. How can religious education honour and enable play at the edges of one’s own knowing and being to occur, yet at the same time, teach for the closure of orthodoxy?

While there may be other ways which achieve these aims, one particular approach which has been shown to honour both the opening and closing tendencies in the creative process, and which has been developed and refined over a period spanning more than thirty-five years, is Godly Play⁴. In this particular process, the participants learn the art of religious language as a means by which to discern meaning in relation to existential issues – by playing at the edges of knowing and being. The Christian language system itself, and the prepared environment of the Godly Play classroom, which is infused with this language system, provide the rules and structures which guide the play, which is one of the best ways to learn a language.

Four ways in which Godly Play can be seen to be grounded in the creative process can be identified. Firstly, and in drawing upon Csikszentmihalyi’s language, the gatekeepers recognise children as theologians who are seeking meaning and direction in relation to their existential limits. The recent research of Hart (2003) and Hyde (2008) affirm this dimension of children’s lives. When the gatekeepers respect and are open to the theological enquiry of children, the children reveal their theological interests. In presenting the lesson, and in allowing children to respond through wondering and art, children learn to think for themselves within their tradition so that they can develop their own authentic and creative ways to confront their existential issues.

Secondly, each of the five steps of the creative process is emphasized in playing the religious language game, and children are encouraged to use the whole process when thinking theologically. For instance, a scanning child (step 2) wandering around the open classroom is supported by the gatekeeper to discover an insight. An insight child (step 3) is encouraged to develop a thought or idea. The rules and structures for behaviour, as well as the organization of the room, assist here in helping to ensure orthodoxy, while simultaneously enabling the child to play with an idea. However, since play is voluntary, the child needs to be “invited, guided, and intrigued to take part” (Berryman, 2005, p. 447).

Thirdly, the creativity styles of children are valued and supported as a way of reconnecting the use of religious language to the creative process. The mentors and gatekeepers also need to be aware of their own frames of knowing so as not to project these onto the children as the only means of religious expression. Traditionally, words have been the dominant mode of communication in religious education, often with the aim of being memorized in some way⁴. However, memorization and prescribed interpretation by-pass the child’s creative process as well as the other frames of knowing. Sensitivity to the children’s developing styles and frames of knowing is encouraged.

Fourthly, the use of play, ritual and storytelling help to ground religious education in the creative process. Play, ritual and storytelling are activities in which all humans engage. Play can involve the scanning for new
frames of meaning to cope with the disruption to one’s circle of meaning. Ritual provides shape and structure (the rules) for the play. Storytelling, as an age-old medium for both children and adults, engages children’s religious experience. The combination of all three provides an effective way of honouring the opening and closing tendencies of the creative process.

**Conclusion and an important post script**

As an infinite game, religious education involves not only human players. In playing the religious language game, God as the Holy Trinity – as Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit – is also invited to play. Rahner (1965) captured this idea in proposing God as “Deus vere ludens” (p. 25, italic in the original) – God who plays. While one cannot guarantee that God is present in this infinite game, acknowledging the possibility that God may be present assumes that children may already know and have experienced God in their lives and in their play.

The implication here is that what happens when children participate in the infinite game of religious education takes places between each child and God. The real “teaching” happens by the work of the Holy Spirit, who acts through the teacher. As Saint Augustine writes “if the Holy Spirit is speaking in those who are handed over to the persecutors on Christ’s account, why not also in those who are handing Christ over to the learners?” (Rotelle, 1996, p. 219).

The role of the children’s mentors is not to impart religious truths, but rather to present the lesson and to provide a safe environment, equipped with the necessary rules and structures (orthodoxy), so that the play between each child and God in community is scaffolded, enabling Creator and creature to play at the edges of knowing and being, to co-create together.

**References**


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1 It is interesting to note that although Ackerman uses the phrase “transcendent heights”, she is actually referring to the deep experience of play, that is, going deeper and inwards rather than higher and outwards. She is, in effect, using a mixed metaphor to describe the notion of deep play.

2 Loder (1979; 1981) describes the five steps of the movement as an inherent pattern or logic of the knowing event which intertwines novelty and continuity. The pattern consists of (1) conflict; (2) interlude and scanning; (3) insight felt with intuitive force; (4) release and redirection of the psychic energy bound up with the original conflict; and (5) interpretation.

3 For a comprehensive guide to the Godly Play process, see Berryman (2009). In this work, both the theoretical underpinnings and practicalities of Godly Play are detailed.

4 Memorization, as it is used here, does not necessarily refer to rote learning, but to any form of learning which requires subject matter to be committed to memory, or learned by heart.
NURTURING SPIRITUALITY THROUGH SYMBOL LITERACY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

Spirituality is the characteristic that distinguishes our species, the Homo Sapiens Sapiens, from any other creature. From the very beginning, humans have been able to conceptualise and create symbols for them to be able to construct meaning and give order to their cosmos. By so doing they were able to transcend everyday reality. It is argued that in our post-modern reality, which is marked by an individualistic and fragmented ethic, many have lost the ability to read symbols. This has considerably diminished access to the Spiritual and impoverished the quality of their Spirituality. It is suggested that the inclusion of symbol literacy in Religious Education programmes will not only serve as a means of teaching religious facts but above all it holds the potential of opening the doors of meaning, giving access to the Spiritual.

Fixing poles

During these past two decades there has been a greater interest in the spirituality and in the spiritual dimension of the human person. This increased interest is neither coincidental nor the product of a momentary hype. It is the result of an age-long journey of Western culture. The initially slow process, which picked up momentum in popular culture after the end of the Second World War, has led to the conceptualisation and appreciation of an ethic and culture of authenticity and has instigated the urge for an individual search for personal self-fulfilment and the need to be true to oneself (Taylor, 1989, 1991, 2007). This has led not only to secularisation, in the sense of the disappearance of the sacred from the public sphere, and to the challenging of beliefs but, more radically, it has brought about a situation of plurality of beliefs existing side by side and where alternatives, previously understood as contradictory, subsist. More importantly, as Taylor (2007) argues, we have arrived at a point where we are “now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane” (p. 300).

This surge in interest in spirituality, together with an increased attention to the realities and needs of childhood, has paralleled education’s quest of being holistic in its aims and approach. Thus, it is not surprising that during these past two decades there has been an ongoing discussion about the place and nature of spiritual education within the curriculum (for instance, Carr, 1995; Hand, 2003; Lewis, 2000, Liard, 1995; Meehan 2002; Yob, 1995). Nonetheless, because of the plurality of meaning of the term “Spirituality” and an inability to agree upon its definition, it is proving difficult to reach a consensus on aims, programmes and methods in the education sector.

Surely enough, in this context, Spirituality is understood as a fundamental human dimension which is the underlying force of human existence both at the communal level and at the individual level. Like communication, spirituality is an intrinsic dimension that constitutes the human person. It is experienced and expressed in and through diverse ways. It is thus difficult and counter productive to define spirituality because by its very nature it is ineffable and is found outside prescribed boundaries. Nonetheless, there are a number of characteristics which indicate its presence and nature, chief among which, awareness, connectedness and meaning. However, these elements find concrete expressions in and through personal and community narratives, rituals and beliefs. Similar expositions of this understanding have also been presented and expounded upon by researchers collaborating with Search Institute (Roehlkepartain, 2008; Yust, Johnson, Sasso & Roehlkepartain, 2006).

At the origins of our being

There is no quibbling about the assertion that, by their very nature, humans are transcendental beings. In the most basic sense humans are transcendental in that they go beyond the here and now and try to find and formulate meaning. Humans have devised different ways in order to explore and create meaning.
Some fifty years ago Joseph Campbell (1959) hinted that mythology finds its origins at the very beginning of our species. He posited that their meaning may be searched at three deep levels, that is, at the beginning of civilisation, in the everyday life of humans during the paleontological period and at the deepest level in ‘rites’ found in creatures antecedent to humanity itself.

Science, archaeology and anthropology hold that possibly our species, Homo Sapiens Sapiens, may find its origins in the appearance of the ancestral ape some six million years ago. There is still controversy among academics about whether the other hominoids were able to conceptualise some form of symbol and perceive a transcendental dimension to life. Wunn (2000) and King (2008) both argue that there is not enough evidence to suggest that any of the hominoid prior to the Homo Sapiens Sapiens developed complicated symbol systems and, consequently, they were not capable of experiencing any spiritual awareness. Wunn (2000) argues that the only clear evidence of belief in afterlife is increasingly detectable after the appearance of our species. She tends to agree with Mithen (1996) that social intelligence, technical intelligence, linguistic ability and abstract thinking, all necessary to develop a complex symbol system, evolved slowly in the course of the millennia through the different hominoids. Similarly, basing her arguments on the observation of apes and archaeological findings, King (2008) argues that human religious imagination [and spirituality] are unique to our species, but nonetheless, she believes that they emerge from deep evolutionary roots.

If we read the following three quotations, from the Babylonian, Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions in the light of the assertions made by the above three anthropologists and archaeologist then we might be able to catch a glimpse of one of the most striking and deep realities of our being human.

When in the height heaven was not named,
And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,
And the primeval Apsu, who begat them,
And chaos, Tiamut, the mother of them both
Their waters were mingled together,
And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;
When of the gods none had been called into being,
And none bore a name, and no destinies were ordained...
Enuma Elish

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
Now the earth was formless and empty,
darkness was over the surface of the deep,
and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.
Gn 1, 1-2

Ere earth and sea, and covering heavens, were known
The face of nature, o’er the world, was one;
All men have called it Chaos; formless; rude;
The mass; dead matter’s weight, inert, and crude;
Where, in the mix’d heap of ill-compounded mould,
The jarring seeds of things confusedly roll’ed
Ovid

All three creation narratives refer to a primordial chaos that eventually, through different processes, was superseded by an ordered and meaningful cosmology. It could well be argued that this primordial chaos, common in different mythologies, is the confusion, and probably fear, that existed in the minds of the first humans and, most likely, in that of hominoids.

King (2008) believes that our earliest ancestors, the hominoids, experienced empathy, created meaning with their
social partners and were conscious creatures just as today’s African apes. Nonetheless, King also believes that to assert that any creature other than Homo Sapiens Sapiens had a spirituality is out of place since no concrete clue has been found to suggest otherwise. A clue, however, of an ancient consciousness and a well developed ability for empathy and meaning making comes from a cave in South Africa. Paleonthologists have discovered a piece of jasperite, now known as the Makapansgat cobble, which resembles a human face. This natural object, whose face-like resemblance is coincidental, seems to have been carried around by the australopithecines some 2.9 million years ago.

For King, it is of no surprise that these ancient ancestors attached some importance to this nature-made icon because even modern apes are able to recognise themselves. However, she doubts whether it had some form of symbolic meaning since these creatures still had an underdeveloped brain. On the other hand, she does not exclude that it is possible these australopithecines did attach some meaning to it. These early traces of meaning-making are at the basis of the revolution that was to follow. The real revolution of the Homo Sapiens Sapiens species lies precisely in its ability to transcend everyday life and express a spiritual dimension.

Among the first signs of a spiritual life and beliefs are those that come from Jebel Qafzeh cave and Skhul in Israel, where deliberate burials with clear evidence of ritual were performed some 100,000 years ago at the dawn of human appearance on earth (Lieberman, 1991). Clearer signs appeared some 60,000 to 70,000 years later with the emergence of a cave painting culture and the making of statuettes such as the Venus of Willendorf and the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel. Burials together with these artefacts are all indicative of the human capacity of conceptualising and using symbols (Mithen, 1996).

It could be well conjured that, with the advent of symbols, human beings have been able to transcend, give order and meaning to their every day life. We do not have exact verbal and/or written accounts of the rituals and beliefs of the pre-historical humans. On the other hand, we can make a number of deductions on the basis of the few testimonies that have resisted the test of time. Why would humans living during the ice-age, and therefore in conditions of severe stress, paint their caves? Most probably, not for aesthetical reasons. The art produced in these upper Palaeolithic caves is a clear indication that these humans possessed impressive knowledge of animal anatomy and an ability to create symbols with metaphorical meaning (Mithen, 1996). The ability to paint demonstrates the ability of these humans to communicate, most probably, through language. Likewise, the ordering of the paintings and the artefacts found in these caves suggest the existence of rituals. Thus, it could be conjured that the development of abstract symbols expressed through art, language and a proto-religion indicate a deeper revolutionary reality, that is, a Spiritual dimension. It is precisely through these “tools” that humans have been able to perceive good and evil in nature, and to conceptualise the idea of the sacred and the occult, spirits, afterlife and gods (Rappaport, 1999). It is possible to argue that by exploring, developing and expressing their spiritual dimension humans have been able to overcome primordial chaos experienced by ancestral humanoids and, perhaps, by the first Homo Sapiens Sapiens.

Spirituality and the spiritual experience are tied to the ineffable. However, humans, who are by nature social beings in need of communicating, expressed their spirituality precisely by conceptualising and concretising symbols through art, language and proto-religion. These concrete media have facilitated humans’ ability to prevail over chaos by giving meaning and, consequently, giving order to the cosmos in which they lived. A further support for this interpretation comes from the various rituals aimed to ascertain order and the maintenance of meaning, such the Egyptian protection rituals against the chaos demon Apep, or the daily human sacrifices in Mesoamerica that were meant to assure that the sun will rise again in the morning. However, most striking was the twelve-day Atiku Festival of ancient Babylon ritual which re-enacted the mythical narrative of the Enuma Elish when Marduk won over Tiamat. The festival started with a number of rites that symbolised chaos, such as having slaves with temporary authority over their masters, and continued with purification rituals and sacrifices aimed at re-establishing order brought about by Marduk (Bell, 1997).

**Religion: language of the spiritual**

The evidence coming from the first human settlements highlight the importance of community and meaning-making. Just like Communication, Spirituality needs a language in order to be expressed. Throughout the ages, humans have developed different symbols, many of which are tied to particular cultural contexts and/or belief
systems. Religions may, to a certain degree, be equated to languages. Just as English or sign language are media for the human fundamental disposition to communicate, so too religions have for millennia served as means of expressing and experiencing spirituality. Although religions are not the only way of accessing spirituality, they have unquestionably held a privileged means of access. Through the ages, religions have developed and influenced each other. They testify to humans’ innate search for the ultimate in everyday life and, in many cases, beyond it.

One of the most basic experiences and awareness of the human person is the encounter with one’s limited nature, experienced among other, through the need for sleep, the feeling of inadequacy and ultimately the awareness of the reality of finitude and death. A second form of awareness of limitedness comes from our sensing that no experience on earth is totally full. Thus, we are aware that there is no such thing as an all encompassing justice, or that we can in no way have a totalising experience of beauty. Human justice may make its conclusions but we are aware that situations are so complex that no full justice can be attained in this reality. Similarly, I may see a beautiful painting, I might feel ecstatic about it and may even decide to buy it but I will never be able to fully become one with that beauty; it will always remain, up to a certain extent, alien to me.

It is through the construction of narratives, beliefs, symbols and rituals, all pregnant of meaning and witness to the importance of present-day and intergenerational community that religions attempt to order and give meaning to life and the universe. In this sense, religion provides

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1966, p. 4)

The challenge of contemporary society

Progressive and radical changes experienced mainly by Western society have brought about the displacement of institutional religion. Individualism, together with the consequential pluralism of meanings and beliefs, is depriving symbols of their function both at a personal level but also at a community level. Symbols are not only an immediate source of meaning making or a means of attaining access to the spiritual reality but they also change the reality and the frameworks in which we live. The world in which we live is not only constituted by material realities, but most importantly it is filled with the concepts and symbols that we have created throughout the millennia (Rappaport, 1999). Religions have been the vehicles for understanding and conceptualising the Ultimate, spirits that influence our lives and/or virtues through which we aspire to live the good life. Religions can be equated to an intergenerational encyclopaedia where the memory and meaning of millennia become concrete in narratives, rituals, symbols and beliefs. Without denying the specificity of each religious tradition, and thus risking accepting a relativistic understanding of religion, one must also admit that due to the commonality of human fundamental experiences, religions share common themes, concerns and symbols. Thus for instance, thinking about immortality with the connected symbols of spirals and the tree of life may be found in different contexts and religions. It would be, however, inappropriate to attach the same meaning to the same symbols. While drawing upon the same concern and source, each tradition develops its own theology and mode of interpretation. This requires a community where the wisdom of the past and shared meaning may be drawn and re-read.

The displacement of religion is gradually eroding memory. We have come to a point where on seeing the Virgin of Botticelli, students ask “who’s that chick?”(Debray, 2002) or worst still, where a fiction book based on pseudo-history, such as Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code, creates confusion in the minds of many. Because of the rupture in the memory of societies (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) and the consequent loss of basic symbol literacy, we are losing intergenerational wisdom that we received from time immemorial through religions. The consequence of this loss is the impoverishment of our spiritual legacy and experience. A clear sign of this impoverishment lies in the increased popularity of conspiracy theories tied with pseudo-esoteric traditions, such as those tied with the Knights Templar.
Although we are experiencing a loss of collective memory, symbols still abound. Globalisation and post-modernity brought about the widespread availability of different symbol systems. They come to us not only through monuments and the arts but especially through advertisements and the entertainment industry. Robbie Williams’ Sin Sin Sin music video is a clear example of this. Lyrics and images include symbols from different religious traditions, namely Christianity, Far Eastern Spiritualities, and New Age. Similarly, in many western societies, it has become fashionable to include furnishings coming from other cultures. It is not unusual to find a statuette of a smiling Buddha, and/or Shiva together with Chinese wind chimes and an African mask in the same home. But, for many, such objects are placed in their home simply because its fashionable, and not because of their meanings. Although symbols are everywhere, most of them remain silent to the majority of their audience. Besides people’s inability to read and understand symbols, many of the symbols are being presented to us together and out of context, creating a cacophony.

Symbol literacy in religious education

This situation is creating a void, opening up the vortex of chaos. It calls for an urgent education of symbols, not so much the teaching of Religious Facts, as Debray (2002) had argued for, as for the potential opening of the doors of meaning, giving access to the Spiritual.

An example as to the why and how is perhaps needed here. As a post-modern age, I too am guilty of having in my house a number of artefacts that do not strictly belong to my culture. To mention a few, a Mezuzah with a Shema scroll is fixed at the doorpost of my house, an African Unity Carving together with an Icon of Christ the Tree of Life and an Icon of St Michael the Archangel are in our sitting room, and a number of Chinese Wind Chimes hang at almost every window. With the exception of wind chimes, all the other symbols communicate meaning to me and generally they allow me to experience the Spiritual dimension. After a day’s work, touching the mezuzah with a Shema scroll from the Jewish tradition reminds me that no matter how fragmented I may perceive reality, God is One and so is the reality that S/He created. It gives me peace, tranquillity and security. Similarly, whenever I find some time to relax, the Orthodox Icons speak to me and call me to prayer and meditation. The Icon of the Tree of Life reminds me that my source of energy and all the fruit I bear are only possible if I remain in Christ (Jn 15, 1-17). It also calls me to meditate on my ministry and the Church. Likewise, the Icon of St. Michael comforts me, reminding me that God is by my side fighting against evil and injustice and that S/He will ultimately crush the serpent’s head (Gen 3, 15). The African Unity carving reminds me that humanity is one. We are all interconnected and so it spurs me on to work against fragmentation and injustices suffered by my brothers and sisters.

So, through these symbols I access meaning, am called upon and urged to live and be committed to my community and I am made aware of myself, others and the Ultimate.

It is not, however, by chance that Chinese Wind Chimes do not connect with me and therefore only rarely and in an accidental manner that they open access to the Spiritual. They do not form part of the worldview that I inherited and constructed through my interactions.

Symbols have the potential to open the realms of the Spiritual, (i) through my cognitive knowledge of the meaning of the symbols and the theology they represent, (ii) through the affective, by connecting me with my deepest emotions, attitudes and values and (iii) through connation, by motivating and calling me to act according to the insights, awareness and meaning that they, through the communities that constructed them, communicate.

Religious Education is duty-bound not only to contribute to knowledge about other religions, or just to facilitate social conviviality through such knowledge. It is mainly called to serve the very same purpose at the heart of education, that is, to help students connect with their very human nature and become human. When teaching symbol literacy, the results may not be immediate. Given that Spirituality touches different processes and modes of knowledge, it is quite probable that results will become evident in the long run. The individual needs to, little by little, construct meaning and build his/her own cosmos of meaning and order, in order to find inner peace and ability to transcend. It is more like finding and collecting the pieces of a large jigsaw puzzle. The image of the puzzle will reveal itself at the right moment for the individual. There is no sense in trying to force the Spiritual. Any method should be understood as a means of facilitating spiritual nurture.
However, given the importance of the area, it is essential that symbol literacy is not a sporadic activity left at the discretion of the teacher. It is important that curriculum and textbook designers are conscious about the importance of symbol literacy as a means of facilitating spirituality and that they strategically provide means of understanding and connecting with symbols. The ultimate aim of these exercises should be that of weaving a wider picture that goes beyond the here and now.

A possible way forward could be the inclusion of symbol literacy as one of the Curriculum Strands for Religious Education. Students need to be exposed, made conscious and empowered to read and make sense of symbols. There are various techniques that may be adopted, from the simple inclusion of symbol literacy through art in the textbooks and/or in lessons (see for instance Carroll & Jaaniste, 2008; Mazzarelo & Tricarico, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005), to participation in workshops (see for instance, Senn, 2002), and/or experiences in sacred places. Up till now, I have not encountered any work that specifically includes symbol literacy in the curriculum. The work by Mazzarelo and Tricarico are, however, particularly interesting given that it proposes four didactic aids for Religious Educators teaching in primary schools and in the first years of secondary education. The four teaching aids help teachers to explain and interpret the Christian message through art and architecture that is mainly found in Churches. The authors draw from the wealthy collection of Italian art. They present biblical narratives and/or religious content through the art of Giotto, Duccio and, Beato Angelico, among others. Tricarico (2002) suggests a very simple but efficacious method that includes:

i. pre-iconographic description: observe the work of art and list the objects that are being depicted without making reference to the symbol it alludes,
ii. iconographic analysis: with the aid of literary or oral sources try to identify the subject depicted. Student have to be empowered with cultural tools in order to be able to read works of art
iii. iconographic interpretation: read the symbols by being aware of the cultural and historical context in which the work of art was produced and grasp the symbolic message that the artist and his/her community wanted to communicate (Tricarico, 2002).

The work, however, remains a suggested content and method and has not as yet been integrated in any Italian Religious Education syllabus. On the other hand, there are plans to include symbol literacy in the Maltese Religious Education syllabus. In Malta, Catholic Religious Education forms part of the core curriculum and only 2% of the parents choose not to have their children follow religious education lessons (Malta. House of Representatives, 2009). The Maltese Catholic Bishops, who by law are responsible for approving the syllabus, have endorsed a new General Learning Outcome Framework which includes symbol literacy. According to the Framework students will be gradually educated in and through symbols. Thus through the 11 years of compulsory education it is hoped that students will be able to

- identify the main Christian feasts in the liturgical year (4-6 yrs old),
- read and interpret common sacred art themes found in homes, streets and Churches (6-8 yrs old),
- recognise the basic symbols of the three monotheistic religions (8-12 yrs old),
- recognise and interpret symbols of major religious traditions found in places of worship, public places or private households and in the media (13-16 yrs old),
- identify, explain, and differentiate the main symbols, of different worldviews (15-16 yrs old)

Although these learning outcomes address mainly the cognitive dimension, they are written in such a way as to complement the learning outcomes identified for the Spiritual Dimension Curriculum Strand. Furthermore, the Learning Outcomes progressively educate the child by moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, including symbols developed by other faith traditions. This should help reduce relativism, minimalism and attitudes of non acceptance of other forms of life stances that are not Catholic.

**Conclusion**
While we might not return to the primordial chaos, by emphasising a utilitarian type of education and by forgetting the meaning of symbols as expressed in the arts, including visual arts, sacred narratives and literature, we may be limiting our individual and communitarian ability of meaning making and of ordering our cosmos. This may well mean a return to a state of individual and societal chaos.

Taylor (1991) understands that as a society we have come to a point of no return. After arriving at the Ideal and the Ethic of authenticity, it is useless and self-deceptive to think that society will disengage itself from an individualistic, and therefore, fragmented mentality. However, by drawing upon the wisdom of the past we would be contributing to a process of retrieval and engaging in a “battle of hearts and minds” (Taylor, 1991, 68-69).

References


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**Margaret Myrtle Power**

**NARRATIVE FICTION AND THE ETHICAL IMAGINATION OF CHILDREN: A PRELIMINARY STUDY**

**Abstract**

Recent times have seen a resurgence in the study of narrative. This article focuses on the role of narrative fiction in shaping the ethical imagination of children, and in fostering the holistic development of the child. It introduces Phase One of an action research study that is currently being designed by the author on the use and role of children’s narrative fiction in several educational contexts in Canada. The article provides a contextual framework for the study by way of introduction, and sets out its basic parameters and salient themes. The proposed research is inspired by a practical hermeneutical approach that shapes much of the religious education curriculum in Catholic schools in Canada. This hermeneutical approach upholds the imagination as an invaluable ingredient in religious education and teaching.

**A contextual framework: metaphorical dimensions of narrative**

Some years ago, when asked about the interrelation between content and form in her fiction, Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence shared these words:

“I am concerned mainly, I think, with finding a form which will enable a novel to reveal itself, a form through which the characters can breathe. When I try to think of form by itself, I have to put it into visual terms – I see it not like a house or a cathedral or any enclosing edifice, but rather as a forest, through which one can see outward, in which the shapes of trees do not prevent air and sun, and in which the trees themselves are growing structures, something alive.” (Kuester, 1994, p. 20)

This metaphorical dimension of narrative fiction as a ‘living space,’ and its ability to nurture the lives and imagination of children, is of chief consideration in this study. The research examines the role of narrative fiction in nurturing the spirituality of the young. It suggests an intimate link between the relational power of narrative (Moore, 1998, pp. 131–132) and the “relational consciousness” of children (Hay & Nye, 1998, pp. 141–144). It explores how the space of narrative fiction can bring children to a place of wholeness, to a place where they can “stand up and embrace their dreams” (Harris, 2007, p. 272).

For philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1991), the space of narrative is a space for new possibilities, for self-understanding – an ethical space. In his hermeneutics of text, Ricoeur explains how literary texts generate meaning and open up the space for self-understanding:

Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be. Everyday reality is thereby metamorphosed by what could be called the imaginative variations that literature carries out on the real. (p. 86)

According to Ricoeur (1991), “there is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols, and texts” (p. 15). In describing the world of the text, he writes: “For what must be interpreted in a text is a proposed world that I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my own most possibilities” (p. 86).

Ricoeur’s (1983) theory of the inherent ability of narrative fiction to “remake” reality in a way that leads to human action provides a hinge for this study. In his words:

Fiction has the power to “remake” reality and, within the framework of narrative fiction in particular, to remake real praxis to the extent that the text intentionally aims at a horizon of new reality which we may call a world. It is this world of the text which intervenes in the world of action in
order to give it a new configuration or, as we might say, in order to transfigure it. (p. 185)

Mitchell (1991) emphasizes the metaphorical space of narrative by recalling an account shared by psychiatrist Robert Coles about a fifteen-year-old boy named Phil with whom Coles worked (p. 34). Phil had polio. While in hospital, he read *Huckleberry Finn* (by Mark Twain) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (by J. D. Salinger). Neither novel “was about Phil or about polio, nor did either novel make a direct point about some hope or possibility for Phil.” Instead, Phil discovered in these novels “new ways of looking at himself, . . . new discoveries of his own, about himself and life” (p. 34).

Coles (1989) reflects on his conversation with Phil, after Phil’s encounter with the world of Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, the character Holden Caulfield in the novel and Pencey Prep School:

. . . he began a lively monologue on that novel, on Holden, on Pencey Prep, on “phonies,” on what it means to be honest and decent in a world full of “phoniness.” Holden’s voice (Salinger’s) had become Phil’s; and uncannily, Holden’s dreams of escape, of rescue (to save not only himself but others), became Phil’s. The novel had, as he put it, “got” to him: lent itself to his purposes as one who was “flat out”: and as one who was wondering what in life he might “try to catch.” He lived on a city street rather than near a field of rye. He was not as utopian, anyway, as Holden. But this youth had been removed by dint of circumstances from the “regular road” (his expression) and he was trying hard to imagine where to go, how to get there. (p. 38)

Coles (1989) recounts how Phil was taken with the novels: “He didn’t like being paralysed; but he did like an emerging angle of vision in himself, and he was eager to tell me about it, to explain its paradoxical relationship to his misfortune” (p. 39).

Phil’s words reveal what was stirring inside of him, and how the characters of Huck and Holden were bringing him to reflection:

I’d like to leave this hospital, and find a friend or two, and a place where we could be happy, but I don’t want to leave the whole world I know. (p. 38)

I’ve seen a lot, lying here. I think I know more about people, including me, myself – all because I got sick and can’t walk. It’s hard to figure out, how polio can be a good thing. It’s not, but I like those books, and I keep reading them, parts of them, over and over. (Coles, p. 39)

In underscoring the kind of world opened up by the depth semantics of the text, Ricoeur (1991) states that “. . . what we want to understand is not something hidden behind the text, but something disclosed in front of it.” Understanding has to do with grasping “the proposed worlds opened up by the references of the text” (p. 165).

For Ricoeur (1983), there is a point to reading or hearing a narrative that reaches out beyond the narrative itself, a point that marks “the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader” (p. 71). The notion of narrative form as occasion for revelation is reflected in Ricoeur’s (1983) observation:

Narrative fiction “imitates” human action, not only in that, before referring to the text, it refers to our own pre-understanding of the meaningful structures of action and of its temporal dimensions, but also in that it contributes, beyond the text, to reshaping these structures and dimensions in accordance with the imaginary configuration of the plot (p. 185).

Similarly, Stone (1995) states that a sensitive use of narrative can help us discover that “illusive presence on the edges of our experience . . . that can move us beyond ourselves in order to take a good look at ourselves” (p. 281).

The need for this metaphorical awareness among practitioners inspires this research, and in particular, among practitioners who have responsibility in establishing religious education curriculum orientations for the young. The focus of the inquiry is the use and role of children’s narrative fiction in fostering the ethical
imagination of children. The participants comprise adults who engage with children in family, school, and community settings. Details of the study are offered next.

**Basic parameters of the study**

**Action research**

The characteristics of the current study reflect the insights of several authors. Reason and Bradbury (2001) describe action research as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. . .” (pp. 1-2). Trist (1985) stresses that action research participants act as project designers and co-researchers (p. 167). Coghlan and Jacobs (2005) promote reflective conversation among action research participants (pp. 243-262). Lewin (1946) proposes a process of steps in action research, beginning with a pre-step, before moving on to planning, action, and fact-finding. He proposes a circle or spiral approach where the findings of one round of research leads to new insights and direction for the next round or spiral within the same study (pp. 34-46). The overall plan of action for the current study, including method and procedure, is being designed in collaboration with the adult participants who will be part of the research. In this way, the study is grounded in a participatory process of co-designers engaged in research planning from the start of the project.

**The who of the study: children ages 5 and 6**

In his analysis of a practical hermeneutical theology based on the insights of Paul Ricoeur, van den Hengel (1996) states: “In the conceptual framework of action, the primary question addressed to action is not the ‘what’ or the ‘why’ but the ‘who.’ . . . The self is at core a relational self, a self of response. . .” (p. 19).

The subjects of this action research are five and six-year-old children. As an example, the five-year-old is caught up in the discovery of self. “Me” is the pivot of the child’s life. The early childhood text *In God’s Image*, that is presently part of the religious education curriculum in English-speaking Catholic Schools in Canada, offers this description of the five-year-old: “At one moment, Me is something I am; at another moment, Me is something I have that is part of me or is linked to me; at still another moment, Me is something I belong to, because I am around things and people” (CCCB, 1993, p. 10). This is the child’s spiritual way of being in the world.

The spiritual dimensions of the young child that lie at the heart of this research are conveyed in the theological and educational orientations of the *In God’s Image* text as it seeks to celebrate the wonder of childhood as a trace of God and affirm the child in all dimensions of growth (p. 10). Reflecting the activities, growth, and very being of the young child, the metaphor “a trace of God” (p.9) is foundational to the vision of the text:

“Trace of God” aptly describes the god-like quality of [young children], who are in the process of creating a space for themselves in the world. The energetic play of the child, the original drawings and forms, the endless curiosity and zest for exploration, the exuberant sense of wonderment – all these are traces of God. They are intimations or hints of God, a God who leaves a mark. (CCCB, 1993, p. 9)

How does narrative fiction participate in moments when the child is inventing and discovering self? How does the space of narrative fiction make room for the ‘Me’ of the child: I Am, I Have, I Belong? How does it nurture the child’s ability to play, to be creative, to imagine, to wonder? How does the space of narrative fiction sustain the personal narratives (Erricker et al., 1997) of children? These considerations are integral to this inquiry, and are supported by the research of Adams, Hyde, and Woolley (2008) who encourage adults “to become more aware of the ‘geography’ of children’s spirituality [and] to engage more fully with children’s worlds – how children experience their inner worlds, and how the inner and outer worlds interact to shape the spiritual dimension of their lives” (p. 9). To nourish spirituality is to allow children to question, “without feeling the need to provide stock answers.” It is to allow natural fascination, and to know that children have a natural sensitivity that allows them to hear their inner wisdom, sometimes beyond the insights held by adults (p. 46). In the words of Hoffman and Lamme (1989):
“Children are the architects of private environments . . . they will search for their spot and know when it has been found . . .

Here in this place, the child is self, full of wonder and joy” (p. 47).

**Salient themes of the study**

In the earliest phase of this research, two themes were identified and formulated to anchor the inquiry. The themes are as follows:

- Narrative fiction generates meaning and opens up a space for self-understanding – an ethical space – in five-year-olds and six-year-olds
- Narrative fiction cultivates the ‘Me’ of the child: I Am, I Have, I Belong.

To probe the findings of this investigation and examine the spontaneous responses and conversations of the children, several key questions were devised to serve as a guide for the researcher:

1. Does narrative fiction offer an occasion of revelation for the child?
2. Does the space of narrative fiction foster the ethical imagination of children?
3. What happens when the child encounters the space of narrative?
4. Does narrative fiction invest in the spiritual lives of children?
5. Does narrative fiction employ a reverence of approach to the child as implicit author?

**Method and procedure**

The first cycle of the proposed study will involve twenty narrative sessions. These sessions will occur in four different settings. Each setting will involve an adult participant with a group of children or an adult participant and a child. The four settings include:

- Home (parent and child)
- Primary School classroom (teacher with a group of children)
- Pre-school classroom (teacher with a group of children)
- Roman Catholic Parish gathering place (catechist with a group of children)

The common feature of the group will be the ages of the children. Ten sessions will be conducted with five-year-olds and ten with six-year-olds.

Each session will involve a story being read to the children by an adult participant. The child’s engagement before, during, and after the story will be observed by the adult for the purposes of the research. Following the session, the adult will document a summary of the responses and conversations of the children. The researcher will interview the adult participants, focusing on the documented reports of the children’s conversation and responses in the session.

An analysis of the responses of the children will form the basis of this study. The insights gathered will offer direction for the second round of narrative sessions in the research.

In initial conversations around this research, it is significant to note that almost all adult participants relied on the vehicle of story in describing how narrative fiction functions in their daily encounters with children. Two samples of these encounters follow:

A teacher participant shared a recent story of what happened when she read the text *Small Beauties* (Woodruff, 2006) to her class of children. This story is situated during the time of the Irish Immigration. Darcy Heart O’Hara is the only daughter in a large Irish family, herself a treasure. Darcy sees beauty in the small objects she collects and stores in the hem of her skirt. It is these small beauties that keep this family...
connected to the old homeland as they forge their new home in America. As the teacher read how Darcy Heart O’Hara brought to life the memories that her family held so dear, a child in the class raised her hand. “I’m just like Darcy,” she said. “I notice everything.”

A second teacher also shared a recent story of what happened when she read the text *The Dot* (Reynolds, 2003) to a group of young students in a country setting. The story is about how each of us has the ability to make our mark in the world, and that sometimes it only takes the recognition and affirmation of someone else to help us realize it. The teacher watched one young boy who had just made a birdfeeder that he was going to hang on a tree. She noticed the young boy’s response when a few boys who lived in the town came over to gaze at his feeder and to tell him what a good job he had done. “Between the story and the affirmation, something happened,” the teacher said.

All such stories (and encounters) shared by adult participants will form an integral part of the content data for this study.

The themes and questions of the study are currently being used to shape the criteria and details for the method and procedure of the study: choices of children’s literature, what to look for in the spontaneous responses and conversations of the children in the narrative sessions, and a guide to ensure a sensitivity of approach to the before, during and after process of story time.

**Inspiration for the study: hermeneutics and a way forward**

Since the mid 1980s, hermeneutics has been applied to guide the religious education curriculum processes used in Catholic schools in Canada (Power, 2006; 2010). Hermeneutics is a way of understanding and interpreting human existence and, in the proposed hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, is framed in a threefold process of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration (van den Hengel, 2003). This process has been applied in the Canadian religious education curriculum and is based on the terminology used by Ricoeur in earlier works on hermeneutics (between 1969 and 1983). In the series, the process falls under the notion of participation (the always-already-there of human existence: humans are not an absolute point of departure), distanciation or explanation (our participation in existence can be researched and hence better understood) and, finally, appropriation (the constant process of making one’s own our participation in human existence (Power & van den Hengel, 2010). What students have appropriated touches on growth and makes a difference on three levels:

The **cognitive** indicates the additional knowledge to be gained by the student . . .

The **practical** looks to the new abilities the student acquires through the activities of the [curriculum].

The **aesthetic** dimension touches the deepest level of growth for the student. It goes beyond knowing and beyond abilities to the level of being. The aesthetic touches the change or transformation that the student undergoes in his or her person . . . The aesthetic operates at the level of feeling and attitudes . . . (CCCB, 1999, 23)

In summary, what is appropriated makes a difference at the levels of understanding, living and witnessing. The emphasis on the human self as agent is key. Understanding is much more than a cognitive penetration into a status quo. It is a capacity to be in situations where one is liberated to initiate things, to be creative, to insert oneself actively. It is holistic and innately spiritual. It is a way of being in the world. In this sense, Ricoeur says that all understanding is self-understanding (Power & van den Hengel, 2010). This aesthetic dimension is inherently about education into freedom as a way forward, and is a chief inspirational springboard for the proposed study.

Dewey (1934) underlined “the need not only to capture the cognitive, social, and affective dimensions of
educational encounters, but to find frameworks and strategies for representing the aesthetics of teaching and learning” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 6). The proposed study investigates the space of narrative fiction as an aesthetic framework for the growth and development of young children.

Accordingly, Streib (1998) proposes that religious education should follow a hermeneutics of fiction, what he describes as “education in perception, in seeing, and in hearing, a school of fictionality and imaginative variation, and a school of responsiveness, remembering, and solidarity” (p. 314). Streib writes:

“Fictionality means to realize the “difference,” to realize that “it-could-be-otherwise” in order to play imaginatively with new worlds. Responsiveness means not only to be aware of the otherness of the other, but, as we can say with Ricoeur, learning to see oneself as another (p. 314).

Adams, Hyde, and Woolley (2008) suggest that “the task of nourishing spirituality is one of releasing, not constricting, children’s understanding and imagination” (p. 46). These authors challenge the “brisk structures that define so much of our work with children” because such structures limit and undermine opportunities for children “to find their voice, explore creative ideas or dream dreams” (p. 44). Through an analysis of the narrative sessions of this study, the researcher sets out to discern further insights into the spirituality of children and the influence that narrative fiction may have in cultivating the ethical imagination of the young. A significant aspect of the study lies in its potential to contribute to contemporary scholarly discourse about imagination as an invaluable ingredient in education, religious education and teaching. For example, Kathleen Fischer (1983) claims that the imagination “not only shows us a possible future; it evokes the energies needed to participate in the coming of that future” (p. 24).

The study is in line with the insights of Eade (2003) who argues that “an over-full curriculum, with an insistent emphasis on pace and knowledge-acquisition, tends to deny opportunities for space and reflection” (p. 161). Eade proposes that opportunities in the search for meaning and identity are “at the core of spiritual experience” (p. 161). Likewise, de Souza (2008) reminds us that education is about transformation, and that a way forward for religious educators is “to develop a religious education curriculum that addresses the intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions of their students’ lives.” It is about attending to “the educational needs of the ‘whole’ child” (p. 1).

Finally, it is hoped that the findings of this study will further reveal the revelatory potential of narrative, and especially narrative fiction, as it bears upon the ethical imagination of the young, and, contributes to the shaping of a well-balanced early childhood education curriculum. After all, Palmer (1997) reminds us that what will transform education is not another theory or another book or another formula, but rather “a transformed way of being in the world” (p. 1).

References


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2 In this study, the ‘Me’ of the child is structured around and includes the following aspects: I Am (incorporates my name, body, feelings, senses, capabilities), I Have (incorporates my likes and dislikes, needs and wants), and I Belong (incorporates my being welcomed and welcoming, family, friends), (CCCB, 1993, p. 11).

3 Presentation entitled “Hermeneutical Approach” was delivered during the Summer Institute of Religious Education (2003) at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada.
JOSEPH WHO HONORS THE SABBATH: 
THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SPIRITUAL GAZE, A CASE STUDY

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze how children construct the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath. More specifically, it attempts to discover how children interpret a Jewish folk story that focuses on the way a Jewish person honors the Sabbath. The story enabled the girls to understand the meaning of honor in its intrinsic meaning, as a mediator to create their own spiritual dignity. To honor the Sabbath means to construct a purified spiritual presence through specific objects. To honor the Sabbath means to develop a spiritual eye, to be sensitive to the spiritual facets of reality. The analysis shows how the Sabbath can bring young girls to new spiritual landscapes and transform the beauty of the objective material into a subjective spiritual presence.

Every Sabbath, after I light the candles, I get a spiritual feeling that the Sabbath is a special gift that God gave especially to me. Only God could invent such an outstanding creation called the Sabbath. As a workaholic, being obliged by religious law not to touch my computer, not to answer the phone, not to write e-mails or faxes and only to rest, gives me a lot of time for real spiritual contemplation. I always try to prepare a special meal for the Sabbath and before it begin I set the table for Sabbath dinner with the nicest dishes and the most beautiful flowers my husband could find in the market, I put on my best clothes, and do my best to receive the Sabbath with tranquility. My children used to say that my face changed after I lit the candles, which filled our house with a very special atmosphere. Surprisingly, in spite of the temptation, I don’t touch books, notebooks, exams, or anything that has any connection to my academic world, which is so precious to me. I often wonder how, through a long socialization process, the spiritual dimension was instilled and constructed to enable me to withstand temptation and to deepen my appreciation of God’s invention. Every week I feel that more than I try to honor the Sabbath, the Sabbath honors me.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how children construct the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath. More specifically, I would like to discover how children interpret a Jewish folk story that focuses on the way a Jewish person honors the Sabbath. I will analyze children’s interpretations of the well-known story “Joseph who honors the Sabbath” [Yosef mokir Shabbat], which is also a well-known English fairy tale entitled “The Ring and the Fish.”

What is the Sabbath?

Jews consider the Sabbath as the most important day in the week, and observing the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. According to Jewish tradition, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. The Sabbath begins twenty minutes before sundown on Friday and ends on Saturday evening after three stars appear in the sky. The exact time, therefore, differs from week to week and from place to place. The Sabbath begins with lighting the Sabbath candles, and ends with a ceremony called Havdallah (separating). The Havdallah ceremony takes us from the Sabbath to the coming week. With a full glass of wine in hand, fragrant spices in a silver container and a tall twisted candle, the Jews say the following prayer:

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, king of the Universe
Who has made a distinction
Between the holy and the mundane
Between the light and the dark
Between Israel and the other peoples of the world
Between the Sabbath and the six days of the week.
Praise be Thou, O Lord,
Who has set a distinction
Between the holy and the mundane.

The Sabbath is a holy day. It is not merely a day off, but rather a unique mechanism that God created to enable human beings to have a real spiritual rest. In Israel, official institutions and shops are closed. It is the official day of rest and people don’t go to work. Secular and religious people denote the Sabbath differently, but this research will focus on the way orthodox Jews celebrate it.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1951) perceived the Sabbath as the epitome of freedom. Though there are many commandments connected to the Sabbath and 39 tasks are forbidden (like cooking or turning on lights), he believed that only those who understand the special structure of the rules of the Sabbath can understand what it means to rest spiritually. In his book *The Sabbath*, Heschel writes:

*Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time,... Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn... Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time, as architecture of time. Most of its observances -- the Sabbath, the New Moon, the festivals, the Sabbatical and the Jubilee year -- depend on a certain hour of the day or season of the year.... The main themes of faith lie in the realm of time. We remember the day of the exodus from Egypt, the day when Israel stood at Sinai; and our Messianic hope is the expectation of a day, of the end of days... When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time.... It was only after the people had succumbed to the temptation of worshipping a thing, a golden calf, that the erection of a Tabernacle, of holiness in space, was commanded. The sanctity of time came first, the sanctity of man came second, and the sanctity of space last. Time was hallowed by God; space, the Tabernacle, was consecrated by Moses.*

The sanctification of time is the basis for understanding the essence of Jewish spirituality.

**Spirituality in the literature**

Spirituality is an expression of human longing to approach a supreme entity or power situated beyond human control and grasp, thereby expressing the existential uniqueness of humans over animals (Gross, 2006). It is realized in abstract aspects of human life that constitute part of one’s existential secular or religious being. Spirituality is thus largely associated with the connection between the human and the sublime, between the concrete and the abstract. It constitutes parts of one’s existential secular or religious being, yet exists apart from and beyond it.

Most research on spirituality was conducted in the fields of psychology and sociology of religion, and was based on empirical studies (Gross, 2009). Only a small part of this research addresses the philosophical aspect (Alexander, 2001; Sheridan, 1986), or contributes to the construction of a conceptual theoretical framework (Poll & Smith, 2003; Smith, 2003). Spirituality is one of the ways in which people construct knowledge and meaning; spiritual identity is regarded as the framework within which the ultimate questions of life are mediated (Stewart, 2002). Indeed, spirituality is regarded in the literature as a universal human capacity that is mainly related to well-being (Weber & Cummings, 2003; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2000). This takes on a broader meaning when spirituality is examined in the context of the relatively new branch of psychology known as positive psychology. The aim of positive psychology is to transform psychology from a preoccupation with repairing the bad things in life, to an emphasis on a salutogenic perspective of human existence (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Spirituality is related to hope and happiness (Bridges & Anderson Moore, 2002), and therefore can be seen as an integral part of positive psychology.
An examination of research on spirituality yields three distinct approaches to the relationship between spirituality and religiosity. There are researchers who view spirituality as an integral part of religiosity (Benson, 1997; Gordon et al., 2002; Smith, 2003); those who view spirituality as separate from religiosity (Scott, 2001; Tisdell, 2000); and those who view spirituality as synonymous with religiosity (Ahmadi Lewin, 2001; Halford, 1999).

**Categories and branches of spirituality**

Elkins, Hedstorm, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders (1988) identified nine non-religious components that constitute what they define as humanistic spirituality, which are distinct from religious forms of spirituality: transcendence, meaning in life, mission in life, sacredness of life, ultimate satisfaction in spiritual rather than material things, commitment to altruism, idealism, awareness of the tragic, and fruits of spirituality. These nine components can be found in diverse ways in this paper.

Painton (2009) argues that children’s spiritual intelligence relates to the human struggle for meaning, vision, spiritual awareness and worth. When children’s spiritual intelligence is encouraged, their greatest gifts and potential for healing and happiness are realized (2009, p. 368). In her book *Encouraging Your Child’s Spiritual Intelligence* (Painton, 2007), Painton constructs her theory of the seven branches of the spiritual tree of life. The first branch deals with intuition and wisdom; the second with the need for belonging; the third with children’s conception of death and their understanding that it is permanent only in the physical dimension; the fourth with participation in an invisible secret spiritual world; the fifth with the concept of good and evil and light and dark; the sixth relates to healing play, which is ruled mainly by the world of metaphor; and the seventh concerns a transformative tour from the past to a promising future – to rebirth.

Painton holds that the road to a spiritual rebirth consists of agonizing steps. Children may visit all seven branches or only some of them and “in this process boys and girls experience movement from an excruciating loss of everything to an unyielding recovery of their life force” (Painton, 2009, p. 378). I found this theory to be a major conceptual instrument for analyzing the way my subjects conceptualize the spiritual dimension of the Sabbath.

**Methodology**

The population of this study included five religious girls, studying in state religious elementary schools in Israel: Michal and Zohar (8 years old); Rachel, Noa and Adi (11 years old). After receiving their parents’ permission, I read them the Hebrew version of the story:

A religious Jew called Joseph was very poor, but he was known to honor the Sabbath. Every week, he went to the market and bought something special for the Sabbath. In his town, there lived a wealthy man who was also wicked. One night the rich man dreamt that all his money and possessions would one day belong to his neighbor Joseph. The wealthy man consulted the sages in the town on what to do and they suggested that he sell all his property and buy a big diamond. He put the diamond in his hat and was happy that all his wealth was with him. One day he was crossing a bridge and a strong wind blew his hat into the river below, where a big fish swallowed the diamond. Shortly afterwards, fishermen caught the big fish and brought it to the market to sell it for the Sabbath. They tried to sell it but it was so big that no one wanted to buy it. Someone suggested that they offer it to Joseph who honors the Sabbath and loves to buy special food for it. Joseph bought the big fish. As he cut it open while preparing to eat it, he suddenly saw the big diamond inside the fish. That was what remained of the wealthy man’s riches. Joseph was happy; he became rich and bought a new house. Joseph, who had honored the Sabbath in spite of his poverty, was able to honor it now out of riches.

In the original story, the rich man was a Gentile. I decided to leave this out as I thought it moves the story to another dimension and makes it less educational. I asked the girls what they thought the message of the story was, what it means to honor the Sabbath, and what Joseph’s attitude toward the Sabbath was.
Findings

The Meaning of the Story
I asked the girls to explain the message of the story and received the following answers:

Rachel (11): “That you don’t have to think only about money but also about other things. Joseph didn’t care about the money but about the Sabbath. That you are not allowed to ask when the Sabbath is over! I want the Sabbath, we want to honor it.”

Adi (11): “That everyone has to do everything to honor the Sabbath because if you honor the Sabbath, it will honor you. The Sabbath brings good things to a person. The Sabbath brought a diamond to Joseph. It can be other things as well: you have to buy good and expensive things for the Sabbath.”

Noa (11): “It pays to honor the Sabbath. That we have to honor the Sabbath with all our heart because if we honor the Sabbath, we will get a reward. If we obey the commandments, we will win a diamond, which is a reward from God. We have to rest like God and we are rewarded – this is sure.”

Zohar (8): “That everyone should honor the Sabbath because the Sabbath is sacred. If you honor the Sabbath, you make yourself happy and make the Sabbath special.”

Michal (8): “That you have to do everything to honor the Sabbath. Because the Sabbath is sacred and if you honor the Sabbath, it will honor you.”

Honoring the Sabbath
All the interviewees agreed that there is a need to honor the Sabbath. All used the spiritual intrinsic meaning of dignity, rather than the simple superficial extrinsic meaning of external behavior or an external manifestation like a decoration. They all emphasized that it was to grant high esteem and glorify it; to respect it for its worth and merit, beyond the need to conform to a certain commandment.

Michal (8): “We accept the Sabbath serenely. When we welcome the Sabbath with peace of mind, we are calm and we don’t have to worry, we are like God. When my mother for instance bought chocolate for us, we kept it and didn’t eat it until the Sabbath. It was difficult yet when we ate it finally on the Sabbath, it was very good – it had a different taste. When we ate it once during the week, it was a bit dry but on the Sabbath it was much much better and yummy.”

Adi (11): “My mother honors the Sabbath when she lights candles earlier – that way she adds some more moments of the Sabbath to our lives. She wants to receive the Sabbath calmly and not rush. To honor the Sabbath is to make it special with special food – you prepare chicken and fish and not just a boiled egg.”

Noa (11): “We honor the Sabbath when we dedicate a few things which are only for the Sabbath. We separate between our everyday dishes and clothes to show that it is different.”

Rachel (11): “Doing special things which are special for the Sabbath – this gives you a special feeling and special moments. The creation of a special environment, a special atmosphere at home, with food, clothes.”

Adi (11): “When we honor the Sabbath, we feel elevated. We feel as if we are angels, not angels but something beyond regular human beings. The Sabbath makes us special human beings.”

Zohar (8): “To honor means to give up something of yourself – I shut the TV off early before the Sabbath to honor the Sabbath. I give up a few moments – that shows that I am ready to give something up.”

Michal (8): “To honor means to use special things that are more expensive and not just to serve simple things like a fried egg. There is a commandment to bring rich – not simple – food. To honor the Sabbath means peace of mind, that we rest like God, that we are not anxious.”

Rachel (11): “To honor the Sabbath means to prepare something to say at the Sabbath table so that we will not just eat – so that it will be a spiritual meal – something beyond just eating. I help my mother in the kitchen, I set the table and organize the house for the Sabbath meal – this means to honor.”

Noa (11): “To honor the Sabbath means to be happy with what you are doing for the Sabbath. It is not just that you have a commandment and you obey it, you are happy to do it and you think how to make it more special and different from other meals.”

Only the two 8 year olds used the word sanctity (kdusha) when referring to the Sabbath:

Michal (8): The Sabbath is sacred. It has a special sanctity.
Joseph’s attitude toward the Sabbath

The spiritual facet of the story in the eyes of the interviewees was the fact that Joseph honors the Sabbath. I tried to understand how they understood this. First, we had an etymological discussion, as in Hebrew, the story is called “Yosef mokir Sabbath.” The word “mokir” was interpreted by all of them as honored, yet I tried to ask them about the stem of the word “yakar,” which means precious or valued. All of them understood it in the figurative, not in the literal meaning – that it means something not materialistic.

When I asked them to explain the meaning of honor, Adi (11) said, “He wanted to accept it out of serenity.”

Rachel (11): “Joseph didn’t honor the Sabbath because he happened to have some money to buy a fish, but because that is what he was. He is a person who honors the Sabbath. The honor is part of him.”

All the interviewees emphasized that Joseph honored the Sabbath out of happiness:

Michal (8): “Joseph keeps the Sabbath and honors it with joy. It is fun to honor the Sabbath. It makes you joyful and through this happiness you feel something extraordinary – it affects your entire body – you are filled with a great feeling, a feeling of greatness. He made a special effort to make it more special – he didn’t have to buy an expensive fish yet he did it because it is something which is beyond the commandment.”

Rachel (11): “The fish gave him a good feeling. He felt above the regular feelings.”

Four of the girls stressed the importance of the Sabbath, which makes it unique.

Rachel (11): “Joseph makes the Sabbath something precious valuable and very important. It is not that he says ok, I have money, I will go and buy a fish for the Sabbath. He says I am a person who takes the Sabbath seriously. It is important for me. It is not something that is done once but there is a continuation and it will continue also next Sabbath, next week, and he intends to do it week after week, there is a continuum because that is what he is and because he thinks it is important.”

Adi (11): “To honor means to create a special atmosphere at home – to make an extra effort. Joseph bought a big fish to enrich the table.”

Adi used the term “hiddur mitzvah,” which means to enrich the commandment in order to glorify God. It refers mainly to the aesthetic dimension of the commandment thus beautifying it. For example, on the Sabbath, Jews bless the Sabbath with wine. Thus, people use silver cups and not paper cups on the Sabbath. This adds to the special atmosphere of the Sabbath. The act of buying a big fish came to enrich and beautify the Sabbath table and make it special.

Rachel (11): “He was poor so he didn’t think about it. So he overcame it. He goes beyond it. He is above his real condition because he honors the Sabbath.”

Rachel (11): “The fish gave him a feeling of transcendence. The Sabbath was elevated because of the fish.”

Noa (11): “The fish gives him a good feeling. He feels like a king.”

Painton’s tree of spirituality

Six of the seven spiritual branches in Painton’s tree of spirituality model were found in the girls’ responses: intuition and wisdom, belonging, participation in a secret spiritual world, the concept of good and evil, healing play, and transformation. Only the conception of death was not found.

Intuition and Wisdom

When I asked Michal (8) if she thought it was important that the wicked man is Jewish, she said it was not important; on the contrary, “it is better that he is a wicked Jew so he can see the light (lahzor betshuva) and improve himself.” In this way, Michal coped with the aspect of evil and transformed it. Painton argues that children who are confronted with spiritual experiences “are wise beyond their years, they are blessed with profound insights, understanding and vision...it takes them beyond the immediate experiences, allowing them to see outside the ordinary” (Painton, 2009, p. 370). She claims that “while they are thinkers ‘outside the box’ they may have an ‘inner voice’ that guides them” (p. 370). Michal was very consistent in her
interpretation that evil should have the potential to transform and improve.

**Connection and Belonging**
All five girls viewed Joseph’s honoring of the Sabbath as a form of belonging. Painton found that when children are involved in a spiritual activity, they are “catalysts for establishing a sense of community” (Painton, 2009, p. 372). de Souza perceives spirituality as “an essential human trait that can be identified through expressions of connectedness that an individual displays to Self, to the Social Other, the Physical Other and the Transcendent Other” (de Souza, 2006, p. 167).

Rachel (11): “If you buy a nice fish for Sabbath that is expensive you feel that the Sabbath is important. It connects you with the Sabbath and it helps you to be part of it.”

Adi (11) widened the scope of the connection to the Jewish nation: “He [Joseph] feels connected to all the Jewish people. If Jews respect the Sabbath, the Messiah will come. I know that if I honor the Sabbath, I feel that I am doing something not only for myself but for the salvation of all the people of Israel.”

Zohar (8): “All religious Jews are highly connected to the Sabbath and will do many things for it and buy nice and special things for it.”

Rachel (11): “When I wear a special dress for Sabbath it shows my special connection to the Sabbath.”

Michal (8): “Sabbath is a sacred day and it is sacred because this day is more connected to God. When I honor the Sabbath and wear special clothes, it shows that I am connected to God.”

The Sabbath is perceived by all the girls as a unique day when a man is obliged to do special things to emphasize the uniqueness of the day and the separation from the other days of the week.

**Secret spiritual world**
All the girls thought that the fact that Joseph went to buy special expensive things for the Sabbath was a sign of his entrance into what Painton defines as “mystical territory wherein great potential for healing and happiness lies” (Painton, 2009, p. 373).

Rachel (11) views it as a miracle: “The fact that every week Joseph could save money and spend it on buying expensive products for the Sabbath is a miracle. God gave him a reward and made a miracle for him and made him happy.”

Michal (8): “The fish is something mysterious and unique – I cannot explain – when my mother sometimes brings a fish I look at his eye though it is sometimes frightening and disgusting, it is strange and mysterious – it hides something in it.”

Spirituality is connected to happiness and well-being.

Zohar (8): “He wanted to buy the fish to make himself happy. Why do we have the Sabbath? In order to be happy. On the Sabbath, we eat a good meal. We eat special good things like chicken and meat and fish – on regular days, we have simple food. The special food makes me happy. It is a sign of good life.”

**Good and evil**
In their analysis, all the girls show their rapport with the hero Joseph in terms of good and evil. Using Painton’s terminology, Joseph is constructed as a spiritual warrior “to help create a world of peace, harmony and good will” (Painton, 2009, p. 374). Like in Painton’s model, the girls were “compelled to design a battlefield wherein darkness is transformed into light and good defeats evil” (p. 374).

Rachel (11): “If someone does good, he will be rewarded. This is a story of winning. Joseph wins because he is good.”

Adi (11): “The story has a happy end because the wicked rich man cannot win. He will fall and die, and he falls.”

Michal (8): “God intentionally brought the fish to Joseph in order to reward him. Evil becomes good – it is just a matter of time.”

The two branches “healing play” and “transformation” in Painton’s theory appeared in the interviewees’ discourse, but not in the context of trauma.
Healing play
The engagement with the story has the capacity to heal distress. Painton (2009) argues that children use ‘metaphors that are not literal representations but rather symbolic communications...their metaphorical play is the language by which they implicitly convey their life story along with their feelings and beliefs...the healing comes from their intimacy with the truth which is at the core of the spirituality’ (p. 376). Only two girls referred to this aspect.

Adi (11): “I think that this discussion will cause me to think how I have to honor the Sabbath more. Joseph’s life was changed – we also have to think about a change in our way of treating the Sabbath. There are some families who are so tense and shout when the Sabbath begins; not in ours, but it gives me a hint that we also have to think how we get ready for the Sabbath and honor it in the true sense.”

Transformation
Painton (2009) argues that during the spiritual journey children experience agonizing moments and “shed their old lives on the road to spiritual rebirth” (p. 377). Their heroes are often “symbols of a frightening journey through an uncharted world of darkness.” Though Painton is referring to children who undergo traumatized journeys full of pain and finally through spirituality gain empowerment, it is partially true for our analysis. In this story, Joseph was happy even when he was poor but the happy end enabled his rebirth. The Sabbath becomes the road to spiritual rebirth. The transformational phase is extremely important to the interviewees as it also transforms them and they started telling me how this story will affect their attitude to the Sabbath.

Michal (8): “The Sabbath helps the poor. Joseph honors the Sabbath and from a poor man he became rich. When you keep mitsvot [commandments], it changes your life tremendously. If you honor the Sabbath it will honor you.”

Rachel (11): “The fact that Joseph becomes rich shows that perhaps all the Jews will keep finally the Sabbath as they can see it pays.”

Spiritual moments are transformational moments. The fact that Joseph honors the Sabbath helps him to withstand hardship:

Michal (8): “Though he is poor, he has a goal and he will not crash. He will collect money and buy and honor the Sabbath also next week and thus he will forget that he is poor.”

Discussion
The findings of this research show how children engage with established systems of shared meaning, with the beliefs, values, and symbols of Jewish culture. Through the interpretation of the story of “Joseph who honors the Sabbath,” they actually interpret their personal world and enable us to analyze the way they conceptualize the Sabbath as a spiritual entity. Through the story, they analyze what the meaning of spirituality is for them and enable us to see how they construct “realities” based on a well-known Jewish narrative and symbols. This approach contradicts the assumption of cognitive psychology that the mind is a mechanism for information processing. Bruner (1996) argues that human beings make meaning through the interpretation and understanding of stories. In his book, *The Culture of Education*, Bruner analyzes how human beings make sense of the world through stories, schemas and especially through similarities and differences. Bruner defined two basic types of thought: the narrative, based on sequential thought, which consists of details and actions, and paradigmatic thinking, which is based on the construction of systematic categories. The narrative mode assumes that the meaning making process is constructed through stories. Thus, a story is not only a means but also an end for the formation of the self. Fowler (1981) constructed a developmental stage theory that shows how faith is developed during the life span of each individual. Fowler conceives the personal master stories as assets that comprise the basic constituents of faith. These constructs help the individual to cope with existential questions encountered in life. Sigel (2009) perceives sacred texts as gateways to the construction of Jewish identity and spiritual development.

Pargament (2009) perceives religiosity as a facilitator of spirituality. The commandments concerning the Sabbath are only facilitators to embarking on spirituality. While trying to explain the message of this story
and the meaning of the word “honor,” the interviewees actually construct the spiritual presence. The physical embodiment of the fish becomes a spiritual evocation.

The Sabbath comes to teach Jews the holiness of time. The main goal of the interviewees is how to view the spiritual reality, which is invoked by the fish Joseph bought in the market. Thus, the Sabbath cultivates a special gaze. It requires that we perceive time by viewing objects (food, special clothing, special dishes) and seeing the holy. This heightens the individual perspective. To honor the Sabbath means to construct a purified spiritual presence through specific objects. It requires a profound understanding of the Sabbath; namely, to see through the fish to the beyond. To honor the Sabbath means to develop a spiritual eye, to be sensitive to the spiritual facets of reality. Holiness is not a spatial dimension but rather a spiritual presence that activates human beings and makes them part of this process. The interviewees think in binary opposites and in a very particularistic parochial mode. Jews are the center of the divine narrative and the Sabbath was created for Jews. Whereas the two younger interviewees speak explicitly about the holy and sacred, the discourse of the three 11 year-old girls is more realistic, trying to think about the practical outcome and utilitarian aspects of the allegory. It seems that the 8 year olds are more spiritual in the literal sense, whereas the 11 year olds are more abstract and more spiritual in the figurative sense. This reflects the age gap between the two groups. Yet all of them undergo a transformative process from a lower to a higher domain.

The connectedness that the children feel to the Sabbath through the fish can help them, as de Souza (2006) claims, to gain a sense of self and place within their world, thereby providing meaning and purpose in their everyday life. However, their connectedness is particularistic and does not go beyond their particularistic group of belonging.

Whereas de Souza (2006) emphasizes connectedness as a major feature of spirituality, this research shows that the act of separation is another major feature that helps the children to enter another level in their spiritual maturity. Paradoxically, the act of separation enables them to perceive their uniqueness and better connect to it. The separation of the Sabbath from regular days gave them a sense of self and promoted their religious resilience. Through the separation process, spirituality became an entity distinct from religiosity and elevated the sacred dimension, thus fueling their religious and spiritual commitment and creating a sense of awe. The process of separation enabled the understanding of the importance of the Sabbath.

To access the spiritual is not “to have” but “to be.” One of the interviewees (Rachel) distinguishes between two modes of existence: between having money and spending it on a fish and between Joseph’s intrinsic need to buy the fish because of what he is; a person who honors the Sabbath. The act of honoring is not an extrinsic characteristic but an integral part of his self-definition. This is a mature analysis that enabled her to distinguish between what Erich Fromm (1976) called “to have” and “to be.” This distinction opens our understanding to two types of spirituality, defined as heritable and conceptual. Rachel can be categorized as being a conceptual existential type.

Gross (2009) argues that following Fromm (1976) “having” and “being” constitute two alternative patterns of human adjustment to oneself and to the cosmos. While “having” expresses an extrinsic tendency towards acquisition of ownership over external resources enabling one to cope with life in this world, “being” reflects an intrinsic desire to nurture and develop inner personality resources for the same purpose. These two modes help Gross (2009) to construct the two parallel dimensions of what she defines as conceptual and heritable spirituality, which express the patterns that typify human adjustment to the universe and basic motivational orientations. Heritable spirituality suits people with “having” tendencies, as their spirituality is of an instrumental nature, whereas conceptual spirituality conforms to the “being” orientation, as it embodies an ideological-fundamental character.

The story enabled the girls to understand the meaning of honor in its intrinsic meaning, as a mediator to create their own spiritual dignity. All the participants agreed that to honor the Sabbath is beyond religiosity.
In this sense, as Pargament (2009) notes, “religiosity facilitates spirituality” and is a prerequisite to the construction of religious commitment. Spirituality thus becomes the essence of meaning making and a basic constituent of the self (Elkins et al., 1988). Spirituality is connected to moral development. The 11-year-old girls could elicit distinct moral messages from the story. Their spirituality and meaning making were connected to their construction of the moral message of the story.

The core of the discourse was the question of ownership. Whereas the physical possessions belong to God who can make a person rich or poor, the spiritual domain is in the hands of human beings. The interviewees show that through socialization, the Sabbath enables them to see through the physical to the spiritual horizon. Human beings who attempt to honor the Sabbath have the power to transform a fish into a holy shrine. This is a constructivistic process of socialization. The research shows a systematic cultivation of spiritual awareness and sensitivity, beyond the scope of religious law. The analysis shows how the Sabbath can bring young girls to new spiritual landscapes and transform the beauty of the objective material into a subjective spiritual presence.

References


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Howard Worsley is a champion for children. He wants their voice to be heard, and for adults to fully appreciate the wisdom they have to offer. This book is a vehicle for achieving those aims, by exploring children's views and reflections about a selection of Bible stories. As a priest, a researcher and a teacher, Worsley combines his skills to present an overview of his research for the Bible Story Project which sought to gain insights into children’s understandings of different types of Biblical stories. The project recruited 30 families, via adverts in the church press, who read the Bible with their children, or who were interested in doing so. The adults were briefed on how to tell a selection of the stories to the children and were asked to record their responses.

In the UK, children regularly hear Biblical Stories as part of Religious Education lessons and collective worship, but their response to them is not always one of enthusiasm, sometimes due to uninspiring teaching strategies. It is commonly believed that children may not be engaged with the texts because they are essentially adult texts but John Hull, in the foreword of the book, raises the possibility that it is adults who find the Bible difficult rather than children, and asks if young people could offer refreshing new insights into it?

The rationale for the project, and hence the book, is clear. Sandwiched in between an introduction and a final chapter considering the implications of the findings, the core of the book is neatly divided into seven chapters according to the type of story discussed in them. These are: texts of wonder; adventure and leadership; terror; justice and judgement; comfort and hope; comedy and mercy and forgiveness. Each of these seven chapters opens with a picture drawn by a child and an excerpt from the story followed by the context in which it was read. Extracts from the transcripts follow, accompanied by a note on the experience of the adult who read the story and a reflective comment by Worsley.

For readers interested in the methodological implications and grounding of the project (such as why there are seven types of text), the appendices offer additional information.

One of the delights of this book is to see how children not only interpret the stories but how they make associations to their own worlds in order to make meaning. Two boys aged four and seven, who had heard the story of the Garden of Eden, were amused by the notion of wearing leaves as clothes and likened the snake to a cartoon character. The garden was similar to a zoo, they observed. The book contains several comments from children of this ilk, which may raise a smile but more importantly, make the reader aware that sometimes children can react to a story in a different way to how we might expect. Further, some of the conversations gave children the opportunity to consider the stories’ deeper meaning and to ask insightful questions in ways which sometimes surprised even their own parents.
Where the book might have benefited is from additional comment and analysis by the author in the sections following the descriptions of the story reading session. The comments tend to be brief, and whilst they are pertinent there is scope for a more in-depth coverage in order to tease out the implications for readers more fully.

The readership of this book lies primarily with parents, RE teachers and church ministers, each of whom have a section dedicated to them in the final chapter, where the implications for them and for children are discussed. But others will find it of interest too. Like Worsley, I also offer children the opportunity to have their spiritual voice heard through my writing, but unlike him, I do not align myself with a faith tradition. Nevertheless I suggest that all who are interested in listening to children with regards to how they make meaning with reference to religion, scripture and spirituality will find this book of value, not only those living or working within the Christian tradition.

It seems appropriate to end this review with an excerpt from the book which includes the voice of a child. A mother asked her 10 year old daughter questions about the story of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25, vv 31-46). The girl duly answered each one, but when the mother asked if she had any other comments about the story, the girl answered, “no, that’s enough”. Listening to the child’s voice is not only about hearing the wisdom and insights they have to offer, but also about accepting when they have had enough of being listened to.

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Although separate publications and each a work within its own right, both of these books by Jerome W Berryman, published in 2009, actually form two volumes of a complete work, and, ideally, are designed to be read together.

Children and the Theologians presents an engaging overview of what selected theologians have said (or in a number of instances, what they have not said) about children over the course of two thousand years of Christian history. Beginning with the carefully constructed vignettes of Paul, Irenaeus, Origin, Chrysostom, Pelagius and Augustine – the earliest theologians, through to contemporary writers such as Marica Bunge, Bonnie Miller, Joyce Ann Mercer, and Martin E Marty, Berryman discusses the influence of these theologians on the way the Church has considered children. The book moves chronologically from the first century of Christianity through to the present time, and as the vignettes of the theologians accumulate, the de facto doctrine of children (as Berryman terms it) begins to take shape. As with any of Berryman’s writing, a sense of playfulness is evident. The vignettes of the various theologians throughout Christian history might be envisaged as the game pieces by which the game can be played so as to move towards a more formal doctrine of children in the Church.

There are four key themes identified by Berryman which seem to emerge from this history, and which are discussed in each of the chapters with reference to the theologians’ impact on the way the Church views children – ambivalence, ambiguity, indifference, and grace. Ambivalence refers to holding two conflicting
feelings about a phenomenon simultaneously. When the history of Christian theology is taken as a whole, Berryman argues that it is ambivalent since it holds both high and low views of children. Ambiguity refers to the fact that the word “children” can be understood in two or more ways. When ambiguity is combined with ambivalence, Berryman maintains that these two themes work together so as to paralyse our best thinking about children in the Church. Indifference refers not so much to holding a neutral view of children, but rather to being unconcerned or even apathetic towards children. Grace, as Berryman uses it, refers to the pre-Christian connotations, and demotes charm, loveliness, favour, kindness, and service to others. Each of these four themes is made explicit towards the end of each chapter, and guides the reflection on the emerging doctrine of children in each period of history under consideration in each chapter.

Accompanying and by way of introduction to each of the chapters is an art work, delicately reproduced, which captures the essence of the feeling towards children as portrayed in the vignettes of the various theologians. Notable among these are Bodhan Piaseki’s (1998) painting of the last supper (in which both women and children are picture with Jesus and the apostles). This is contrasted with da Vinci’s famous painting (1489) which picture only celibate men (or women, as Berryman notes). In the final chapter, appropriately titled “Children as a means of grace: A proposal for a formal doctrine of children”, Berryman has included two paintings collected from one of the children who attended the early research classes which laid the foundations for Godly Play. These are images of The Holy Family, and The Parable of the Mustard Seed, both painted by Lindsay Gerber Gonzales in 1985 when she was seven years old. Both of these paintings currently hang in the Centre for the Theology of Childhood in Denver, Colorado, the research and development arm of the Godly Play Foundation, and where Berryman is the Senior Fellow. These two paintings in particular, when viewed within the context of the final chapter of the book, serve to propose children as a means of grace because of the way in which the biological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of grace are unified in them through the creative process.

Berryman proposes children as a means of grace (with its pre-Christian connotations) because the creative process works in them in an intense and unified way. It is the creative process which enables children (and adults for that matter) to play at the edges of their knowing and being so as to confront existential issue in their lives. The second of Berryman’s books, Teaching Godly Play, outlines both the theory and practice, emanating from more than thirty-five years of research, of an approach to religious education which enables children to learn the art of using the Christian language system through the creative process, to play at the edges of their knowing and being, and so discern meaning in their lives.

Originally published in 1995 as Teaching Godly Play: The Sunday Morning Handbook by Abingdon Press, this new revised and expanded work details the Godly Play process thoroughly with reference to each of the five elements which comprise that process – crossing the threshold, the circle, responding, the feast, and leaving. Each element of this process, which mirrors closely the pattern of Christian worship, is explored in depth, and brings together creative synthesis of praxis, foundational theory and methodology, which makes it unique.

The first chapter explores thoroughly the notion of play, and the origins of the Godly Play process in the Montessori Method. Although drawing upon philosophy, anthropology, psychology and education in its description, Berryman’s writing style remains readable and engaging, rendering it of appeal to both academics and practitioners.

Chapter Seven, titled “Knowing Godly Play when you see it” is of particular interest. The name, the materials, the organisation of the room and the training of the Godly Play teachers are all important. Yet it is possible to have all of these, and still not have Godly Play. In this chapter, Berryman poses three key questions which need to be asked in order to discern whether or not Godly Play is really occurring: Is the possibility left wide open for God to come and play? Is the community of children [actually] at play? And, is the living spiral of the curriculum at work in the process? As Berryman himself says, “Bits and pieces of Godly Play can be effective, but to help the children enter adolescence with a working model of the classical Christian language system, God needs to be invited to come and play and children need to be at play as they work their way through the whole spiral curriculum” (p. 128, italics in the original). Godly Play, in its truest and authentic form, enables this to occur by grounding children in the Tradition, yet
encouraging them to explore their expanding horizons – both of which are parts of the creative process (although they tend to pull in opposite directions) and both of which come together to form what Berryman calls “playful orthodoxy”.

Berryman often describes himself as merely trying to be good a teacher of children. While this undoubtedly true, it is clear from both of these publications that Berryman is in fact both a scholar and a practitioner. Much of what is written in *Children and the Theologians* will challenge the thinking of some. Similarly, much of what is to be found *Teaching Godly Play* will raise questions for those working in contexts in which the Godly Play process has been adapted for early years’ classrooms, or in which the religious education curriculum has been influenced by Godly Play principles. Nonetheless, these two much anticipated works are the fruit of a lifetime of study to which Berryman has devoted himself. They will provide readers with insight and challenges. They will inspire further thought and investigation by a new generation of scholars and religious educators.

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