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century occultism, James Webb's *The Occult Underground* (Illinois, 1974), and *The Occult Establishment* (Illinois, 1976) are highly informative and fascinating. A useful introduction to astrology is provided by Christopher Macintosh, *The Astrologers and their Creed*, (London, 1969). Bruce Campbell's *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, (Berkeley, 1980) is a standard history of the theosophical movement. For the New Age novel of the 1980s, one cannot go past Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*.

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Spirituality and an Experiential Approach to Religious Education

Penny Thompson

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Spirituality has become an important theme of the National Curriculum. It is intended that attention should be paid to the spiritual dimension of every subject area. The spiritual aspect should be seen to pervade the whole of human experience.

This would seem a welcome development to Christians who have seen their faith marginalized and given less and less room to influence either education or public life in general. However, we need to ask what is meant by 'spirituality'. We may be dealing with a secularized spirituality. On visits to prospective schools for our children we may find headteachers insisting on the importance of spirituality. In one case in the writer's recent experience, the Head was clearly an agnostic with little time for God. The word 'God' did not appear in the school's prospectus and when, in a letter, he needed to mention God the word appeared in inverted commas. Yet he insisted that he considered spirituality to be very important. For him, at least, it would seem that spirituality had little to do with belief in a personal God.

This year's Reith lecturer, the Chief-Rabbi elect of the U.K., spoke of the inability of the society in which we live, dominated as it is by the motive of consumerism, to fulfil the deeper needs of the people. In the wake of the demise of the two great visions of the twentieth century, Marxism and Fascism, there is an emptiness which consumerism cannot satisfy. Perhaps the popular emphasis on spirituality is a reaction to this vacuum. For the Chief Rabbi it is the task of the religions to step in and show the way forward. For those who have rejected traditional religion, however, and I number the agnostic Headmaster among their number, a simple return to religious faith is unlikely to be the answer. For them spirituality may mean something quite different.

Religious words may be used in a way that empties them of theological meaning while retaining a religious connotation. This appears to add depth yet has no base in a real belief about God. In this way, 'Christmas' may come to mean human giving and sharing rather than Incarnation and God's giving to humankind. In a recent lesson, for example, I used a page of the 'Radio Times' in which there was an abundance of religious words such as

‘requiem’, ‘spirit’, ‘afterlife’, p. 212 ‘ritual’ but there was little serious consideration of religion involved in the programmes concerned. Modern man has yet to find a satisfactory substitute for the richness of experience and meaning given him by his religious ancestry. It is not so easy, in the striking words used by the Chief Rabbi, to ‘edit God out of the language’.

AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO R.E.

It is natural that the professionals in R.E. should be looked to for their contribution to the analysis of the meaning of ‘spirituality’. The approach I am about to examine has a great deal to say on this issue and it is therefore not surprising that it is becoming so influential at the present time.

This approach is set forth in a recently published book, *New Methods in R.E.: An Experiential Approach*,¹ the fruit of the work of the Religious Experience and Education Project. This project, based at the School of Education at Nottingham University, has involved advisors and primary and secondary teachers in most areas of the country. It is in turn the outcome of work at the Alister Hardy Research Centre in Oxford. Among the book’s contributors are John Hammond of St Martin’s College, Lancaster and David Hay, the Director of the Project.

Many training courses in this approach have been held up and down the country (and the writer has recently attended both a one day and a residential weekend course). It is claimed that the approach has radically changed the methods and attitudes of numerous teachers. It has been adopted by teachers of diverse religious commitments and has been welcomed by many Christians.

To what is the undoubted success of this approach due? Its aims are not apparently different from those of the most modern R.E. syllabi so perhaps its success is due entirely to its new methods, as the title of the book would suggest. If so, a Christian teacher who is in sympathy with the aims of modern R.E. may adopt it with confidence. If, however, we find in this approach the outworkings of a philosophy or vision with a dynamism of its own, a cool appraisal of the nature of this vision will be called for. p. 213

THE TWO AIMS OF R.E.

To evaluate this approach, it is necessary to look first at the aims it sets out to achieve. These are described as follows:—

These (the two aims of R.E.) are: helping pupils to understand the perspective of the religious person without suggesting or implying that they should personally adopt a particular perspective, and helping pupils to develop their own individual responses to the spiritual dimension.²

These aims will be found in one way or another in most recent R.E. syllabi with the addition, in some cases, of a rider to the effect that there should be due emphasis given to Christianity as the dominant religion of our culture. A further aim is sometimes stated: that of developing an attitude of tolerance and respect towards all those who hold religious beliefs that are at variance with one’s own. In fact, this aim is central to this approach, dominated as it is by the phenomenological method that underpins it. The

¹ John Hammond, *et al*, *New Methods in R.E.: An Experiential Approach* (Oliver and Boyd, 1990).

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

phenomenological method, despite mounting criticism in recent years, still is uppermost in most people's conceptions of modern R.E. It is assumed to be a necessary foundation to R.E. and it is taken for granted in the approach of the book in question. It has the status of a dogma, a *sine qua non* of modern R.E. theory.

The link with phenomenology implied in the first aim mentioned above is made more explicit in the following passage from the book:—

Phenomenology is primarily concerned with understanding—understanding the nature and source of religion(s), and understanding oneself in relation to religion. In aiming to develop understanding, empathy and respect for different religious traditions, phenomenology transcends questions of indoctrination and the undermining of the faith which may be raised when a critical or analytical approach is stressed.³

Empathy has been around in R.E. since long before History got hold of it! In R.E., it entails the 'bracketing out' of personal convictions and critical notions and an entering into the experience of the religious believer. Only so will an outsider be able to understand and thereby respect the convictions of another. A second important aspect is to teach that there are many different ways of understanding the world. This is brought out in the following passage:—

One of our main objectives is to help pupils become aware that their own p. 214 way of seeing the world is only one among many perspectives: thus assisting the development of the skills of empathy.⁴

There are some subtle undercurrents here. On the one hand, it must be part of growing up to realize that there are many views about the meaning of life and to many children growing up with a materialist view of reality it may be very difficult to accept that theirs is not the only possible view. To do so is in fact to undermine faith. This is not such a problem for the phenomenologist who is at heart a relativist but it may, and often does, raise problems for the believer in some form of absolute truth, whether atheist or theist. The obvious thing to do, having raised the fact of the plurality of truth-claims, is to discuss their relative merits yet this is the very thing that is forbidden lest it harm the empathic enterprise.

Phenomenology offers no way of assessing a religion. It can suggest no way of responding to it either. It offers a method for entering into the experience of faith without any rationale for so doing. The suspension of the critical faculty is a serious problem. The reason for it is the impossibility of agreeing on a rational standpoint from which to assess a religion. This is a very real difficulty but the alternative also has its problems. If religion is beyond criticism then it is also beyond approval. There is neither reason to reject nor to recommend it. It becomes, for all that is said to the contrary, a museum piece that you can admire or not as takes your fancy. It invites an existentialist 'leap of faith'. It has been relegated to the area of the meaningless, beyond falsification in the realm of the 'upper storey'. This approach may unwittingly breed indifference followed by hostility to religion. This possibility is brought out in the following from a Farmington Trust Occasional Paper written by John McIntyre:—

It was Don Cupitt who first drew my attention to the intellectual sequence that may well follow this type of purely descriptive religious education. Modifying a little what he said, you begin with the affirmation of *strict neutrality* in relation to the religions presented, on

³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the grounds that adherence to any one of them would be unfair to the rest. In that context, *subjectivism* comes into its own, as emphasising the fact that choice among the different religions is a matter of purely subjective preference. There is no ground objectively discernible or objectively denoted by the presenter, why one should be preferred to any other. At that point *indifferentism* appears for it is a matter of pure indifference which you choose; one is just as good or as bad, as true or as false as any other. It is possible at this stage to adopt *humanism*, and to interpret the whole religious phenomenon as man's attempt to come to terms with himself and his environment, in a manner that gives him greatest solace. The final stages of the process would be *agnosticism* and *atheism*.⁵

That hostility to religion exists among our pupils is not in doubt. Many surveys have shown this over the last few years. It is perhaps still too early, however, for the conclusion to be drawn that phenomenology has something to do with this. *New Methods* takes the view that it is not phenomenology that is at fault but rather that it has not been taught properly. The hostility to religion exists and has prevented pupils from entering into the experience of empathizing with the religious believer. What is needed is a way of persuading pupils to enter into the experience. In the approach in question an opting out of real phenomenology seems to take place at this point. It is often stated that the approach does not offer 'religious experience'. Rather, it offers a 'way in' or an 'open door'. It does this by breaking down the barriers of 'us' and 'them' so that pupils are able to begin to identify with those who follow a religion. This is achieved by showing pupils through exercises of an experiential nature that they have an inner world which gives meaning to their lives. Then, again through the experiential method, i.e., actually experiencing the truth that is being conveyed, they are led to see that others have their own inner world or life-history which may be very different from their own but equally important to them. This may be done by showing the pupils ambiguous puzzle-pictures, e.g., that of the duck/rabbit which may be interpreted in different ways. The hope is that by showing that they too have a religious or spiritual side, pupils will be disposed to look more favourably on those whose experience is more explicitly 'religious'.

This aim cannot be faulted and the approach appears to be successful. A third year pupil from a Roman Catholic comprehensive school in Nottingham is quoted as saying:—

My ideas of religious experience have changed because before I thought religious experience was when God appeared to the chosen few but now I see that it is an everyday occurrence. It's not for the chosen few but for everyone.⁶

It is interesting to note that this girl identifies her experience as 'religious'. It may be natural for pupils to see their experience this way p.216 yet to the authors of *New Methods* this experience should not be seen as 'religious'.

In addition to its own internal difficulties, the phenomenological approach has serious implications for the attainment of the second aim mentioned earlier. It can offer no guidance in the development of a response to the spiritual dimension. It positively forbids the rational analysis of a particular viewpoint or, indeed, any method which might lead to the 'adoption of a particular perspective'. All it can do is to increase awareness and understanding. As the authors write:—

⁵ John McIntyre, 'Occasional Paper No. 3' (Oxford: The Farmington Institute for Christian Studies, 1978), quoted in Edward Hulmes, *Commitment and Neutrality* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), p. 48.

⁶ *New Methods in R.E.*, p. 29.

They (the exercises) do not provide answers. Nor do they intend to induce change. They provide opportunities to become more aware and absorb that experience.⁷

The authors acknowledge that there is a tension between the two accepted aims of R.E. and, in the context of their statement of these aims, they write:—

While this approach offers a vehicle in which pupils can approach the spiritual world it does not alter the underlying tension between two of the aims of religious education.⁸

SPIRITUALITY AND THE TENSION BETWEEN THE AIMS OF R.E.

How then does the book and the approach in general attempt to resolve this tension and how successful is it? It is important to note that the word 'spiritual' is used rather than 'religious' in the second aim stated. Basic to the whole approach is the conviction that all religious and, indeed, non-religious perspectives have one thing in common: their spirituality. Something of this is seen in the following extracts from the book:—

To concentrate on externals such as discussion of doctrine, moral stances, pilgrimages, rituals, etc. is to ignore the most central issue in religion—its spirituality.⁹

The historical religions are in all cases the public expression of an inner experience of the sacred.¹⁰

The work of the Alister Hardy Centre in Oxford has shown that 50% of adult Britons have experienced some sort of direct religious awareness. [p. 217](#) Half of these never attend a place of worship and quite often do not want to associate their experience with a particular religion. The approach in question posits a common thread in all religions and in much non-religious experience and goes on to assume that this thread, identified as spirituality or experience of the sacred, can be made accessible to pupils independently of a particular religion and without favouring any religion. It is as if the authors are trying to find a neutral 'spiritual' standpoint, as opposed to a rational standpoint, from which one may begin to survey the various religious perspectives.

THE PATH OF AWARENESS

The method used to gain access to the spiritual is that of raising awareness. The main body of *New Methods* is concerned with classroom activities and consists of six chapters. The first and last are entitled 'Getting Started' and 'Endings'. The other four all contain the word 'awareness': 'Raising Awareness', 'Embodying Awareness', 'Framing Awareness' and 'Extending Awareness'. Religion becomes a 'gloss' on the real thing which is the 'awareness' or the engagement with the 'spiritual'. The fear of favouring one religion has meant the relegation of religion; the concern for engagement has meant that 'the medium has become the message'.

I propose now to look at the concept of spirituality presented by this approach in an attempt to assess its independence of any particular outlook. The authors write:—

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Contemporary developments in spirituality in Britain are extremely rich and varied, drawing not only upon cross-fertilisation between Europe and Asia, but also on a sophisticated use of the techniques of psychoanalysis, an understanding of humanistic psychology and a recovery of the arts of spiritual direction, or the following of a guide or guru.¹¹

The parameters of teacher training are certainly going to have to be broadened to encompass this experience! The link between spirituality and psychoanalysis is not drawn out but the emphasis on awareness noted above has its counterpart in psychoanalysis and so there is an obvious link there. The fact that there are different schools of psychotherapy and how one might choose between them is not discussed. Some of the exercises both in the book and on the courses remind me of encounter group techniques where the aim is to become aware of the hidden depths of one's psyche. From a psychotherapist's p. 218 point of view the aim is to heal damage. It is difficult to see what relevance this might have to R.E. However, the exercises do relate quite closely to the mystical or contemplative tradition in religion. The phrase 'spiritual direction' refers to growth in a particular faith or aspect of a faith and the following of a guru would be understood to imply a Hindu or Buddhist path of exploration. Yet it is insisted that such spirituality is held in common by all religions. The authors write:—

We are caught up in an endless round of remembering past events or wondering what we have to do next. From the religious person's point of view, this low level of awareness is a kind of blindness which gets in the way of important exercises like prayer, meditation or ritual.¹²

Self-awareness techniques are said to be:

of crucial importance in the inner life of the religious person and developed to very high levels of sophistication in many of the religions of the world.¹³

It would seem that the exercises in self-awareness are seen as a way-in to the mystical tradition in religion. But here there seems to be an assumption made: that mystical experience is the same across the board. However, R. C. Zaehner, once Professor of Eastern Religions at the University of Oxford, insists that there are different kinds of mysticism and Ninian Smart says the same thing in 'The Religious Experience of Mankind'.¹⁴

These exercises in self-awareness are introduced to the pupils without any specific direction. This is in line with the aims of impartiality and of allowing the pupils to direct their own responses. They are to be told repeatedly that any response is permitted. Yet in the art of spiritual direction the novice is always under the guidance of an experienced person who can help to interpret and direct according to the received wisdom of the tradition. It is acknowledged that there are pitfalls along the way. Yet in the approach in question pupils are inducted into consciousness raising without any such safeguards—even though the methods outlined in the book and those I experienced on the courses do show great sensitivity. The pupils themselves must interpret and guide their experiences. This seems naive and dangerous. Zaehner warns of the dangers of a type of nature

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Fontana, 1971), p. 681.

mysticism in which an experience of the cosmic consciousness of the 'all is one and one is all' type predominates. This has its roots in Eastern mysticism p. 219 and Persian Sufism and it teaches of a timeless state of being which transcends good and evil. This may encourage in certain cases an indifference to the usual distinction between right and wrong and with tragic results. In 1969 the world was shocked by the revelations at the trial of Charlie Manson for the murder of Sharon Tate and others. Zaehner argues that Manson acted as much as a result of his experiences of mysticism as of his trips on drugs. He continues:—

He (Manson) is no doubt an exceptional case, but there have been other murderers since in California who have interpreted Eastern mysticism in just this way ... there is a moral ambivalence both in neo-Vedanta and Zen ... and in our everyday world this can have disastrous results.¹⁵

In his *The Dust of Death*,¹⁶ Os Guinness discusses mysticism and its connection with religion and drug-taking. He cites the case of Timothy Leary whose aim was the expanding of consciousness and for whom the taking of drugs was secondary to this purpose. Leary's descriptions of the six levels of consciousness are not far removed from the type of awareness recommended by this approach to R.E.

One cannot of course accuse the authors of this approach of advocating this type of mysticism. The problem is that their concern not to appear to be favouring any particular brand opens the doors to the more unhealthy branches of the mystical art. In this respect, the basic premise of *New Methods* is flawed.

I have argued here that a degree of neutrality has been achieved by this approach. But this is probably debatable. Kathy Raban honestly admits in her essay on guided imagery and R.E. that it is difficult to avoid allowing one's own beliefs to influence the way in which one conducts a fantasy journey. She conducted a fantasy on the theme of darkness and light, in which she suggested that the integration of the two was a good thing. This was disputed by some Christians who felt that there could be no union of good with evil. However, she does not go on to discuss whether or not one can conduct such an exercise without one's beliefs affecting the content. She assumes that by means of scrupulous integrity such a 'crime' will be avoided. This unexamined assumption is found throughout the book.

THE SEARCH

What else is said about this inner experience or spirituality which is said to be at the heart of religion? Words like 'engagement', the p. 220 'struggle', the 'journey', even the 'basic bewilderment' mentioned in the quotation with which the book ends all come to mind. Teachers are to seek to be 'facilitators' rather than imparters of knowledge. 'Uncertainty' seems to have become a virtue. In this context, the use of the word 'story' is instructive. Religions are said to offer 'stories' which help their followers to find meaning. They 'face up to the most fundamental of all questions ... and they do so by telling a story'.¹⁷ Religious

¹⁵ R. C. Zaehner, *Our Savage God* (Collins, 1974), p. 15.

¹⁶ Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (IVP, 1973).

¹⁷ *New Methods in R.E.*, p. 138.

language is metaphorical and thus beliefs are 'simply the vehicles we use to articulate experience'.¹⁸ We have to come to terms with 'the basic bewilderment'.

When a story is told in which the believer claims to know the truth, such a believer is presented in a poor light. It is not stated but there seems to be a strong implication that such a person is not spiritual. In the following story, the Christian is presented as inferior to the Master of Zen:—

A Christian once visited a Zen Master and said, 'Allow me to read you some sentences from the Sermon on the Mount.' 'I shall listen to them with pleasure', said the Master. The Christian read a few sentences and looked up. The Master interrupted and said, 'The man who pronounced those words could truly be called a saviour of mankind.' The Christian was thrilled. He continued to read to the end. The Master then said, 'That sermon was pronounced by a man who was radiant with divinity.' The Christian's joy knew no bounds. He left, determined to return and convince the Zen Master that he should himself become a Christian. On the way back home he found Christ standing by the roadside. 'Lord,' he said enthusiastically, 'I got that man to confess that you are divine!' Jesus smiled and said, 'And what good did it do to you except to inflate your Christian ego!'.¹⁹

The Zen Master appears to be more spiritual because he is willing to learn from others whereas the Christian is seen as closed to further enlightenment because he knows the truth. The former is open-minded and tolerant, the latter arrogant and intolerant. However, had the Christian done his research more thoroughly, he would have realized that the Zen Master was only rehearsing his basic beliefs in recognizing another guru in the man Jesus. He would surely have been far from tolerant of the claim of Christ to be Lord and Master.

Such a spirituality that lays great value on the search tends to [p. 221](#) devalue those religions that claim to offer certain truth. Thus it is a spirituality that has more in common with the Eastern religions, particularly the Buddhist tradition with its stress on the need for strenuous individual discipleship in search of enlightenment. It is in accord too with the Buddhist belief that truth lies beyond individual religions. This aspect is brought out in a story called 'The Devil and his Friend'. In this story the devil is not disturbed by the fact that a man finds a piece of truth lying by the roadside. He will allow him to make a religious belief out of it. Religious beliefs are thus seen in this approach as distorting the truth rather than presenting it.

Man as intellectual, man as moral, man as under the authority of absolute laws, man as responsible for the creation ... all these aspects have no place in this spirituality. It is as if by locating the heart of religion in some esoteric, psychological experience that religion has been reduced to just that. Bonhoeffer in his Nazi prison foresaw the reduction of religion in this way and he rejected a spirituality that identified man's essential nature with his interior life. He wrote:—

The 'heart' in the biblical sense is the whole man in relation to God ... I am anxious that God should not be relegated to some last secret place ... that we should give up all our clerical subterfuges and our regarding of psychotherapy and existentialism as precursors of God!²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁹ This story is not in the book but it was used on one of the courses which I attended.

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (S.C.M., 1953), p. 118.

The requirement of phenomenology that judgement on the truth of a religion be suspended has proved a serious obstacle to the realization of the second aim of R.E.: that of encouraging spiritual development. It can give no reasons for choosing one type of spiritual development or even for getting to the starting post. It can offer no guidance since to do so would be to favour one approach rather than another. In order to overcome this impasse an assumption is made which can be approached by the use of self-awareness techniques. This overlooks the fact that some awareness exercises may be harmful. It also enables a particular view of spirituality to be advocated, one that tends towards the practice of Zen. Thus, on the one hand, an appearance of neutrality is maintained whilst in reality a preference for a particular view is conveyed. That this preference undermines traditional Christian faith should be a cause of concern to Christians. p. 222

The following words of Ninian Smart make an apt comment with which to finish:—

By removing religion, and spiritual enlightenment from the sphere of intellectual thinking, Zen appeals to those who find doctrines difficult and unfortunate.... Zen might have a special attraction to those in the vanguard of the creative arts ... it can be practised by anyone. It is adapted to everyday living. It promises a break with deadly routine. It harmonizes with the existentialist ethic. We make up our values as we go along.²¹

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²¹ Ninian Smart (1971), p. 680.