

Spirituality for Youth-Work

“This book makes a significant contribution to the international literature on spirituality and youth work. The volume shows a strong commitment to the voices of young people, prompting a deeper engagement with young people’s spiritualities in their diverse contemporary contexts. By connecting these with the critically reflective experiences and narratives of professionals, the contributions offer a tangible sense of how professional practice can engage with spirituality in a range of settings to respond to young people more holistically. [...] Researchers, students, and those working with young people will all find something of value in the drawing together of material across disciplines, including sociological and psychological perspectives. The volume offers important ways of reflecting on how a deeper engagement with spirituality supports our professional engagements with young people as human beings.”

—*Dr Andrew Orton, Senior Lecturer in Community and Youth Work, Durham University, UK*

“This volume confronts the sometimes difficult reality of working positively with youth in a relational manner in secular contexts, while taking seriously the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which denoted spiritual development as a human right. Whereas many books about youth work seem to be survival guides for those whose work is an intrepid adventure, this volume poses the twin questions of ‘How can we flourish?’ and ‘How can facilitate those we work with to flourish?’ These are not just questions for those in youth work, but for all of us who work in the health and human service sectors. The wisdom found in this book is necessary, beneficial and a real blessing.”

—*Professor Beth Crisp, School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University, Australia*

“In this important volume, readers are offered a conceptual framework that recalibrates our social policy settings, the range of services it supports and the curriculum by which youth workers are trained needs to be informed by a more holistic view of the human condition and its potential. Daughtry and Devenish—and those authors who have contributed their chapters—are to be commended for pulling together a pool of rich resources that speak directly to policy framers, youth practitioners, managers of youth services and those providing education and training opportunities.”

—*Dr Ross Bensley, Acting CEO of Re-Engage Youth Services, Adelaide, South Australia.*

“This deeply scholarly book brings to the reader a sophisticated and insightful range of chapters that examine in detail concepts related to spirituality and young people. To my surprise, the implications of this collection far exceed concerns related only to youth-work, but instead, in the breadth and depth of the topics, present insight into spirituality in a post-modern society and the fundamental desire for meaning that emerges within all humans. [...] The authors are to be congratulated on their timely and evocative contributions.”

—*Dr Carol Irizarry, Associate Professor of Social Work, School of Social and Policy Studies, Flinders University, Australia.*

Spirituality for Youth-Work:

*New Vocabulary, Concepts
and Practices*

Edited by

Phil Daughtry and Stuart Devenish

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	viii
Foreword	ix
Section 1: Social Context	
‘The Young Ones’	2
Joel McKerrow	
Chapter One.....	3
Spirituality, Religion and Youth in Secular Times	
David Tacey	
Chapter Two	16
Spiritual Education: Drawing Out What Is Within	
David Tacey	
Chapter Three	32
Spirituality in a Secular Age: Possibilities for Youth Work	
Trudi Cooper	
Section 2: Identity Formation	
‘Napkin Maps’	52
Joel McKerrow	
Chapter Four.....	54
Constructing Who I Am: Exploring the Contribution of Religion and Spirituality to Younger Peoples’ Identity	
Rowan Lewis	
Chapter Five	79
Anti-Suppressant Youth Work: Exploring Identity and Spirituality for Practitioners	
Sean Lappin	

Chapter Six	96
Created to Create: Balancing Spiritual Development in an Indigenous Holistic Framework	
Rod Baxter and Merinda Jackson	
Section 3: Youth Work as Instilling Justice	
‘Little Fishes’	116
Joel McKerrow	
Chapter Seven.....	119
Angry Young Men and the Spiritual Intelligence of Peace-Building as a Youth Work Practice	
Ben Lohmeyer	
Chapter Eight.....	137
Conceptual Understandings of Justice: Enhancing the Human Flourishing Work of Youth Work Practitioners	
Tracey Price	
Chapter Nine.....	168
Life, Loss and Lock-Up: Spiritual Care among Incarcerated Young People in South Australia	
Nigel Uppill	
Section 4: Education and Youth Work	
‘The Low Road or the High?’	190
Joel McKerrow	
Chapter Ten	192
Artful Reimagining: Enhancing Spiritual Resonance through Storytelling and the Arts	
Jean Caldow	
Chapter Eleven	217
A Storytelling Spirituality: Narrative as an Alternative Approach to Spiritual Discovery and Learning	
Kirsten Macaitis and Phil Daughtry	

Chapter Twelve	237
Educating for the Conversation: Religion, Spirituality, and Secular Youth Work Dave Fagg	
Conclusion.....	260
Maxine Green	
Contributor Biographies	270
Index.....	274

ABSTRACT

This book addresses a systemic gap in the human services/youth work literature. While the notion of spirituality makes the odd appearance in the literature, it is often vaguely defined and underdeveloped—both as a concept and as a mode of practice. This ambiguity is symptomatic of the broader shift in the sociological context of Western and global societies that has been referred to variously as post-modern, late-modern and/or post-secular. From the perspective of the relationship between human development and the spiritual/theological, we live in a “time between times”. We have not yet worked out how to speak of “spirit”; nor how to include its meanings in positive youth intervention, and developments in our language for a public spiritual consciousness remains in a state of cultural flux. This book offers a coherent vocabulary and narrative from which to construct a more explicit and deliberate practice of spiritual care, education and professional identity for youth workers. It speaks directly to youth work practitioners, managers of youth services, those providing youth work education, and anyone with an interest in youth and spirituality research and practice.

FOREWORD

This book has its origins in a two-day conference event entitled *Burning Conversations*, held at Tabor College of Higher Education, Adelaide, South Australia, over October 1-2, 2014. The conference was characterised by people engaging with beautiful ideas in robust and respectful dialogue, a sense of community, care, hospitality, poetry and an essential joy and gratitude for the gift of life. All of the chapters in the book were selected papers presented in “seed” form by the authors at the conference. Contributors come mainly from the Australian context, with an important contribution from New Zealand and a response from Maxine Green—who was an invited Keynote speaker from the UK. The volume is structured around four key youth work themes: addressing the social context, identity formation, justice, and education.

The intention of the conference—and subsequently this publication—was and is to open up a space for meaningful conversation about the significance of spirituality to human experience, with particular reference to the experience of youth work practice. It is the view of the authors in this book that this conversation is necessary because the notion of spirituality continues to capture the contemporary imagination, and persists in our vocabulary as a word that points to the essence and integration of life as a whole. Yet, spirituality is a contested notion, and much confusion persists about its meaning and place as an aspect of human consciousness, and its application in our personal and social worlds. Such confusion is an inevitable consequence of the seismic cultural and intellectual movements in Western societies from the period of the Enlightenment onwards. These movements have intensified in the late-modern era through developments such as postmodern deconstruction, the globalisation of economies, the policy and practice of multiculturalism and the normalisation of the secular and pluralist democracy. It is into that dialectic of confusion caused by the attraction and repulsion around the place and meaning of spirituality... that this volume speaks.

The context for these conversations is the youth work relationship. Youth work, like spirituality, is itself a contested phrase and an oft misunderstood profession. The authors in this volume hold an understanding of youth work that aligns with notions of community development, informal education, and young people as primary clients and emergent adults. In plain language, the youth work relationship is one in

which the youth worker seeks to offer a safe, ethical and professional space in which young people can develop self-awareness, moral philosophies and fuller participation as citizens in the various communities to which they belong. Such a notion of youth work is not embedded in one particular religious and/or social ideology, but seeks to draw from a range of educational sources in order to better enable and support young people to identify the meaning and purpose of their own lives, choices, responsibilities and contributions. In our view, spirituality seems very important as a centring and unifying energy, principle and way of being in relation to this work.

The voices in this volume are variegated but nonetheless hold in common three strong convictions. The first is the belief—based in research, theory, practice and experience—that spirituality is a notion worth wrestling with and taking the trouble to conceptualise and re-conceptualise more carefully. The second is that young people matter and have the right to have access to coherent spiritual narratives, vocabulary and practices from which to formulate their own sense of living from the centre and from the experience of the numinous. And thirdly, that spirituality must be lived and explored in the experience and world of the youth worker/educator, for there to be any real chance of youth access to points of living reference for their own journeys.

We—the editors—commend this volume to you—the readers—as a series of important texts and living artefacts. Each is worthy of careful study in its own right. Collectively, the volume offers a mosaic of sacred threads, source material for coats of many colours. May the offerings presented here both enliven your consciousness and form your practice. May you sense a renewal of joy, hope, courage and compassion as you embrace the elegance of work with young people in the context of spirit.

Phil Daughtry & Stuart Devenish

SECTION 1:

SOCIAL CONTEXT

To what extent do young people care about spirituality in a secular age? What language and processes are relevant to assisting young people to engage with spirituality? How is spirituality a potential dynamic in youth work in light of our structural contexts? This first section explores the meaning of spirituality in and for youth work in light of our particular era and social setting. David Tacey introduces perspectives from contemporary philosophy and experiential learning and includes a significant number of youth voices. Trudi Cooper outlines the meaning of the sociological features of late-modern Western societies with a focus on the particular Australian context and youth spirituality studies.

‘THE YOUNG ONES’

BY JOEL MCKERROW

The young ones came, but they did not sit at our feet.
They came from all the places we wished they did not have to.
 They came from broken.
 They came from burning.
We watched the yearning, falling, tripping mess of our humanity
laying there bare and naked. A mirror of our own mess.
They came and we watched and they waited and we waited
and in the silence that fell we looked into the other.
Where eyes are doors and doors are open and for a time we
 looked.
In the hazy mix of misspoken slang our worlds found collision.
Embarrassed we looked away, hoping they did not notice our
 stumble,
but they did not care. Their world was a world away from ours,
they did not sit at our feet. For all they knew was that feet were
 for kicking,
out of home, out of school, out...always out.
So they run inside out.
Pain held on their skin and in their fist and middle finger.
They run and they yell and we tell them they are enough
but they hear the voices telling them they never shall be,
and they read the magazines telling them they never shall be,
and they drink it all away and they push us all away.
It is a dance, this work that we do,
it is a tug-of-war leaving limbs a tangled mess.
Yet, if you can hold on, feel the burn of the rope between fingers
 and still hold on,
if you tell them you will not let go,
if you hold on and tell them and hold on and tell them,
then one day they may stop the pushing and the pulling and
to-and-fro-ing.
One day they shall let us into their world
and there, in the silence, we stare and they stare back
and they know they have finally been understood.

CHAPTER ONE

SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AND YOUTH IN SECULAR TIMES

DAVID TACEY

Abstract

It is ironic that in a so-called “secular age”, the sensibilities of Western consumer culture in general and young people in particular, are creating a new hunger towards the spiritual. But that spirit does not come pre-packaged, contained in the guise of traditional religion. The “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) phenomenon is now well-known. The question now is what shape will the spirit/spiritual take? What forms will this evolving hunger for spirit take, and what are the implications for community organisations such as schools and universities, churches and care agencies, and especially (in this context) for youth workers? In times past, the traditional religions—including Christianity—spoke *ex cathedra*, giving the substance of belief unprocessed to an unsuspecting public. In today’s world, youth are not interested in the abstract propositions that have not been verified by their experience. If it is true that, “Called or not called, God is always present”—then what is required for an authentic personal and public response to that reality? This chapter arises out of my teaching courses on spirituality in a university setting over the past decade, and the kinds of responses that students are now beginning to offer. This chapter addresses the responses of young males who have grown up in a secular age devoid of the teachings of Christianity, to the spiritual reality which continually erupts within their own lives, and which emerges in themes of contemporary culture, cinema and the arts.

“Wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born” (Arnold, 1855/1965, p. 288).

We live in a period of history in which public opinion is privileging “spirituality” above “religion”, and where the latter is regarded with a good deal of suspicion. “Religion”, as the term is used today, refers to

traditional Christian practices which are considered by the majority of youth to be anachronistic and uninspiring. “Spirituality” refers to the personal pursuit of the sacred, often expressed in individualistic ways. This gets a lot of good press; young people speak of it in glowing terms and their idealisations raise cause for concern. The new spirituality is influenced by Eastern philosophies, and the turn to the East is forcing Western spirituality and religion further apart. I sometimes imagine spirituality and religion as separating continents. They were once fused and represented a stable platform for civilisation. But a rupture has occurred in the continental plates, and the foundations of culture have been shaken. This indicates that the West is in crisis and things are adrift in society and human nature.

I should say at the outset that there is a common misperception that all spirituality outside formal religion is “New Age”. I disagree with this view and have written extensively on this matter (Tacey, 2001). The New Age is a highly commercialised, ideological and often anti-Christian movement. It is a cluster of industries that package and sell spiritual ideas and technologies often stolen from indigenous cultures or borrowed from non-Christian sources. Most youth spirituality is not New Age and ought not to be categorised in this way. It is a grassroots, popular movement which is a response to the limitations of secularism. It is, if anything, a Romantic rebellion against Reason. The New Age would like to lay claim to this broad movement, but cannot do so. The spirituality movement is a spontaneous upwelling of spiritual desire and arises from the spiritual life of the post-secular condition. It is not the result of marketing forces, although it can be influenced and manipulated by them.

For those who don’t look deeply enough into youth spirituality, the New Age shop-front is all they see. This causes New Age advocates to claim that the New Age is set to eclipse all religious traditions and to become the dominant social trend (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). It causes secular-materialists to conclude that youth spirituality is sheer fantasy or escapism, and should be strongly opposed (Carrette & King, 2005). It causes some conservative religious commentators to claim that it is a *gnostic* revival, set to destroy Christianity and to be combated at all costs (Hanegraaf, 1996; Pacwa, 1992). Both the progressive left and the conservative right dislike youth spirituality because it does not fit into the categories and goals that they have so much investment in.

Instead of seeing youth spirituality as some kind of conspiracy or fraud, I see it as a genuine upwelling of spiritual life in a time of darkness. It could be the harbinger of new things to come, and ought not to be categorised in paranoid terms. It is certainly difficult to square with old-

style religion, but what we find in youth spirituality may, in my view, be close to the mystical sources of Western religion. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor (2007), the philosopher of religion, puts forward the argument that Christianity has been leading toward, and preparing the ground for, a secular, non-churchy spirituality from the beginning. He believes, as I do, that secular spirituality ought to be taken seriously, and we might be seeing not some abhorrent social trend but a genuine spiritual revival.

The construction of spirituality and religion as opposites is anomalous from an historical point of view. "Spirituality" once referred to the living core of religion and the capacity to appropriate religion in a personal way. While those who followed weekly services and creedal precepts were said to be "religious", others who wanted to take faith a step further, and establish a personal relationship with God, were said to be "spiritual". But in the wider community today, spirituality has little or nothing to do with formal religion, and refers to all forms of activity that concern the search for meaning. Religious people sometimes claim spirituality has been hijacked by the secular, and this may be the case, but it is now an historical fact and cannot be denied. Recently the idea of "secular spirituality" has emerged in popular and scholarly discourse, a term which would have been viewed as contradictory a hundred years ago (Van Ness, 1996).

Spirituality and religion became separated due to secularisation. Originally, the secular state was neutral toward religion and not hostile to it, but this changed over time. In the course of history, "the secular" became *secularism*, an ideology which was basically inimical to religion and saw it as escapism and mystification. Secularism found religion to be an embarrassment to the primary idea of the secular state, that is, the notion of the autonomy and independence of the human will. Appeals to God, or spirit, or forces beyond us were not what secularism wanted to hear. Consequently, the spiritual life of modernity was shut down and forced underground; churches declined and lost authority in the public sphere. But spirit could not be wholly expunged from human nature. Secularism resulted in the privatisation of the sacred, and that is what we find in our young people today. They are alienated from churches because they are products of a secular culture that has devalued public worship and forced spiritual life into the human subject. This weakened religion in the public sphere and intensified spiritual longing in the private sphere.

Secularism, like state capitalism or communism, would like to dispense with the spiritual, but cannot do so. The spiritual is part of who we are as human beings, and its suppression would not lead to its

annihilation, only to its distortion. One might define spirituality as the search for connectedness, which seems to operate in four major areas: connectedness to others and society; to nature and environment; to the interior self or soul; and to the cosmos and to what some still call God. But the forging of links to these areas is easier said than done. Making links between self and other, and the Ultimate Other, is what culture and religion are about, and without the support of culture and religion it can be difficult or even impossible to achieve. Yet we live in a DIY society which has unbounded optimism in the capabilities of the individual. Although many define spirituality as “connectedness”, most do not realise that this is precisely what religion means. The term *religion* derives from the Latin *religio*, meaning “to bind back” or “reconnect”. Religion and spirituality are fairly much the same thing, although the term “religion” has narrowed in recent times.

In an ideal world, spirituality and religion belong together. Most students don't like me saying this, because the fashion now is all for divisiveness. But spirituality and religion need each other, although not necessarily in their current forms, where they are obviously not going to work together. Spirituality offers personal experience of the numinous, an apprehension of the mystical dimensions of the world, and an intuitive and feeling-based access to the ideas upon which religion is founded. Religion offers a common language to describe and articulate spiritual experience. It offers a conceptual framework, historical background, and the possibility of the present speaking to the past, and the past to the present. Religion offers the capacity to build and share community. Spirituality without religion is like a flowering plant without roots. We might appreciate the flowers and admire their beauty, but they fade quickly because they lack ground in the soil of community and ancestral life. Religion without spirituality, on the other hand, is form without substance.

Young people often say they want spirituality without religion. During my ten year period of teaching spirituality at university, I heard the constant refrain: “I am spiritual but not religious”, abbreviated as SBNR. This phrase, which some see as a cliché, originated in the United States but is used worldwide (Fuller, 2001). Young people tend to see formal religions as out of step with their lives, and are often negative toward them. But youth are often unaware of the way in which their values have been shaped by society. As I've said, modernity has an unbounded optimism in the capabilities of the individual, but achieving connection to the four areas mentioned is a major undertaking, and requires help. In my view, spirituality needs to overcome its individualistic character, to which

it is currently wedded. It is doing little to hold society together. Throughout history the role of spirit is to bind people together, and yet private spirituality is part of the fragmentation process.

Youth spirituality, directly or indirectly influenced by the East, is offering a corrective to Western religion, which has tended to be outwardly focused and external; its God has been “up there” in heaven, its emphasis has been on the Jesus of history not the mystical Christ, its spirituality has been conducted through good works, social justice and charity. The internal dimension has been sorely lacking, found only in cloisters and monasteries. Youth are reminding the West of a forgotten or hidden dimension: spirituality involves the cultivation of spirit and the transformation of the personality (*metanoia*). The modern hunger is exemplified in Brecht’s play, *Life of Galileo*, Sagredo asks, “Where’s God?” and Galileo says, “Inside us or nowhere” (Brecht, 1972, p. 23). Like any corrective, it can move too far in the other direction, so that the out-breath of spirit becomes eclipsed by the in-breath. But the in-breath is scriptural and all too easily lost by the extraverted West:

“The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

Youth are bringing up this lost or hidden dimension and offering a necessary corrective to the West. But as they turn inward, they are not only losing touch with the world but also with each other. Spirituality can never reach its fulfilment in a state of isolation. If it remains private, spirit becomes frustrated and does not flourish. Irish writer John O’Donohue (1973) put it this way:

Although each soul is individual and unique, by its very nature the soul hungers for relationship. No soul is private. As well as being the vital principle of your individual life, your soul is ancient and eternal; it weaves you into the great tapestry of spirit which connects everything everywhere (p. xvii).

Spirit longs to be shared and communicated with others; it is a transpersonal force with a transpersonal goal. This is another way of saying that spirit asks us to love, and love cannot be experienced alone. The health of the individual is based on his or her ability to relate to and love others. This is also true of society: if society is not animated by the flow of spirit and shared meaning it suffers enormously. The bonds that create community, dry up, and people become shut up inside cocoons,

generating the alienation of suburban living. In our world, it is hard to avoid living narrowly focused lives, because society promotes individualism above community. But individualism and spirituality are antithetical.

Today the search for connectedness takes place in an utterly disconnected world. So the spiritual search is against the odds from the outset. Many pretend that spirituality is possible in a disconnected world. Some connections can be made, if we struggle to find and consolidate them, but the drift of society is against connections. Society continues, such as it is, but the sense of community is being eroded. Society without community makes the spiritual quest problematic. Private spirituality is no solution to our individual or social problems, but that is where many of us are stuck today, because the traditions do not speak to us and we can't return to them in their present form. My sense is that many of us are in denial about these problems, and young people in particular seem caught by the illusion that personal spirituality will be the solution to their problems; they say they need to practice it more often, and things will be okay. The idea that personal spirituality is sufficient is a modern myth that has not yet been seen through. Some have said the myth of spirituality is an invention of consumer society, which claims that our needs can be met on an individualistic basis.

We see the consumerist element most strongly in the New Age movement; you feel a spiritual need, you purchase products or texts from other cultures and you fill up on them. This has rightly been called spiritual materialism (Trungpa, 1978). It is odd to see spirituality co-opted by consumer capitalism and reduced to the status of a commodity, but that is what is happening in some quarters today. People defend their personal spirituality vigorously, and any criticism is met with a sharp rebuke. But I have met too many people claiming to be spiritual, and suffering at the same time from isolation, depression or anxiety, to enable me to accept at face value the popular spin on spirituality. I recall speaking to a young student who told me how important spirituality was to his life, but it made him feel divorced from family and friends. A month after our conversation, he committed suicide and left a note saying he could not bear his isolation. That was a defining moment for me, when I realised spirituality is not all that it is made out to be. Some will reply that people die of loneliness in community as well, especially if their lifestyle or sexuality is not approved by the group. This is true, but there was something about this man's story that made me aware of the limitations of the "spirituality but no religion" path. It is a belief system that requires critique and unpacking.

Having explored why private spirituality is not sufficient, I will turn now to why youth cannot accept public religion in its present form. We stand in a difficult place: between traditional religions that have been outgrown, and a spirituality that all too often leads to alienation. We have to live in the interregnum between two ages, one that is dead, and the other yet to be born.

Youth have a legitimate desire for spirituality, but the old way of doing religion is not able to meet their needs. The formal religions have been incapable of moving into the arena of youth spirituality and connecting meaningfully with youth. The churches continue to think in terms of their old models of worship and evangelisation, but these turn young people off rather than on. Modernity has changed everything, and both sides of the spirituality/religion divide must change with it. Religion faces a real problem, as it believes its forms of worship are “good enough” as they exist. Its theology is informed by the notion that truth is immutable and religion sees no reason to change in response to shifts in cultural conditions. Jung put the situation in paradoxical terms:

Eternal truth needs a human language that alters with the spirit of the times (Jung, 1946, §396);

And more radically:

All the true things must change and only that which changes remains true (Jung, 1955-1956, §503).

If the religions don't get this, they will never speak to the rising generations. Secularisation has displaced the old religious forms, and made the longing for *religio* a personal quest or private concern. If religion wants to connect with youth it will have to learn to connect with their interiority, and not expect them to conform to the collective forms of the past. This means religion has to become psychologically astute and sophisticated. It cannot bypass the soul but must pass through it if it wants to connect to the spiritual lives of young adults. The religions are still thinking in traditional, not post-modern or post-secular terms. The most that many churches can do for youth is try to generate interest in social justice, but even this can be just another defence against the interiority of their spiritual lives.

The most basic cause of the disjunction between youth and religion today is that youth are not interested in abstract propositions that have not been verified by their experience. Religion is based on many propositions and beliefs, but young people are taught by science, education and

modernity not to believe anything that has been handed down from the past. For modernity and science, belief is discounted. What is crucial is experimentation, as in the scientific method, which only draws conclusions after experiments have been conducted, and precepts tested against experience. Religion asks people to believe a lot of ideas, creeds, dogmas, and youth find these unacceptable. They won't believe unless they have reasons to do so, unless their experience has shown them that these beliefs have validity. If they believe in anything, it has to pass through their experience first.

In the past, religion would deliver its creeds to people, expect them to be believed, and if people were lucky, they would find a connection between creeds and experience during the course of their lives. Religious dictates would be imposed from above, by authority and fiat, and enter through the head. If we were lucky, the religious message might eventually find its way to the heart, where it could be verified and backed up by experience. Then people became inspired by their faith and religion became anchored in their lives. Today it works in reverse: experience is primary, and abstractions come afterwards. Today's generations, brought up on science and critical thinking, must experience something first, and then they can reflect on it and connect with tradition. So we have moved from a world where tradition came first and experience second, to a world where experience is first and tradition second. If this is carried through, the result will be mysticism, that is, experience of God, not second-hand thoughts about God.

The West is not good at doing this. The East is better at it, which is one reason why there is such a widespread interest in Eastern pathways, especially among the young. The East places experience first and asks people to experiment with spiritual practices and draw conclusions based on experience. This is the perfect formula for religious life in a post-modern, post-secular and scientific world, which I guess is why Albert Einstein (2005) famously declared that the future of religion is Buddhism (p. 202). My own view is that Western traditions won't attract young people until they learn what the East has always known, that one has to "start with the heart", and work upwards from there. Experience has to be engaged, and this is more so now than ever before. The West has some background here, but it is found in monastic contexts and mystical traditions. The hunger of the heart needs to be engaged, and then the rest follows. The only kind of religion that will meet the needs of the young will be mystical, experiential and existential. Anything else they will reject and keep on rejecting.

Young males and spirituality

Young men often enter my classes with the announcement that they are atheists. In one class, every male declared himself to be an atheist, while only one or two females did likewise. Most females in the class said they were in search of God, or, if not, they were agnostic. The males claimed the females were fence-sitting, and they should come over to their side. But one of the women said: “Why do you guys think of yourselves as atheists? What’s with you guys? And why would you even enrol in a course on spirituality if you have these attitudes?” One young man ventured an awkward reply: “I just want to find out what youse [sic] believe”, he said, as if the matter had nothing to do with him. But the woman would have none of this, and replied: “In my view you guys are so full of your selves that you cannot imagine an authority greater than your own. That’s what your atheism is about—a refusal to accept a higher authority”. The room fell silent. The guys felt accused and the criticism hit hard. I refused to get involved in the strife, because my university was officially atheist, and there was nothing new in this position. I just let the young woman’s words hang in the air, as an educative force.

The problem of God, for most young men, is that God seems unbelievable, remote and far away. As one young man said, “Even if God exists, he seems so far removed from my experience that he may as well not exist”. This seems to be the real problem when it comes to developing a relationship with God. Knowing this, I encourage students to review their personal experience, and write about moments of healing in which they have felt the presence of something greater than themselves. I don’t use God language in this exercise, because atheists and agnostics would be offended. Instead I use the term “sacred”, and ask them to search for moments in their lives when they have felt close to something sacred. To argue conceptually for the existence of God does not work, and ends up in sterile disputes. So we leave the head for a moment and go to the heart. Almost everyone, even atheists, can relate to special moments when they felt moved by grace or presence. I let them stay with these moments and draw their own conclusions.

One of my personal mottos is the Latin maxim: “Called or not called, God is always present”. If God is alive, God is present to everyone and not only to believers. One student hit the mark when she said: “There is too much God language, and not enough God presence, in religion”. Here is a brief story of Joshua’s struggle with God and spirituality:

The notion of God that I grew up with in the church was, I see now, extremely limited. To think that God disapproves of certain styles of dress,

music, or words, or any other thing that my church did not like, seems insulting to the infinite beauty and wisdom that is behind the creation of the universe. After ‘losing my faith’ I spent some years as an atheist: variously an existentialist, solipsist, nihilist, hedonist. But I was attempting to fill a spiritual hole with an intellectual peg. This, I think, is the problem with most of the world’s philosophies, and goes a fair way to explaining why philosophers tend to be so depressed, and often insane or suicidal. When I found God again, I was amazed to find that there was no intellectual support for the notion of God’s existence, and yet it was something I knew through sheer intuition. On one occasion, I feel that I met God, not in body or in mind, but in spirit. I felt as if the whole world fell into place, as if it made new sense in its own way. Everything that exists is a product of God’s imagination, and God loves his Creation. (Josh, personal communication).

Here is a story of Jason, an eighteen-year-old student, who describes his spiritual journey from Catholicism to Buddhism, and to a form of mystical Christianity:

Experience is a fundamental part of spirituality. It is through experience that we learn about ourselves, others, the world, and how we relate to it all. Experience is powerful because it is your own. What has attracted me to practising Buddhism is its emphasis on listening to the teachings, and experimenting with them in our actual experience. You are encouraged to ask questions about the religion, such as ‘How does this relate to my life?’ and also, ‘Is this actually true?’ Then, through direct experience of the truth of the teachings, you develop trust in them, can realize them, and know that it is your experience.

This was what I found lacking in my education and upbringing in Catholic institutions. At school and again at church, I was simply told that this is the truth, that these are the rules, and urged to believe in and subscribe to them. I was never encouraged to experiment with or test the church’s teachings, and so I never developed the feeling that this was my truth, or these were my rules. I could never embrace what I was being taught as it all felt so alien to me, and I felt removed from it. Mass was just a hollow ritual, the Eucharist was cardboard. It was all quite easy to set aside, as I had never felt part of it.

What I feel to be spiritual—the intuitive, interior or mystical side of things—I tend to locate not in church but in nature, in other people, and in community service. I think it is a very sad state of affairs concerning the Catholic church that the only way I found out about the interesting work of Father Thomas Merton, a man whose writings speak directly to me because they are so liberating, was through reading the wonderful autobiography of the Dalai Lama. This was the year after I finished secondary school. Ironically, it is only now, through my growing understanding of Buddhism,

and through my readings of Merton, that I have begun to glimpse the spirituality and mysticism of Catholicism. (Jason, personal communication).

It is ironic, as this student indicates, that it was his reading of a Buddhist work that made him alert to the mystical potentials of his own natal tradition. Perhaps he would not have felt impelled to disinherit Catholicism had he been made aware of the contemplative writings of Merton and other mystics. Christian leaders have failed to understand that in times of disbelief, when religious claims appear incredulous to the scientific mind, the path of mystical interiority is one of the few ways in which religious life can be recovered.

One student who denied having faith at the start of the course had this to say at the end:

It is hard to sway a convinced materialist like myself from his constant scepticism about religious matters, at least I thought it was before this course. But it is terribly hard to continue to oppose the idea of 'spirit' when it is presented in poetry and inspirational writings. Before the course, I blocked out religion as irrelevant to my life, it made no sense to me at all in its conventional, archaic and drab form. But when spirituality is expressed in poetry, passion, and subjectivity, I have to take another look, as these expressions are inspirational and move me in an unexpected way. I now see that emotion and spirit can be included in my world, and I can have such elements without straying from reality. (Steven, personal communication).

When a person is "moved" in an "unexpected way", he is able to change his views and discover that religion is speaking to him. I often notice that young men are concerned about the problem of reality and how to adjust to it. Steven says he is pleased he can have spirit "without straying from reality". Secularism has conditioned our notion of reality, defining it in its own terms and excluding spirit from the real. People dare not affirm spirit in case they become "unreal" to themselves and disloyal to their concept of the real. However once spirit has been presented as a reality accessible to their subjectivity, they are prepared to turn around.

As soon as we get an inkling of God in our experience, the God of tradition appears as a real possibility on the horizon. But without the internal connection there is no way that people are going to make the old leap of faith. The philosopher of religion Bernard Lonergan (1968) summed up effective religious practice in a simple formulation: The fruit of the truth must grow and mature on the tree of the subject, before it can be plucked and placed in the absolute realm (p. 3).

I could not think of a better formulation of the challenge facing traditions today. The traditions want to hand people the fruit of the truth and ask them to accept it. People won't—can't—accept it, unless it has been grown from their experience. A great many religious people do not understand this, and in fact, they trivialise it. I have heard such people say: why do youth want what tradition cannot give them? Why do they want the “funny internal feeling” before they can believe? Are they so narcissistic that everything has to pass through their own experience before it can be accepted? All of these questions come from a position of bad faith. They show that religious people do not understand the rupture that has taken place between modernity and the past; they fail to see that the era of belief is over, and the only kind of faith available to us, now and in the future, is a faith generated from experience rather than second-hand sources and outside authority.

Instead of complaining about youth, why they are rejecting traditional forms, and why they are narcissistic, etc., it would be better if religious people put their energy into constructing bridges between experience and tradition. Bridges can be built, but they will need to be experiential rather than conceptual. The first task is to contact the heart and soul of individuals, and lead forth what is inside the heart. Here we need a new theology based not on the self as cursed by original sin, but as blessed by the grace of God. Man and woman are made in the image of God, and the theology based on the Fall says this image was sullied or lost a long time ago, and human experience cannot be trusted, or cannot possibly lead to God because it is fallen and sinful. This old theology is inadequate because it is one-sided; it did not read scripture correctly and forgot the paradox that although we are fallen creatures, we nevertheless continue to have an abiding relationship, if attenuated at times, with our Creator.

In addition to sin and corruption, there is, even now, the possibility of grace and presence. Education means to lead out what is within, and this is surely the future of religious education: it needs to make landfall on something holy in the human heart, and lead it forth. But unless this ground work is done, there can be no bridges built between the new spirituality and religion. Churches throughout the world continue to ask “where have all the young people gone?” and “how can we get them back?”, but such questions cannot be answered until we understand modernity and the conditions of our secular and now post-secular society.

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CHAPTER TWO

SPIRITUAL EDUCATION: DRAWING OUT WHAT IS WITHIN

DAVID TACEY

Abstract

This chapter continues my analysis of a ten-year teaching experiment, offering spirituality courses in a profoundly secular university. Despite tensions from colleagues and resistance from the institution, students nevertheless welcomed the risky and paradoxical intrusion of the spiritual into the academic curriculum. In this chapter, it is the voices of young women to take prominence. The chapter explores young women's—in particular—attunement to the mystical in life, and their ready “sense” that there are resources to be found in the spirit and the spiritual, without necessarily being trapped by the tradition in which much religious belief and practice comes pre-wrapped. Spiritual education may not be the darling of secular humanism, and may not receive the levels of prominence, funding or profile which is valued by best-practice dictation in our schools, colleges and universities. Nevertheless many young people in my classes embraced its relevance and significance to their own lives. Drawing out what is within ought to be a primary goal of the social and human sciences.

Today faith requires an inner life (Dupré, 1998, p. 4).

The theological problem today is the art of drawing religion out of an individual, not pumping it into him or her. The art is to help people become what they really are (Rahner, cited by Gallagher, 1998, p. 75).

Build it and they will come

When the idea first came to me to teach a subject on spirituality I did not know what kind of students to expect. My colleagues were suspicious and said I would probably attract two kinds. The first kind would be the “very religious”, who would present problems of intellectual rigidity; it was said

that they are Teflon-coated, because nothing new will stick to them as they already have the answers. The second group, it was said, would be the “New Agers”, who would present a different kind of problem: “flakiness”. As one colleague remarked, “The religious right and New Age odd-balls will sign up for your class”. Or so they imagined. They did not value spirituality and saw the idea as inimical to university study. For them, spirituality was a “phase” humanity went through on the way to becoming enlightened. It was a phase of civilisation’s childhood, to be shunted aside by a mature consciousness. However, I agree with Mircea Eliade (1969), who said: “The sacred is not a stage in the history of consciousness, but an element in the structure of consciousness” (p. i). Many intellectuals are blinded by the prejudices of secularism, and do not understand the peculiarities of our time. The sacred is not disappearing into the mists of the past. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1996/1998) put it: the enigmatic ‘re’ at the start of the word ‘religion’ ensures that this phenomenon will re-turn, re-vive, re-new. He wrote, “Religion is that which succeeds in returning” (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 29).

Many academics like to see themselves as up to date with developments in philosophy, but they are lagging behind if they refuse to take note of what the most influential philosopher of recent decades is saying. Derrida wrote numerous works in which he said intellectual culture was out of touch with social reality, where religious impulses were alive and gaining vitality. Materialistic secularism was valued by intellectual elites, but, he said, “Secularisation is only a manner of speaking” (Derrida, 2000/2005, p. 32). Intellectuals who believe materialism is the rational option for thinking people do not understand the post-secular condition. Philosophers are shedding the old materialism, but many do not know this is happening. Far from being an atavistic regression to an earlier stage, spirituality and religion are at the forefront of thought.

My university colleagues said spirituality was not an established academic field, and the subject would involve a risky encounter with student beliefs and subjectivity. This was true, but my sense was that a new interest in spiritual life is indicative of postmodernity, and I wanted to take a risk and see what emerged. My colleagues’ anxiety rose as I designed the course, and they warned I should not expect them to lecture on it, or to fill in for me in the event of my sickness. It was going to be a one-person effort. I discerned that their fear was not related to the experimental nature of the course, but to the threat it posed to their belief in the autonomy of the human will. If there was substance to spirituality, their worldview was defective, and this was the real issue. Therefore, it was to their benefit to believe that only eccentric or

odd students would be attracted to the course, and it would not draw the mainstream.

They were quite wrong about this. The majority of those who signed up were in fact from the secular mainstream. The course did attract some from faith traditions but these were mostly visiting students from other countries. Islamic, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist students from abroad enrolled in the course, but the majority of Australians were from non-religious backgrounds. They were not advocates of the New Age or adherents of cults. They were not interested in esoterica such as spirit travel, spells, channelling, occultism, ghosts or crystals. These interests constitute spiritualism not spirituality, but many confuse the two (Tacey, 2003, pp. 207-214). The spirituality of my students was not New Age but *postmodern*, since we know that the postmodern includes the possibility of the post-secular (Caputo, 2001).

Teaching a course on spirituality to such a diverse group presented challenges I had never encountered before. I felt I had to tiptoe around a lot of sensitivities. Firstly, my university strictly forbade religious proselytising; the constitution, drawn up in the heyday of academic Marxism, stated that those engaged in preaching could be summarily dismissed. Secondly, due to the multi-cultural, multi-faith, but mostly, “no-faith”, positions of students, I could not construct myself as a religious educator in the sense of promoting one tradition. I had to find a new standpoint as a spiritual educator; an existential approach that, as it were, preceded any confessional tradition. This was not easy, and did not develop overnight. I discovered my role after numerous mistakes and errors.

For instance, in the first year of the course, I discussed Fall and Redemption theology in a lecture on humanity’s relation to the Creator. This caused a stir of protest in the student body, and numbers of students stood up in the lecture and walked out of the hall. I had apparently crossed the line of acceptability, and had to apologise later. Some atheists protested at the Christian overlay of the course, and said they did not sign up for this course to be indoctrinated into religion. They were annoyed that my teaching appeared to be crossing over into preaching. I had to balance all these sensitivities as best as I could, and find a language that offended none, neither Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, nor atheists. After several months of trial and error, I found that language, which was mysticism.

The mystical temper of our time

Mysticism appealed to them like nothing else; but all great mystics come from one tradition or another. What was I to do? Paradoxically, I found students did not care whether mystics were Christian, Islamic, Jewish or

Hindu, as long as their language was not dogmatic or theological. They did not like the way theology asserted positive knowledge of the sacred, but were enthralled by how mystics evoked the sacred. I could teach the Christian Eckhart, the Hindu Kabir, the Islamic Rumi, and there would be no protest. Why was this so? It was because the mystics began with experience and not with doctrine. Like today's youth, mystics eschewed doctrine, and often got into trouble for doing so. Students could relate to anything that used experience as its touchstone, but anything abstract or doctrinal was suspect. Their bias was not against Christianity as such, but against theology of any tradition. The answer to the conflict of religions is to find an experiential ground which is mystical. My task was not to convert students to any tradition, but to make them aware of the numinous in their lives and cultures. They could then supply the proper nouns that suited their tastes and backgrounds, but they did not want me to give them religious instruction.

In effect, this meant Islamic students became more deeply grounded in their Islamic faith, and Jewish students in their Jewish faith, even though the course was not about Islam or Judaism. Some students who had abandoned Christianity in their youth found it spoke to them again. The knack of spiritual education is to reach a ground which is common to all traditions, and yet prior to any one of them. So "spirituality" as I conceived it for the purpose of this course was a mixture of literary study, mystical writing, psychology, philosophy and personal reflection. I included some of the mystics already mentioned, as well as the poetry of William Blake, Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy and Les Murray. I drew from the prose works of Irishman John O'Donohue, Canadian Margaret Atwood, and Aboriginal David Mowaljarlai.

To my astonishment, former students would sometimes visit my office years after completing the course and announce that they were now ordained as Buddhist monks or nuns, Anglican priests, Presbyterian ministers, or Jewish rabbis. They would say the course helped them find their way into a personal connection to their respective faith traditions. I found this humbling but also astonishing given the "generic" nature of the course. "Don't blame me", I would say with a wry smile, and they would protest that the course had got them started. The course provided a climate of acceptance in which spirit could be admitted, and they supplied the proper nouns and went on to further religious training.

Spiritual life and mental health

Most students reported that a sense of absence or loss had inspired them to become interested in spirituality. They often wrote that "something was

missing” and said they had felt this most of their lives. I was pleased to hear this, because this has been the call to spiritual experience throughout the ages. The mystics and visionaries were encouraged into spirituality, not because they felt God’s presence, but on the contrary, because they sensed God’s absence. Ironically, the spiritual wilderness of secular modernity sets up the ideal conditions for many to become “mystic” in search of truth. Since it starves us of spirit, society sets in motion a compensatory desire for spirit. Perhaps this is what is meant by the first beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3).

Quite a few of my students suffered from a sense of emptiness. During my teaching, I became aware that some of them suffered from depression, anxiety, panic attacks, social phobias, eating disorders or personality problems, and they were looking to spirituality as a form of healing. This accorded with recent medical research, which indicated that up to half of the patients suffering from mental health problems consider that spirituality is important for their recovery (Faulkner, 1997; Koenig, 2002; Roach, 1997; Swinton, 2001). Students in this category are not driven to spirituality by mere curiosity or academic interest, but by a sense of urgency, often sparked by a crisis in the home, family or personal relationships.

When I started to teach this course I was not aware of the mental health issue. I was trying to teach the course at an intellectual level, and did not wish to pry into their personal lives. But as the years went on, I noticed that in their remarks in tutorials, and in essays and exercises, many said they had suffered or continued to suffer from mental health problems. For instance, a few requested that they preferred to sit by the door, in case a panic attack came upon them and they had to rush outside. Some openly declared they were recovering from drug addictions, and hoped they would be able to keep up with the course and attend as many classes as possible—but if they had to miss classes, would I please understand? When I read the first essays in which I asked them to respond to the question, “What is spirituality?”, a few wrote that spirituality was paramount in their attempt to overcome depression, which had burdened some since early adolescence. I realised that a significant proportion of the students were vulnerable. They had gravitated to the course as if supplementing their therapy and recovery.

These issues prompted me to consult mental health reports from the university counselling service and national studies in epidemiology (Eckersley, 2004). A report on student health from La Trobe University stated that 20%, or one in five, would suffer from a diagnosable mental illness during their studies. This meant that in a course with 150 students, about 30 would be suffering from a mental health problem. These figures were echoed in studies from the University of Tasmania and the University of