

# Journal of Education & Christian Belief

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# **Journal of Education & Christian Belief**

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## **Book Reviews**

**Jeff Astley (ed.)**

*Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education*

Reviewer: Arthur Rowe (p.92)

**Anthony J. Diekema**

*Academic Freedom and Christian Scholarship*

Reviewer: Elmer John Thiessen (p.93)

**Leslie J. Frances (ed.)**

*Sociology, Theology and the Curriculum*

Reviewer: David I. Smith (p.95)

**Liam Gearon (ed.)**

*English Literature, Theology, and the Curriculum*

Reviewer: Elizabeth Clarke (p.96)

**M. Halstead & M. Taylor**

*The Development of Values, Attitudes and Personal Qualities: A Review of Recent Research*

Reviewer: Ruth Deakin Crick (p.97)

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## Editorial: Hallowing the Curriculum?

IT HAS BECOME commonplace in the modern world in general, and in recent discussions of spiritual development in particular, to associate the spiritual firmly with the transcendent, the inward and the immaterial. Doubtless there are good reasons to stress the importance of transcendence and of invisible realities in the context of a highly materialist culture. Christian educators should hesitate, however, before embracing these emphases too wholeheartedly, for doing so may lead us in directions which, on the one hand, do not do justice to full-bodied Christian faith and, on the other, curtail the relevance of that faith to the school curriculum.

Taking the first point, there are from a Christian perspective some fundamental problems with the popular tendency to regard the spiritual as the opposite of the material. The faith portrayed in the Christian Scriptures affirms the original goodness of a material creation, the incarnation of God as human flesh and blood, and the resurrection of believers not to an existence as immaterial spirits but to resurrected bodies and a restored creation. The beliefs that materiality was itself the source of evil or that immateriality was necessarily superior were rejected early in the church's history as heretical. Pointing to the dignity accorded to simple bread and wine from the earliest days of the church, Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas states that 'unlike ancient Greek and especially Neoplatonic attitudes to spirituality, the patristic mentality, based on a eucharistic approach to life, stressed that being "spiritual" meant accepting and sanctifying the material world and not undermining its importance in any way' (J. D. Zizioulas, 'The Christian Community' in B. McGinn & J. Meyendorff (eds.), *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, pp.23-43, (p.35)).

If we look more closely at the New Testament, we find the same. The New Testament writers are comfortable speaking of 'spiritual bodies' (1 Corinthians 15:44), a phrase which can only be deeply puzzling if the spiritual and the material are held to be opposites. It has for some time been widely recognised that the Pauline distinction between 'spiritual' and 'fleshly' is to be read as a distinction not between spirit and matter, but rather between that which is oriented towards God and that which is not. (See e.g. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*, London: SCM, 1952). The 'works of the flesh' include such apparently 'spiritual' sins as discord, jealousy and selfish ambition (Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 3:3), and Paul urges us: 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Romans 12:1-3, emphasis added; see similarly Romans 6:13; 1 Corinthians 6:13, 15, 19). If Paul thought that spirits were good and bodies bad, then he had a very odd way of expressing himself!

It is true that throughout Christian history there has been a repeated tendency to assimilate the Pauline spirit/flesh contrast to an opposition between the immaterial and the bodily. It is, however, a tendency which has repeatedly been resisted from within the Christian tradition, and a denigration of the material or an automatic association of the good with the immaterial are in tension with Christian orthodoxy. Philosopher Charles Taylor has argued at length that Christian spirituality, in particular the spirituality of the Reformation, lies at the roots of the modern affirmation of ordinary life as a locus of personal significance. By denying a hierarchy of callings in which clerical vocations brought an automatically closer proximity to God, the Reformers were 'denying the very distinction between sacred and profane and hence affirming their interpenetration' (Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989, p.217). Taylor goes on to argue that 'As a result, certain of the original potentialities of Christian faith, which tended to be neutralized in the amalgam with ancient metaphysics and morals, were allowed to develop. The crucial potentiality here was that of conceiving the hallowing of life not as something which takes place only at the limits, as it were, but as a change which can penetrate the full extent of mundane life.' (p.221)

Spirituality, on this historic Christian view, is to be understood neither as an escape from life in the world, nor as the mysterious something which is left over when all of our everyday human tasks have been given their due. Such a view of spirituality as a residue can only result from seeing such everyday tasks as in themselves spiritless. Christian spirituality is rather expressed in a growing patterning of the whole of life

(‘heart, soul, mind and strength’) after Christ, who is the image of God (Mark 12:30; 2 Corinthians 4:4). Spirituality has to do with how we orient life in its fulness, not with the creation of a small sacred enclosure. This point is echoed in Philip Sheldrake’s definition of Christian spirituality as ‘the whole of life viewed in terms of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit and within the community of believers’ (P. Sheldrake, ‘Spirituality as an Academic Discipline’ in A. Thatcher (ed.), *Spirituality and the Curriculum*, London: Cassell, 1999, pp.55-78, (p.57)).

Why is all of this important for the school curriculum? One reason is that it has a direct bearing on the credibility of connecting a Christian understanding of spirituality with educational matters across the curriculum. Nigel Blake has raised concerns in a recent article about the possibility that the idea of spiritual development across the curriculum could undermine rather than enhance more familiar educational goals. Where the form of spirituality which is to become manifest across the curriculum is left undefined and open to all comers, then an escapist and other-worldly spirituality could draw students’ attention away from those very matters which are important to their education. Blake sees Christian spirituality as a prime example of what should be avoided, arguing that:

‘spirituality (including bodily spirituality) is a kind of experience which it is contradictory to incorporate into education, because it puts in question the fundamentals which underpin education. Spirituality, if it is anything, is an escape from, or at least a distancing from the very world of experience that education addresses or serves. By the same token, the educator cannot be sure that a successful education in spirituality would not lead a student to the rejection of everything else that education had tried to instill. The rest of education is firmly to do with the this-worldly, the mundane. How can we guarantee that the spiritually enlightened student might not come to renounce it all? We cannot.’ (Nigel Blake, *Against spiritual education*, 1996, p.454).

It is, of course, appropriate to retort that not all renunciations are bad, and that much of the ‘this-worldly’ may be better understood when it is put in perspective and not viewed as an end in itself. It is also, however, needful to note that the interpretation of spirituality which Blake sketches and then rejects is at odds with the Christian themes outlined above. If Christian spirituality has to do with all of life, and involves a hallowing of the material world rather than its rejection, then its connections with the ‘world of experience that education addresses’ are much more obvious.

This leads to a second issue which emerges when we ask how a Christian view of spirituality relates to the school curriculum. Even if we think that spirituality should, in spite of Blake’s warnings, be interwoven with the curriculum, as long as spirituality is understood primarily in terms of withdrawal and transcendence, its relationship to much of what goes on in the classroom will likely be tenuous. It may, for instance, be valuable to pause from time to time for a few minutes of silence, making space for measured introspection among the hectic sequence of things to be mastered, and such pauses may provide space and impetus for spiritual growth. It is not clear, however, that this establishes any robust relationship between the spiritual and the educational explorations in hand - it seems as if the latter are put on hold, placed on one side to make room for the former.

If, however, spirituality is conceived, as Taylor put it, ‘not as something which takes place only at the limits ... but as a change which can penetrate the full extent of mundane life’, then we are faced with the challenge of working out how spirituality penetrates the full extent of the mundane curriculum. This will surely move us beyond pauses for reflection to a more thorough investigation of the spirit of our pedagogy, of the assumptions which it makes about the spiritual capacities of learners, of the shaping beliefs and commitments which can be seen at work in, for instance, particular episodes of history, works of literature or cultural ways of life. If the standpoint of Christian faith is to see the material not as opposed to, but as shot through with the spiritual, then an authentic Christian engagement with the spiritual in education must address the mundane curriculum in its day-to-day concreteness, and not retreat to the transcendent gaps. Such an engagement would stand well positioned to make an invaluable contribution to current exploration of the notion of spiritual development across the curriculum.

\* \* \* \* \*

Educational leadership is a major theme in the first two articles in this issue of *JECB*. Lee Hollaar and Mike Goheen are both concerned to relate their discussions of the subject to the paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity with which they believe Christians who are in positions of leadership in

education must reckon. But relevance should not lead to compromise of our central Christian calling in an idolatry which ascribes ultimacy to that which is human and therefore creaturely. As Goheen reminds us, we are called to live at the crossroads between the big true story of the Bible and the 'western story'. This requires us to build community around a worldview centre, to be both affirming of culture and antithetical to it. The battle is not a mere intellectual one between competing perspectives but a spiritual one between cosmic forces of light and darkness. Therefore, says Goheen, 'educational leaders in our postmodern setting will need to be men and women of prayer who are deeply rooted in Jesus Christ'.

Rosemary Cox reminds us that education is far from being confined to what happens in day schools as she explores how we use the Bible with children. She calls us to move beyond an exclusive focus on the stories of the Bible to its Big Story, that which makes the little stories meaningful. She wants us to take note of the diversity of the literary genres of the Bible and to provide children with interpretative skills to understand them. We and they can be shaped by studying the Bible together. Cox closes her article with a reminder of a Jewish saying, 'Do not limit children to your own learning, for they were born in another time'. Like Hollaar and Goheen, Cox is concerned with education in times that are a 'chargin'. If we only give children the results of our own study of the Bible, we shall limit them to our own learning. However, she says, 'if we, rather, give them the skills to explore the Bible for themselves, then listen respectfully to their insights, and encourage them to find their own applications, we shall begin to discover together what it means to belong to the body of Christ, sharing both in his life, and in the ongoing story of his grace and love'.

William Cox takes us from our general concerns to use the Bible faithfully with children in home, church or school contexts to the very specific issue of prayer in American public schools. In spite of its specific context, the issues raised in this article are of importance for all concerned with education, whether in the US or elsewhere. Cox concludes that Christians face a dilemma, caught between their obligations to protect all against religious coercion and to bring up their children in a godly way. The way out that he advocates is that each school, if on equal financial footing with all others, could have its own unopposed prayer as well as total religious orientation since it would be patronized primarily, if not exclusively, by those with harmonious beliefs. As he puts it, 'equal privileges would be enjoyed by all and the government would promote no religious monopoly (e.g., Christianity, secular humanism)'.

Australia is a country where Christian schools find themselves on a more equal financial footing with other schools than is certainly the case in the US and is probably so in quite a number of other parts of the world. Jim Twelves shares the results of a study he made of the characteristics of three Christian schools in Australia. The focus returns to leadership as his interviews were with the leaders of these schools and several of the characteristics he describes are concerned with leadership and management. It is interesting to compare his findings with some of the prescriptions of Hollaar and Goheen for Christian educational leadership in postmodernity.

It is also interesting to compare Twelves' findings from his studies of three Christian schools in Australia with Harro Van Brummelen's study of the core values of a Christian university in Canada. Themes of transformation of life and culture, of collaborative servant leadership and of community emerge again as Van Brummelen outlines the steps that Trinity Western University are taking in an attempt to maintain its distinctiveness as an institution of Christian education.

Calvin College in Grand Rapids is one of the Christian higher education institutions that Van Brummelen mentions as a good example in his article. It is also the subject of one of the books reviewed in our Reviews section where the book is described as providing 'an interesting analysis of the unique identity of the college, as well as a challenge to the various constituents of Calvin College to remain true to their Reformed identity'. Themes resonate once again! Others of the books reviewed deal with: the nature of adult Christian education; the interfaces between both sociology and literature, on the one hand, and, on the other, both theology and the curriculum of Christian teacher training colleges; and research on the development of values, attitudes and personal qualities.

In the correspondence section, Elmer Thiessen responds to recent discussions between John Van Dyk and Doug Blomberg of problem-posing approaches to pedagogy. Perhaps there is something within the pages of this issue that may stimulate or even provoke you to respond? If so, we would be delighted to hear from you.

*John Shortt & David I. Smith*