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Inspecting Spiritual Development

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"No one has complained yet," a headteacher told me when I questioned the wisdom of an English teacher whose idea of homework on *Macbeth* was to invite pupils to write a witches' spell. There were some Christian parents, I felt, who would not consider such a task as appropriate, and if any of them had chosen to complain that week, at least the school would have heard it first from an inspector.

I believe we should be grateful that questionable practices can be challenged through the OFSTED inspection system. David I Smith, in a recent *Whitefield Briefing*, cites the legal framework that requires inspectors to report on curriculum opportunities for spiritual development.¹ All inspectors are responsible to seek out evidence of provision for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC), which ought to be a feature of "the whole school and of the whole curriculum, as well as of activities outside the curriculum", as OFSTED made clear in 1994.² My experience is that this is taken very seriously by inspection teams.

What is not so well-known is the part Christians played in the inclusion of the clauses concerning SMSC in the 1992 Education (Schools) Act.³ Lord Northbourne, the independent peer who introduced the relevant amendments, was briefed by staff from CARE (Christian Action, Research and Education) and was supported by bishops in the House of Lords. Although the proposed amendments were based on the provision of the 1988 Education Reform Act for schools to provide a curriculum that "promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils"⁴, they were not intended to reinforce common values of a 'broadly Christian' type in schools and in society, whatever the inclinations of the government of the day had been. Lord Northbourne had, in fact, had more in mind. He posed the alternatives in a speech to the Upper House: "Either one follows the French and American systems, where it is forbidden by law to teach faith or values in state schools," or one allowed a much more challenging possibility, which was "to take the stopper out of the bottle, to let the genie out and to embrace the rich diversity which results."⁵ He had the support of Christians who recognised that only a principled pluralism, which is presumably what he meant by "rich diversity", would allow believers (of all faiths) to present their beliefs with integrity, rather than having them diluted in an attempt to produce a common set of 'spiritual' values. Whether or not this diversity has been achieved in a more general way in the ensuing decade is open to debate. Trevor Cooling argues that recent pronouncements from the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency are "a response to religious pluralism which looks for an uncontroversial essence... and ends up eradicating the very pluralism it claims to respect".⁶

OFSTED, however, inherited the amendments to the 1992 Act, and has not shirked its responsibility to implement them. Its 1994 discussion paper, quoted above, was only a start. Every school inspection is obliged to contain a report on opportunities for SMSC development. A des-

ignated inspector on each team collates the evidence from colleagues on this particular aspect, and writes a paragraph on it for the report. It is an essential feature of the inspection framework. Part of the initial training for inspectors is in how to find evidence of these aspects. In my own training, in 1994, we were given specific guidance on what constitutes the spiritual. To be honest, though, not all inspectors have found it easy to identify in practice. It is significant that OFSTED are currently recruiting and briefing inspectors with the relevant expertise to deliver specific training, "so that each team can fulfil the requirement to have at least one inspector trained in evaluating SMSC by January 2002".⁷

Many inspectors would agree with the observation that finding evidence of provision for spiritual development is one of the most difficult tasks that they undertake. Schools, too, find it difficult, and are often unclear about what is required. For many schools, inadequate provision in this area can be the only blemish on an otherwise excellent inspection report. Research evidence suggests that it is the spiritual component that invariably lets them down. Jackie Watson, in a recent study of OFSTED inspection reports on secondary schools in Norfolk, found that the results for this county were broadly in line with national trends: "These schools were judged less effective at delivering spiritual and cultural development than moral and social development... and less effective at delivering spiritual development than cultural."⁸ OFSTED themselves recognise that, although there has been some improvement, the provision for spiritual development is "good or better in about one third of schools but unsatisfactory in a similar proportion".⁹ In moral and social education, nine out of ten schools have good or better provision, according to the Chief Inspector.

Jackie Watson analyses what inspection reports actually say about provision for spiritual development, and detects no little confusion. What she finds comes as no surprise to anyone involved in the inspection process:

According to the OFSTED reports many schools needed to improve the spiritual dimension of the curriculum. Several reports observed that teachers did not understand what was meant by this or how they could provide opportunities for spiritual development in their subject areas. Unfortunately, however, when the inspection reports were compared, the guidance needed by teachers

to understand improvement was found to be inconsistent and even, at times, contradictory.¹⁰

Some schools have actually produced an audit of where SMSC aspects might be found across the curriculum, and this goes a long way towards helping teachers identify opportunities in their subject areas. Where there is no such audit or guidelines, the results are predictable. My own experience echoes that found in Jackie Watson's research. Any analysis by subject will find that most 'sightings' of spiritual development opportunities are in English lessons, with a good sprinkling in history and the arts. Occasionally, 'awe and wonder' make an appearance in science lessons – the teacher who rushed his class off to see chickens hatching in an incubator helped them to reflect on life in a new way, certainly. As an English specialist, by contrast, one discovers the spiritual when death is the subject of a text. Shakespeare's Prospero contemplates life back in Milan "where every third thought shall be my grave". The proportion of 'spiritual' references in the average English lesson may be less than this, but it is significant. English syllabuses demand some reference to the non-material, even where teachers do not share the reported sentiments of Dr Allington of Eton, who told an enquiring parent that the education of his son was a preparation for *death*. Unfortunately, what sometimes goes for spirituality in English teaching is often something else, as I argue elsewhere.¹¹ Many teachers – and inspectors – are content to regard emotional or aesthetic experiences as 'spiritual'. Activities that induce reflection or enhance 'self-esteem' are deemed to provide for spiritual development. By contrast, few, if any, refer to the development of *humility* as a virtue, which David I Smith suggests as an aspect of spirituality.¹²

The difficulty we face is that there is confusion in most people's minds about what spirituality is. Even Christians find it difficult, as the Bible hardly deals with the concept. Fred Hughes urges us to "be cautious about spiritual development without reference to Christ".¹³ This has implications even for religious education lessons. Trevor Cooling rightly attacks the idea that a neutral spirituality can exist, uncontroversial because it is derived from no particular religion.¹⁴ But there are many attempts to explore 'neutral' spirituality in RE. Children are encouraged to meditate, which apparently helps to create calmer classrooms, or to indulge in 'stilling' exercises. At best, these could be seen as a form of psychotherapy:

inner journeyings, with no intention of contacting a transcendent spiritual world. At worst, they might indeed put children in contact with a darker spiritual world. Some Christian writers have sounded clear warnings about such pedagogic approaches. Laurence Osborn, for instance, has explored some of the dangers of guided fantasy as an educational tool.¹⁵ Penny Thompson¹⁶ and Richard Wilkins¹⁷ suggest that spirituality might be being hijacked by Eastern religions. Such approaches claim to be neutral, but, according to Richard Wilkins, are monistic, being based on the assumption that “all existence is ultimately one, and spiritual development means realising this at the deepest levels of consciousness”. We must recognise, he argues, that “within education based on that belief, Christians are dissident... they must challenge courteously but firmly the Hindu sectarianism of mainline spiritual education”.¹⁸ In practice, however, OFSTED inspectors are not able to make such distinctions, important though they may be to many Christians. Spirituality, for them, is defined in terms of the non-material, but cannot be limited to the theology of any particular religion. As an inspector, I have to accept this limited definition of spirituality; as a Christian, I know there is much more one would like to see provided in schools, and sometimes one sees it, particularly in church schools. Put simply, it means opening up children to the work of the Holy Spirit.

What can be done? If it is difficult for Christians to detect what is happening in ‘spiritual education’, is there any chance of the wider educational world, including inspectors, having the slightest notion about what counts as provision for spiritual development? Christians may well pause to reflect on the teaching in Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* about the unregenerate mind being ‘dead’ to the things of the spirit, and to wonder whether asking schools to provide for its development is asking the impossible. But I believe that we must be thankful for what is being provided, even though the provision may be limited. It is surely no bad thing that there is now official recognition in our schools that “man does not live by bread alone”. Where Christians have the opportunity, they can legitimately introduce a spiritual dimension into their teaching, in the full knowledge that they are not simply staying within the law but that they are fulfilling it better than many of their non-Christian colleagues. The production of the *Charis* materials has made this task easier¹⁹. Teams of Christians, working in different subject areas, have produced quality materials that chal-

lenge the narrowness of much that is offered in the standard secondary school curriculum. Why should death not be discussed in mathematics lessons? Life expectancy matters to insurance companies and many others in the financial sector. Why are so many modern foreign language textbooks obsessed with the values of youth culture and consumerism, to the exclusion of the contribution made by faith communities in various European countries? Why are the religious beliefs of writers and scientists ignored when their work is studied? The fact that Christians have challenged the blinkered approaches of much current curriculum provision opens up possibilities. It *can* be done. Even within the constraints of an examination syllabus, a more holistic approach to life can and should be presented, where teachers rise to the challenge. We can build on the fruitful partnerships that already exist. Teachers are benefiting from the work of Christian writers and researchers. Christian inspectors are not without influence: for several years, meetings have been held under the aegis of the Christian Inspection Network, looking at ways in which inspectors can offer guidance on the spiritual in the curriculum. As inspectors report back to schools, Christian governors and teachers alike can seize on what is suggested, and use any reference to under-provision to demand a greater emphasis on the spiritual.

There is evidence that the inspection process has stimulated schools to audit their provision for SMSC, as well as encouraging a greater use of visiting speakers in assemblies and better compliance with statutory regulations on the provision of RE at Key Stage 4 – often by the introduction of GCSE short course RE. Schools that were not providing enough are advertising for RE specialists: this of course requires Christians to offer themselves to teach in this strategic area. The Stapleford Centre has done more than most in recent years to train RE specialists. RE lessons for sixth formers were, until recently, more honoured in the breach than the observance in most schools. Inspectors have drawn attention to the fact that provision here is also statutory, and pointed out that a conference held once or twice a year might be one way of complying with regulations. Speakers from groups such as the Damaris Trust have not been slow to take up the invitations that have flowed, and the evidence is that more invitations are coming in than can be met. As an inspector, I come across a good number of Christian schools workers, often employed by local churches. Schools who have discovered what a valuable resource these people are go well beyond using them as a

cosmetic solution to the demands of OFSTED. Some are used as mentors or in student counselling, as well as being asked to come in to assemblies, RE and PSHE lessons, or to look after voluntary groups.

We need not lose heart. If God can use his servants as winetasters or members of the harem of a Persian emperor, he can surely use OFSTED inspectors ready to do his will. As in all the work of his kingdom, it does not come from working alone: anything that is achieved is done by our being part of a much bigger work, of Christians working in education at every level, from parliament to the playground.

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For Further Reading

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