Christian Spirituality

What Does a Christian Framework Bring to Spirituality in Education?

One common way of talking about the aspects of education where matters like faith, hope, and love come to the fore is to talk about spirituality, spiritual formation, or spiritual development. What does it do to our approaches to learning if we begin with the assumption that the learners before us are not merely processors of information or future contributors to the economy, but are also spiritual beings? More succinctly put, does spirituality have anything to do with learning?

An immediate problem in this kind of discussion concerns what we might mean by spirituality. Some have hoped that talk of the "spiritual" might move us out of the problems and disagreements implied by talking of "religion." Could a focus on the "spiritual" get us away from uncomfortable disagreements about beliefs and let us focus on feelings of awe, wonder, and belonging that everyone experiences? This line of thought has proved tempting, but a closer look at the ongoing debates concerning spirituality in education makes it very clear that the nature of spiritual experience and its relationship to beliefs is one of the very things about which people have varying convictions. Our beliefs about the spiritual will affect how we approach it in school. On this website the focus is on spirituality as understood within the Christian tradition and the contribution that it can make to education.

Christian spirituality is, of course, a vast topic. Here we will focus on a few broad implications of approaching spirituality in Christian terms. We will suggest in another article a concise framework for thinking about spirituality practically in the classroom.

Spirituality and Everyday Life

There's a view of spirituality enshrined in many a cartoon, often with Christian references, that sees it as the opposite of the material and the mundane. Spirituality on this view is mainly about floating around on clouds, meditating around candles, and staying away from the nitty gritty of bodily existence. In fact, Christian theology has long resisted viewing the spiritual as simply the opposite of the bodily, or as the mysterious something that is left over when all of our everyday human tasks have been given their due.

Christian faith affirms the original goodness of creation. It celebrates the incarnation of God as human flesh and blood, born in humble, earthy circumstances and dying a very real death on a Roman cross. It looks forward to the resurrection of believers not to an existence as immaterial ghosts, but to raised bodies and a restored creation. Bread and wine, basic staples of daily life, are central Christian symbols. The New Testament does not just speak to some invisible inward part of us, but calls us to honor God with our bodily actions: "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness," says Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, "but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13). As Paul puts it elsewhere, "Honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Spirituality is not, therefore, about escaping from our earthly existence. It is about the way our lives are shaped by what we love and give ourselves to. It includes a focus on the practical here and now. Spirituality in the classroom is therefore not just about the invisible and inexpressible, or about moments for eyes closed and special sensations; it includes considering all the ways in which our lives and experiences are patterned by our commitments and our relationship to or estrangement from God. It might include, for instance, exploring how faith affects people's actions in history or design and technology.

Spirituality and Commitment

Since spirituality helps give shape to our lives, Christians maintain that there is no getting away from choosing which spiritual direction to pursue. Different beliefs and commitments will shape differing spiritualities and different life patterns. There will be overlap and some commonalities of experience, of course, but essential to a Christian understanding of spirituality is the contention that in the end it matters what you give yourself to. As time goes on, we begin to become like that which we place at the heart of our lives.

To talk of "growing spiritually," in generic terms, without considering the role of particular commitments, is a little like thinking of learning to "speak language" without learning to speak any particular language. In biblical terms, Christian spirituality rests on the invitation and command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength [and] love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30). Helping students to engage with spiritual growth will include making clear that choices and commitments are involved. For example, this could include

exploring the consequences of characters' choices in a literature lesson or considering how others' commitments shaped their lives in a foreign language lesson.

Spirituality and Self-Help

Christian spirituality includes a call to seek God and work at living a faithful life, but it also is rooted in the conviction that faith is not a self-help technique. Spiritual growth is about trusting and receiving before it is about striving and perfecting. A central Christian claim is that if we are to become able to live a life of love to God and neighbor, we first must stand in need of grace. Grace is the unmerited acceptance and assistance that become available to us as we open ourselves to what Christ has already done for us. It involves learning to look beyond our own efforts.

This also means that spirituality is not just about making us feel more peaceful. Spiritual growth will not just involve positive experiences such as awe and wonder; it will include facing our own fears and failures and experiencing confession, forgiveness, and then thankfulness for good things not deserved. Christian spirituality will not be faithfully reflected in the classroom if it is allowed to be reduced to a series of techniques for feeling calm or exhortations to become a nicer person by trying harder. The role of grace and thankfulness can be explored in terms both of understanding and of experience during the school day.

These three emphases are drawn together in a definition of spirituality such as that offered by Philip Sheldrake, who describes 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."[1]

How, then, do we make the connections with the everyday business of teaching and learning? What might it mean to teach in the light of the Christian conviction that our students have spiritual lives? The various teaching and learning examples on this site all address these questions in concrete ways. A further article offers a concise framework that can help us to know what we are looking for when we seek to take the spiritual dimension of learning seriously.

Footnotes

1. P. Sheldrake, “Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” in A. Thatcher, ed., *Spirituality and the Curriculum* (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 55–78, quotation from p. 57.