

Dimensions of Spirituality: A Framework for Adult Educators

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This article is an early draft of an article which has been published in *British Journal of Theological Education*, 1(1) pp 36-51. For the full article and references, please consult the published source.

Abstract

This paper argues that although spirituality is increasingly featured in adult education literature, much is either descriptive or enthusiastically prescriptive. A rather wild eclecticism currently prevails. As educators we lack robust theoretical tools to help illuminate wide variation among spiritual orientations, each with different fundamental beliefs and values. **The paper presents a framework comprising eight dimensions of spirituality,** as a first step to illuminating important distinctions and incommensurable elements. These are (1) life and death; (2) soul and self; (3) cosmology; (4) knowledge; (5) the “way”; (6) focus; (7) practices of spirituality and the role of others; and (8) responses. Our discussion of these dimensions focuses upon the central question, **What is the real intent of pedagogical interventions (in theory or practice) which integrate or focus upon spirituality?**

Introduction

Spirituality is gaining prominence as an integral part of adult education practice and adult development theory. Clark and Caffarella (1999) recently have named spirituality as a distinct dimension in their four-part classification of adult development theory (biological, psychological, sociocultural, and integrative). MacKeracher (1996) also addresses spirituality explicitly in her text about adult learning, and even provides instruction for facilitators in things spiritual. Dirkx (2000) writes about the soul, urging adult educators to recognize and honor the spiritual in learning. Tisdell (1999) observes that spirituality is “all encompassing and cannot be torn from other aspects of adult development” (p. 94), and argues that the spiritual domain is linked with adult educators’ call and commitment to vocation. In an edited book devoted to the topic, English and Gillen (1999) explore a wide range of practices and understandings integrating spirituality in adult education. Fenwick and Lange (1998) also illustrate the growing numbers of North American training and adult education programs developing spirituality, and pose critical questions about the agendas and ethics of integrating adult education with spirituality in particular contexts.

These are examples of a growing body of literature that still remains largely at the descriptive stage. Beyond some research (i.e. English, 1998; Tisdell, 2000; West, 2000) exploring adults’ spiritual experiences as these are integrated with learning, little theory in the adult education field exists to critically examine forms and ranges of spirituality. If spirituality continues to attract the significant popular and pedagogical interest that is evident to date, robust analytical frames would be helpful to sort through what Taylor (1996) has termed the “wild

explosion” of spiritual literature and expressions that are proliferating. Many “spiritual” writers now seem to draw freely from astrology, New Age consumables, Western and Eastern religious doctrines and theology, recovery movement “healing” literature, and even personal ecstatic experience. Such eclecticism may be democratic, but the result can be a confusing and misleading mash of spiritual traditions. Educators need to move beyond shallow notions and romantic rhetoric to more rigorous conceptions of what spirituality means, and how different conceptions and responses might be enacted in adult learning and education. This article suggests dimensions of spirituality that might be useful when analysing expressions of spirituality presented in adult education literature.

First, a closer look at the influences of spirituality within adult education literature reveals many themes, among which two prominent themes will be discussed here. One is a historic influence that is predominantly North American and Christian; the other is a contemporary shift by some to incorporate a non-religious spirituality as part of holistic educational practices. In the first instance, English et al. (2002) have traced the entwinings of adult education with Christian religion. For example, early 20th century adult educator Basil Yeaxlee (1925), who had a long involvement with the YMCA, wrote about the integration of spirituality and education. The Antigonish Movement was founded on Christian principles and specifically on an ideology that everyone could be free and independent. Myles Horton and Eduard Lindeman both were strongly influenced by the social Gospel (Fisher, 1997). Paulo Freire not only had strong religious roots but saw his work as spiritual. In analysing Freire’s liberation theology, Welton (1993) shows intersections between Freire’s conscientization and the Christian notion of conversion, and connects Freire’s commitment to freedom from oppression to the Gospel narrative. Historian Gordon Selman (1998) links the numbers of prominent educators with religious or spiritual roots to adult education’s early emphases on social justice and reform for the common good, through individual transformation as well as collective change. More recently, Tisdell (2000) has also made this link in her research exploring spiritual influences (though not exclusively Christian) on emancipatory adult educators.

The second theme emerging in adult education literature, of spirituality as part of holistic learning and being, exists alongside contemporary writers’ distancing from any particular religious doctrine or commitment. For example, adult educators English and Gillen (2000) define spirituality as broader than religion, “an awareness of something greater than ourselves... [that] moves one outward to others as an expression of one’s spiritual experiences” (p. 1). This movement is echoed in Merriam and Heuer’s (1996) exploration of a mass “search for meaning”, and Hunt’s (1998) stress on spirituality as connectedness. Tisdell (1999) and MacKeracher (1996) explore the dual nature of spirituality as both inner- and outer-directed, part of yearnings to connect with a community or other transcendent energy, and to liberate this energy within oneself and others. Both emphasize holism in education, such that spirituality is understood to infuse both learners’ and educators’ purposes and practices. Heron (1999) promotes holistic education to integrate the innermost parts of selves; for him, all of life is spiritual, and spirituality is life. Similarly Clark and Caffarella (1999) describe spirituality in adult development as integrative or holistic, an amalgam of psychological, biological, cultural and social dimensions. Individuals’ longing for connection, coherence and spiritual expression are responses to anxiety and fragmentation, the conditions of late-modern society, argues West (2001) drawing from empirical studies of contemporary adults’ life histories of development.

This second literature tends to accept spirituality as a human impulse, without reference to particular ideologies or doctrinal beliefs beyond the tales sometimes told by interviewees about their religious backgrounds. The first literature acknowledges the strong influences upon adult education historically exercised by one religion in particular, but little follow-up analysis exists showing doctrinal foundations of different spiritual writings and advocates in contemporary adult education. It would seem that continued work melding adult education with spirituality, particularly in these times of pluralistic beliefs and faith expressions grounding the spiritual, would be well-served by some theoretical distinctions among spiritual bases.

Choosing dimensions to compare highly diverse positions, beliefs and expressions of spirituality without distorting them is to some extent impossible. Any dimensions chosen will reflect organizing principles embedded in some spiritualities that are perhaps foreign to others. The exercise itself is grounded in a particular rational, structural analytic approach that may be incommensurable with movements of spirit. However, these limitations do not diminish the need for the attempt. At the least, it may prompt debate about the need for, and approaches to, analysing the “wild” explosion of spiritualities attending late modernity. Here, eight themes that are associated with spiritual domains are suggested as a beginning step to comparing spiritual bases. These eight have been selected from a review of spiritual literature, some of which is detailed in the following thematic descriptions. Non-theological philosophical theories addressing spirituality were examined first, starting with Taylor’s (1996) distinction of spiritualities according to life/death orientations and cosmology, and Wilber’s (1997) perspectival and historical analysis of spiritual influences on knowledge. Philosophical literature yielded further focus on themes of self/soul across different doctrines (Mack, 1992; Oliver, 1992), and purposes and expressions of the spiritual pursuit (Kung, 1988). Theological literature in different traditions was drawn upon to corroborate and extend these themes, with greater attention to Christian-based theology as a fair reflection of adult education’s historic roots. Then educational writings on spiritual matters were compared to all of these themes to locate connections and expand the dimensions, such as in Dirkx’s (2000) examination of soul, Palmer’s (1993) focus on the interior life in spiritual pursuit, Slattery’s (1995) and Purpel’s (1989) focus on educator’s purposes and responses, and Tisdell’s (2000) related examination of spiritual influences on educator’s social action commitments.

The resulting themes are (1) life and death; (2) soul and self; (3) cosmology; (4) knowledge; (5) the “way”; (6) focus; (7) practices of spirituality and the role of others; and (8) responses. These do not pretend to be comprehensive or definitive. For example, important areas such as moral principle and ethical practice were omitted, simply to contain the scope. The themes are intended as a starting point only, to begin to illustrate how spiritual beliefs and practices are differently situated. For educators reading through these, a fruitful question to ask is the extent to which these dimensions, and particular ideas described within them, resonate with personal spiritual experience and beliefs. Further implications for educators will be explored following the description of themes.

1. Life and Death (The Meaning of Life on Earth or Beyond)

Some spiritual traditions are “life-centered”, focusing on meeting worldly needs, enhancing, and empowering life. Others focus on the transcendent, renouncing everyday life to

seek “life beyond”. Taylor (1996) shows that spiritual belief systems range on a continuum between these two fundamental orientations. Spiritual goodness was sometimes located in production, hard work, and the family: emblems of a particular material form of life-centredness. At other times goodness has been connected to a life-centredness that spreads justice, benevolence, and equality, relieving suffering and fostering prosperity. This stance echoes Coady’s integration of spiritual development with economic pragmatism. The transcendent stance, most evident in the monastic tradition that is currently enjoying a popular revival, has often been rejected for abandoning the human world of life and suffering to indulge a lofty and esoteric path.

For some faith traditions, suffering (including doubt, darkness, misfortune, evil) is an essential part of life -- to be accepted, dwelt in, learned from and possibly saved from, but not necessarily ‘fixed’ in our modernist sense of problem-solving. Self-sacrifice has been represented as a gift leading to grace (Christianity), a discipline to tame desire (Buddhism), and a necessary door to losing the self and attaining enlightenment. In other spiritualities, suffering and sacrifice are treated as obstacles to enhanced, flourishing life, from which spiritual practices can help deliver us. However when any of these struggles are unnamed in a spirituality, the spiritual sojourner is left bereft. Sunny idealism and feel-good beliefs go only so far in explaining life’s complexity.

Death, in some life-centred spiritualities, is either absent from consideration or is resisted. Conversely certain ecological life-centred spiritualities view death and destruction as a natural part of the lifeworld, and critical to transformation. The concept of kenosis in Buddhism, for example, is an ‘emptying out’ of self, putting to death something within the self, in order to renounce the ‘grasping’ parts of the ego. Or in ecological terms, consider the life of a forest. Balance of life, consumption, and death are priorities; the will to preserve life of one being above all can be viewed as an attempt to assert human control over broader ecological cycles upon which life depends.

2. Soul and Self (The Nature of Spirit)

All spiritual traditions declare some fundamental understanding of soul, and as Wilber (1997) explains, soul and self are closely connected in most writings. Some believe the self is fixed, autonomous, and coherent (i.e. Hillman, 1996). Others argue that humans have multiple, shifting selves which emerge in different situations and stories (Clark and Dirks, 2000). Wilber describes spirit as evolving through our various selves so that, through us, spirit sees itself, knows itself. The highest human state is that of divine witness.

Some spiritualities celebrate and glorify self, seeking to understand and pamper one’s ‘authentic’ self. However in other spiritual pursuits, surrender of self is a key dimension. In the Judeo-Christian traditions, followers are called to surrender the will, to give away one’s life, to find it in God and/or the communal. Emphasis is on servanthood and discipleship. In Buddhist meditation, one learns to surrender one’s desires and ego-self, as well as the search for absolute meaning itself (Buddhaghosa, 1976). Oliver (1992) argues, working with the varied philosophies of Buber, Eckhart, Nishida Kitaro and orthodox Christianity, that spiritual reality is understanding and dwelling in the ‘true’ self, which is a ‘no-self’: it dissolves in the act of

experiencing the world. To know the true self, the no self, the relational self, is to be one with the divine.

3. *Cosmology (The Nature of the Spiritual Universe, Including Higher Powers)*

Most spiritual traditions construct an understanding of the origins and structure of the cosmos, and share an interest in the nature of the sacred, time, how energy and power flow through the spiritual universe, and the existence of ‘higher power’ or the ‘divine’. Within this cosmos are defined the nature of self and its relation to the divine, the relation of the present to eternity, the relation of the human world to the natural and supernatural, the grounds of moral reasoning and prescriptions for behavior. The nature of the sacred is at issue in all spiritualities: How is it infused into daily life, glimpsed, and recovered? Spiritual time is a second important issue of the cosmos. What is eternity? What is tradition, and history? What is ‘the present moment’? Which is most pre-occupying? Should we orient ourselves more to the present, or to the future? As Taylor (1996) argues, spiritualities distinguish themselves according to how they respond to this question.

A third cosmological issue is the source and circulation of energy. The presence of a higher power for some is monotheistic (one God), for others polytheistic (many gods), and for still others pantheistic (god in all things). Some do not believe in a theistic authority at all, viewing energy as human empowerment, or as circulating in natural, ecological systems.

A fourth issue is the nature of individuals’ relationship with the energy of the cosmos. Some spiritualities approach this relationship as the ultimate goal, others as the starting point supporting pursuit of personal goals (ranging from fulfillment of worldly desires to attaining other-worldly enlightenment). Jones (1992) distinguishes between those who understand this relationship as an inner experience (apophatic), or as an outer experience (kataphatic). Creation theology (whose proponents include Matthew Fox (1993), among others) emphasizes intimacy between human and natural world, understanding all as a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects.

4. *Knowledge (The Nature of Truth)*

Different spiritualities can be distinguished according to what counts as knowledge, distinguished along three dimensions: (a) the possibility of absolute truth or multiple truths; (b) the presence of divine authorit(ies); and (c) the role of human intellect in seeking spiritual knowledge/s. Some spiritualities rest on a doctrine of absolute truth with varying degrees of fundamentalism (intolerance for contradicting beliefs). Others understand multiple truths, with varying degrees of genuine acceptance of different beliefs and even fluid boundaries or the possibility of evolution among beliefs. Epistemic authority may be granted to a higher power (addressed above). Human rationality is variously treated as an obstacle (the monkey mind of Buddhism) or a pathway to divine inspiration (Judaism and Islam). Wilber (1997) describes a human rationality as enabling spiritual ‘perspectivism’, an integration of various points of view to better detect the contours of human experience.

A second issue is the process of spiritual knowing. Knowledge is variously revealed through divine or supernatural revelation and prophetic message. In different spiritual communities, personal mystical knowings are questioned and regulated through dialogue, discipline, doctrine, and study. The role of humans seeking truth ranges from those spiritual paradigms dedicated to wisdom and enlightenment, to those who encourage faith in and acceptance of mystery. Knowledge is variously represented as the 'key' to spiritual growth, or a dangerous door to a loss of innocence. Some spiritualities insist on long study, others on intuition and simplicity. Some do not focus on knowledge at all, emphasizing emotional release and communion above thought. Within spiritualities, tradition sometimes collides with today's tempo as new converts want quick answers. Jewish scholars, describing the problem with the newly popularized Kabbalah faith, refer to a traditional light/fire phenomenon in spirituality: the truth we long for can't be controlled, hurried, or 'applied', and it often bites (Wiltz, 1997).

5. The "Way" (*The Nature of the Spiritual Journey or Search*)

The 'way' theme speaks to appreciating learners' life struggles, and educators' role in them. The nature of this journey varies among spiritualities according to several dimensions, some of which have been alluded to in previous sections. First is the time required: a lifetime, a quick healing, or time beyond life -- perhaps reaching through several human lives or into a heavenly afterlife. Second is the extent of personal freedom to control and make choices along this journey, in contrast to faith or surrender to other energies and dynamics. Related is a third point: where is spirituality in one's life? Is the spiritual journey represented as simply one dimension of life, co-existing with but supporting intellectual life, marital life, career and creativity? Or are other parts of life subordinate to the spiritual life? This dimension is closely connected to the continuum described in section 1, between an essential focus on life-centredness or on transcendence.

Fourth, is the spiritual journey represented more as a solitary sojourn or a connective, communal one? Is it more meditative or action-oriented in nature? Fifth, what is the emotional content of the journey? How are peak experiences understood, and what role do they play? Conversely, what is the role of negativity, questioning, and doubting on the journey in contrast to an emphasis on the positive: joy, healing, peace, and happiness? Or is the journey a more cerebral and intellectual truth-seeking, understanding certain emotions as distractive ego-grasping?

Sixth and most important, how is the outcome of a spiritual journey portrayed? James Fowler (1975) and others represent this journey as progressive growth, in a western psychologistic 'development/improvement' paradigm. In strong contrast, other spiritualities seek to accept and dwell in mystery, and oppose the appropriation of the spiritual journey as a self-help technology (Moore, 1996).

5. Focus (*The Purposes of Spiritual Seeking*)

Popular spiritual writers often promote an inner journey of healing, personal peace, and exalting the self. Others (i.e. Mack, 1992) focus on an outward journey expressed in action such as servanthood, integrating spiritual perspectives with gritty everyday reality. Principe (1997) explains spirituality as a dual movement, simultaneously inward and outward, that connects the world with individual souls.

This dialogue highlights the importance of purpose, as a distinguishing dimension of spiritualities. Different individuals pursue a spiritual journey for motives ranging from those more self-focused (such as seeking redemption, repentance, rebirth) and self-serving (becoming more creative, happy, healthy) to more other-focused (caring and connecting to help others and create community). Purposes range from more worldly to other-worldly, and from more inquiry-oriented to more action-oriented such as the liberation theologies of social justice described in the next section. Holmes (1980) differentiates spiritualities according to four purposes (i.e. societal regeneration, inner life, personal renewal, or theological renewal).

Purpose and motive in spiritual pursuit is continually troubled by the problem of desire. Why are we drawn to this or that spirituality, this or that vocation, this or that drive to possess? Some spiritualities represent this problem as discerning our 'true' desire, putting to death the misleading destructive desires of our grasping life to awaken to 'true' life. Macpherson (1996) describes Tantric Buddhism, for example, as an education of desire, transcending dualisms of right and wrong and a cult of consumption and production to find a path of moderation. For others, desire for greater wisdom, wealth, and success is celebrated as the fuel and reward of spiritual endeavor. Then there are those apparently untroubled by motive, for whom spirituality is a trend to be marketed and spiritual need a weakness to be turned to competitive advantage.

6. *Practices of Spirituality and the Role of Others*

Slattery (1995) writes that the spiritual approaches union with the mystery of eternity through various practices: meditational practice, ecclesial and daily ritual, divine revelation, theological discipline, service to others, participation in community, human relationships, work, and learning. Spiritual practices of many organized religions such as Islam and Judaism are regulated through disciplines of routine, rules, and even sacrifice. Others focus more on reverence through relationships and disciplines of responsibility and service. 'Mindfulness' is a discipline of both Buddhist and Celtic spiritualities, invoking wide-awake attention to and engagement with all parts of one's being to each full moment of everyday life. Discipline stands in contrast to spiritualities that eschew regulation of any kind, or practices other than spontaneous ad-hoc expression.

A growing tension among spiritualities that Dreyer (2000) identifies is that between community-centered practices and individualistic practices. Communitality has historically provided spiritual support and strength through doctrine, ritual, shared experience, and voice. Meanwhile, the cult of self flourishes in much popular expression of spirituality.

7. *Responses (Action and Application Arising From Spiritual Pursuits)*

Human response is linked to purpose of the spiritual pursuit, and may be more life-centered (i.e. expanding creative potential, healing spiritual pain, or activating social justice) or transcendent (prayer, retreats, grace). Adult educators are often compelled by desires to serve, but what constitutes service varies from Fox's (1993) notions of compassion to Freire's of transformation.

Service responses in some spiritualities are broad-based, spreading far afield for social transformation (as in liberation theologies) or conversion of others (as in evangelistic traditions). Other spiritualities concentrate on accepting what is and liberating oneself within it close to home, as in the Benedictine way to find focus and humility in community, seeking joy where one is at present. Service may be enacted in building or transforming communities, cultivating sacred environments towards a 'spirit-filled' world, or simply attending deeply and with compassion to another person. Service may be focused on justice, as in Ghandi's "loving people into transformation", or Myles Horton's celebration of common human experience to liberate human empowerment in civil rights struggles.

Liberation theology and emancipatory pedagogy share a long tradition of uniting the spiritual search with critical thinking and social action. In the past decade more curriculum theorists such as Slattery (1995) and theologians such as Griffin (1988) are articulating a common vision linking spirituality with education as a process of personal and civic transformation. Slattery contends that religion and education are inseparable, and he outlines a constructive postmodern vision which threads "ethical and ecumenical integration of spirituality and theology into the very fabric of education" (p. 68).

Discussion: Links to Adult Education Theory and Practice

Three theoretical implications for adult education may be drawn from the foregoing. First is that certain themes of spirituality would appear to offer a natural alignment with concerns of adult education. Interest in understanding the nature of self/s and the learning journey embodied in life-course development are also prominent in theological literature. The adult educators' commitment to establish meaningful purpose through the vocation of service to others towards the common good has strong parallels to spiritual literature, as does the struggle to determine the 'right' focus and direction for this desire – whether it be through meditative writing, teaching, social action, and other responses.

Second is that meaningful references to the spiritual cannot be divorced from clear identification of the specific position taken in terms of belief about the nature of spirit, life, universe and 'right' expression. 'Spirituality' in educational literature sometimes is represented as though it can be assumed to float ambiguously in a space unhindered by faith traditions, as though fundamental beliefs underpinning spirituality could be excised or assumed unitary, cut free from deep cultural, doctrinal and historic divides. This comparative discussion illustrates that multiple delineations, pursuits and tensions in spirituality addressed within theological and philosophical literature. This is not to deny the interrelatedness of the dimensions discussed here, or the possibility of certain universal themes. However, most spiritual practices embed, explicitly or tacitly, a position representing particular ways of seeing, believing, and acting in the world. To address ways of understanding spirituality, fostering it in others or incorporating it within one's practice without more precise definition or acknowledgement of this diversity may be naïve or even hegemonic.

Third is that while recognition of diversity and discussions of ecumenical possibilities persist in theological literature, the problem of how to ethically enact one's spirituality in public spaces in a highly pluralistic world remains unresolved. As agents of change towards improving

social life, adult educators exercise influence in those public spaces in which they work. To make spirituality explicit in their talk, practice, theory and research is to enter highly fractious areas, and to do so with some authority. Irreconcilable differences about epistemic authority, moral purposes, understandings of soul, self, and relation to the cosmos, etc. have historically generated horrific conflicts among spiritualities. Indeed in many scholarly circles, demonizing of organized religion, particularly Christianity and denominations labeled 'the religious right', is tacitly accepted. Amidst these politics, how do educators construct a pedagogical philosophy entwining spirituality while upholding justice, caring, criticality, and equity?

As we have argued elsewhere (English, Fenwick and Parsons, 2002), we maintain that educators who link their practice to spirituality need to examine these dimensions carefully. We need to discern the motives and centres of different spiritualities, as well as our own motives and the source of our attraction to them. This is one aspect most neglected by some educational writings on spirituality, moral leadership and community building. Are we simply seeking a short-lived feel-good self-affirmation? Are we seeking to escape uncertainty and rapid change through simple answers? Are we hiding from life's pain in a rosy glow of panaceas -- and ignoring darker purposes moving underneath the spiritual promises? For educators who have already decided to promote spirituality in their practice, the pluralism of spiritual expression presents an interesting further choice. Does the educator ask, How do I create an inclusive practice which welcomes and appreciates all spiritual expression? Or does the educator ask, How do I form a defensible position of moral adjudication from which I will presume to distinguish between the rich and the impoverished, the nourishing and the destructive, in spiritual pursuits that become entwined with my practice? This old debate around relativism cannot ethically be ignored. Spirituality is neither simple emotivism, nor an idealized caring community where the prevailing belief is whatever sliding vision the members of the moment create for themselves.

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