

(Published in *Pastoral Care in Education*, 28(4), December, 2010, pp.331-334)

A Child Sees God. Children talk about Bible stories

Rev Dr Howard Worsley, with a Foreword by Professor John M. Hull, 2009

London, Jessica Kingsley

£14.99 (pbk) 166 pp.

ISBN 978-1-84310-972-3

Somewhere in our concept of the developing child - mixed in with the personal, the social and the emotional - is the *spiritual*, a category whose meaning and utility in the discussion of educational aims remains hotly contested. This is partly because of the difficulty of defining 'spirituality' at all, and partly because, for most if not all people, the 'spiritual' is inextricably connected with religion and therefore prey to all the doubts and uncertainties about claims for religious truth and the morality of teaching such 'truths' to young children.

In the decade following the 1988 Education Reform Act in the UK, these doubts and difficulties were worked through (with varying degrees of success) by those responsible for Religious Education syllabi (the Standing Advisory Committees for Religious Education), those responsible for providing guidance to schools on the promotion of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development or SMSC (at that time the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority), and those responsible for checking that schools were delivering on it (the Office for Standards in Education). Since then, the desirability of spiritual education and the promotion of religious belief through schooling have become even more contentious as Government support for the establishment and funding of 'faith schools' has coincided with growing fears about religious fundamentalism and its connections with political extremism. The events now known simply as '9/11' and '7/7' have been construed (rightly or wrongly) as a consequence of the kind of indoctrination which builds on the teaching of religion to young children.

Yet for those who see education as necessarily involved in the development of the *whole* child, and for whom a part of that 'whole-ness' is the experience of what, for want of a better word, we call 'the spiritual', to simply refuse to engage with such experience is not an option. Nor is it an option if we accept that spirituality and religion are part and parcel of the culture, history and traditions of society and the

communities which comprise it, and that an education which shut all this out would not be much of an education at all. The quest for a better understanding of the spiritual and of religion, and especially of the spiritual and religious experience of children, must continue if such an education is to be achieved at all. Howard Worsley's book is therefore to be welcomed.

A Child Sees God reports some of the findings of a research project which aimed "to see if the child's eye view of the Bible could offer a new way of understanding it" (p.12), and "to encourage the adult to respond to the child's insights" (p.13). The capacity for children, untrammelled by the constraints of 'maturity', to see something both fundamental and special in what for adults has become 'foreign' or banal offers the possibility of the 'child as theologian', able to teach us a thing or two we either never knew or have long forgotten. It is this which Worsley has set out in part to test as an hypothesis and in part to examine as a basis for educative practice in the home and elsewhere. To do this, he selected three Bible stories for each of seven genres - wonder; adventure and leadership; terror; justice and judgment; comfort and hope; comedy; and mercy and forgiveness - which were then read to children (ages ranged from 5 to 17) by a parent or (in one case) a youth worker. The parents, who were all volunteers who regularly read Bible stories to their children, were asked to select and read one story from each genre and to record what happened in the story-telling episodes. The findings from these records are presented in seven chapters, followed by a final chapter which draws out the implications of the findings for anyone engaged in storytelling with children.

There is a common format for each chapter: first, the reading in its entirety, then a note of the identity of the story teller and the ages and gender of the children, followed by a summary and/or extracts from the discussion itself, then some comments on the experience, and, finally, an interpretation by Worsley. In some cases, the distinction between the last two is unclear and their division into sections seems superfluous.

Although described in John Hull's Foreword as "the best of the material", the length and depth of the reports varies greatly and I suspect that what we have here are not so much the "best" or most interesting as a *representative* selection from the discussions.

The responses to the stories vary widely, as is to be expected given the diverse genres and the considerable range in the ages of the children. Critical insight is by no means the preserve of the older children, however, and there are some surprises for anyone who might make such a presumption. That said, underpinning Worsley's analysis is the kind of 'stage theory' of cognitive development most often associated with Piaget, who is cited with an appropriate reference to Margaret Donaldson's important critique (p.15) and, in terms of moral development, Kohlberg (who is not cited but 'there in spirit', e.g. on p.53). However, the more relevant theory appears to be that of Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' which is cited frequently throughout. While a reader might infer these stages by collecting the references together, a synopsis of his overall schema in the Introduction would have been helpful.

There are differences in the parents' competence as storytellers. They are not equally adept at delivering the stories and responding to the children's reactions. Some admit to being tired at the time of the event, or being un-moved by the story themselves. Some confess to side-stepping difficult questions, such as "Do you actually think this story is true?" (p51), and some to being relieved that certain questions were *not* asked (e.g. "What is a prostitute?" (p.55)). That said, the way the parents handled the discussions was generally impressive, more often than not allowing, and frequently encouraging, the children to shape the unfolding agenda rather than force the discussion in a pre-determined direction. As Worsley comments in regard to the discussion of the story of Noah's Ark with a 10 year-old girl and an 8 year-old boy:

"This conversation is a good example of how children learn by testing the boundaries in a safe place. Rather than being met with credal certainty or by closed answers, they are allowed to play with concepts. They have not as yet queried whether the story is mythical but within a literalist worldview, they feel that everything is up for testing. This will pave the way for their faith to be contextualized and owned in the future, though it does ensure their credal orthodoxy" (p97).

And later:

"When read aloud to children, Bible stories create a world of imagination and of wonder where faith can grow. If this is done in a way which allows for questions and doubt as well as for affirmation and confirmation, of thoughts,

the resultant faith will be well-founded, neither diseased by the need to be certain nor choked by the fear of using a creative imagination” (p144).

This will be comforting for the reader who hopes that the kind of ‘autonomy-via-faith’ championed by such philosophers as Terence McLaughlin and Hanan Alexander (see Haydon, 2009) is a real possibility.

It may not be of much comfort for those who doubt the wisdom of promoting religious faith at all, however. For underpinning the book is the assumption that the Christian Faith should be promoted and that the reading or telling of Bible stories to children is to be encouraged. But without a presumption of faith, one must wonder what (if anything) some of these stories have to offer that could not be found in secular stories of one kind or another (a question touched upon by the author in an appendix). To argue that Bible stories - and especially those of the Old Testament - are an integral and living part of the history and cultural tradition of most people dwelling in (so-called) Christian societies seems doubtful to me. In some cases their (im)morality is such that, as with many a violent computer video-game, it is questionable whether *anyone* should be exposed to them, let alone children. I am thinking here particularly of a 10 year-old’s response to the slaughter of the people of Jericho as acceptable because “God is good” (p53), of telling a *five* year-old the story of Jephthah’s killing of his virgin daughter, to keep a foolish vow (p72), and of the fundamentalist acceptance by a group of teenagers of the rightness of self-sacrifice for one’s faith in the story of Abraham and Isaac (pp66-67). Is it enough to say that, properly handled, such stories (taken out of context) may be the basis for the development of children’s capacity for moral criticism? I have my doubts.

The concluding chapter brings together some of the pedagogical points raised throughout the book, and offers six “hallmarks of good story-telling”. It also identifies some significant dangers in the kind of story-telling which is likely to *close* minds to doubt, question and argument rather than to open them as a basis for the development of rational and moral autonomy. It also reminds us that we may have as much to learn from listening to children as they do from listening to us - even in matters of theology.

At face value, what goes on between parents and children when they share a story may seem a little distant from the 'big' questions of educational philosophy and policy: What is 'spirituality'? Is spiritual development a valid or feasible aim for the curriculum? Can one be initiated into a religious faith without being indoctrinated? Are 'faith schools' where such initiation takes place a good thing? But in providing food for thought about such issues, this book has a real (if necessarily limited) contribution to make.

Reference:

Haydon, G (Ed) (2009): *Faith in Education. A tribute to Terence McLaughlin*.
London: Institute of Education

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