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Promoting spiritual development through religious education in the first school

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore what it means in practice for teachers of young children to promote spiritual development within the context of the National Curriculum and in the light of the guidelines given by the 1988 Education Reform Act. The thesis begins by setting the discussion within a particular historical and philosophical context; a context which has been heavily influenced by the basic assumptions of Rationalism. I then discuss the influential work of Ronald Goldman in *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (1964) who applied the psychological methodologies of Jean Piaget (1929) to the particular subject of Religious Education, looking specifically at his understanding of children's language development. The possibility of encouraging the development of language skills alongside the opportunity to experience the spiritual side of reality is then discussed as a means of developing children's conceptual understanding of God. The thesis then offers a critique of *New Methods in R.E. Teaching: an Experiential Approach* (Hammond *et al.*, 1990) as an example of one particular model for promoting spiritual development in the classroom. The role of the imagination is then drawn out as being of crucial importance for Religious Education and those involved in seeking to promote spiritual development through it. Finally, this theory is fully developed in a practical context through a programme of activities which have been used effectively in the classroom as a means of seeking to promote spiritual development.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

The origins of this thesis can be traced back to 1991 when I made a short exploration of children's concepts of God, as part of a dissertation for a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education at Durham University. My aim in that study was to explore how young children understand God by examining both the academic debate and to gain some first hand experience of children's ideas, in order to weigh the two against each other. It was during that investigation that I began to realise the vastness of my field of enquiry, but more importantly, the need for research which was rooted in classroom experience. I also became increasingly dissatisfied with the way that the course for this kind of research was still being mapped out by those whose main points of reference were the methodologies of theorists like Piaget or Goldman and those who favoured a purely rational approach to enquiry.

It thus became apparent that one of the pressing and relevant questions that many primary school teachers were having to face in this field, was how they should respond to the demands of the National Curriculum, as set out in the 1988 Education Reform Act and how this related to the responsibility to foster and promote '*the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development*' (H.M. Government, 1988: 5), not only of individual pupils, but indeed of society as a whole.

The main aim of this thesis is thus to look at what it actually means in practice for a teacher of young children to promote *spiritual* development and how this relates to the teaching of Religious Education. Indeed, by merely addressing the requirements of the locally agreed Religious Education syllabus, I want to question whether or not teachers are effectively promoting spiritual growth and a conceptual understanding of God within their

pupils. In the course of this thesis, I will be seeking to answer this question by examining the historical and religious traditions which have shaped the debate, evaluating the models of learning which some educationalists have suggested for the subject and presenting an alternative approach for promoting spiritual development which has been tested in the classroom.

The term *spirituality* is clearly one which is constantly being defined and redefined by scholars and by those who are trying to understand their own religious or secular beliefs. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines 'spirituality' as that which belongs or is due to the Church. Within the context of Religious Education in schools and the demands of the National Curriculum, however, I would see the need for a much broader and all encompassing definition; for while the distinctiveness of every religion's own spirituality must be acknowledged, there are clearly some common threads running through the way that spirituality is understood which must be drawn out as I attempt to define the term. Indeed, I prefer I.V. Cully's definition (1990: 607) which states that it is a 'sense of relatedness to that which is beyond the self and yet approachable. For some the spiritual is around or within the self. This may be personal or non-personal, named God, power or presence.' (Cully, 1990: 607). As this thesis develops I shall therefore seek to present a model of spirituality which not only forms an integral part of Religious Education, but encompasses all areas of the curriculum; for promoting the spiritual development of a child involves developing the way in which children see and value themselves in relation to other people and to the rest of their environment, both visible and invisible.

Chapter one begins by setting the discussion within a particular historical and philosophical context; a context which I believe is directly responsible for the distinctive way that Religious Education has developed in England over the last century. I have chosen to focus my enquiry upon the philosophical foundation which has underpinned this debate, namely, Rationalism and its over dependence upon a scientific understanding of truth. I then look in more detail at the work and influence of Ronald Goldman who in the 1960's, applied the findings of the psychologist Jean Piaget to the field of Religious

Education and children's religious development. Indeed, I believe, a discussion of Goldman's (1964) work is crucial to an understanding of how the teaching of this subject has developed.

In the second chapter I examine one of the main tenets of Goldman's argument, which relates to children's language development and evaluate it in the light of some research which I undertook with young children in a school setting. Goldman's argument is then considered in relation to more recent educational research which examines children's development of language and numeracy skills. The chapter concludes by looking at ways in which children may be encouraged to develop appropriate language skills alongside being given the opportunity to experience the spiritual side of reality, in order that they may develop their conceptual understanding of God.

Chapter three develops these ideas further through a close examination of the work of David Hay (Hammond *et al.*, 1990), who has been trying to develop resources for teachers which seek to provide opportunities for young children to have direct and personal experiences of the spiritual side of reality. I will also begin to evaluate a recent work on *New Methods in R.E. Teaching: an Experiential Approach* (Hammond *et al.*, 1990) which attempts to put into practice Hay's methodology. This chapter explores the philosophical framework in which David Hay is operating and evaluates his activities, discussing how successful and appropriate they were when tried in the classroom.

My fourth chapter seeks to reflect upon the role of Religious Education within the curriculum and the role of the teacher in its' delivery. These two strands are then brought together by an exploration of the role of the imagination in promoting spiritual development. In this chapter I therefore aim to map out a possible way forward for those involved in Religious Education at the primary phase. Indeed, I believe that young children will only receive their full entitlement in this subject when those involved in delivering the curriculum begin to use their expertise to shape the way that the subject develops, rather than allowing its course to be determined by theorists like Goldman, who do not have first hand knowledge of how young children think and learn.

In the final chapter I draw upon both my observations of the purely experiential approach to classroom practice of David Hay (Hammond *et al.*, *1990*), along with my conclusions from the survey of the philosophical presuppositions which underpin much work in this field, in order to describe my own activities. These are activities which I have designed and used in the classroom as a means of seeking to promote spiritual development. This chapter is essentially the heart of my thesis since it puts theory into practice in a way that is accessible to class teachers who may be seeking to evaluate how they will respond to the requirements of the 1988 Education Act to promote spiritual development.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT
The nature of religious thinking

1.00 THE ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN BRITAIN

The tradition of Religious Education in schools can be traced back to the Education Act of 1870, although clearly the tradition of training novices within the monastic tradition is evident from the time of the Venerable Bede. During the period of industrial revolution in the nineteenth century there was an obvious need for literacy and numeracy skills to be made more readily available to those who were being employed to carry out clerical work, for example in the newly developing industries of commerce and transportation. The way for this had been prepared by J. S. Mill who had put forward his view that if the state was to provide general education it must not infringe upon individual liberty. Indeed, he wrote:

> A general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is sufficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.
> (Mill, 1977: 302)

Mill thereby advocated establishing a compulsory and public examination to ensure that an acceptable standard of general education was provided and 'to prevent the State from exercising, through these arrangements, an improper influence over opinion. The

knowledge required for passing an examination ... should ... be confined to facts and positive science exclusively.' (1977: 303). An emphasis upon science and the rational was thus to provide a particular climate within which Religious Education was to be nurtured.

> The examinations on religion, politics or other disputed topics, should not turn on the truth or falsehood of opinions, but on the matter of fact that such and such an opinion is held, on grounds, by such authors, or schools, or churches. (Mill, 1977: 303)

From this standpoint Religious Education was thus presented in a factual manner which simply gave instruction but did not seek to influence personal opinion. From the outset, no catechism or religious formulary distinctive to one denomination could be promoted, although the teacher was permitted to offer personal opinions. Indeed, the general ethos indicated that children should not be influenced too greatly by the predominant religious issues of the day that were being discussed.

J. S. Mill's influence prepared the way for a form of Religious Education which was an educational rather than an indoctrinatory exercise. It was generally agreed that its main aim was not to mould religious beliefs or to promote any kind of religious conformity, since this would be an infringement of personal liberty. Rather the consensus opinion was to expect and encourage people to be informed and highly rational, seeing reason as the only source of authority. The educational goal was thus to give pupils the ability to express and defend their personal positions. The implications of this for Religious Education, however, cannot be overlooked. Indeed, Religious Education could only be understood as a kind of religious *instruction* which had as its main goal the acquisition of skills and factual information. The historical, political, and social context of the individuals who were being instructed was largely ignored and seen as irrelevant to a discussion of the foundations of religious beliefs and practices, which often had no particular bearing upon the pupil's individual experience. In other words, the purely rational and scientific side of religion was promoted while its experiential or reflective

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nature was denied since it pertained too closely to subjectivity.

Religious Education was therefore born into a climate of scientific rationalism which was to determine the way the subject would develop over the following century. The Religious Education curriculum was therefore promoting an expectation that pupils could gain an objective and highly rational perspective upon religion. Although this is one way in which to view religion, however, it ignored the possibility that religion can be viewed very differently. That is to say, belief and truth have sometimes been understood as paradoxical in nature: not devoid of reason, yet difficult to understand apart from the eyes of faith. As Søren Kierkegaard classically argued: 'When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd.' (1967: 7). This particular understanding of belief also had implications for the way that learning was to be understood. Learning was therefore seen as a passive activity which was little more than comprehension and memory. Thus the model of education which was employed failed to recognise the mind as active and creative. Rather, it presented a picture of a world which was one of sense and reason alone. The result of this was that Religious Education in the nineteenth century attempted to employ the language of exact description and scientific rationalism. Moreover, religion was interpreted only in objective terms as a series of scientific facts, and never in subjective terms which valued the imagination or personal experience. Indeed, as Brenda Watson and Elizabeth Ashton point out in their recent book *Education, Assumptions and Values* (1995), when discussing the influence of positivism upon the values inherent in modern education:

> Scientific method and concern for what objectively is, quite apart from any subjective imagining, is important not only in the sciences but in many other areas as well. Yet if this poses as the *sole* reliable method of arriving at knowledge, it is deeply destructive of other ways of knowing. One of the most fundamental assumptions behind education is the importance of people as people. Positivism, however, acts against the possibility of taking people seriously as centres of experience. (1995: 43)

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If the subject is understood to involve apprehending that which is infinite, then it is therefore essential that Religious Education seeks to foster and nurture the creative imagination, rather than depend upon scientific rationalism as the only reliable means of knowing. Religious Education, in following a course mapped out by the rationalist alone, seems to have ignored the wisdom and experience of the poet Coleridge, whose words reflect this:

> You have been bred in a land abounding in men able in the arts, learning and knowledge manifold. But there is one art of which every man should be master, the art of reflection. If you are not a thinking man, to what extent are you a man at all. (Coleridge, 1913: xix)

From the perspective of Coleridge, the heart of Religious Education is not purely the practice and exercise of rationalism, but the opportunity to reflect upon that which is ultimately infinite and beyond the grasp of purely rational thought. He continues:

> The only method by which another can aid our effort in the work of reflection is by first reflecting himself and so pointing out the process and marking the results by words. (1913: xxvi)

Religious Education has, perhaps, therefore failed to promote the art of reflection but has sought to offer neat rational answers to very difficult questions. Indeed, as shall be shown in the following chapter, the legacy of this subject is one in which pupils have been denied an education which equips them to reflect upon that which is ultimately infinite by means other than the purely rational.

> Religions, representing as they do complex patterns of beliefs, ritual, story and behaviour developed over centuries, are not readily reducible to manageable curriculum packages and the attempt to do so may lead to unhelpful oversimplification and misleading caricature. The aim of education must be to set the flames of learning alight in students' minds so that it will carry on burning long after schooling is over ... If a good education leaves much to be

desired, a bad one kills off the innate and infectious curiosity which is the hallmark of the intelligent human being. (Slee, 1992: 38)

Just as Nicola Slee has employed the metaphor of kindling a flame to describe this model of learning, Religious Education could also be likened to a journey. Indeed, if we believe that religious enquiry is essentially about reflecting upon the infinite, then Religious Education by it's very nature must involve trying to prepare pupils for a journey that will continue for the rest of their lives. Religious Education is thus about learning to question and experience rather than to remember neatly packaged answers for examinations. If we are also prepared to acknowledge that there is a mystery at the heart of religion, then Religious Education must be about provoking an awareness of that mystery by all the means possible and encouraging reflection upon it. Priestly has described this in the following way:

> The methods we do employ, essentially those of the empiricist than those of the poet and artist, come into direct conflict with the subject matter under review. We then deal superficially with depth (content to draw Moslem prayers positions rather than reflect upon the inner mental state which the bodily movements indicate), analytically with wholes (drawing maps and collecting statistics of Calcutta as a way of 'understanding' Mother Theresa) and resolve ultimate questions with finite answers along the lines of "Hindus believe" ... Understanding religion necessarily involves recognising that there is a 'beyond which always eludes.' (Priestly, 1982: 17-18)

In this section I have attempted to show that modern Religious Education was influenced and shaped by particular philosophical beliefs which have prevailed since the last century. Although R.E. teaching has attempted to be objective and value free, it is the product of a society which holds up scientific reason as its primary and, indeed, only source of truth. Imaginative reflection upon experience has not been seen as an alternative dimension that could enhance and enrich the curriculum. Indeed it is my belief that it is

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only when we see the subject against this particular background that we can ever truly understand why Religious Education has developed in this country in this particular way over the last century.

1.01 RONALD GOLDMAN

In the years that passed between the Butler Act of 1944 and the 1988 Education Reform Act there were many key influences which determined the path of Religious Education in this country. I have chosen to focus upon one person whose influence in this field has been significant and whose ideas have helped to shape the majority of syllabi for Religious Education. Writing in the 1960s, Ronald Goldman tried to apply the psychological method of Piaget to the teaching of Religious Education in schools. In this section I want to outline, firstly, the basis of his argument and, secondly, comment upon his basic presuppositions which seem to have had such a significant influence upon modern Religious Education in this country.

Goldman began from the premise that a child's stages of intellectual development are very closely related to biological growth. By applying his own theories to the development of both numeracy and literacy skills, Piaget had reached the conclusion that children are unable to think in abstract form until adolescence. These radical conclusions from his experiments, if accepted, clearly had enormous implications for the teaching of Religious Education, as well as for the rest of the curriculum. It is for this very reason that Ronald Goldman introduces his volume *Readiness for Religion* (1965) with the words:

> It is the purpose of this volume to outline a programme of religious education more consistent with what we know of child development and more in accord with modern educational theory. (Goldman, 1965: x)

The first issue he challenges is an approach to Religious Education which presents religion as a body of knowledge to be accepted by pupils in an unquestioning way. He

states:

> Religion is a personal search for faith, not a body of information to be learned. (1965: xi)

Indeed, he argued, lack of conceptual understanding in religion lay primarily with what he saw as a misuse of the Bible which was then the main source book for Religious Education. He wrote:

> The Bible is not a children's book. The teaching of large areas of it may do more damage than good in a child's religious understanding and that too much biblical material is used too soon and too frequently. (1965: 7)

Few people would disagree with Goldman's assertion that the Bible is not for children. However, the question for teachers concerns how children may be introduced to the teachings it offers. Goldman regarded Religious Education which promotes a literal understanding of scripture as inappropriate. He viewed the Bible as a difficult enough text for even an adult to understand. Thus, he suggests, 'it is an impossible task to teach the Bible as such to children much before adolescence.' (1965: 8). For Goldman, religion is primarily a personal search for meaning rather than an adherence to and acceptance of a revealed set of propositions which are contained within the biblical tradition. Indeed, throughout his writings, he denies that religion has any kind of cognitive basis. This is perhaps exemplified in his quote from T. S. Eliot's 'The Rock.'

> Where is the life we have lost in living?
>
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
>
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? (1965: xiii)

Goldman's reaction is primarily to a *Fundamentalist* understanding of Christianity which accepts the stories of the Bible as historical truth and fails to acknowledge the need for interpretation or questions.

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In our concern to build a spiritual foundation for our children, we have often been over anxious to provide a ready made religion, a complete system of beliefs and ideas, which we impose upon them. (1965: 11)

In Goldman's application of Piagetian methodology he introduces us to a case study which he believes exemplifies his view (1965: 13-15). Caroline is a six year old who goes to her local infant school which uses 'informal activity methods' (Goldman, 1965:13) in all subjects except Religious Education. Although her parents no longer go to church, they encourage Caroline to attend Sunday school. Caroline sees church as a special place, particularly because of the architecture. Goldman comments that although she prays every night, her prayers are largely egocentric and materialistic. For Caroline, her concept of God is of a man with a long white shawl and a kind face. At the same time, she has a rather pantheistic view of a God who is everywhere, and the world is a mere physical extension of Him. Goldman interprets Caroline's concept of God as one of a human magician and sees her view of prayer as almost magical. In Piagetian terms, Caroline is at the pre-religious stage and possesses no real insight into a religious view of life. Religious language and thought are merged completely in her general experience. It is interesting to note that here Goldman interprets her understanding as purely fantasy and feeling which he derides over and against logic.

It is clear that Goldman used Piagetian stages of development, which were based upon biological stages of growth, to measure and assess children's *religious* development. According to Goldman, during the pre-school and early school years the child's thought is egocentric in nature. The child is unable to relate one concept to another with any accuracy and can only deal with one idea at a time. He argues that children have no intellectual check over whether they are mistaken or not. By the junior years the child will become less egocentric and will make fewer generalisations, but will still be at a very immature stage of religious development. The primary aged child will, according to this model, be unable to think in terms other than the concrete. An obvious problem thus arises if you

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accept these presuppositions and base all your Religious Education on a narrative, namely the Bible, which is highly abstract, non-concrete and full of richly metaphorical language. To quote Goldman again:

> The frequency with which God is described in the Bible in human terms fixes in the children's minds the man-likeness of God and this anthropomorphism, natural to the child, is taken literally. God is not thought of as a man, but he is a man. He is most frequently depicted by children as a very old man with a long white beard, sitting on the clouds, surrounded by the angels and clad in appropriate Palestinian garments. How God operates in the universe is seen physically and concretely, often the very opposite of the spiritual truths of which the New Testament speaks. (1965: 30)

Goldman goes on to claim that children's literal means of understanding make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to step forward into a more *spiritual* understanding of religious truth.

Another issue which Goldman raises is the problem of religious language. It is his view that many children possess a religious vocabulary which is well developed and quite sophisticated but also outstrips their actual understanding. His research (1965: 46) seems to suggest that children acquire a specific religious vocabulary which is not rooted in any understanding of their real truth. Children hear this vocabulary and will repeat it, and yet it is in no sense grounded in their own experience of life. Clearly it is acceptable to affirm the fact that children need to become familiar with religious language through their own experiences, but Goldman rejects even this as an impossibility since it is the language of poetry which he sees as different to that of real life.

What then does Goldman say specifically about early childhood and concepts of the Divine in the light of these initial observations? First of all he emphasises the significance of play and fantasy in the intellectual development of the infant. He suggests that due to the assumed incapacity of children for cognitive reasoning until adolescence, teachers in primary schools should be preparing children for the time when reasoning, particularly the

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ability to decipher 'religious language' had arrived. Time should be spent in 'feeling' and 'playing' their way into religion and work should be planned within life-themes, such as 'people who help us'. In play, a focus is often placed upon a parental figure who, to the child, may have Divine-like qualities of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. The child may then move from 'deifying parent to parentalizing the deity' (Goldman, 1965: 80). The child will also have a hunger for certainty of trust. Ideas of God may then develop into having a physical identity and human characteristics. The infant will have few doubts, but will accept everything. Goldman states that 'this must not be mistaken for a profound phase of spiritual wisdom and insight.' (Goldman, 1965: 80). He then expands what a child's view of the Bible may be as 'magical veneration, written by God, to be accepted at a literal level as entirely true.' (Goldman, 1965: 80).

Goldman's book, *Readiness for Religion* (1965), was truly radical for Religious Education in its day and his theories challenged some of the currently accepted methodology of Religious Education, especially the dominance of Bible stories in primary school classrooms. Until quite recently, Goldman's work had been quite widely accepted as a sound basis for the Religious Education curriculum and even when his work was not directly quoted, his basic presuppositions were followed. I believe that those involved in Religious Education are left then asking whether or not his conclusions should simply be accepted without question or whether they should be evaluated and criticised in the light of contemporary experience and observation.

The first consideration that can be raised in our critique is Goldman's over-dependence upon Piagetian psychology. Clearly Goldman readily accepted Piaget's recognised stages of development which were inextricably linked to biological growth. In recent years, however, many psychologists and educationalists alike have attempted to challenge Piaget's method of questioning and indeed his presuppositions. Margaret Donaldson, in her book, *Children's Minds* (Fontana, 1978), argues that evidence now compels her to reject certain features of Piaget's theory of intellectual development. Indeed, she believes that if children were asked the same questions set in a different context, then it would be

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possible to reach 'stages' which Piaget believed to be impossible at their age. Whilst we are required to consider the heritage of Piagetian research in order to understand more fully the way that education has changed since the Second World War, our understanding of child development is still an area of great debate.

If we now turn to look directly at Goldman, we are forced to recognise his particular theological stance. Goldman states quite categorically that religion is all about a personal search for faith and begins first and foremost with humanity. Clearly he has a particular understanding of Christianity, one which is not acceptable to many who practice the faith, and is offensive to many since it reduces the amount of cognitive reasoning which underpins it. He is understandably very critical of those who might present religion, especially Christianity, as a body of knowledge to be unquestioned. What he seems to dislike most, however, is the notion that religion can be seen as a complete system of beliefs and ideas. I think that there are very few teachers today, however, who would seek to impose a systematised religious world view in a way that denied the existence of questions. At the same time, Goldman comes from a distinctive theological tradition which sets humanity at the heart of religion, rather than a God who has revealed himself. The Christian religion requires humanity to question and, from its inception, has encouraged faith to seek understanding, but at the heart of Christianity is God's revelation of himself to humankind in the person of Jesus Christ, rather than individual man's searching for a God who is unknowable.

Bound up in this idea is Goldman's scepticism of those who believe in a God who operates in the universe in a concrete way. In this view, Goldman is making explicit his apparent belief in one philosophical tradition, namely Deism. Yet whilst Goldman is entitled to this personal view, he cannot expect the whole of Religious Education in schools to reflect this one philosophical stance. He openly criticises the traditions which have a different view of revelation and scripture to his own. Goldman exhorts us to step forward to a more spiritual understanding of religious truth. He again reflects the Enlightenment call for humanity to come of age.

If we look more specifically at Goldman's view of the Bible and its appropriateness for Religious Education, he again speaks out categorically in terms which reflect his views. He states, for example, that the Bible is not a children's book. It is interesting that in Goldman's work with children, he chooses biblical narratives which are controversial in nature and full of metaphorical language, for example, the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses and the burning bush, and the story of Jesus' temptation. The stories that he focuses upon all require, on the surface, a belief in an interventionist God who works beyond the laws of nature. He is thus presenting children with stories which are indeed ambiguous and difficult to interpret.

To move on, the next issue which Goldman's work raises relates to his understanding of how young children, aged between four and seven, think. He makes a number of observations. Firstly, he believes that a child's thought is egocentric and cannot relate one concept to another. Secondly, a child can only think in concrete terms and will have few doubts about what they are told by adults. It is apparent that few would deny that children are egocentric during their early years but this does not directly mean that they are totally unable to think about the world beyond themselves. Indeed, as Elizabeth Ashton points out:

> Recent research has suggested that a child as young as four years old has an intellectual
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> capacity resembling much more closely that of adults than has hitherto been understood.
>
> (Ashton, 1989: 7)[1]

The whole crux of Goldman's views about using the Bible with young children is that they cannot recognise or interpret metaphorical language. Clearly the Bible does contain metaphors, but these are perhaps not a problem for children when handled appropriately (see chapter 3 activity 3). Indeed, experience with young children will show that it is extremely difficult to accept Goldman's assumption that children will accept everything

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[1] In this context Ashton herself refers to Margaret Donaldson's work on *Children's Minds*: 'At least from age four, then, we must again acknowledge that the supposed gap between children and adults is less than many have claimed.' (Donaldson, 1978:58).

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that they are told, when it runs contrary to their experience of life.

According to Edward Robinson, the problem with Piagetian theory is that it 'is continually setting children an exam in a subject that adults are good at and children bad.' (Robinson, 1983: 10). Robinson is here advocating the view that children's ideas are often only seen as immature versions of adult beliefs which have no intrinsic value of their own. Only when we begin to understand the way in which modern Religious Education has been so heavily influenced by Piagetian developmental psychology and its basic assumptions about childhood, can we therefore move beyond this restrictive impasse and learn to see childhood as an enlightening and mysterious phase of life. Indeed, as we will discuss again in the next chapter, some of the most profound experiences that people interpret as religious, occur during the childhood years and then are developed into their adult lives. Adults will thus gain a great deal from seeking to understand the spiritual life of children rather than rejecting it as immature and lacking in understanding, in the manner in which Goldman is perhaps doing.

The aim of this chapter has been to summarise and comment upon some of the historical and philosophical influences which have shaped current Religious Education. It is, however, imperative that those involved in teaching this subject are aware that current practice in Religious Education is very much the product of a particular philosophical, cultural, historical, and theological context. The next chapter shall look specifically at the nature of learning in Religious Education and seek to establish a basis which is not built upon the presuppositions of the Piagetian school of thought, as it was applied by Goldman, but upon one which arises from my own experience of young children and the way in which they learn.

RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING AND SPIRITUAL AWARENESS
some problems that arise in the classroom

2.00 'HAROLD BE THY NAME': THE PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOUS THINKING

Ronald Goldman begins his book, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (1964), with a number of amusing stories about children's misunderstandings of religious language. He mentions, for example, the well known malversion of the Lord's prayer: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be thy name.' Goldman also recounts a story about a child who thought that 'King Solomon must have been fond of animals, because he had many wives and one thousand porcupines.' (Goldman, 1964: 1). Goldman uses these examples to support the view that errors such as these are attributable to the fact that young children are immature and limited in their religious understanding, thus confirming his belief that all young children are at a pre-religious stage in their development. To illustrate this belief he refers, once again, to Caroline, aged six, whose religious understanding exemplifies her Piagetian stage of development (Goldman, 1965: 13-15).

Caroline, who was mentioned in section 1.01, is from a nominal church going background and, according to Goldman, she enjoys Sunday School and feels that:

> ... church is a special place because it has special doors and coloured windows and people go
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> there to sing. Caroline prays every night ... Prayers are addressed to Jesus, although the
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> words "Jesus" and "God" are used interchangeably. Her prayers are largely egocentric and
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> materialistic ... There is no problem of unanswered prayer for her since "they all come true"
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> ... God is a man wearing "a long sort of white shawl." He'd be a special sort of man, not

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like other men, and he'd have a kind face. Caroline feels God is everywhere and this is what is special about him because the world is physically an extension of himself ... God lives in a far-off place in the sky. (Goldman, 1965: 14)

Goldman thus describes Caroline's concept of God as being similar to that of a human magician who loves everyone but punishes those who are 'naughty'. Whilst on the one hand, he acknowledges her positive attitude to religion, which he describes as being on 'a fairy tale level of religion,' he also states that Caroline:

... uses a large number of religious words, which she clearly does not understand ... and her reasoning is far from logical ... Concepts of God are crudely anthropomorphic and her ideas of prayer are magical. There is a refreshingly simple and naive pantheism about her view of God. (Goldman, 1965: 15)

Although Goldman is not suggesting that Caroline's religious understanding is typical of *all* six-year-olds, he presents her as a representative of the 'stage' that most children of that age would be at in their religious development, namely, a 'pre-religious stage' and interprets this as meaning that she has no real insight into the religious dimension of life. Goldman thus concludes that her 'religious experience, language and thought are merged so completely in her general experience that their significance escapes her.' (Goldman, 1965: 24).

Caroline's story is not unique. Many children are prone to crude anthropomorphic ideas, as I found when, in 1991, I undertook a small research project in two schools in the North East of England. I have outlined the scope and nature of this research below.

Research Methodology

I decided to use the individual unstructured interview as my chosen research technique for this project. This seemed to be the most appropriate way of assessing a group of individual children's concepts of God. The interview technique is clearly very useful for

testing and developing hypotheses, whilst at the same time being a simple way to gather data from children. One of the schools where I interviewed children was selected because I was placed there on teaching practice and it was therefore necessary to find a method which was consistent with the fact that I knew the children to whom I was talking and was used to conversing with them in an informal manner. This technique allows the interviewer the freedom to modify the sequence and wording of the questions whilst still having specific key issues which need to be raised in a conversational style. This technique has been defined by Cannell and Kahn (1968) as

> ...a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation.(Cannell and Kahn, 1968)

The technique clearly allows for a greater depth of response than perhaps some other methods and also was appropriate for the subject matter in hand. Clearly, the wording of questions about the nature of God can easily assume certain answers and can indeed encourage children to understand God in particular ways. For example, if one simply asks a child to draw a picture of God, then implicit in that instruction is the idea that God must exist and, secondly, that God must have a physical form that can be graphically represented. Clearly, this technique also allows children a degree of freedom in how they want to respond and how much or little information they want to impart to the interviewer. As Tuckman (1972) states:

> ...by providing access to what is `inside a person's head' it makes it possible to measure what a person knows (knowledge or information), what a person likes or dislikes (values and preferences), and what a person thinks (attitudes and beliefs). (Tuckman, 1972)

The obvious weakness with this particular technique however is that it can be affected by the subjectivity and bias of the interviewer. Clearly, the interviewer is able to choose the

content, sequence and wording of the questions but this does not mean, as Cohen and Manion (1980: 273) point out, that the unstructured interview is a casual affair, for in its own way it has to be carefully planned. Clearly, the issue of bias needs to be recognised and minimised, but I do not believe that this disadvantage invalidates the whole technique. As Kitwood (1977) states:

> If the interviewer does his job well (establishes rapport, asks questions in an acceptable manner, etc.), and if the respondent is sincere and well-motivated, accurate data may be obtained. Of course all kinds of bias are liable to creep in, but with skill these can largely be eliminated. In its fullest expression, this view accords closely with that of the psychometricians, who apparently believe that there is a relatively permanent, consistent, 'core' to the personality, about which a person will give information under certain conditions. (Kitwood, 1977)

Research Data

Research was carried out in two schools, the first of which was a local authority infant school of 180 children in Billingham, Cleveland. The school was selected because I was based at the school for a block of initial teacher training and I wanted to carry out my research in a familiar context where I was aware of the whole school ethos and educational philosophy. The second school was a private preparatory school in Jesmond, Newcastle-upon-Tyne with 90 children aged 4-11 years which was selected as a contrasting establishment with children from a very different socio-economic group. In each school I held 10 minute individual interviews with 6 children who were randomly selected by the class teacher. The children were aged five or six years and I spoke with 6 boys and 6 girls. Each of the discussions were tape recorded and then transcripts made. Although the interviews took on an unstructured form, there were three key issues that I wanted to address. The first of these was to discover what words the children might use to describe god. The second was to discuss the possibility of being able to draw God, whilst not

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expecting the children to actually draw him and thus impose the view that it is possible to draw God. Thirdly, to elicit where they thought God might be found.

The most common response to the initial question about words to describe God was that he is loving. This was the response given by eight of the twelve children, although such statements were often qualified in rather interesting ways. Sonny aged six, for example, added that `if you are naughty God punishes you.' Four children commented that God is `nice' or `kind.' Another interesting word offered in response was `Lord'. Again, however, this was qualified by the remark that `he makes sure that the world is safe.' One child stated that if he was in trouble God would help him, while another boy stated that God saves you. Yet when asked what God saves him from, he was unsure.

The second subject for discussion was whether or not it would be possible to draw a picture of God. Twenty five per cent of the children questioned stated that it would be impossible to draw God because nobody knows what he looks like. Fifty per cent of the children believed that God lives in the sky and could be seen if one went up high enough in an aeroplane. The pictures of God that were described by these children were anthropomorphic ones of a white elderly male with a beard. One six year old boy said `He is white and he will have some eyes and a mouth and his hands are not like real hands. His hands are just like clouds.' Another child commented that `he's got a white suit on but it's like a dress. God's a man but he's just got a sort of dress.'

The final subject for discussion was where God might be found. Fifty per cent of the children categorically stated that he lives in heaven which is physically located in the sky. One six year old boy stated that `when people die they go up to heaven where God is. I know it's covered in clouds.' Another of the children commented that he's got a big house in the sky. One seven year old boy, of Chinese origin, commented that when God is in the sky he stops the world from going too near the sun. Another child added to his description of God in the sky that he is busy making people, using skin for the people and pastry for the other things.

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It must be stated from the outset that this series of interviews do not in any way constitute a large scale research project, but were a series of informal discussions aimed at giving some indicators of how key stage one children understand God. In some respects, however, these interviews give more information about the way that questions need to be phrased in order to illicit children's ideas, than about their responses since such a small sample were questioned. In retrospect, it was evident that this particular method of questioning was assessing the children's language development rather more than their religious understanding. By reflecting upon my experiences of questioning children in this way, I began to realise that it is very difficult to find appropriate methods for children to communicate their understanding which avoid the obvious dangers of encouraging purely anthropomorphic images of God. Everybody has preferred means of communication with which they are more at ease. Attempts must therefore be made not to discriminate against those who struggle to put their ideas into a verbal or written form.

The second area of discussion made it evident that at least seventy five per cent of the children questioned understood God in very anthropomorphic ways. Indeed all of these children believed God to be a white male of a mature age. Whilst ideas such as these could support Goldman's theory that these children are at a pre-religious stage of development, it may be possible that if a group of adults who had not been exposed to any systematic programme of Religious Education, that similar responses might be given. Clearly, many of the images of God which surround us in art and the media, are crudely anthropomorphic and cannot fail to influence our conceptual understanding and mould our thinking. Similarly, children are bombarded with such representations but are rarely given the tools with which to interpret such imagery in helpful and creative ways. It is, therefore, not surprising that the images which children see in religious paintings and the images that they may conjure up in their heads after hearing a Bible story read to them in collective worship, are the very images that they will describe when they are asked what God is like. There are obvious connections between images of God as an old gentleman

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with a long white beard and the widely held view by at least half of the children that he lives in the sky.

Interpretation

Most of the concepts expressed by the children in these simple interviews are crude and naive, but it should be acknowledged that none of the children questioned had been exposed to a systematic programme of Religious Education or regularly attended a place of worship. The children in both schools had listened to a variety of religious stories which had been selected by their teachers to support work in a range of curriculum areas, rather than because of the religious concepts contained therein. In both schools the stories were read aloud to the children with very little formal discussion about their meaning or the use of metaphorical or symbolic language. The children's responses would clearly have been categorised by Goldman as pre-religious and immature in terms of their conceptual development. If, therefore, this data causes us to arrive at the same conclusions as Goldman's research of the 1960's, are we then to conclude that children are incapable of a religious thinking and understanding which moves beyond crude anthropomorphism and naive literalism? For in the words of Goldman,

> We have already seen that other investigators, especially Piaget, have noted the tendency in young children to anthropomorphise the deity. This is a natural result of egocentric thinking where only human and childhood experiences are known. It stems from what Bovet describes as the need of the child `to parentalise the deity', once he discovers that his human parents are not infallible nor possess the divine qualities, as he had previously imagined...Although children refine their anthropomorphisms it is evident that they do not altogether outgrow them and they take them forward to adult life...The limitation of the child is to take the analogy for a fact, and indeed, the language of religion may encourage him in this. (1965: 87)

In my next section I will suggest an alternative interpretation of the research in question,

which could prepare the way for a method of Religious Education which challenges the assumptions of Goldman.

2.01 'HAROLD BE THY NAME' REVISITED: SOME LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

On the basis of a number of amusing stories of children's misunderstandings, Goldman arrives at a number of conclusions and judgements about their conceptual development. Indeed, after quoting the amusing malversion of the Lord's prayer, he summarises his thesis as follows:

> We recognise these statements, not as blasphemies, but as rather amusing examples of children's misconceptions. All too frequently, however, we fail to recognise them as symptoms of the child's real difficulties in thinking, and as indicators of the serious limitations experienced by the young in making intellectual interpretations of experience. The truth is that when faced with complex problems of thinking, children try to make as much sense of them as possible. (Goldman, 1964: 1)

It seems to me, however, that children's misunderstandings reveal very little about the limitations of their intellectual interpretation of experience, but rather suggest that the word 'hallowed' is simply not part of the child's vocabulary and experience of life. Indeed, as Dora Ainsworth notes:

> Goldman's findings demonstrate not the level of children's capacity to understand but the inadequacy of their language and/or experience and imply their lack of adequate Religious Education. (Ainsworth, 1978:7)

Similarly, Donaldson (1978) quotes an episode from Laurie Lee's work, *Cider with Rose*, which illustrates beautifully how children can be misled by the way adults use language in a rather ambiguous way in different contexts .

I spent that first day picking holes in paper, then went home in a smouldering temper.

'What's the matter, Love? Didn't he like it at school then?'

'They never give me the present.'

'Present? What present?'

'They said they'd give me a present.'

'Well now, I'm sure they didn't'

'They did! They said: "You're Laurie Lee, aren't you? Well just sit there for the present." I sat there all day but I never got it. I ain't going back there again.'

(Lee, 1965: 50)

According to Donaldson, the teacher in this fictional example has used language without considering what her words could be likely to mean to a small child, and thus shown that she has acted out of her own self-centredness. This lesson is one which teachers of very young children find they are constantly having to relearn and then modify their classroom practice accordingly. Another rather amusing episode which illustrates this point is the story of the reception class teacher who arranged a basket of fruit on her art table and asked a group of new entrants to the class to paint the fruit. Upon her return to the group, five minutes later, she discovered that they had ignored the paper put out for them and were busily applying paint to each piece of fruit! It is thus of no surprise to find that children are confused by the peculiar language of the Lord's prayer, since it contains words which are so categorially different from those in their everyday usage. As religious educators, we are therefore obliged to look at the way *we* use and manipulate language in a religious context rather than automatically blame children for their misunderstandings and confusions. Indeed, I believe that it is better to avoid making judgements about children's conceptual understanding based purely on their ability to understand a particular vocabulary and distinctive ways of talking about religion. Rather, I suggest that we might begin by looking at the way adults themselves talk about religion and only then start to think about how we can help children to use particular forms of language appropriately

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and correctly, so that they can find themselves in a more advantageous position to understand what religion is all about. According to John Hull, the blame clearly should lie with the adults, who remain at a pre-religious stage of development in terms of their use of appropriate language to talk about God.

> It is from de-theologised adults that young children pick up such clichés (these are little more than verbalisms). God is male, is old, looks after us, makes flowers grow and that we go to be with Jesus when we die etc. What we find in this repertoire of childlike religiosity is intrinsic to childhood but a great deal which indicates the puerilization of adult religious life.' (Hull, 1986: 60)

The next section will look at how children can be helped to use language in a more meaningful way which is appropriate to their understanding of the religious dimension of life by observing parallels in other curriculum areas.

2.02   LEARNING THE LANGUAGE: PARALLELS IN OTHER AREAS OF THE CURRICULUM

This chapter began by looking at some evidence which suggests that children have problems in understanding the way language is used in the context of religion and thus find it difficult to grasp some religious concepts which are expressed by such language. Attention then focused upon how this might suggest the existence of problems in the actual way that language is used, rather than in children's cognitive skills. I now propose to look at why I believe it is essential to reconsider the importance of introducing children to religious language and how this might be possible in the context of the primary curriculum.

Over the past thirty years much research has been carried out and debates have raged over the way children acquire language skills.[2] These discussions have then been echoed

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[2] There have been three main alternative models to explain how children acquire language. Firstly the Imitative, behaviourist theories propounded by B.T. Skinner and based on the notion that children learn language by copying. Secondly, the Innate theories associated with N. Chomsky who believed that we have a Language Acquisition Device enabling us to deduce underlying rules of language in a process rather like osmosis. Thirdly, the Interaction theories associated with J.S. Bruner who suggested that the quantity and quality of the social

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within the contexts of particular curriculum areas and have thus drawn our attention to the way children need to be equipped with the linguistic tools to adequately make sense of the subject in hand. For example, in the area of mathematics, teachers have become increasingly aware of the importance of language and discussion in the development of mathematical concepts and principles (Haylock and Cockburn, 1989). For many children, mathematics appears to be a matter of moving symbols around and writing them on a piece of paper. It is now, however, recognised that the learning of recipes for answering various types of questions is not the basis of understanding in mathematics (Haylock and Cockburn, 1989 : 1-19).

> A simple model that enables us to talk about understanding in mathematics is to view the growth of understanding as the building up of cognitive connections. More specifically, when we encounter some new experience there is a sense in which we understand it if we can connect it to previous experiences or, better, to a network of previously-connected experiences. The more strongly connected the experience, the more we understand it. Learning without making connections is what we call learning by rote. The teacher's role in developing understanding is, then, to help the child to build up connections between new experiences and previous learning. (Haylock and Cockburn, 1989: 2-3)

We can clearly draw parallels here with Goldman's example of the child's misunderstanding of the Lord's prayer; for in so far as he confused the word 'hallowed' with 'Harold' it is evident that Goldman's child failed to connect the words of the Lord's Prayer with any previous experience. Similarly, it would seem that children who recite mathematical language, of which they have no understanding and which is not based on their own experiences, consistently fail to connect these mathematical concepts with the world around them. Brenda Watson (1987:159) thus cites an example of an eight-year-old son of a Newcastle baker who was unable to do mental arithmetic until it was translated into buns and loaves. She also quotes some research carried out by Gill Barrett (1986) on

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context, the Language Acquisition Support System were vital in supporting the child's efforts.

groups of children of different ages which found that when five-year-olds were looking at things they knew well they were capable of higher levels of abstraction.

> Higher level thinking, whether it was conceptual or functional, seemed more related to language and thinking experience, that is, exposure to them, and opportunity and confidence to practice them, than to age or intelligence per se ... I see all these skills as relevant and usable at all ages but I recognise that differences may lie in the degree to which they are 'usable' at any point in an individual's learning process, both because of lack of experience or opportunity to use any one skill and/or because of personal style in relating to the world.
> (Barrett, 1986: 73)

One of the most significant influences upon developing understanding is thus having the opportunity to use cognitive skills in a meaningful context. Jerome Bruner notes that 'the growth of the mind is always growth assisted from the outside and the intellectual nurturing that makes it possible eventually to use language as a tool of thought requires long years and complex training.' (Bruner, 1972: 50). Just as we recognise the importance of introducing children to the language of mathematics and offering plenty of opportunities in which to apply it for themselves, teachers must, therefore, be prepared to do the same in Religious Education; acknowledging that failure to equip children in this way may ultimately be detrimental to their growth of understanding.

2.03 EXPERIENCING THE RELIGIOUS: A CONTEXT FOR USING RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

In attempting to develop an understanding of the way in which children come to an understanding of God, there seem to be two essential ingredients which are needed. Firstly, as previously discussed in section 2.02, children need to be given the opportunity to develop appropriate language skills through occasions to explore and to play with language in a religious setting, in for example role play activities which have a religious theme. Secondly, their experience of life needs to be such that they have a real and

meaningful context in which to apply these linguistic skills. Hence, it is only through the development of experience and language together that children can adequately mature in their conceptual understanding. Thus for example, to understand what a ball is one needs to have had opportunities to experience or play with one, alongside being told that there is a particular name for the spherical object which is accepted by all who speak the child's language. Whilst in the majority of learning situations these experiences need to be first hand, observing the way that other people use language to express meaning can be similarly insightful. As St. Augustine recalls in his *Confessions*:

> I ceased to be a baby unable to talk, and was now a boy with the power of speech. I can remember that time, and later on I realised how I had learnt to speak. It was not my elders who showed me the words by some set system of instruction, in the way that they taught me to read not long afterwards; but, instead, I taught myself by using the intelligence which you, my God, gave to me. For when I tried to express my meaning by crying out and making various sounds and movements, so that my wishes should be obeyed, I found that I could not convey all that I meant or make myself understood by everyone whom I wished to understand me....I noticed that people would name some object and then turn towards whatever it was that they had named. I watched them and understood that the sound they made when they wanted to indicate that particular thing was the name that they gave to it, and their actions clearly showed what they meant, for there is a kind of universal language, consisting of expressions of the face and eyes, gestures and tones of voice which can show whether a person means to ask for something and get it, or refuse it and have nothing to do with it. (Augustine, 1961:29)

One of the chief exponents of this experiential approach to religious understanding is Edward Robinson. Through his studies at the Alister Hardy Research Centre, he has carried out extensive work on religious experiences, from the premise that experimental psychology and developmentalism have dominated the study of human nature and imposed their own set of presuppositions. Indeed, he argues that in the area of children's

religious development, most of the research has begun from the false assumption that young children are incapable of experiencing, perceiving and thinking as adults do, and consequently are religiously inadequate and underdeveloped. In his foreword to the American edition of Robinson's, *The Original Vision* (1983), John Westerhoff thus states:

> Robinson, on the other hand, assumes that children have a natural capacity for insight, imagination, understanding and knowing that does not need to develop into some higher form. Children, he found, have experiences that are essentially religious; and he further found that no mature religious life is possible without the presence and continuance of such experiences. (Robinson, 1983: x)

One of the most powerful stories which Robinson records in *The Original Vision* centres around a young girl's experience when she observed some ants. The story is retold retrospectively by the girl many years after the experience and so it is, therefore, difficult to separate how much of the story has gained significance for her over time and how much is original to her childhood experience. The story does, however provide an excellent illustration of the view that children are capable of having profound religious experiences, although it is often only in later life that they are given the tools to name, describe, explain and integrate their experiences.

> When I was about five I had the experience on which, in a sense, my life has been based. It has always remained real and true for me. Sitting in the garden one day I suddenly became conscious of a colony of ants in the grass, running rapidly and purposefully about their business. Pausing to watch them I studied the form of their activity, wondering how much of their own pattern they were able to see for themselves. All at once I knew that I was so large that, to them, I was invisible - except, perhaps, as a shadow over their lives. I was gigantic, huge - able at one glance to comprehend, at least to some extent, the work of the whole colony. I had the power to destroy or scatter it, and I was completely outside the sphere of their knowledge and understanding. They were part of the body of the earth. But

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they knew nothing of the earth except the tiny part of it which was their home.

Turning away from them to my surroundings, I saw there was a tree not far away, and the sun was shining. There were clouds, and blue sky that went on for ever and ever. And suddenly I was tiny - so little and weak and insignificant that it didn't really matter at all whether I existed or not. And yet, insignificant as I was, my mind was capable of understanding that the limitless world I could see was beyond my comprehension. I could know myself to be a minute part of it all. I could understand my lack of understanding.

A watcher would have to be incredibly big to see me and the world around me as I could see the ants and their world, I thought. Would he think me to be as unaware of his existence as I knew the ants were of mine? He would have to be vaster than the world and space, and beyond understanding, and yet I *could* be aware of him - I *was* aware of him, in spite of my limitations. At the same time he was, and he was not, beyond my understanding.

Although my flash of comprehension was thrilling and transforming, I knew that in reality it was no more than a tiny glimmer. And yet, because there was already this glimmer of understanding, the door of eternity was already open. My own part, however limited it might be, became in that moment a reality and must be included in the whole. In fact, the whole could not be complete without my own particular contribution. I was at the same time so insignificant as to be almost non-existent and so important that without me the whole could not reach fulfilment.

Every single person was a part of Body, the purpose of which was as much beyond my comprehension no as I was beyond the comprehension of the ants. I was enchanted. Running indoors, delighted with my discovery, I announced happily, "We're like ants, running about on a giant's tummy!" No one understood, but that was unimportant. I knew what I was.

It was a lovely thing to have happened. All my life, in times of great pain or distress or

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failure, I have been able to look back and remember, quite sure that the present agony was not the whole picture and that my understanding of it was limited as were the ants in their comprehension of their part of the world I knew.

This inner knowledge was exciting and absorbingly interesting, but it remained unsaid because, even if I could have expressed it, no one would have understood. (Robinson, 1983: 12-13)

Clearly, as I have already acknowledged, the story has been reinterpreted and retold through the eyes of an adult who has reflected deeply upon the experience and this perhaps invalidates this story from this research. Yet it may contain a number of interesting insights into children's spirituality, although these are of a purely speculative nature. Firstly, the story illustrates the belief that children are often much more aware than adults are of the existence of something greater than themselves. Children are usually happy to believe in the existence of giants, wizards, and witches, whilst adults having disproved their existence try to set themselves up as the all-knowing, all-powerful ones. Even when adults are happy to acknowledge the possibility of an omniscient and omnipotent being they try to diminish his power in their minds, thus increasing their own importance. Secondly, the story also illustrates the fascination which many children have with nature and the possibilities that it has to offer in enabling us to appreciate our place in the vast order of life. As adults we tend to become rather over familiar with the natural order and thus ignore the powerful lessons it has to teach us. For the little girl in the story it was a sense of awe and wonder that opened up the possibility of catching a glimpse of the Divine which would indeed shape the rest of her life.

Westerhoff and Robinson believe, however, that Religious Education has tended to focus purely upon cognition and objective reflection, at the expense of developing the imaginative side of religion which allows children to experience the spiritual dimension of life at a very young age. They believe that children can be most receptive to the spiritual realm through being given the opportunities to engage in creative activities.

Our personal encounter with that ultimate mystery which is God is nurtured, expressed and

communicated through dance, music, drama, poetry, painting, sculpture and film, through

the stimulation of the imagination and our own visual, oral and kinetic senses. (Westerhoff

in Robinson, 1983: xiii)

Westerhoff goes on to relate his ideas about religious experiences to his assumptions about the way that young children's language develops. He states quite categorically his belief that children only acquire the language to describe their religious experiences in later life.

Children have profound, mature religious experiences which only in later life can be named,

described, explained and comprehended. Just as religion is danced before it is believed, it is

experienced before it is explained; we hear God speak before we can express what God says.'

(Westerhoff in Robinson, 1983: xiii)

The next chapter will look at how this particular philosophical framework, with its emphasis upon experiential learning has been applied to Religious Education in the work of David Hay.

3

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL AWAKENING
an experiential approach explored

3.00 'SUSPICION OF THE SPIRITUAL'

In his article, *Suspicion of the Spiritual: Teaching Religion in a world of Secular Experience* (1985), David Hay sets out his interpretation of why an apparent rift exists between the way that Religious Education is regarded by society and the way in which committed believers see their religious beliefs. He asserts that the reason for this lies in the fact that religion, as it is presented to them in the classroom, makes no connections with their personal life experience. Further he asserts that this is due to the fact that our experience of reality arises out of a specific social context which is profoundly sceptical of religion. In an attempt to reject the questionable role that the Church has played in European history and the vileness of religious wars, society has turned religion into something that one should be ashamed of.

> It does not matter that most people do not even know the names of these ancient controversies: they underlie a pervasive mood which turns religion into a topic for shyness and embarrassment for the average man in the street. Almost every Western Christian believer has had to confront that history and that embarrassment, and somehow or other transcend it or blot it out during his education. (Hay, 1985: 140)

David Hay believes that the legacy of this unfortunate history has been the appearance of a multiplicity of metaphors for describing reality. Metaphors like god operating on this solar system *as if* he were outside it.

What these metaphors, and others like them, succeed in doing is to reify a sceptical stance towards appearances which has been dominant since the Copernican revolution. Paul Ricer chooses out a triumvirate of great men, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, who, operating from this perspective in their reflections on religion, develop an 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' It is this hermeneutic that people engage in when they conceive of their experience of the sacred as illusion, the lies of consciousness....I contend that the power of this system of metaphors is sufficiently great in contemporary industrial Europe to act as an unintentional indoctrination. (Hay, 1985; 141)

According to Hay, this subtle form of indoctrination which denies the spiritual realm, encourages people to become secretive about their religious experiences and then reflect on their meaning in a merely fragmentary way which does not encourage them to integrate their experiences with the rest of their life. This stands in contrast to religious behaviour which usually aims to interpret and act upon an experience of the Divine taken at face value. David Hay goes on to assert that Religious Education for too long has paid more attention to suspicion than to faith, thus resulting in the subject becoming detached from experiences that are anything other than secular.

Observing religious rituals, re-enacting festivals, studying sacred texts, debating the grounds for belief, discussing the ethical and political stances appropriate to a believer, hearing talks from believers- none of these is necessarily to study religion as the believer understands it. All these experiences, however vivid and interesting, can be assimilated in a totally secular way, via the hermeneutics of suspicion. If my consciously available experience of reality is mediated via secular metaphors, it is very difficult for me to enter into religion apart from an imperialist foray to see how the natives live. I may be humane, sympathetic, even concerned that such cultures should survive, but within me is an experiential *apartheid* which detaches me from the possibility of genuine understanding. (Hay, 1985; 142)

Against this particular background, David Hay sets out how he believes Religious Education should face the challenge of still being an essential component of the curriculum whilst working within a climate of scepticism. He states in this article that teachers must present religion in a truly honest form, which he sees as a response by human beings to what they experience as the sacred. Teachers must also encourage pupils to recognise aspects of their own experiences which can be interpreted by believers as the very root of religion. He claims that both of these aims are educational rather than indoctrinatory in intention when he states:

> It is important to note that both tasks, whilst they point directly to the source of religious
>
> motivation for the believer, still bracket out questions of the ultimate truth of religion.
>
> (Hay, 1985; 142)

In raising some of the issues that are intrinsic to the debate about the nature of Religious Education, David Hay draws some useful parallels with science education, as a subject which must be rooted in direct experience. Thus, he believes, it is impossible for children to understand the nature of religion if they are out of touch with the areas of human experience which can be interpreted religiously. Whilst Hay is eager not to ignore the need for the visible and conceptual content of religion to be studied, the starting point must be experience. He again illustrates this point by stating;

> Teachers proceed from practice to interpretation by giving their pupils a scientific language
>
> and concepts which will enable them to enter more deeply and subtly into their experience.
>
> Similarly, in religious education, it is not enough to point to experience. (Hay, 1985; 144)

According to Hay, the teacher must be aware of the suppression of the religious aspect of children's experience which is common in our modern society. Northrop Frye develops this idea more fully when he writes:

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The teacher, as has been recognised at least since Plato's *Meno*, is not primarily someone who knows, instructing someone who does not know. He is rather someone who attempts to recreate the subject in the student's mind, and his strategy in doing this is first of all to get the student to recognise what he already potentially knows, which includes breaking up the powers of repression in his mind that keep him from knowing what he knows. (Frye, 1982: 89)

The teacher, according to Hay, is also required to create a setting which encourages class members to examine the religious side of experience in an unhindered way. Hay draws attention to a range of techniques which are used in humanistic education to build up self-esteem and promote self-awareness, suggesting that, with very little adaptation, they could become appropriate for helping children to enter empathetically the experiential world of the religious believer.

3.01 NEW METHODS IN R.E. TEACHING: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

In this section I intend to evaluate a number of activities which are described in *New Methods in R.E. Teaching: an Experiential Approach* (Hammond *et al.*, 1990), with the purpose of illustrating how the purely experiential approach of David Hay can be put into practice in the classroom. I will begin by describing the activities from this book and how I used them with a class of mixed ability Year Three and Year Four children. I will then discuss some of the issues which arose from trying these activities. At the outset I must point out that the activities which I have chosen all come under the umbrella theme of personal awareness and self esteem. I used these activities from David Hay's book with a class of Year three and four children in the First school where I work. My intention was to evaluate these activities using the Reflective Practitioner Model. The activities were carried out on a weekly basis for forty five minutes, following the precise instructions contained within the book.

The first activity which I chose to use is outlined on pages 44-47, under the heading *Who's here?* The main aim of this activity 'is to help pupils to get to know one another and discover interests and experiences they share. It also encourages personal reflection by listening to others, and responding to, the revelations of others, and provides opportunities to think in an intuitive way' (Hammond, 1990: 44)

The first stage of the activity requires the children to think about their favourite colour and then to think about which colour might best represent how they feel. The children record this on paper and are then asked to find any other children in the class who have chosen the same colour and discover if they have anything in common with the others in the group. They are also encouraged to describe, if they can, why they selected that particular colour. The second stage of the activity requires the children to write down five statements about themselves which they are proud of or pleased about; something that they have achieved, or a particular skill that they possess. The papers are then collected in and read out to the class anonymously so that the rest of the children have an opportunity to guess who is being described. The children are asked to put their hands up if they want to guess the identity of the person being described and no negative comments are permitted when speaking about other members of the class. The book outlines the type of learning that should be drawn out from the activity by suggesting appropriate questions that could be asked at the end of the session. 'What do you remember most about doing this activity? How did you feel while you were taking part? What surprised you? What do you notice or appreciate about the things that others said? What have you learned about others in the group? What have you learned about yourself?' (Hammond, 1990: 48).

I carried out this activity with a class of thirty four children in a fairly small classroom and it lasted about forty-five minutes. The children are usually well motivated by activities which require moving freely around the classroom and involve plenty of discussion. They all participated to a greater or lesser extent and most of the children apparently found it an

enjoyable experience. The children who are not independent writers were given as much support as they needed to allow them to participate fully in the session on an equal level. They all managed to follow the instructions and were actively engaged in the *Colour Me* part of the session. I was unsure, however, of the value or purpose behind putting all the 'angry red' children in one group for example and all the rather 'withdrawn' children who had chosen the colour black in the same group with a rather vague agenda of what to discuss. Although all the children participated in this discussion, many of them seemed rather unsure of the purpose behind what they were doing. The children are used to always being able to see the purpose behind a piece of work or activity, so that they can understand how it is part of an integrated topic, or how it fits in to an on-going programme of work; so for many of them they found it hard to connect this activity to other work that was going on during the day.

The most significant difficulty which I found with this activity, however, was that the individual children who have very low self-esteem were publicly exposed when they were struggling to find anything in their own lives that they were proud of and felt prepared to share with the whole class. For each child who found it difficult to think of things that they were proud of, I encouraged them with suggestions of achievements that I had noticed they had made in the classroom. Yet it was evident that reminding such children of their successes in physical education, for example, was actually a very long way from helping them to value their own achievements. Indeed, the whole activity managed to very effectively highlight the obvious successes of their peers, which they probably had no problem in recalling! This very fact seemed to perpetuate the problem of certain successful and confident children having power over the more vulnerable ones who struggle to value themselves and thus be valued by their community. This activity, like many in this book, required the children to get in touch with feelings which can sometimes be very painful and perhaps should not be exposed in such a public way. I think that it should be acknowledged that teachers are not trained to deal with potential situations that may arise out of sessions such as these, particularly when they must be undertaken with such large

groups of children.

Activity Two: Just a Minute

The second theme which I explored with my class from *New Methods in R.E. Teaching* was that of listening, and was based on the activities described on pages 60-65 under the heading *Just a Minute*. The activity involves asking the children to speak to a partner for one minute on a given subject. The partner is then required to show the other person, by their actions, that they are *not* listening. The children then swap roles with a different subject to speak about. A list is then drawn up by the class of signs that people give that they are not listening. The exercise is then repeated with both partners trying to exhibit good examples of listening skills.

Once again this activity was well received by the children, especially the most articulate ones who have plenty of self confidence. It was, however, a very difficult activity in terms of classroom management because it involved seventeen children all trying to make themselves heard at once, and the other seventeen being as distracting as possible, in a very confined space! The children rapidly became very excited and found it quite difficult to concentrate on the task in hand. It was clearly the kind of activity that some children see as a perfect opportunity to exhibit inappropriate forms of behaviour, and one in which others find that they are unsure of how to behave in a less structured context. In hindsight, the session may have been more manageable if two children carried out the activity whilst the rest of the class were observing and commenting on what was happening, although this would perhaps go against the aim of the book that all learning situations involve a first hand experience for the child. Once again questions were raised in my mind about the connection between this activity and Religious Education, since no explicit links are drawn with spiritual or religious awareness by the authors of the book.

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<u>Activity Three</u>: If I was a ...

The third main group of activities that I used with my class was a basic introduction to metaphor and symbolism. The activities are described on pages 105-108 under the title *If I was a ...* The session begins with a toy car, a model animal, and a piece of fruit being passed in turn around a circle of children sitting on the floor. The children are asked to think about what kind of toy or car or fruit they might be if they had to choose one to represent them. When the object reaches them, this signifies that it is their turn to tell the other children what they have chosen. This activity can be carried out as a whole class discussion and then each child can be given the opportunity to make a pictorial record of their ideas. When I carried out this activity, I felt rather sceptical about how successful it would be since the children were only given a brief introduction to the session and, secondly, the book suggests that this activity is only appropriate for much older children. I was, however, pleasantly surprised to discover that out of the whole class of thirty four, there was only one child who did not understand what he was doing and could not participate at all. There was also a couple of children who participated by just mentioning their favourite car, animal or fruit, rather than grasping that they were supposed to be thinking of objects that might represent themselves.

One of the most interesting observations that I made whilst the children were engaged in this task was that there were many obvious links to be made between the children's self-esteem and the things that they chose. For example, one very confident boy saw himself as a brand new B.M.W. car, while his friend, who is very lacking in self confidence, described himself as a broken down, old V.W. Beetle. Another child in the class, who takes on the role of the class comedian, described himself as a "three wheeled clown car", while another child, who is very practical and enjoys the outdoor life, represented himself as a Land Rover.

The suggestions for the animal category were similarly interesting to observe and reflect upon. The quietest, most well behaved children in the class all represented themselves as

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domestic cats, while the monkey was a very popular choice with the more mischievous element. There was a clear contrast between the girls, who in the main chose domestic animals, and the boys, who generally chose wild animals. The children then went on to record on paper how they would represent themselves in terms of the weather, sounds, food, and flowers, along with the categories that I have already described.

This activity was a very interesting one in many ways, not least as a means of enriching the children's understanding of the way that language can be played with, but once again it failed to draw out any parallels of an explicitly *religious* nature. The activity, as a part of the Religious Education curriculum is, perhaps, useful only in so far as it is an excellent introduction to understanding religious metaphor and symbolism. There seems to be very little point, however, in carrying out the activity in an isolated way, when it could so easily be extended to widen young children's appreciation of symbols in religious life, and the way that language can be played with to enrich understanding. Why develop such skills in the context of Religious Education if you are not prepared to apply them to an explicitly religious context ? It is also interesting to note that this activity was designed to be used with much older children, although young children are clearly perfectly able to understand it fully. This seems to echo the thoughts and expectations of Piaget and Goldman, who expected young children to lack the conceptual framework to make sense of metaphor and symbolic language; a point which work such as this seems to contradict. As Goldman writes in his book, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*:

> All too frequently we fail to recognise children's misconceptions as symptoms of the child's
>
> real difficulties in thinking, and as indicators of the serious limitations experienced by the
>
> young in making intellectual interpretations of experience. (Goldman, 1964: 1)

3.02 AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH EVALUATED FROM PRACTICE

I would now like to draw out a number of key issues which arose from actually applying this purely experiential approach to Religious Education in the classroom. My comments

relate specifically to the practicalities of using these activities in a classroom with young children rather than purely their content.

Classroom Management

If a teacher decides to use the method that is outlined in *New Methods in R.E. Teaching* as a basis for their activities for Religious Education, then there are a number of noteworthy implications for classroom management, which are implicit in the approach. First of all, many of the activities are probably best suited to being used in a large room where no restrictions are placed on the noise level that can be made by the children. The limitations of space and noise that are placed upon many teachers today seem to have been rather overlooked by the authors of this book. There is also the obvious constraint of large class sizes, which can affect the types of activities which a teacher may be tempted to try out. Similarly, the standards of behaviour in a particular class or school may also be a deterrent to those teachers who are unsure about the wisdom of using activities which involve role play, for example, which is carried out by an entire class performing at the same time. There are also particular children in some classes who need plenty of reassurance and stability to enable them to conform in situations which can make them feel very insecure. Issues such as these must be thought about before embarking on this kind of work.

Handling powerful emotions

Many of the activities which are outlined in the book require children to try and think about their feelings and to become aware of some of the powerful emotions which they may have. For many children this can be a very painful experience, and one which is not best suited to a school or classroom setting. Some of the suggested activities which involve, for example, guided fantasy, may give rise to situations which most teachers are not indeed prepared or qualified to deal with.

Peer Judgement

A number of the activities which are described here require children to publicly make judgements about both themselves and about other children. In many situations this can be very damaging if the children are not aware of just how hurtful negative comments can be, or intentionally use the activity to hurt their peers. Such comments may also result in more power being given to the very children in a class who may abuse the dominant positions that they hold. For the more confidant children, activities such as these do not involve taking much of a risk by exposing themselves to the rest of their class, but for the children who are less self assured it can be a very risky moment when they are expected to reveal deep feelings to a large group which may contain individuals who will take an opportunity such as this to tease another child repeatedly in the playground about what they have shared. The implications of these activities for each individual member of the class must be carefully weighed before embarking on this particular scheme of work and approach to Religious Education.

Limitations of time

It has been recommended by those involved in the inspection of Religious Education that children who are working at Key Stage One should spend thirty-six hours per year engaged in Religious Education and children at Key Stage Two should be spending forty-five hours each year on this area of the curriculum. Although the authors (Hammond *et al.*, 1990) suggest that many of these activities are a kind of preliminary to more explicit Religious Education, I wonder how justifiable it is to spend so much time on preparatory activities which may not be covering the locally agreed syllabus.

Religion is what you make it

Although the authors state that their main aim in this textbook is to promote empathy and understanding towards all religious traditions in an unbiased way, their work is by no means free from religious presuppositions. It is clearly an impossible task to present

Religious Education in a style which is completely unbiased, but the philosophical outlook which the authors appear to favour seems to be strongly rooted in Buddhism and some strands of Hinduism, although this is never made explicit. Neither is our attention drawn to the fact that the activities themselves will be heavily biased by the philosophical and religious presuppositions of the teacher who is directing the activities.

Are children's minds really closed to the transcendent?

In the introduction to this book a number of comments are made asserting that society should be held responsible for closing children's minds to the possibility of a reality existing beyond the immediate.[3] The authors then go on to suggest that it is only through activities such as these that children can once again become more sympathetic to an extra-material dimension to life. However, this statement seems to me to be unnecessarily pessimistic in the light of the fact that experiences of fantasy and imaginary worlds are so characteristic, though not exclusive, of childhood. One only needs to pick up a piece of children's literature or switch on a children's television programme to realise that children spend a large proportion of their time experiencing imaginary worlds which are outside space and time. It thus seems negligent that we often refuse to encourage young children to think about the transcendent realm when they are at a stage in their lives when they are perhaps more responsive to the world beyond their immediate environment. For fear of being accused of indoctrinating young children, we follow the path favoured by Piaget, waiting until children have rejected the possibility of the transcendent realm before we start to offer them opportunities to learn about how the world's religions set about trying to make sense of the world beyond our immediate environment.

Private Individualism

There are very few activities in this book that could escape the charge of promoting inwardness, introspection, and, ultimately, individualism. Clearly the majority of the

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[3] See Hammond *et al.*, 1990: 15.

world's religions have aspects to their spirituality which encourage reflection upon the self, but for the most part it is the corporate nature of religion that is emphasised focusing upon each individual's part within a distinctive community of faith. If teachers thus base their approach to Religious Education upon personal experience as the only basis for learning, then we will surely be in danger of teaching children about only one aspect of religion which encourages a very individualistic outlook upon life.

The perpetuation of Dualism

There seems to be an implicit assumption underlying many of the activities in the book which sees the *inner* and *outer* life as very much separate and distinct. The activities which I tried with my class, as well as those which are perhaps more explicitly religious, seemed to exist in a kind of vacuum which failed to connect directly with the outside world. This was exemplified by the fact that the children seemed not to grasp the true purpose behind the activities, and the authors did not make suggestions of how the teacher could draw the sessions to an end in a way that encouraged the children to try to integrate their experiences in the classroom with their experiences beyond the school gate. It seems imperative to me that Religious Education is continually related to a real context; a context to which children can relate and see purpose in. If we fail to take this seriously, then we will end up in the same position as Laurie Lee's teacher in the episode which Margaret Donaldson quotes to illustrate the problems that many children face when they are placed in a new and perhaps alien context.

> This teacher was behaving, however understandably, in a way that psychologists would call `ego-centric'. Used in this way, the word does not mean, in a precise sense, `self-centred'. It refers to the act of looking out on the world from one's own position in it, literally or metaphorically, and failing to realise how the same world, seen from a different stance, would appear- or what meaning the same words, heard and interpreted by a different brain with a different store of previous knowledge and experience, would carry. (Donaldson, 1978:

Integration with the rest of the curriculum

With the pressures that the introduction of a very weighty National Curriculum has placed upon primary teachers, many are very keen to find ways in which differing aspects of the curriculum can be integrated in a creative way. The activities in *New Methods in R.E. teaching* are clearly designed to be used in quite an independent way from the rest of the curriculum, perhaps because most have been created with secondary aged children in mind. Many of the themes which are explored by the book, however, would actually lend themselves to being applied in a more cross curricular way and this might help children to integrate their experiences in Religious Education with the rest of their school life. If the themes could be applied in a more integrated way, then perhaps primary school teachers would be more able to justify the amount of time that they were spending on activities which may be seen as preparation for Religious Education. The session that was based on metaphor could have been used as an introduction to the concept and then subsequently developed into a language session looking at metaphors in poetry or descriptive writing. Alternatively, it could have been used as a stimulus for some art work in an abstract style which used metaphorical imagery to design logos or posters. This kind of creative work would surely be an excellent foundation for exploring the way metaphor can be used in religious literature and as a means of introducing religious ideas in an appropriate form for young children. My experience in the classroom has shown me that children learn in the most effective and enjoyable way when they are presented with opportunities for learning which look at the same theme from a variety of differing perspectives. The activities in *New Methods in R.E. Teaching* could quite easily be developed in a more cross curricular way to make them more useful to teachers of younger children, and also to promote a more holistic approach to Religious Education which enhances good practice in the primary classroom.

There seems to be little doubt that if a teacher were to use activities such as the ones outlined in *New Methods in R.E. Teaching* and adopt its approach, then it could be argued that the teacher was seeking to fulfil the request of the 1988 Act to *promote spiritual development*. It does, however, seem that many of the activities, whilst they may be used to promote *spiritual* development, ignore the potential for promoting *religious* understanding at the same time. In many of the activities, for example, there seems to be an obvious avoidance of any explicit, or indeed implicit religious language or frames of reference. If this particular approach to Religious Education is going to fulfil its responsibility as a legitimate part of the curriculum, then it must make explicit its links with the great spiritual and religious traditions of our culture and make children aware of their rich heritage.

In the next chapter of this thesis I will be looking at how the aspects of this approach to Religious Education, which I believe enhance learning in this area of the curriculum, can be used as a foundation for a programme of work which seeks to promote both *spiritual* development and *religious* understanding. I intend to do this by looking specifically at the role of Religious Education within the whole curriculum and in particular the part that the teacher has to play in that.

4

TOWARDS THE PROMOTION OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT
a way forward for Religious Education

4.00 THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION WITHIN THE CURRICULUM

This chapter provides a structured framework for a series of teaching activities, designed to promote spiritual development. These practical activities, together with the subsequent reflections upon their effectiveness in the classroom, can best be viewed against a backdrop of a discussion of three particular components of Religious Education. The first of which is the place and role of Religious Education within the framework of the whole curriculum. I will then look at the specific role of the teacher in relation to the delivery of the R.E. curriculum and, finally, I will focus upon how the subject can be most effectively delivered by exploring the role of the imagination in the development of religious concepts and spiritual awareness.

In recent times the subject of Religious Education has clearly become an area of great complexity and controversy. As teachers seek to come to terms with the constantly changing demands of the curriculum, questions are asked by many of them about the relevance of the subject in a secular society. Clearly there is not the time to go into this debate in great depth in this thesis, especially in the light of the fact that my main purpose here is to look at the actual implications of the requirements of recent legislation, rather than to debate the place of Religious Education within the National Curriculum. Indeed this is a separate research area which is of central importance to the development of Religious Education. I would, however, prefer to focus attention here upon certain characteristics of modern Religious Education. The subject has clearly been shaped by

modern debates about both the nature of religious belief and which particular aspects of belief are appropriate for children to learn, whilst also being influenced by recent educational research which has explored *how* children think and learn.

Watson has produced a very useful table of information to illustrate this particular point (1993: 38). The reader's attention is drawn to what she believes are six common features of contemporary Religious Education namely that it is educationally open, promotes understanding, is multi-faith and global, skills are taught, it is relevant and finally it relates to the whole of life. She then points to some contrasting features which have consequently been rejected. Firstly, by making the subject educationally 'open', it can no longer be accused of being indoctrinatory by nature. Secondly, it has attempted to promote understanding rather than to engage primarily in the promotion of propaganda. Thirdly, whilst the subject was once very narrowly Christian in outlook and content, it is no longer able to uphold the exclusive truth claims of only one religious perspective, but has been forced to embrace the fact that we live in a multi-faith society; a fact that must be reflected in the way that children are educated. As in all areas of the curriculum, Religious Education has generally rejected the narrow teaching of ill-understood facts, in favour of developing skills which can then be related by the student to a variety of contexts and fields of enquiry. There has also been a move away from presenting the subject as one which is impersonally academic and isolated from the real experiences of life, in favour of an emphasis upon how it is actually relevant and relates to the whole of life. Like the author of this book, I would see all of these changes in approach as positive developments in the subject and in keeping with my own experiences of observing how children think and learn. Watson goes on to draw our attention to other modern features of the subject which are perhaps more debatable in terms of their benefit for the subject:

> R.E. teachers have responded positively to many of the insights of the modern world but in
>
> the process they have sometimes allowed the pendulum to swing too far to the other side
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> .... Thus for example many have deemed it necessary - in order to make R.E. relevant,

acceptable and interesting today- to downplay work on religious vocabulary and explicit beliefs. This has led to considerable confusion as to what religion is anyway, because any necessary reference to the divine, to God, to the transcendent has been removed from it. This has not encouraged clear thinking on a number of other points of vital importance to R.E. such as the question of openness and religious commitment presumed by many to be incompatible. (Watson, 1993: 37)

The features of modern Religious Education, which Watson lists as being more open to question, contain many of the very features which I have in fact criticised about the purely experiential approach which is advocated in *New Methods in R.E. Teaching* (Hammond *et al.*, 1990). For example, the subject has tended to place too much emphasis upon the *implicit,* at the expense of the *explicit* aspects of religious life. Children are therefore encouraged to think purely about their own feelings about prayer rather than to learn about the reasons why Christians might find particular buildings like cathedrals or monasteries easier places to worship. Favouring a purely affective approach has resulted in children failing to develop the cognitive skills which they possess from an early age and are necessary for the subject. Children have also rarely been offered an historical perspective upon faith because the `religion of today' is believed to be more relevant to their experiences. A purely experiential approach to learning has often been used exclusively, ignoring the insights of modern theology. The commitment to one particular religious outlook, which has usually been regarded as intrinsic to the nature of belief, has often been rejected, in a vain attempt to see the world from a completely neutral perspective which denies the existence of personal presuppositions and prejudices. In an attempt to redress the balance of attention from Christianity to the rest of the world's religions, the Christian Faith has therefore become marginalised by teachers of Religious Education. This tendency to advocate a phenomenological approach to the subject is perhaps exemplified in the work of Ninian Smart (1989:12), who has attempted to draw out the common dimensions of religious beliefs. Finally, the subject has also tended to focus

upon the more observable practices of religious life and in so doing has often failed to acknowledge what is at the very heart of religion. Those involved in Religious Education must, therefore, seek to avoid the many pitfalls which the subject seems to have fallen into in recent times and yet acknowledge the great benefits of an approach to education which begins from where children *are*, and provides the means by which they can develop a realistic and helpful understanding of religious belief. If the subject is to remain a legitimate part of the curriculum, then it must remain faithful to the very aspects of the subject which make it distinctive. If the subject is prepared to be taken over by the latest influence in education, without stopping to evaluate its real implications, then the subject will continue to lack credibility and influence in the struggle with all of the other curriculum subjects for time, resources and attention. Jackson (1987) in his article on *Religious education - a middle way* thus seeks to present a possible way forward for the subject, presenting it as 'a study of religions conducted in such a way that it makes a distinctive contribution to the pupils' development of a coherent and personally satisfying set of beliefs and values.' (Jackson, 1987: 17). In the same way, the *Schools Council Working Paper 36* proposed a similar aim for the subject in 1971:

> Religious education must include both the personal search for meaning and the objective study of the phenomena of religion. It should be both a dialogue with experience and a dialogue with living religions so that one can interpret and reinforce the other. (H.M.S.O., 1971: 43)

I would now like to draw up a list of some of the key elements which seem to be essential for the development of Religious Education as a distinctive and valuable component of the curriculum. These elements are particularly essential if the subject is to become a stimulating arena for the promotion of spiritual development in our modern primary schools.

First of all, it is essential that the subject is built upon a recognition of the uniqueness of

human beings. Children must be encouraged to become aware that people have different experiences, interests and needs. I believe that an awareness of this can only truly develop as a result of individuals becoming more aware of their own uniqueness and value in the world. This awareness is also a key influence in the promotion of *tolerance* towards people who hold different views to our own. I would view tolerance here as a particular aspect of empathy, which involves the sharing of equally valid concerns or interests. Similarly, it is only through encouraging children to *respect* other people, despite obvious differences, that any kind of moral conscience and awareness can ever be developed

Secondly, Religious Education has a responsibility to emphasise the *distinctiveness* of religion. I believe that children will never be able to understand the true nature of religious belief if they are only ever presented with a watered down version which is merely a mixture of the common elements in all religions and yet is faithful to none. Religious belief arises out of a strong commitment to one particular view of life and a firm conviction of the truth of its claims. It then usually involves becoming a member of a particular community of faith, together with participation in practices which are distinctive to that religious outlook. How much this allows for individual differences and personalities depends upon the religious community that has been joined.

The third element which I would see as crucial is the encouragement of a sense of *openness* to the possibility of there being more to the world than meets the eye. As has already been explored in chapter one of this thesis, children are being brought up in a society which is very sceptical of the spiritual realm. Children, therefore, have a right to be encouraged to become aware of a religious or spiritual outlook upon life. If children are merely given opportunities to examine the external aspects of religion, then they will end up having a rather impoverished view which is indeed inaccurate.

Religious Education must acknowledge its *controversial* nature despite the fact that it so often heightens people's emotions and reveals their prejudices. Once again the subject will never be true to its intrinsic nature if it fears conflict and disagreement. If children are given plenty of opportunities within the classroom to talk about differences of opinion

through the teacher's sensitive use of stories or role-play situations, then they are far more likely to grow up with a willingness to engage in dialogue with people who hold contrasting views to their own.

If Religious Education is to remain an important subject in the curriculum, then it must find effective ways of developing, rather than ignoring the *cognitive skills* and *conceptual understanding* which are necessary for, and indeed intrinsic to, the comprehension of the subject. Clearly there is a place for a model of learning which is dependant upon first hand experiences, but there is also a very important place for more traditional models of learning like Goldman's (1965: 66), which are primarily more cognitive. As I have discussed in chapter two of this thesis, children need to be introduced to expressive tools, such as the use of metaphor, which describe and make sense of their own and other people's experiences. I believe that it must also be recognised that positive conceptual development is also largely influenced by effective teaching strategies. It may also be acknowledged that Religious Education does not lend itself to only one method of teaching, which can be used for all aspects of the subject. It does, however, require imaginative planning which can make use of the whole range of teaching styles and methods available, in order to promote effective learning for all. To some extent the appropriateness of each method may also vary from child to child, thus requiring the teacher to be familiar with the needs of each individual child in the class.

Finally it is crucial that Religious Education becomes a *valued* part of the curriculum. Clearly, R.E. has a unique place within the curriculum as the DES Circular 3/89 expresses thus:

> The special status of religious education as part of the basic curriculum but not of the National Curriculum is important. It ensures that religious education has equal standing in relation to the core and other foundation subjects within the school's curriculum, but is not subject to nationally prescribed attainment targets, programmes of study and assessment arrangements.

It is, therefore, particularly important that teachers give it a fair allocation of time in the school day. Those who have been given responsibility to co-ordinate the subject in primary schools must also fight for a fair share of resources to be allocated to the subject as a sign that Religious Education is valued equally with the other foundation subjects.

4.01 THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AS RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR
AND PROMOTER OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

In every area of the curriculum the teacher has a particular and distinctive role to play. In this section I would like to draw out the particular qualities which I believe a teacher needs to develop in order to make this particular approach to Religious Education as effective as possible. At the very outset, however, I must point out that these qualities are by no means innate . Rather, they must be developed and worked for. In a recent lecture series given by Paulo Freire at the Institute of Education in London, he sought to define some of the qualities of, what he describes, is a `progressive teacher':

> I am speaking about something that we make, we build by doing, by acting. I am sure that
>
> no one was born as he or she is; one becomes. We never **are,** because in order to be, it is
>
> necessary not to be. In other words it is necessary to become. It is in becoming that I make
>
> myself. I am not, if I do not become....I have never received the gift of being a teacher, as I
>
> am. I became. Thus the virtue means that I have to create quality by putting into practice
>
> the quality I would like to have. (Freire, 1995: 19)

Despite the fact that these qualities are not in themselves innate, they are, however, shaped and influenced by the personality of the individual teacher. Watson points out:

> The role of the teacher is crucial. The most consistently identified factor in situations where
>
> education is seen to be effective is the personality and commitment of the teacher concerned.
>
> (Watson, 1987: 62)

Many of the qualities which I am going to describe are ones which are appropriate for all

teachers, but in the context of this thesis attention will be focused upon their significance in the promotion of spiritual development through Religious Education.

The first quality which we will look at is that of *humility*, which Freire defines as follows:

> To be humble does not mean to be afraid of doing things. On the contrary. To be humble
>
> pushes me towards acting without thinking that by acting I am the best. To be humble does
>
> not mean to love being loved. To be humble implies understanding oneself as one who is
>
> in the process of being with all the abilities and all the faults; to accept oneself as one who
>
> is becoming. (Freire, 1995: 19)

Within the context of Religious Education, humility is a vital quality for those who are seeking to avoid the danger of indoctrinating their pupils. Indeed, as this quote from Freire points out, being a humble teacher implies knowing oneself and, therefore, being aware of one's own basic presuppositions and assumptions. If the teacher is at least aware of the factors that have strongly influenced and shaped their outlook on life, in particular, the spiritual dimension, then the teacher is in a much stronger position to present a whole range of ideas in an open and less biased way. The quality of humility is also an excellent safeguard against the teacher's potential desire to create replicas of herself by imposing her particular views on the children.

In striving to promote spiritual development, the teacher also needs to present a suitable example for *personal relationships* through her interaction with the children in her care, whilst at the same time encouraging individual personality traits. Within this quality a great deal of room for personal interpretation on the part of the teacher should be allowed since there is not *one* perfect model for relating to children in the classroom. Again, Freire describes this in terms of the ability to love:

> When I say to love I mean to love the process of teaching; to discover how beautiful it is to
>
> be involved in the process of teaching....During the very process of teaching I have to

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discover that I am inside another process which is the process of education. This is beautiful

in itself. If I am not able to discover how teaching has to do with beauty it is not easy for

me to love teaching ... My point is not about loving students because they are persons, but

it is about loving both the object- students - and the process of teaching. (Freire, 1995: 20)

Thus the type of relationship that a teacher has with her students is inextricably linked to the pleasure which the teacher is deriving from the interactions with her pupils. This is not to say that the pupils are involved in an equal and mutually supportive relationship with their teachers, but rather that pleasure and stimulation is derived for both parties through the relationship. Clearly there is a certain amount of flexibility in this which is dependant upon the personalities of the child and teacher, but the reward for the teacher should come from her *role* and, therefore, not be directly dependant upon positive feedback from the children. A danger immediately arises when a teacher's self esteem is wholly dependant upon receiving praise and affirmation from her class. This clearly places a very heavy burden upon the children; one which they quickly become aware of since it gives them the power to control their teachers' feelings.

The teacher is also required to exhibit a great *integrity* in the way that she behaves. Clearly we base most of our judgements of other people upon how they act and who they are rather than upon what they actually say. Watson defines this integrity in this way:

By this I mean a concern that people develop a true individuality which, because it is not a

role or a mask behind which someone hides, is capable of real relationship with other

persons. Such acting is encouraged by so much in modern life, but it can lead to deep crises

of identity and a lack of self-esteem. It is fundamentally superficial, like the veneer on a

painting. The good teacher is more concerned about helping students to create the painting

which they have within them, rather than diverting their energies to the veneer. To do this

teachers must themselves be real people, prepared to have real relationships, indeed not

tolerating false ones if at all possible. (Watson, 1987: 64)

Since so much of religious belief is dependant upon relationships then there is no other subject where the way in which a teacher interacts with her pupils is more important. If the teacher fails to show any integrity in the management of her class, then everything that she says about the subject might as well be ignored.

The teacher is also required to model the quality of *tolerance* by her words and actions. Clearly one of the primary aims of the subject is to develop a sense of tolerance in the children towards others who may hold different views and beliefs to our own. Freire defines it in this way:

> It is the ability to enjoy difference. It is to learn from the difference. It means not to consider ourselves better than others precisely because they are different from us. When we think about tolerance we immediately think about racism which is the strongest negation of being tolerant; it is the lowest level of the negation of the differences. (Freire, 1995: 21)

Specifically within the scope of Religious Education, tolerance does not amount to the same thing as indifference or an unquestioning acceptance of all the different kinds of religious ideas and practices in which people believe. Rather, it requires the ability to be strongly committed to a particular philosophy of life and yet able to embrace the richness and diversity of traditions. A teacher must also exhibit tolerance and patience in the way in which she relates to the cross section of children in her care. It must not be denied, however, that some children are much easier to like than others, even if we try to hide this from children and not show any favouritism.

The teacher must also not shy away from her responsibility to exercise *authority* over her pupils. This should, however, be the kind of authority which does not diminish the freedom of the children, but indeed enhances it. Clearly these two concepts appear to be in contradiction with each other, and yet it is not truly possible to have one without the other. Children are unable to really experience freedom unless it is within certain limits; limits which have been established by someone with authority. This authority does, however, need to be *coherent* and *consistent* if it is to be respected. The teacher has a

responsibility to act in accordance with her words. A teacher who speaks about showing respect to others and then tells her class to `shut up' is not providing a very consistent model of behaviour.

The final quality which an effective teacher of Religious Education must strive to develop is the ability to *initiate learning* and then to pass the responsibility for that learning back to the child. This may be likened to kindling a flame and then retreating to watch the fire grow. This kindling process involves such factors as providing a stimulating environment, presenting materials in an imaginative way and never answering a question until it is actually asked by a member of the class. This is obviously the basis of a child-centred approach to education, which is as crucial for Religious Education as it is for every other area of the curriculum.

4.02 THE ROLE OF THE IMAGINATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS

Having explored the nature of the subject and the qualities which are needed by those who are presenting it to children, I would now like to conclude this chapter by looking at the actual means by which the subject can be brought alive and made relevant to the experiences of the children in the classroom. I would thus like to propose that the answer to our question, 'how do we promote spiritual development through Religious Education?', is that this is achieved primarily through the stimulation of the *imagination*. I propose to first of all look at what the imagination actually is, and then explore its significance for spiritual development and Religious Education.

The imagination is primarily the human power to move beyond an immediate context, through the ability to link one image to another. Nicola Slee defines it as the function which enables human beings:

> ... to open up awareness to what lies beneath and beyond and within the appearance of
>
> things, to perceive the mystery in the mundane, the depth beneath the surface, the beyond in
>
> the midst, or, as the poets themselves suggest, to discern 'Heaven in ordinarie' ... It is the

ability to conceive of things being different from the way they are as being, in some sense, significant of something other than what is present at the purely objective level of sheer data, which distinguishes human beings from all other species. (Slee, 1992: 46-49)

The imagination is, therefore, a crucial factor in enabling us to move *beyond* a purely phenomenological approach to knowing, which observes life from the sidelines but fails to engage fully in the learning process. It offers the possibility of experiencing life in a way that rises above a sterile and superficial level, to something much more creative and free. Edward Robinson describes this as 'our natural inborn faculty for transcendence.' (Robinson, 1987: 12). Indeed, he goes on to describe this ability to conceive of things being more than what is immediately apparent in his book, *The Language of Mystery* (1987):

> It is the peculiar gift of the imagination, and its prime function, not to keep its eyes on the horizon but to speculate continually on what lies beyond it: not simply, as the word might suggest, to create images, or even to pass from one image to another, but to conceive of a reality that may be beyond all conceivable images. (Robinson, 1987: 23-24)

It must be stated, however, that the kind of reality which might be imagined is not always only part of the more elevated realms of the arts or religion. As humans we also use the imagination to perceive the more mundane aspects of life. Mary Warnock makes this point in her highly acclaimed article on the subject of the imagination.

> There is a continuum of imagination. At its most humdrum, it is that by which we interpret sense experience in accordance with the ordinary presuppositions we need and use in everyday life, by which I interpret a red light not just as a coloured light but as a prohibition, or I interpret someone's stance as indicating misery or fatigue. Children who are described as 'imaginative' are those who readily see the tree as a house, or the chest as a ship. In its highest function, the imagination of the creative artist enables him to see, and present to others, the particular significance of a place or an event or a pattern of colour or

sound. Somewhere along this continuum comes the aesthetic imagination by which those who are not themselves creative artists are enabled to enjoy and feel that they understand the creative works of others. And allied to this is the imagination by which in the experience of nature ... people may sometimes feel that what is before them speaks of something urgent, but something which words or other symbols are necessarily inadequate to express. (Warnock, 1980: 404)

How then does this understanding of the imagination specifically relate to the promotion of spiritual development and the teaching of Religious Education? First of all, if one is going to advocate an approach to the subject which seeks to develop the possibility of seeing the subject from *within* a religious perspective, rather merely looking on from the outside, then the imagination is the ideal tool for this task. The imagination can allow people to transcend the confines of their own world view, to catch a glimpse of somebody else's in a unique way. As creative ways of ensuring that pupils gain an accurate insight into a particular set of beliefs are searched for, the imagination can be employed, through such techniques as role play, to allow this to happen. In role play situations children have the unique opportunity to hold any views that they like and explore how it feels to be somebody else. For example, when exploring the story of Jonah in the Bible the child who takes on the character of Jonah may be able to feel the tension that can exist when deciding between whether to act in a selfish way or whether to act in a way that will benefit his whole community. In seeking to avoid the potential dangers of either indoctrination or indifference, the development of the imagination seems to be the most creative and helpful solution for Religious Education. It opens up the possibility of transforming those very aspects of the subject which are made more explicit through the use of story, drama, dance, and art.

The imagination is also an essential ingredient for a subject which requires the exploration of experiences in great depth. How else can we ever hope to understand the unique religious experiences which have so deeply affected the lives of many people, if we

do not try to foster our imaginative powers to do so? As children struggle to make sense of a variety of different life experiences, the imagination can be used to develop a sense of the wholeness of life. It can also enable them to experience, through drama for example, events which have not yet actually happened to them, but may in the course of life do so, as a kind of preparation for what is to come and, therefore, make meaningful connections with their present situation.

Many of the issues and materials which are essential to this subject involve the recognition of the symbols, metaphors, and the use of narrative. Clearly this is an impossible task without the use of the imagination. The difficult concepts which underpin the majority of religious belief are so often made more accessible and understandable for us when they are explained by the use of narratives. This point is exemplified by the fact that the truths of the world's principal religions are predominantly wrapped up in great stories. In her article, *The Imagination, Human Development and the Importance of the Story* , Watson(1982) makes the following point:

> Stories are of fundamental importance to all human beings who seek to understand
>
> themselves and all that surrounds them; stories are the source material from which all such
>
> human knowledge is originally derived and extracted; yet there would be no stories at all but
>
> for man's most essential human quality, the ability to imagine. (Watson, 1982 :124)

Thus the imagination is crucial for all those who are involved in the story, including the original story maker, the story teller, and the listener who must respond to what is hidden within the imaginative framework of the narrative. Within the context of Religious Education the pupil will seek to make sense of the story on both a conscious and a subconscious level, perhaps by just enjoying the fact that they have heard a good story or perhaps by seeking to make sense of religious or spiritual concepts which are encapsulated or shrouded within it. Watson develops this point by suggesting that the truth which is contained within narratives often takes time to be recognised.

Good stories act like scaffolding in a child's mind in which the truth will grow up firmly

until it is strong enough to stand apart on its own. (Watson, 1982 : 127)

In seeking to explore the significance of the imagination for effective Religious Education, parallels can be observed between the imagination and faith, both of which could be interpreted as means of perceiving and indeed receiving the transcendent mystery of religion in ordinary and everyday terms. If we hold the view that there exists a mystery at the very heart of religion, and that it is the aim of the subject to provoke an awareness of that, then we need to look for tools which can sharpen our perceptions. Lealman has put forward an interesting argument that states that this tool is indeed the imagination.

> Somewhere at the centre of R.E. is the developing of a passion for a way of responding to the mystery, reflecting on this and articulating it. The metaphoric process is consistently essential and so is the work of the imagination which can become so much more vigorous through the sharpening of the visual perception, through vital activity at the perceptual level. The argument is not that the sight of that flashing sea leads to a feeling that God is in all creation, but that it can spark off creative processes which make more possible a new way of viewing life- which means, in the end, that we live more exuberantly.(Lealman, 1982: 62)

My final point about the relationship between the imagination and the promotion of spiritual development through Religious Education is that we need to be aware that potential dangers exist if we see the imagination as fundamentally the same as spirituality. Yes, the two are related, but if we confuse the two then we can easily find that the children are merely engaged in fantasy which has no cognitive basis. It is essential that we do not fall into the trap of rejecting reason and seeing it as the exact opposite of the imagination. I believe, however, that every time we employ the imagination to develop religious understanding, we must be prepared to check we are not merely speculating, but are supported by reason and tradition. It must also be recognised that the imagination can go

beyond the boundaries of reason, but is not in contradiction with it. As Webster points out: 'The imagination does not dethrone reason; it enriches it by extending it's boundaries.' (Warnock, 1982: 90). In his introduction to Warnock's article on the imagination, Mark makes this interesting point:

> The imagination can help us to see what otherwise we should not see; to make connections which would otherwise be missing; to go further than reason and knowledge can take us. (Mark in Warnock, 1980: 403)

I would like to conclude this section with a quote from Lash on the subject:

> The appropriate exercise of imagination is ... as strenuous, costly and ascetic an enterprise as is any other intellectually and morally possible use of the human mind ... Imagination is the intellect in quest of appropriate precision. (Lash, 1979: 21)

In the next chapter I propose to apply this theoretical framework to a practical context by describing, and then reflecting upon, a scheme of work which I have developed to promote spiritual development in young children. I will begin by outlining the philosophical presuppositions which underlie this approach and then explain how it can be applied to the curriculum as a whole before relating it specifically to a classroom context.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE
reflections upon classroom experiences

5.00 SPIRITUALITY AND THE CURRICULUM

The 1988 *Education Reform Act* states at the outset one of the intrinsic elements of education that all children are entitled to 'a balanced and broadly based curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at school and of society.' (DES, 1988: 1:2). Yet it is possible that many primary schools are currently struggling under a heavily prescribed curriculum, and the prospect of yet another enormous responsibility on top of the other academic requirements can at times be daunting. Teachers must, therefore, look for means by which the subjects of the National Curriculum can be presented in such a way as to promote spiritual development, even when they do not have an explicitly religious focus. This aim also supports my belief that spirituality is not something which exists in a vacuum, but can be found permeating the whole of life and thus may be detected as being an intrinsic part of a balanced curriculum. For this discussion I propose to use Cully's definition of spirituality as a 'sense of relatedness to that which is beyond the self and yet approachable. For some the spiritual is around or within the self. This may be personal or non personal, named God, power or presence.' (Cully, 1990: 607). My aim in this section is to look at different aspects of the curriculum in turn, by focusing upon the Statutory Orders contained in the National Curriculum document, and then to draw out specific requirements which exhibit obvious connections with spirituality. I will then seek to draw out some of the ways in which spiritual development might be promoted through the provision of the actual content of the

National Curriculum. There are clearly some very significant factors which relate to the teacher's approach to her pupils or the general ethos of the school which underpin the potential for promoting spiritual development, but my main aim here is to examine the explicit content of the curriculum.

The English Orders clearly encourage the very means by which we communicate with other people around us. The three profile components of speaking and listening (AT 1), reading (AT 2), and writing (AT 3) are all focused towards a purpose of communicating effectively. The Orders emphasise the variety of contexts and audiences for which writing is used, thus giving the subject a primarily communicative purpose which involves the development of individual ideas. The purpose of reading is also acknowledged as being most importantly about understanding and responding to texts and, therefore, indirectly to those who seek to communicate to others through the written word. The programme of study for speaking and listening states that children should be given the opportunity to learn how to express and justify feelings, opinions and viewpoints. This aim has obvious connections with the promotion of spiritual development. As I have tried to draw out in chapter two of this work, children will struggle to make any sense of their experiences of the spiritual realm if they are not encouraged to use the appropriate linguistic tools to express and discuss their perceptions. I believe that any experience may only become the basis for a concept once a child is given the appropriate means by which to express that experience within a sympathetic context. Children are also required by the Orders to present their ideas, experiences and understanding in a widening range of contexts across the curriculum, thus hopefully encouraging a heightened awareness of the integration and connectedness between subjects. A session of Religious Education may perhaps be an ideal context for children to present their ideas, experiences and understanding, in order to enrich their use of language. It is evident that if we are to experience a 'sense of relatedness' to another person or indeed to that which is beyond ourselves, then communication and language must be developed in order for us to recognise the universal nature of our experiences.

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The Orders for the delivery of the physical education curriculum emphasise the development of positive attitudes to one's self and to those around. It requires that children must understand and cope with a variety of outcomes in life including success and limitations in performances. The Orders also encourage teachers to ensure that children should be made aware of the effects and consequences of their actions on others and the environment. It is also interesting that the orders mention the importance of appreciating one's own strengths and weaknesses. All of these underlying themes could be used to contribute towards the promotion of spiritual development within the specific context of physical education. Clearly, a sense of physical well being has an important role to play in the way in which we value ourselves as individuals. The building up of physical strength and stamina can also be an excellent means of building up the self esteem of some children who do not enjoy success in more academic subjects. In carrying out the exercise called *Who's here?* from *New Methods in R.E. Teaching* (Hammond *et al.*, 1990: 44) it became apparent that, for certain children, success in physical activities is the only success which they place any value upon. For these children, it is important that physical education is seen as a legitimate context in which to encourage their spiritual development. The way in which we, as teachers, value the place of physical education in the curriculum, can also communicate non-verbal messages to children which could sometimes suggest that we value the more academic subjects more highly than we do the more practical components.

The creative nature of spirituality and the art curriculum can be linked very closely with the promotion of spiritual development. The development of visual perception and visual literacy are intrinsic to an appreciation of aesthetics and creativity. The creative nature of God and in turn humanity, can be illuminated by the development of artistic skills and through the appreciation of other people's forms of artistic expression. By drawing children's attention to the ways in which the great masters of art have, over the centuries, interpreted their religious experiences in an artistic manner, we are opening up opportunities for them to see their own experiences as part of a great heritage.

For the same reason, the technology curriculum can be interpreted as highlighting other

spiritual aspects of the curriculum. It speaks of the development of a child's understanding of the needs and beliefs of other peoples, now and in the past. There is clearly spiritual significance in promoting an appreciation of the way that generations have gone about solving technical problems by creative means. The practical aspects of the technology curriculum obviously stimulate children's aesthetic appreciation, but also involve a great deal of discussion of ideas, plans and progress with other people. Collaborative work such as this can be very effective as a means of encouraging mutual dependence and a sense of respect for other peoples ideas. I can think of a number of examples of disagreements which have arisen during the execution of technology tasks; disagreements which have subsequently formed the basis for some interesting class discussions about the way people with different points of view can work together. Discussions such as these provide an ideal forum for exploring a number of themes which are intrinsic to our spiritual development. It also creates an ideal starting point for class discussions, which relate to every child's experience of learning within a community of diverse individuals.

There are many parallels between spirituality and studying the history of our culture. Many of the skills and concepts which the orders state must be developed through the delivery of the history curriculum can be linked with development of an understanding of the spiritual dimension of life. There are obvious parallels between learning to appreciate how people lived during a completely different period of history and learning to appreciate how people with a different set of beliefs and values choose to live their lives. The ability to imagine that you are looking through someone else's eyes is crucial in the development of historical skills, as well as in the promotion of spiritual and religious understanding. Some of the actual content of the history curriculum is also explicitly religious. The detailed guidance explaining what aspects of life should be explored as part of a topic on a certain period in history, usually notes that the religious outlook and beliefs of the period should be discussed. Clearly at many points in history, key events were chiefly determined by religious as well as political factors. Therefore it is perhaps only when

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these factors are appreciated that a full picture can be seen of how religion and spirituality have moulded our history in the way that they have.

The geography curriculum can also be recognised as holding a central place in the development of children's awareness of their sense of relatedness to their environment. Any meaningful study of the use or misuse of natural resources, or the quality or vulnerability of different environments will often lead children to reflect upon their place in our world. Such questions are surely at the heart of a reflective spirituality. The possibility of the existence of a creative God is also very likely to become a matter of discussion and a cause for reflection during some geographical study. The ways in which groups of people organise themselves into distinctive communities can also stimulate questions about how we are dependent upon other individuals or groups within a particular society. Through reflection upon issues such as these, children can develop yet another facet of their understanding of the spiritual dimension of life.

The science curriculum can also be seen in parallel to the study of geography. The Orders demand that children begin to investigate phenomena of the natural world around them and to explore humanity's intervention in it. As children begin to carry out their own investigative work they begin to ask more questions about the way the world works and the laws which govern its survival. As their confidence increases in this area children become more prepared to offer their own hypotheses based on how their investigations may turn out. The sense of awe and wonder that children experience when they carry out their own investigations also highlights another way in which spirituality and science can go hand in hand.

Over the centuries people have sought to express their feelings about the visible and invisible world through music. The music curriculum seeks to provide a context in which children learn to express their own feelings through sound and begin to appreciate the diverse styles which other people might choose to express their feelings. Through performing and composing, listening, and appraising, children are learning to see themselves as part of a diverse musical heritage. While there is no reason why the music

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that is introduced to children to be appreciated must come from a religious tradition if it is to promote spiritual development, there is a rich heritage that can be explored which is based on musical interpretations of profoundly spiritual experiences. We must, therefore, seek to communicate to children that music is a means of illustrating how we appreciate and experience that which is beyond the physical world that we can see.

The sense of order and logic which children recognise in their mathematical enquiry can also be used to promote spiritual development. The recognition of patterns and the relationships that exist between numbers are often a source of interest and delight for children when they are exploring algebra. The example of probability is, perhaps, one which is likely to raise questions in children's minds about the spiritual realm and the way in which the universe is ordered. It also seems to true to my experience of teaching that when children are given opportunities to explore mathematical patterns and sequences in an open-ended way, they can very quickly get caught up in the excitement of recognising that numbers operate according to certain rules and laws. While for some children mathematics can be rather a mystery, for many it can be a source of great pleasure and stimulation which can enhance their enjoyment of learning with others. It can also be the vehicle by which some children recognise that there is a sense of order in the world which they can at times predict.

It is important to realise that when teachers struggle with such an extensive curriculum to be fitted into so few hours in a school day, comfort can be drawn from the fact that they may be providing for some of the spiritual needs of the children in their care, whatever subject they are explicitly covering. Life experiences clearly do not always fit into neat compartments with curriculum subject labels. It is the very fact that it is so diverse and, yet, can be woven together so creatively, that stimulates our awareness that there is something which is 'beyond the self and yet approachable' which children have every right to experience through all of their learning.

In this next section I intend to reflect upon a set of activities which formed the basis of an eight week introduction to spiritual reflection. These activities are described in Appendix Two. They have been designed for, and then used with, both Key Stage One and Key Stage Two children in the classroom. The eight themes which I have chosen to explore are as follows: *feelings, birth, starting school, friendship and bullying, self-esteem, truth and lies, marriage and divorce*, and *death*. These particular eight themes have been chosen because they are common experiences which children can relate to and have parallels in religious traditions. Although these themes could be explored under the general heading of promoting spiritual development, there are explicitly religious parallels which are introduced alongside each theme to make them a part of a more explicit Religious Education curriculum. I do believe, however, that children need to be introduced to the possibility of an awareness of the spiritual realm, and to the art of reflection, before any explicit Religious Education is meaningful to them.

General aims of the exercises

Each of the activities which will be described have aims which are specific to them, but the course also has more general aims which apply to all the sessions and can be used to ensure integration between the themes.

To encourage group and personal reflection upon key life experiences
Four of the themes which I have chosen are based on life events which are common to most children's experiences. These events must be reflected upon by children in their own particular way and in their own time, in order to help them make sense of their world. Such events have also been given particular significance by the world's main religions, through the development of rites of passage, such as wedding and funeral services. The activities that I have chosen provide opportunities for children to reflect upon the

significance of such events, before being introduced to their religious importance.

To stimulate discussion about spiritual matters

Each of the activities provide the time and space for the children to discuss freely the issues in hand, in an understanding environment. The activities are designed to provoke questions and arguments on subjects which are very often avoided in our modern society. By giving children the occasion to talk about such issues at school, it is hoped that they would grow up free from the inhibitions which many adults suffer when talking about such matters.

To encourage and develop listening skills

Whilst it is important for young children to learn to articulate their feelings and experiences, it is of equal importance that they learn to appreciate the divergence of opinion in the world by listening to other people's points of view. Activities such as these may in fact be the only occasion when some children experience actually being listened to by other people.

To explore how people with religious beliefs make sense of different life experiences

Whilst these sessions are primarily designed to help children make sense of their own experiences of life, they are also useful in promoting an awareness and an appreciation of religious ceremonies which can be seen as an alternative way of understanding life. Throughout the work the teacher needs to try and promote a sense of *empathy* in her children, as a crucial element for the Religious Education.

These themes and sessions are described in detail in Appendix two. They serve as an introduction to a vast and varied subject, which all children have a right to experience, as a part of the balanced and broadly based curriculum to which they are entitled. I hope that by focusing upon just a small group of themes, more attention has been paid to the methodological approach which, I believe, can enhance Religious Education, and, at the

same, time promote spiritual development. I now intend to develop the ideas which have been brought to light by these activities and draw out the specifically religious themes which are intrinsic to their distinctiveness and indeed their effectiveness. I will also comment upon their implications for teachers who are seeking to develop their own understanding of what it means in practice to promote spiritual development.

5.02 MAKING THE RELIGIOUS EXPLICIT

To this end, I would like to return to some of the eight themes of *feelings, birth, starting school, friendship and bullying, self esteem, truth and lies, marriage and divorce and death* which I have explored in this chapter. Whilst the discussion and activities which related to these themes were designed to prepare the ground for promoting spiritual development through Religious Education, I would now like to return to develop some of the themes from a specifically religious perspective as a framework for my concluding remarks.

These themes clearly have a universal relevance to pupils of all ages and could stand alone as components of the curriculum which, I believe, most children might benefit from considering, in order to promote their religious understanding. In order to preserve the distinctiveness of each religion's outlook, it is of prime importance that children are made aware that the theme is being explored from say a Jewish or an Islamic perspective, rather than from a vague, and non specific, religious perspective. I have, therefore, chosen to reconsider some of the themes in turn from a purely Christian perspective, basing the activities upon stories and practices from that particular tradition and seeking to draw out issues which might be pertinent to that particular religion.

Session One: feelings

1. Retell a collection of stories taken from the Christian tradition which contain examples of the characters experiencing powerful emotions. Use these stories as the basis for role

play activities where the children need to interpret how particular circumstances stimulate specific emotions in people, and allow them to consider how such feelings can be appropriately expressed. Stories about key figures from the Old Testament, such as Cain and Abel, Joseph, Jonah and King David, provide plenty of rich examples of people experiencing powerful feelings, and can also act as additional opportunities for children to become more familiar with the key stories which are part of the Christian heritage.

2. The life of Jesus could also be used as a resource for this activity, either through the use of stories or by basing discussions around artistic portraits of Jesus at significant moments in his earthly life. Activities such as these might also provide a useful and interesting means of challenging some commonly held assumptions about Jesus and how he responded to his own powerful feelings.

3. Stories about modern characters who are of great significance to the Christian tradition, such as Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, could also be used to enrich this work on feelings.

4. Discussion work and role-play activities could be followed up by using charcoal on white paper to recreate the style of the black and white photographs that were looked at in the previous work about feelings, to portray in an artistic form the different characters expressing a range of emotions.

Session Two: birth and starting school

1. Watch a video of a Christian Baptism service, where a child is being initiated into the life of the Church. Stop the video at regular points to see if the children can explain what is happening and what is the significance of different parts of the service. Encourage the children to ask as many questions as they want to about what they are watching and draw out as many parallels as are appropriate about being born and the changes that occur as we grow up.

2. Ask the children to try and make up a simple service which might be used to welcome

new members to the class and that would help them to feel a part of an already existing community.

3. Look at the life story of Jesus in the Bible, starting with the Nativity and use it as a basis for talking about the changes that occur as we grow up.

Session Three: friendship and bullying

1. Read the story of the Good Samaritan and discuss the various attitudes of the characters in the story. Ask the children to make up a modern version of the parable as a cartoon strip.

2. When the children have shared their own insights with the rest of the class, draw up a list of the characteristics of a good friend and, perhaps, also a bad one. Encourage the children to try and reflect upon what it might be that makes some people act in an inappropriate way towards others. Help them to look beyond actual expressions of bad behaviour to what might be the cause.

Session Four: self-esteem

1. Find a variety of quotes from the Bible which refer to how God feels about human beings and how he values humanity. Divide the class into small discussion groups with copies of these passages cut up. Ask the children to try and reorganise them so that they make sense.

2. See if each group can then design a poster which could advertise why Christianity is so appealing to millions of individuals around the world, and why it helps some people to feel more positive about themselves.

Session Five: truth and lies

1. Ask the children to close their eyes and think about whether they believe that there is a

God. Encourage them to reflect upon why they might believe that God exists and why they might not. When they have had plenty of time to think about this on their own, then give them the opportunity to swap ideas with a partner and draw up a list of reasons for and against the truth of the existence of God. Then ask each pair to join with another pair and exchange ideas and continue this pattern until the whole class are back together again.

2. Draw on the class's recent discussion to create a list of the factors which influence us as we make decisions about the truth of various statements.

Session Six: death

1. Invite a local priest or Christian minister to come into school and tell the class about what happens at a funeral service. Encourage the children to recognise the importance of the funeral service and to understand some of the symbols which are so significant in the ceremony.

2. Imagine that a class pet has died and encourage the children to think up a way of saying good-bye to the animal. Draw up a list of ideas for a simple funeral service and design an order of service which incorporates some of the ideas.

6

CONCLUSION

6.00 OUTCOMES OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

○ Religious Education and the promotion of spiritual development has, until recently, been founded almost exclusively upon the legacy of Enlightenment Rationalism. Scientific knowledge and the externals of religion have been taught to the exclusion of imaginative inquiry into the possibility of spiritual experience (See §1.00).

○ Since the 1960's, Religious Education has been dominated by the research findings of Ronald Goldman. Under the influence of Piagetian psychology, Goldman sought to exclude certain concepts of religion from the education of young children on the basis of their apparent cognitive incapacity. In retrospect, however, it would appear that Goldman failed to differentiate between the child's capacity to understand and her ability to express in words certain religious concepts (See §1.01 and §§2.00-2.01).

○ The experiential approach of David Hay has, by contrast, focused upon the self as the locus of spiritual development. Religious indoctrination is therefore rejected in favour of teaching exercises that encourage introspection and self-awareness in the spiritual realm. The problem with this approach, however, is that it fails to recognise the extent to which spiritual experiences invariably depend upon specific cultural, historical, and theological beliefs systems for their sense of meaning. This particular approach also fails to acknowledge the importance of cognitive reasoning (See §§3.00-3.02).

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o   The naming and describing of childhood religious experience, *contra* Goldman and Hay, depends upon the development of certain linguistic frameworks within which a child is able to affirm her experience of the transcendent within a particular cultural, historical, and theological framework. Only through the marriage of named experience and explicit religious traditions are religious concepts formed and understood (See §§2.02-2.03).

o   The religious poet has historically stood apart from the theological extremes of Rationalism and Empiricism. Typically, then, Coleridge locates the imagination as the medium through which religious experience and cognition are meaningfully co-ordinated within the spiritual life of the individual. This thesis has drawn attention to educational initiatives that have sought to foster the power of the imagination in the spiritual education of children. Clearly the subject needs to afford greater recognition to the validity of creative insight and the ability to reason from an early age (See §1.00 and §4.02).

6.01 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN FIRST SCHOOLS

o   The primary task of Religious Education is to develop methods of learning that imaginatively transform the child's experience of the world rather than burden her with factual knowledge (See §4.00).

o   Religious Education needs to be fully integrated with a child-centred curriculum, affirming personal spiritual experiences and seeking to incorporate them into appropriate conceptual frameworks of religious belief (See §5.01).

o   The role of the religious educator is primarily to encourage the art of inquiry and reflection upon childhood experiences. The educator must then search for imaginative ways in which to relate these experiences to broader theological perspectives (See §4.01).

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- Religious Education should seek to highlight the spiritual dimension that penetrates the whole of the school curriculum. The activities outlined in this thesis seek to illustrate the way in which spiritual development can be promoted both implicitly and explicitly in relation to religious and non-religious subjects (See §4.00 and §§5.00-5.02).

6.02 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- An examination of the ways in which teachers consciously and unconsciously impose their own subjective frameworks of interpretation and assumptions about religious experience in the classroom.

- A study of how assessment and record-keeping procedures are able to monitor the spiritual development of young children.

- An exploration of the impact of early childhood religious experiences upon adult belief.

- An investigation into the possibility of inter-religious dialogue among young children of differing theological perspectives.

The 1944 and 1988 Education Acts

The 1944 Education Act was a great landmark for Religious Education in this country. It provided the statutory framework for Religious Education in the schools of England and Wales. All previous legislation was thus either superseded or incorporated into this Act and all subsequent changes have built upon its basic tenets. With regard to Religious Education, certain aspects of the Act can be seen as a response to the particular problems that can arise when a state provides Religious Education and also practices religious toleration. Either a secular solution is chosen, as in France or the U.S.A., and religious instruction is excluded from state schools, or the more confessional option is taken which gives religious organisations the chance to offer instruction to their own members in school, as in Germany. England and Wales, however, took a unique route rather than opting for one of these approaches. In 1870 the Education Act sought to solve this problem by offering the new School Boards three options. The first option was not to include any religious instruction at all. Secondly, to read the Bible offering no comments upon it, and thirdly, to give Biblical teaching without denominational instruction. The third option was generally favoured and was complemented by the Cowper-Temple clause which established, by legislation, the neutrality of the state in regard to competing Christian denominations. The year 1870 also marked the beginning of the tradition of 'conscience clauses' or the right of withdrawal, which have characterised every subsequent Act relating to Religious Education.

The Butler Act of 1944 thus built upon the legislation of 1870 and codified more precisely what was already normal practice. It stated that religious instruction should be

given in every county school and that each day should begin with an act of worship. The Act also contained a conscience clause which offered both teachers and parents, on behalf of their children, the right of withdrawal. As far as the actual content of religious instruction was concerned, it was to be determined by each local authority in its agreed syllabus which had to be drawn up by a conference constituted according to the requirements of the Act and convened by the Local Educational Authority. Each committee consisted of such religious denominations which, in the opinion of the authority, ought to be represented, plus representatives of the Church of England, teachers' organisations and the Local Authority. Recommendations were also required to be unanimous with each individual member having a power of veto.

The operation of the agreed syllabus procedures have developed since 1944 in response to current changes in understanding and circumstances. In the early stages many syllabuses were produced which were very prescriptive and gave detailed instructions about each years work. Any small changes then had to be agreed by a full council, obviously a very cumbersome procedure. This led to the development of many standing advisory councils on Religious Education which were set up to act as consultants on methods of teaching and similar practical issues. In the years following 1944, syllabuses began to include material from non-Christian religions and with their representatives being included in the conferences. It also became a matter of debate that, while all parents had the right of withdrawal from Religious Education, all parents were also entitled to a form of Religious Education for their children which reflected their own religious beliefs. As a consequence, local conferences were then questioned about their response to non-religious philosophies and their representatives. Again each authority under the Act had the freedom to make their own independent response to such issues.

The heart of the 1944 Act is thus located in its statement that: 'It shall be the duty of the Local Education Authority for every area so far as their powers extend, to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community.' (part 2, par. 7). At that time however many assumed that the *spiritual* was synonymous with the

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religious and that, therefore, this was a statement about the provision of Religious Education by statutory law.

It is still a matter of debate whether the 1944 Act propagated a confessional approach to Religious Education as is suggested by the word 'instruction' and the possibility of withdrawal on grounds of conscience. John Hull, for example, has argued that the Act did little more than promote an informative and impartial form of Religious Education which focused upon inert facts and was rather afraid of controversy, rather like the approach advocated by the Plowden Report of 1967. Whatever our belief may be on the presuppositions which underpin the 1944 Act, however, its significance can never be underestimated; for while its basic tenets are very directive and clear, its legal frameworks are still very much open to personal interpretation. The great diversity of opinions about how the Religious Education curriculum should be delivered and what it should contain bears witness to the breadth of interpretation that the 1944 Act was open to.

The year 1988 was particularly significant for education with the introduction of a National Curriculum. The Education Reform Act introduced the notion of a basic curriculum which was to be the entitlement of all pupils and thus provided by all schools in the state sector. It was set up to be 'a balanced and broadly based curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society.' (1: 2). As one D.E.S. circular expresses, Religious Education was given a unique position within that curriculum:

> The special status of religious education as part of the basic curriculum but not of the National Curriculum is important. It ensures that religious education has equal standing in relation to the core and other foundational subjects within a schools curriculum, but it is not subject to nationally prescribed attainment targets, programmes of study and assessment arrangements. (D.E.S. circular, 3/89)

The responsibility for Religious Education was once again given to the L.E.A. rather than to the Secretary of State, so that it could be prescribed locally and not nationally.

Although this might be interpreted to be a political move akin to 'passing the buck,' there were some very honourable objectives behind such a move. Firstly, the reaffirmation of the right to withdrawal by parents meant that a part of the National Curriculum would have been made voluntary, which could perhaps be a contradiction in terms. Secondly, there was a long standing tradition of the L.E.A.s successfully having responsibility for the Religious Education syllabus which ensured that the Religious Education syllabus was relevant to the religious make up and traditions of a particular locality. Another consideration was the implications for voluntary-aided schools where Religious Education was the responsibility of the governing body and subject to the Trust Deeds. It would thus have been an incredibly difficult job to reach a national consensus in accordance with so many difficult rules and traditions. While reasserting the value of L.E.A. authority in these matters, the Education Reform Act did lay down detailed guidance about the constitution of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (S.A.C.R.E.). Members of non-Christian religious traditions were entitled to belong to a S.A.C.R.E. on equal terms with the Christian representatives (a point of debate from the 1944 guidelines). This emphasised the fact that Religious Education should take account of the teaching of and practices of all the principal religions of the UK.

It is important to note that there were a number of significant changes in the legislation for Religious Education from the Butler Act. The subject's name was changed from 'religious instruction' to 'Religious Education'; a term which was already more favoured in popular usage. The Cowper-Temple clause which prohibited the use of any catechism or formulary which was distinctive was reaffirmed, although slightly altered. One of the most significant changes was, however, that 'all new Agreed Syllabuses must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.' (Bastide, 1992: 17). Thus although it is significant that the legislation was for the first time directing the actual content of Religious Education, the breadth of the statement left plenty of room for the S.A.C.R.E.s to interpret the guidelines in a manner

appropriate to their locality. The reference to 'religious traditions' again recognised the religious pluralism of the country and removed the monopoly position which Christianity had held in all the previous Acts. Although the specific aims for Religious Education were not clearly stated in the Act, its references to religious plurality and diversity seem to imply that an approach to Religious Education which encouraged understanding was being promoted, rather than one which was primarily confessional.

Learning to Reflect upon Life Experiences

Session One: feelings

aims:

1. To explore how we recognise the range of feelings that we experience and the means by which we express our feelings to other people in a variety of different contexts.

2. To reflect upon how different situations stimulate a range of emotions in people.

3. To encourage children to acknowledge that we all have different feelings and that it is acceptable to talk about them with other people.

activities:

1. Select a variety of photographs of ethnically diverse people expressing a range of different emotions. Black and white postcards are ideal as they can be very atmospheric and good for promoting discussion. Show the pictures to the children, one at a time, asking them to describe how the person in the photograph might be feeling. Encourage them to articulate what it is about the person that communicates how they are feeling. This activity can be carried out as a whole class or in small groups with each group being given an opportunity to report back to the class on what they have decided. During the activity it is useful if the teacher can try to use a wide and varied vocabulary so as to enrich the children's means of expressing their opinions.

2. Make a collection of cards with different emotions written on them (e.g. happy, sad, excited, embarrassed, insecure, angry, shy). Spread out the cards face down on the floor and let the children choose one at a time. When they turn over a card they must try to

think of a time in their life when they experienced that particular emotion which they are prepared to share and recount to the class.

3. Music is an excellent means of expressing and communicating emotions. Play a variety of extracts which convey powerful feelings and ask the children to describe how the music makes them feel. See if they guess what kind of emotions the composer may have been trying to convey when he wrote the music. Greig's *Morning*, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, Morricone's *The Mission* and John Williams' music from the film *Schindler's List* are all examples of very expressive music which have provoked some good discussions.

4. Present the children with a choice of musical instruments and ask one child to come and communicate a particular emotion to the class by playing their instrument. The rest of the class are then given an opportunity to try and guess which emotion they are trying to communicate. Once all the children are familiar with the idea they can then be given an opportunity to compose a short piece of music in a group which conveys a particular emotion. They might also like to write some poetry to accompany their musical compositions. Work such as this could then be used as part of an assembly or a small performance to another class.

reflections:

The children found this an extremely interesting session and were well motivated right from the beginning. The black and white postcards which I had bought to use for this activity were all quite unusual and, therefore, stimulated a fair amount of interest, discussion and indeed laughter! The children were generally all eager to have a turn and none of them opted out. The children were mostly able to use a wide and descriptive vocabulary in explaining how the people in the photograph might be feeling. A quite marked difference came when the children were asked to think up examples of times when they had encountered such feelings for themselves, since the majority of them were quite inhibited about talking about their own emotions and experiences. Clearly they found

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discussion of such matters much easier if it was related to something more concrete than their own experience. As soon as the children were able to return to the more familiar ground of playing musical instruments, their imaginative ideas seem to start to flow once again.

Session Two: birth

aims:

1. To encourage reflection upon the very beginnings of life.

2. To help the children to become aware of how they have and will continue to change over their lifetime.

3. To introduce children to the ways in which people with religious beliefs mark the birth of a child.

activities:

1. Start by showing the children a photograph of oneself as a baby and see if they are able to guess who the picture is of. Perhaps the teacher could describe to the children what they were like as a child and see if they can point out what changes have occurred over time. It may be possible to persuade other members of staff to lend pictures of themselves as children, as a means of extending and broadening the discussion.

2. Ask the children to describe what they were like when they were a baby, and encourage them to articulate how they have changed since the day that they were born. If the children are warned in advance, they could bring in photographs of themselves as babies and try to identify each other.

3. Play the children Enya's *Angels* from the album *Shepherd Moons,* and ask them to close their eyes to listen to the music, imagining how they have changed. With younger children they could be asked to mime their growth cycle while the music plays, or make up a simple dance which expresses how they have changed.

4. Give the children a long strip of paper that can be divided into the number of years that they have been alive. Provide a variety of art materials for them to represent themselves at each stage of their life. They could be offered collage materials which they could use to make more abstract and symbolic representations of each year of their life.

5. Read Anthony Brown's *Changes* as a starting point for a discussion about the changes which take place in a family when a new sibling arrives. Similar discussions could result from reading *George Speaks* by Dick King Smith.

6. A discussion could be held, looking at the ways that the children expect to change as they grow up. Music could once again be used as a stimulus for thoughts on the matter. The god Janus could also be incorporated into discussions about looking forwards and backwards in time.

reflections:

When I carried out this session with children in the Reception class, it became very apparent that young children have great problems discerning a person's age. They were, however, very good at describing the changes that take place as people grow up, and most children were able to use a rich vocabulary. Particularly strong were many of their memories of younger siblings being born. One child recounted with great feeling: 'I fell off my chair and got told off.' Another child said that she was given sweets to keep her quiet. All of the children participated in the mime and enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in drama at the same time. As an introduction to the activity, I asked the children to explain what the word *imagine* meant and they described it as meaning 'to dream', 'to think about in your head' and 'to pretend'. The pictures that the children drew of themselves at various stages in their lives showed that they recognised size difference and an improvement in mobility from lying still, to crawling and then finally to walking. When I asked the children what they were looking forward to being able to do as an adult that they were unable to do at the moment, they said 'drive a car;, 'go out alone' and 'work in the Trout pub'.

aims:

1. To encourage the children to remember what it was like to start school and to recall what kind of feelings dominate those particular memories.

2. To give the children an opportunity to share their feelings about a common experience which may have had great significance for them.

activities:

1. Read the story of *Frankie's First Day at School* by Lilian Martin which describes one little boy's experience of beginning school. In the story Frankie begins to cry as soon as he arrives at his new school because he does not want to leave his mother and then refuses to stop despite various attempts by the school staff to calm him down. In the end, Frankie's tears cause a flood in the school and the rest of the children have to swim to safety as a result. It is the amusing nature of the events which result from this flood that cause Frankie to cheer up and subsequently realise that school is not as bad as he once thought. Ask the children to act out the story whilst it is being read to them and observe how the children interpret Frankie's feelings as they are described.

2. Give the children a large sheet of paper which has been divided into quarters. Ask them to recall two positive and two negative memories that they have about their first day at school and draw them in each quadrant of the paper. The teacher's own memories of starting school will provide a good starting point which may show the children that she is prepared to confide in her class.

3. Discuss with the children how the first day at school could be made easier for new entrants. Draw up a list of guidelines with the class for reception class teachers.

reflections:

This session seemed to be the first opportunity that the children had ever had to discuss

their feelings about starting school, and most of them were eager to do this. They enjoyed the story and whilst acting it out were able to show how they were able to use the whole of their body to express the feelings that Frankie might have been going through. This activity seemed to provide an excellent test of their understanding of what they were hearing. When we began to talk about the specific memories that the children had of the whole experience of starting school, it became clear how painful some of their memories were. Different children described themselves as being 'nervous', 'shy', 'worried' and 'lonely'. One child said, 'I couldn't tell anyone how I was feeling.' The pictorial representations of how the children were feeling perhaps communicated even more.

Session Four: friendship and bullying

aims:

1. To promote thought about the way that we are attracted to some people for friendship and not to others.

2. To reflect upon how friendships begin.

3. To discuss the issue of being bullied or bullying others.

4. To introduce the possibility of discovering the reasons behind what motivates some people to act in aggressive ways.

5. To ask the children to suggest strategies for coping with bullies in school.

activities:

1. Read the story of *The Lion at School* by Philippa Pearce which is about a girl called Betty Small who meets a lion on her way to school one day who wants to go with her. The story goes on to describe what happens at school and how the lion interacts with a boy called Jack Tall who has been bullying Betty. When the children have talked about the story, ask them to draw around two children in the class on some large sheets of paper and cut them out. Encourage the children to imagine how Betty Small felt at different

points in the story and write these words on one of the paper figures. Then go on to repeat the exercise considering Jack Tall's feelings. Ask the children to consider why he might have been behaving like he did or what the school could have done to help him or his victims. The children could also go on to make up their own bullying stories, perhaps in small groups as a means of encouraging reflective discussion.

2. It may be more appropriate with older children to carry out the same activities based around *The Eighteenth Emergency* by Betsy Byars. It may also be more of an issue for older children to discuss how they feel about confiding in adults and also encourage them to consider whether they believe that adults really have any power to prevent or change such situations.

reflections:

The children liked the story of *The Lion at School*, and many of them could recall situations in which they had found themselves when they would have enjoyed being rescued by a friendly lion! The children, however, clearly seemed to find it much easier to describe the bully than the victim. The words that they wrote on the outline of Betty Small included: 'very, very scared', 'afraid', 'frightened', and 'relieved'. They chose the words 'cruel', 'nasty', 'horrid', 'mean', 'horrible'. and 'bad' to describe Jack Tall. The younger children who tried this activity were clearly much more positive about teacher intervention in such incidents, than the older ones, who seemed to take a more fatalistic approach to the subject, seeing it as just a fact of life.

Session Five: self-esteem

aims:

1. To encourage the children to appreciate their uniqueness.

2. To begin to identify factors which make people feel good or bad about themselves.

3. To provide an opportunity for the children to describe how they feel about themselves

and receive feedback about how they are seen by other people.

activities:

1. Find a small cardboard box and cover it with fabric or paper. Inside the box fix a mirror to the bottom of it and tell the children that one of the most valuable things in the whole world can be found in the box. The children can then take it in turns to look inside thus finding that they are looking at their own reflection. They are then asked not to tell the others what is inside until everybody has had their turn.

2. Read the Michael Foreman story called *Panda's Puzzle* and talk about the emotions that the children feel as a result of hearing the story.

3. Read the well known story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams which describes a relationship between a young boy and a toy rabbit, which, despite its shabby exterior, is loved so much that it becomes real. The story is basically an illustration of the idea that it is doesn't matter how we look on the outside, since we are loved on the basis of what we are like on the inside. The story can thus provide an excellent way in to a discussion on what it means to be *real*.

4. Ask the children to make a secret list of what they like and dislike about themselves. They can then put it somewhere safe where nobody else will find it. When they have done that, they can fix a sheet of paper to their backs and walk around the room writing only positive comments on other children's backs. They might decide to write things like 'I like the way you are always smiling' or 'You are really good at gymnastics'. When they have had plenty of time to write anonymously on the back of everybody in the class, then they can compare the way that others see them with their own original list of how they feel about themselves.

reflections:

Although I believe that this is one of the most risky areas for discussion with some children, these activities worked surprisingly well. The mirror activity is perhaps more

appropriate for younger children, since they always respond well to secrets or surprises. The novelty factor of the secret cardboard box with unknown contents also adds extra interest for them. Once again, this proved to be a subject which the children find easier to discuss in relation to a story which is slightly removed from their personal experience than when they are encouraged to talk about themselves. As with the David Hay activities, some children really struggled to find anything good to say about themselves, but found it easier once they were told that they would not have to disclose their lists. I was impressed by the sensible way in which all of the class participated in writing down good qualities about their peers without any embarrassment.

Session Six: truth and lies

aims:

1. To discuss why we place so much value upon telling the truth.

2. To begin to appreciate the consequences of not telling the truth for ourselves and those around us.

3. To explore the wider issue of truth , through the use of story.

activities:

1. Read the Tony Ross version of the story *The Boy who Cried Wolf.* Discuss whether or not the children have ever been in a similar situation and how they could have acted. Ask the children to act out the story and discuss how different courses of action could have brought about a different conclusion to the well known story.

2. Ask the children to arrange themselves so that they are seated in a large circle. Ask them to each think of three statements about themselves, two of which are true and one of which is false. It may be helpful if the teacher gives an example about herself which illustrates that it is better to think of plausible rather than ridiculous false statements, so that it makes the activity harder for those having to guess. Then give each of the children

an opportunity to read out the three statements whilst the others try and pick out the false one.

3. Read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by John Scierzka and use it as an introduction to a discussion of what makes something *true*. Clearly this is a philosophical question which has caused discussion since at least the Classical period, but this should not be seen as a deterrent to raising the matter with young children.

reflections:

Although the youngest children with whom I used these activities with were able and willing to discuss the issues raised by the stories, they found the game quite a difficult one to play. The game clearly requires the participants to think in quite a sophisticated way and be able to lie without making it too obvious. Most of the Year Three and Year Four children coped very well with the session and were able to reflect upon the issue in the light of the discussion arising from the game.

Session Seven: marriage, separation and divorce

aims:

1. To help children to appreciate the complex nature of adult relationships.

2. To provide children with an opportunity to discuss family life in a general, rather than a specific, way.

3. To talk about some of the hidden fears that some children might be experiencing about family life.

activities:

1. Read the story of *Burglar Bill* by Alan and Janet Ahlburgh. Talk about why Burglar Bill and Burglar Betty decide that they want to get married, and how this fact might have contributed to their mutual desire to give up burglary in favour of more honest careers.

2. Show the children some extracts from a wedding video. One could be borrowed which

shows a traditional Christian wedding, and one could be of a wedding of a couple who have a different religious faith. Ask the children to discuss what the services have in common and to act out certain parts of the ceremonies. They might like to think about all the different roles that people have in wedding services and bring in their own experiences of weddings that they have attended. If the children are asked in advance, they could possibly bring in their own artefacts from weddings that they might have at home. While discussions about the ceremonies are very important, it is good to continually draw the children's attention back to the actual relationships which are being celebrated through the external events.

3. Introduce a general discussion with the children about what qualities they think it is important for parents to have, but try to ensure that the children are not given the chance to divulge private information about their parents which is inappropriate. Then ask them to draw up a secret list of ten things that they like about their parents and then use the lists as a basis for a letter to their parents thanking them for having those particular qualities.

4. It may be appropriate to base discussions with older children around the story of *Mrs. Doubtfire* by Anne Fine which many of the children may have seen on video and tells the story of two parents who separate. The very amusing story is based around the fact that the father disguises himself as an elderly nanny in a desperate attempt to be allowed to spend more time with his children, and is employed to look after his own children without his wife realising who he really is.

reflections:

This was clearly a very sensitive topic for discussion, and needed careful handling. It was fairly easy to discuss the explicit side of marriage and the children found the wealth of special traditions which surround weddings rather fascinating. Even the children who had experienced the break up of their parents were eager to show pictures and artefacts that they had been able to bring in. Most children obviously made their own connections between wedding ceremonies and the romance of fairy tales with princesses being carried

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off by handsome princes on white chargers.

The most difficult experience which arose during one of these sessions was when one child was unable to find anything positive to say about his mother, even after being given copious suggestions. It is very difficult to know how to handle a situation like that without either making the problem worse or denying that one exists. In the end the child ended up making a list of what he liked about his grandparents and writing a letter of thanks to them.

Session Eight: death

aims:

1. To dispel some of the sense of taboo which exists around talking about death.

2. To give the children an opportunity to raise their own questions about death in a safe environment.

3. To learn about the importance and significance of funeral services.

4. To develop ways of remembering special people who have died.

activities:

1. Read the very moving story of *Badger's Parting Gift* by Susan Varley, which offers an example of how one community of animals was able to come to terms with the death of their friend, the badger, by recalling all of the good things that they remembered about his life and all of the special skills that he had taught them. Encourage the children to reflect upon the story by thinking about one character at a time. Allow the children to make connections between the events of the story and their own experiences. Ask them whether they would describe the story as a happy or sad one, and ask them to reflect upon how it makes them feel.

2. Ask the children to think of something special that somebody has taught them to do, just as the animals recalled all the special things that the badger had taught them to do.

Ask them to write a letter to that person showing their appreciation.

3. Show the children the video animation of the John Burningham story, *Grandpa*. Ask the children to discuss what kind of feelings they had during the film. The children could then imagine that they are the little boy in the story and get them to write a letter to the grandpa thanking him for all that he meant to him.

reflections:

I once used to teach a Reception class in a room which overlooked a church. One day I heard a group of five-year-olds holding a discussion about a funeral that was about to begin in the church. One child said: 'Oh look there's a funeral!' But his friend replied: 'Oh no it isn't. It's a wedding, because they are all wearing suits!' 'But who is that in the box?' asked another child in the group. 'Oh that is a dead person' replied another participant in this funny conversation. 'But why is a dead person going to a wedding?' asked another child. So the conversation continued, in this rather amusing fashion, all the time becoming a perfect illustration of how confusing children can find religious ceremonies particularly when they involve death.

The children responded very well to the activities and discussions about death. It thus became very apparent that so often our adult fears about raising the subject must seem rather ridiculous to young children who clearly have no such anxieties and are actually prepared to see it as a natural event which will ultimately happen to us all.

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