Spirituality and Adult Education

Learning with Adults: A Critical Pedagogical Introduction. Leona M. English and Peter Mayo

A colleague and one of us exchanges knowing glances when a student declares an interest in spirituality. It makes us a little uneasy although we are both church attached and appreciative of spirituality: We wonder what we will have to deal with? Is there an altar call or worse yet, a smudging ceremony in the works? At issue for us, and we imagine for many of our colleagues in adult education, is the extremes of belief and practice, and what some would call the flake factor. We sigh with relief when we realize the student is full of energy and is just willing to explore and seek some answers to his or her own life's existential questions. Most often the student is seeking meaning, connection and a relationship with a higher power. That is close to what we see as spirituality in our practice as adult educators.

For adult educators, the relationship to spirituality is one that has been recognized since the beginning of ours as an academic field of study. And in the early years this was very much wrapped up with religious institutions and traditions. Nothing could be harder to dismiss than the role of religion and spirituality in the histories and motivations of adult education's field of scholars and practitioners. The number of ministers and those with religious training in adult education is high. Peter Jarvis, Peter Willis, Nicholas Walters, Liam Carey, Libby Tisdell, Janet Groen, and Carolyn Clark, are just a few of those who have acknowledged their work in and affiliation with organized religion, and all are very much imbued with the spirituality of social change (English & Tisdell, 2010). And this interlocking of purpose of justice and spirituality has stood the test of time. Most international adult education initiatives, including the Antigonish Movement and Frontier College in Canada, Highlander and Chautauqua in the USA, popular education in the Christian Base Communities and pastoral centres in Latin America, and the worker cooperative education in Mondragón in the Basque region of Spain were rooted in and influenced by religious movements and figures of various sorts. The same applies to the Folk High School (FHS) movement in Denmark which drew inspiration from the Lutheran pastor, Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, the most heralded figure in European adult education and who lends his name to the adult education "action" (part of the European Union's Lifelong Learning programme). Grundtvig provided inspiration for the development of the FHS for a variety of reasons, not least the kind of Christian

 Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-No comercial-Compartir igual

pietism that he espoused. Figures such as N.F.S. Grundtvig, Moses Coady, and Don José Maria Arizmendarrieta stand out with respect to many of the projects just mentioned. Furthermore it is not uncommon to see convents and religious places serving as adult education centres in various parts of the world, with different religions and approaches to spirituality involved. One of us recalls a visit to Limerick in Ireland, in 1989, where Sisters of the Apparition were very much involved in, and made the premises available for, adult education and the long-term unemployed, acting in concert with the Vocational Education Council (VEC) there. Adult education often has strong links with the various belief systems in the world and especially with organized religion. Yet, more recently, spirituality (without religion) seems to have most appeal to those in the west.

Islam

As Ver Beek (2000) has shown, however, religion is still a guiding force in much of the world, and must be factored into the planning and delivery of adult education programs. When one thinks of the spread of Islam, for example, it becomes apparent that adult educators working with Muslim believers need to and often do take religion (and race, customs, language, etc.) into account. With around 70 million illiterates estimated in the Arab world (UNESCO, 2003) adult educators often combine their literacy efforts with religious goals. Excerpts from the Qur'an were used in such literacy programs as the 'Read in the Name of your God' syllabus in Egypt' which the country's Authority for Literacy carried out with ALECSO. The educational material included suras from the Qu'ran and sayings by the Prophet. The project involved around a hundred classes in the Cairo and Giza governorates. (Abel Gawad, 2004, p. 49). It is quite common to find literacy programmes in the classical Arabic language being provided at Islamic centres, such as the one in Malta, where one of the goals is that of enabling persons to read the Qu'ran. This recalls some of the earlier literacy campaigns in Europe (pre-20th century), where the main goal was to enable people to read the Bible (Arnove & Graff, 1987). In the Ottoman period, mosques and medreses (Muslim theological schools) carried out various adult educational activities in Turkey (Okcabol, 1992, pp. 260-261).

Greek Orthodoxy, Buber's Mysticism and Today's Secular version

In Cyprus, the Christian Orthodox Church has a long tradition in adult education (Symeonides, 1992, p. 210) whereas, in Malta and Italy, agencies such as Caritas

(prominent in Egyptian literacy efforts, also involving the Coptic Church), that form part of the Catholic Church's larger network, are important adult education players. Furthermore, one other figure, a Jewish philosopher and mystic strongly associated with adult education and spirituality, stamped his mark on a particular area of the region and the rest of the world. Martin Buber moved from central Europe to Palestine and died in what became the state of Israel. His influence on the Jewish adult education field is enormous and quite strong was his influence on Freire, also a man of faith, and many others, especially through his writings on interpersonal communication, well captured in his classic *I and Thou*(Buber, 1970). His thinking and adult education work is firmly grounded in spirituality. So the connections between spirituality and adult education have a long history. It often emanates from organized religion but of course this has not always been the case. Admittedly, however, how a number of actors in some of these movements defined spirituality is far more sacred than our secular version today.

Describing Spirituality

Spirituality has been used and understood in our field in many ways (English & Tisdell, 2010; Hunt, 1998). Misunderstandings of the term mix it with religion and proselytizing on the one hand, and with flaky new-age feelings, on the other hand. As noted above, spirituality has often been defined over and against organized religion with which it has increasingly developed a somewhat testy relationship. Recognizing the discontent and disconnection with organized religion, adult educators have been quick to point out that organized religion has had a history of colonizing the spirit and has not always attended to meaning making or to justice. Despite the tensions we offer three discernable dimensions to spirituality:

The first of these is attempts to name spirituality as a relationship with a higher power. Most descriptions begin here, acknowledging a divine presence in the universe. It is this aspect of spirituality that sometimes gets confused with religion. Although religious groups generally have been the standard bearers of rituals and traditions that have supported and nurtured spirituality, they have also been colonizers and proselytizers of minds, bodies and spirits. In this sense, we recognize a tentative division between spirituality and organized religion. Allan Jones (2005), Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and noted spirituality writer, observes that it is nonsense to divide these, given that religion, for good or bad, has carried spirituality for generations, through its rituals, sacred texts and observances. The spiritual traditions inform all religious traditions. Yet, the distinction between

spirituality and religion is especially strong in the West.

A second dimension of our understanding of spirituality is the search for meaning or purpose in life. Here spirituality is viewed in the humanistic and personal development sense articulated by MacKeracher (2004) and Heron (1998) who look on spirituality as a means of personal improvement and growth. This is heavily influenced by the humanism in adult education associated with Knowles (1968) and andragogy in the 1970s. This stress has connections with the holistic and humanistic education that seemed to predominate earlier on in the field. It was known variously as humanistic education, holistic education, and education for whole person.

A third dimension of spirituality is the continuous attempt to reach out to education for transformation and care for the world (English & Gillen, 2000). This latter dimension of justice and transformation is perhaps the strongest aspect for adult educators interested in community development work (Botchwey, 2007), environmental education (O'Sullivan, 1999), and organizational learning (Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007; Groen, 2004). This dimension brings adult educators into the public realm where spirituality focuses on justice and civil society. There is an intricate relationship between spirituality and social justice and arguably many have been attracted to adult education because it is concerned about the social good and about the promotion of education to address social and economic problems. Those writing in adult education have consistently linked spirituality to justice and to the common good. Some such as English and Tisdell (2010) explicitly addresses culture, diversity and equity as aspects of this justice work. And, without the other dimensions of meaning making and a sense of something greater than ourselves, this definition would be diminished. We see the three dimensions as integral to each other, providing grounding and sustenance for adult education work and its long term sustainability. As will be shown below, this tripartite understanding is strongly rooted in our past.

The History of Spirituality in the Field

Some of the most revered moments in adult education history have been connected to spirituality, especially in the social justice movements that define us as a field. Adult educators who identified with these movements include Yeaxlee (1925), Lindeman (1926), and Coady (1939); later contributors such as Kidd (1975); and more current writers such as Dirkx (2001). Historically spirituality and adult education were entwined with many of the early figures in the field coming of age

 Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-No comercial-Compartir igual

through religious groups and impulses. One only has to think of the famous ones like Mondragón, Chautauqua, Highlander, Frontier College, and the Antigonish Movement to see the religious impulses and supports for them. Here we look at several of these to illustrate the point. Some of these movements have been mentioned elsewhere in this text but we group them here to focus specifically on their relationship to spirituality.

Frontier College: Literacy on the frontiers of Canada in the 1800s was a major concern for many people, not the least of which was Alfred Fitzpatrick, a Presbyterian minister who started Frontier College, an initiative that involved teachers who went to work on the railways by day and who taught the other workers to read and write by night (Cook, 1987). Alfred was a God-fearing man who saw his mission as bringing the gospel to life in areas of greatest need. When he wrote *University in Overalls*(1999/1920) he revealed his plans to have Frontier College become a university for the working man. Although this plan was not realized his efforts for literacy through Frontier College continue today on the streets with homeless and in northern Canada. He enacted his spirituality through his educational agenda and in so doing he joined a long list of reformers such as Paulo Freire who saw literacy as a way to reform society.

Antigonish Movement. The Antigonish Movement is also one of the better known adult education movements not just in North America but also more internationally, and it too combined spirituality and religion with social progressivism. Born at the intersection of spiritual and social purposes in the early 20th century, it had its roots in the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of the 1890s (Pope Leo XIII, 1891), which advanced the rights of labourers and the working class, and addressed the social and economic conditions of the times. Inspired by Catholic social teaching, Coady and his co-workers had a firm belief in the rewards of hard work (*ora et labora*) was focused on improving the spirit. Consequently, his one book *Masters of Their Own Destiny*(Coady, 1939) is a mixture of progressivism, religious fervor and historical sentiment. It rallied people to action, especially to improving the conditions of farmers, miners and fishers in northeastern Nova Scotia.

Most of women associated with the Women and Work program had theological and religious backgrounds and were heavily influenced by their own lower class experience of the economic needs of rural northeastern Nova Scotia. Rusty Neal's book *Brotherhood Economics*(1998) explores the ways in which these women were important to the story of the Movement, promoting cooperatives through study clubs, print materials, and newspapers; organizing handcraft work, and fostering

women's learning in ways apart from the mere domestic. Sr. Marie Michael McKinnon, in particular, had an idea that women's education should prepare them for leadership and participation in cooperative management, committees, and meetings (p. 149). She worked consistently toward this goal, though her progress like all those in the Movement was limited.

Neal (1998) shows how two female religious orders, the Sisters of St. Martha and the Sister of Charity, worked together along with a host of other significant women to accomplish the work of the Movement. Sr. Delores Donnelly, for instance, supported and promoted libraries as a means of local improvement and education. Commenting on their version of Catholicism, Rusty Neal notes that the "Catholic ideology was elastic enough to accommodate new activities for women (of the movement] as long as those activities did not overtly challenge doctrine" (p. 104). Neal observes that it was Sr. Delores who had a broad vision of the Antigonish Movement as "fighting with the weapons of ideas" (p. 174). Her most notable achievement was establishing the library system in Cape Breton. She understood libraries as being part of lifelong learning, not just reading. It was her faith and her dedication that moved her forward.

Similarly, Sr. Irene Doyle (2007; also known as Sr. Anselm), a native of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, freshly graduated with a degree in Home Economics in 1935, was assigned to the St Francis Xavier Extension Department under the direction of Fr Moses Coady. Working directly with Sr. Marie Michael MacKinnon, her responsibility was to promote handicrafts through study clubs and conferences. Sr. Irene's own personal achievements included designing linoleum cuts for the movement's newspaper, *Maritime Cooperator*, covers of pamphlets and leaflets, lettered many posters. When she talked about her work and leadership with handicrafts and the Women's Program in 2007, she spoke as one who had a lifetime of fulfillment. Along with Sr. Marie Michael, her achievements included helping bring women into the cash economy, through producing handicrafts, which was previously considered a hobby. This movement to promote art and craft was borne of her deep religious convictions and her idea that spirituality should have feet.

Chautauqua. One of the signature moments in the history of critical adult education and its spiritual influences is Chautauqua, a town in the state of New York which served as a support and instigator for many social justice activities in the late 19th century. Formed by John Heyl Vincent, a Methodist minister and Lewis Miller, an industrialist, it was intended to be retreat and summer school for Sunday School teachers (Kilde, 1999: Scott, 1999). Yet, despite its anodyne intentions, it drew

radicals like Jane Addams, who founded the famous Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago for the poor, as well as suffragettes Susan B. Anthony and Julia Ward Howe. For women it was especially important because it provided them with a platform where they could speak on issues such as temperance, the right to vote, and spousal abuse. Although it was primarily white and middle class, Chautauqua was a major force in women's liberation movements, and it served as the incubator of organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance union, which was the forerunner of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (Kilde, Scott).

Social Action Movement. In Malta, the Social Action Movement (MAS) was founded in 1955 by a secular priest, Fr. Fortunato Mizzi, whose father, active in Italian and Maltese politics (founder of one of the two major parties in Malta), is mentioned in one of Gramsci's (date) notes in the *Prison Notebooks*. Fr. Mizzi stresses that the Movement was primarily set up not for "obstructive" purposes, that is to say for preventing communist forces from taking root in Malta, but mainly to help create in Malta "a community based on justice, brotherly love and liberty, the principal elements for social peace" (Mayo, 1990, p. 16). A year following its establishment, the Movement set up the Centre for Social Research with the task of "organising adult education courses, lectures, seminars etc. in political economy and social leadership" (in Mayo, p. 16). MAS sought to promote cooperatives in various sectors, including the agricultural and fishing sectors (Baldacchino, 1990, p. 105). MAS was inspired, in its work, by such foreign centres as the Coady Institute with, as we have shown, its echoes of the Antigonish Movement and the reform minded priests dubbed "Bolsheviks of a better sort" by Jimmy Tompkins (Welton, 1995c, p. 230), a statement which attests to the perennial struggle between Catholic Church and Communist forces for control of the social field. Learning activities for agricultural workers were organised in rural areas. There were also learning activities for fishers held in fishing villages. Non formal, outreach settings were used throughout, including the jetty at the Maltese fishing village of Marsaxlokk (Mayo, 2007, p.18). MAS gave rise to this cooperative movement which, as well as other organisations and two unions, one focusing on women and one on workers and families (in 1956), was intended to continue to develop as an independent entity.

Many of the above initiatives are clear evidence of the enduring role of justice and spirituality in adult education. While some are more overtly religious, others reflect a secular spirituality in which personally held beliefs and convictions are fused with action to create change and an increase in civil society. They show how the times served as incubators of important ideas and as supporters of vigorous actions. More

current examples, given in the next section, show how some of these same ideas are playing out today.

Current Day Manifestations of Spirituality

Given this backdrop of interest in spirituality in our history and traditions, it is not surprising that spirituality continues to emerge as a central interest in our field. We see the emergence of a number of books and journals on the topic. Spirituality is now a category of analysis as evinced by its inclusion in the select survey text *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education p*ublished in the US every 10 years. Prior to this most recent edition, religion was the main category in the text. And one is hard pressed to think of a major work of adult education that does not at least acknowledge spirituality as an integral part of learning. So, with the emergence of interest, we will try here to categorize some of the interest. Our sources are current journals in the field (e.g., *Studies in the Education of Adults; Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, Adult Education Quarterly*), books from publishers such as Jossey Bass, Krieger, and SUNY Press, and others. There are two main categories of writing on spirituality that are present in educational circles today, each of them marked by their distance from organized religion.

Category 1. Holistic Learning Approach

One of the enduring themes in writing on spirituality connects it with a holistic approach to teaching and learning, most closely identified with teachers and thinkers at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto, in the 1980s, who saw spirituality as part of holistic education. Writers such as Virginia Griffin (1997), David Hunt (1992), and John Miller (2000) all wrote on spirituality as part of education, never once indicating that they saw it as a new idea or as particularly groundbreaking. OISE graduates, including Dorothy MacKeracher (2004) and Janet Groen (2004, 2008), have continued the line of research and contributed to a richer insight into holistic teaching and learning processes. MacKeracher's book, *Making Sense of Adult Learning*, turns attention to all the ways that adults need to facilitate learning. She focuses on the emotional, cognitive, social, physical, spiritual aspects of the learner in her discussion of how to facilitate adult learning. MacKeracher sees learning as a kaleidoscope where "the characteristic shape and color of the separate pieces matters much less than the combinations created as colours and shapes mingle" (p. 243). She advocates using metaphors, recording dreams, and writing journal entries as ways to help educators and learners increase

their self-understanding and self-knowledge. Others connect it to reflective practice and to the flourishing of the human spirit through the arts (see English & Tisdell, 2010).

Other writers and writings that could be included in this holistic writing are Heron (1998), as well as those who have embraced a similar version of spirituality with terms such as “renewal of personal energy” (Hunt, 1992), “aesthetic education” (Harris, 1987), a “spirited epistemology” (Vella, 2000), and “inner landscape” (Palmer, 1998). For each of these writers, spirituality was a complex and integral part of the educational process. It was intended to guide life and living and to be focused on creating alive and dynamic teaching and learning spaces.

Category Two. Critical Social Justice Dimension

Although there is overlap of emphasis with writers who include a holistic dimension to spirituality in adult education, there is a distinctly critical dimension to how some adult education writers talk about spirituality. They do not believe that it is sufficient to educate people for personal development and introspection. In this critical social justice tradition, spirituality is bona fide only when it reaches out to others in a critical way, when it seeks to change and transform the world and the relationships between people. In this group we would classify Ver Beek (2000) who writes on international adult education and development, as well as English (2005) who writes about spirituality in the lives of those doing adult education for development.

We would also note here those who see spirituality as an integral part of establishing the integrity of creation and peace. In terms of the environment, for instance, O’Sullivan (1999), strongly influenced by his mentor, Thomas J. Berry, has seen spirituality as part of the quest for reclaiming the earth and transforming the world. Besides Berry, this grouping includes those from religious traditions such as Brian Swimme and Larry Rasmussen, as well as those who do not articulate a specifically religious version but who see it as a critical dimension of civil society (Swimme & Berry, 1992).

Spirituality in Context

Today in adult education, writing on spirituality is the norm. We have moved from a time when we were religious to a time where spirituality is part of the fabric of our being. We see this interest in a number of specific contextual elements of our practice.

Workplace education. There is a burgeoning literature on spirituality in workplace education and organizational literature (Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007; Groen, 2004, 2008; Weick & Putnam, 2006), much of it sympathetic to the need to bring in spirituality but a great deal of it cautioning the worker to beware of the motives of the employer. Significantly, there is more theorizing on this topic than there is actual research, or study of those who are actively promoting spirituality in the workplace. Yet, the relationship between spirituality and education has blossomed as evidenced by the multiple publications in this area. Our reading of this literature and experience in the workplace is that the only defensible purpose for acknowledging or cultivating the spirituality of workers ought to be about the cultivation of full human flourishing, not the bottom line.

We believe there are three ethical and defensible approaches to promoting spirituality in work. First, we acknowledge that developing and expressing one's own spirituality is important for the workplace educator, as well as for his and his colleagues. It may indeed be legitimate to facilitate the growth and development of an environment that nurtures spirituality. Second, we believe that there needs to be a continuous questioning of why this spirituality is being cultivated. Our constant question is: What is the purpose and whose values are being furthered?

Sobey's Business School at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, has developed an international Centre for Spirituality and Work which has focused attention of scholars and business leaders alike on the importance of attending to spirituality in the workplace. This centre through its affiliated faculty has attempted to address the technicization of spirituality (Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007) and to encourage a critical approach to spirituality in the workplace. Most refreshing is their perspective that the links between spirituality and business have been heralded before now and are not new. Driscoll and Wiebe note that cognate terms such as happiness, empowerment, creativity and values have long been discussed in business literature, and they challenge readers to think critically about what they hear.

Higher education. There is great and growing interest in how spirituality can be incorporated into higher education (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Shahjahan, 2004). And indeed, within higher education there are many people interested in spirituality. They want to know how to incorporate it into their classes, how to recognize it and if an overt or implicit job is best. They want to see if they can incorporate a knowing dimension to their work in a way that is plausible. Groen (2008) has written especially on this pointing out that there are tensions in the

whole mix. She uses Palmer's paradoxical tensions as a framework for understanding this. She does her course on line which brings in an added dimension to the mix.

Hoppe and Speck (2005) writing in the *New Directions for Teaching and Learning series* from Jossey -Bass, bring together a whole host of writers interested in how spirituality gets played out in higher education. They recommend that teachers confront it head on, deal with it, and not ignore it. Its main strength is that it gives scholarly justification for talking about spirituality (often considered taboo in contexts such as the North American one) in class. Even in theology classrooms professors may be wary of the personal discussion but this book seems to allow for it. It remains to be seen if this can remain free from legal and other considerations.

Conclusion

Clearly, interest in spirituality is not going away. Arguably, given its links to mature adult development (Irwin, 2006) there will be continued interest in it as the population ages. Whether in the context of workplace, home, school, or public sphere, the quest for ultimate significance and meaning still stirs the interest of adult educators. Questions remain about the authentic intersection of spirituality and adult education research and practice and given the influence of spirituality in adult education, further exploration about this issue is essential.

 Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-No comercial-Compartir igual