

# Spirituality in schools

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## 1. Introduction

To speak of people's spiritual dimension is to speak of everything that unites us and opens us up to others; it is not just a simple sum of the other dimensions (physical, emotional, intellectual, social, political, economic and religious), nor is it in juxtaposition to them. The spiritual dimension is not simply one more among others; it unites them. Spirituality does not stand above the others; it 'underpins' them, sustaining, harmonizing and expanding them. It enables the different dimensions that make up every human being to engage one another and question each other without any one of them being suppressed or dominated by the rest. Spirituality is linked to humility because it recognizes complexity and opens the individual up to a world rich in uncontainable possibilities. It therefore helps to develop a sense of responsibility inevitably linked to trust. We are asked to be responsible for a reality that we are not able and never will be able to control. Only together with others will exercising our responsibility bear fruit, but we are responsible for our part as individuals.

It is this recognition of a person's spiritual dimension that makes it impossible for the individual to be taught according to a *banking* model of education, which merely consists of *making knowledge deposits*. To educate, as Freire taught us, is to enable ourselves to become subjects of the educational process, to awaken ourselves to the fact that we are generators of knowledge and responsible, together with others, for its degree of truth.

To have a lasting impact, the spiritual dimension should be taught continuously in school to both children and adults (for the entire duration of schooling), included across the curriculum (affecting all subjects) and embodied in teachers (not just transmitted by them).

This article, in which I reflect on how to deal with spirituality in schools, will include the subject of religion. Spirituality and religion are not the same. I believe it is

essential to analyse not only their differences but also the links that connect them. By this I do not mean to suggest that the role of the school is to provide catechism lessons or permit religious indoctrination of any kind. Schools should talk about religions, but not as if they were all the same from a historical and cultural viewpoint. To better understand how they have developed and to evaluate them critically and openly, they should be presented as deeply rooted in the specific history and culture of the place they are from.

## 2. Daily silence

In big cities we live in a sensory-overload culture. We receive constant visual and aural impacts, which change at great speed. A few years ago, I saw again one of the episodes of the television series *Pippi Longstocking*, which I had seen as a child, and I was struck by how slow the images, dialogue and action were. I remembered it as an exciting series that had thrilled me as a child, never as slow and boring. The comparison with series that children see today is overwhelming; in the time that two images were seen in the sixties, twenty are seen today. And not only is it a question of speed but also of simultaneity. The computer has made simultaneous, overlapping images commonplace. The best examples are video clips and some cartoon series, which bombard us with images in intoxicating ways. The same happens with personal communications: simultaneous messages received at great speed from different friends on different social networks. We need a break, we need silence.

Personally, stopping the excessive external stimulation is the only way to pay attention to what is going on inside me. What is happening within is not a parallel reality to the outside, but rather the way in which I experience and incorporate what is happening around me, the way in which it affects me. The inner space is the space for my freedom, understood as my creative response to what comes from the outside. But it is not only that. Another source of information comes not from the outside, nor can it be reduced merely to my reception of external impulses. It is the spiritual impulse, the voice of God inside me, the voice of beauty or goodness that I can feel even when everything outside is ugly or violent; it is the longing for truth that I am able to experience even when I am surrounded by lies.

Teachers who do not experience this dimension within themselves cannot possibly transmit it. Likewise, for students to understand, a teacher's experience is not enough; the experience must be personal. Introducing regular moments of silence in the school timetable is no guarantee, but it is a first step. Some students will get

bored, but for others it can be an awareness-raising moment and it will be an opportunity for everyone. The moment of silence does not have to last long, one or two minutes is enough, but it must be practiced frequently and introduced specifically. Silence can be observed by everyone together at the start of the school day. Students can be encouraged to ask themselves: What am I going to do? What do I expect? What fears do I have? What expectations? Silence can be observed again at the end of the school day: What exactly have I done? What has been today's surprise, today's gift? Silence can be observed by everyone together at the beginning and at the end of each activity (subjects, meals, break times, etc.). Students will remember the general awareness raising undertaken at the beginning of the day and refine it in the present moment. Students can also be encouraged to practice these moments of silence at home, alone or – even better – in the company of siblings (whether or not they go to the same school and are used to them), as well as with parents or grandparents. Parents should be introduced to the practice of observing brief moments of silence at regularly scheduled parent-teacher meetings or at a meeting held specifically to deal with this issue. In family, brief moments of silence can be observed at home when getting up, going to bed or at mealtimes, on trips, and whenever the family does something together.

Observing brief moments of silence ought not to be a solemn practice: it should be sincere, but light; not a burden, but an opportunity to make contact with our inner selves, with our strength and also with our vulnerability. This silence should be experienced as a moment of freedom, a moment of joy at the realization that we are not mere recipients of stimuli, a moment of awareness of our own creative force. We become aware not only of the unity between our world and ourselves (fundamental, essential, inescapable unity), but also of distance (equally fundamental, born not out of fear, indifference or alienation, but out of the mystery that we are and the world is). There is one reality, but it is made up of open, empty spaces that permit the new to emerge and creativity to surface.

Apart from these brief but frequent moments of daily silence, which all students should observe, it would also be good to create a place where students could go to keep silence whenever they wanted. A simple, beautiful place, if possible with a burning candle, soft light and a suggestive image. This meditation room or space for silence should always be open so students could go there whenever they wanted to or felt the need. It would be seen as a space for freedom.

Finally, apart from brief moments of silence every day and a permanently accessible space for silence, observing a longer period of silence of about forty-five

minutes once a day or at least once a week would be a good idea. This should be a voluntary practice for the teachers or students who wish to do so. Someone would have to be in charge of maintaining this longer period of silence each week; a responsibility that could be shared on a rotating basis by anyone willing to take part. Being responsible for maintaining a period of silence does not entail any kind of preparation; it only means being there and being there with all one's heart.

### 3. The basis or foundation of spirituality

The pre-modern cultures we know about were theocentric. They saw reality as a whole centred on and organized by God in such a way that everyone had a place and a specific task. To rebel against one's assigned place in society was tantamount to rebelling against God. The modern era emerged with force and disrupted this state of affairs, paving the way for autonomous individuals, capable of self-determination, of creating their own life plan and taking responsibility for it individually. Pre-modern spiritual beings frequently fell short of society's expectations by moving away from the established system to take refuge in monastic solitude, celibacy and voluntary poverty. In contrast, modern spiritual beings often fail to live up to social expectations when they seek to foment community spirit, develop the relational dimension of the individual, and realize that not only does opening oneself up to others not weaken one's individuality, it actually makes it grow. This is the experience of love – the more we give love, and the more freely we give of ourselves, the more we get back. In Catalan, the word for *self-giving* is *lliurament*. Differing slightly in spelling, but not in pronunciation, is the adverb *lliurement*, which means *freely* and permits a play on words: giving ourselves makes us free; it is through the act of giving that we free ourselves and we become our true selves in more profound, authentic ways. The dialectic between *in esse* (that undeniable personal space that makes us unique and original individuals) and *ad esse* (our essential relationality) is a rudimentary way of recognizing the two dimensions that make up each individual that is also reflected in gender stereotypes: men are seen as freer and more capable of innovating initiative (*in esse*), and women as more dedicated and able to pay attention to others (*ad esse*). Heterosexual relationships based on these stereotypes may be stable, but they may stop or limit personal growth – *in esse* and *ad esse* are essential components of every person and have to be developed. We are neither half an orange, nor a whole one; we are complete segments of a whole orange that encompasses the whole of humanity.

A new-born baby has no sense of itself as an individual separate from its mother. It has lived with her for nine months, sharing her emotions regulated by hormones and neurotransmitters that have circulated around both their bodies at the same time. If the mother got angry, her adrenaline made the foetal heart accelerate; if she felt pleasure, the endorphins she released relaxed the foetal muscles generating a feeling of well-being. At the same time that the unborn child's body was reacting to the hormonal stimulation of the mother, its developing brain was gradually learning to relate its own intimate body sensations to the mother's voice, transmitted from the larynx to the pelvis and perceived through vibrations of the amniotic fluid. This, I believe, is a key point in understanding ourselves as human beings – the most intimate part of us is not separate from what others say or do to us, or what they have said or done to us in the past; we are essentially relational beings. However, the fact that the most intimate part of us is not separate from what comes to us from the outside does not mean it is the same. In my case, spirituality is precisely my practical recognition, embodied in the space and time of every specific situation, that two irrepressible dimensions exist within me that cannot be identified or separated: *in esse*(selfhood) and *ad esse*(relationality).

#### 4. The senses and the body

It is crucial that we enable students to appreciate their own body and respect its wisdom. Modern thought, based on Descartes and his distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, has tended to establish a dichotomy between spirit and body, identifying masculinity, rationality and culture with the spirit, and femininity, feelings and nature with the body. This anthropological theory does not correspond to what we are as individuals. Present-day fields of research, such as psychoneuroimmunology, have abandoned not only the fanciful Cartesian notion of the pineal gland as the point of connection between body and soul, but also the idea that consciousness resides in the brain. Nowadays we talk of the visceral brain (related to the neural connections of the solar plexus, located in the pit of the stomach) and the cortical brain (related to the nerve fibres of the cardiac muscle). These groups of nerve fibres, located in the stomach or the heart, not only receive orders 'from above' (from the brain in our head), they are also able to make decisions that influence our behaviour. Our whole body is inhabited by this reality we call 'awareness', or the capacity for self-reflection, not just a specific organ. Before children are taught where the different organs are found, they tend to locate all their aches and pains in the stomach. For example, 'my tummy hurts' may correspond to earache. Similarly, when elderly people say 'my body aches', it may

correspond to a urinary infection.

Learning to listen to our body is learning how to develop our spirituality. Some techniques exist that can facilitate this, for example the Focusing technique, or yoga, which would be good to teach in schools.

## 5. Animals

Ideally, the school should have animals, or at least have access to a farm where students could be in contact with animals. Here I am referring to an organic farm, not an industrial farm that treats animals as if they were objects. Saint Francis spoke to animals (to birds and fish) and referred to them as brothers (*Brother Wolf*, for example). Animal contact is a source of healing for both children and adults. From a spiritual viewpoint, animals enable us to lower our guard; in the gaze of their watchful eyes, which observe yet do not judge us, our most common fears give way to trust. Animals, especially baby animals, make us more human, although it is true that some children show cruelty to animals, especially to the weaker ones. Children should be paired with an animal that is appropriate for them; it is better for some children to take care of a large animal like a bull or a horse so they cannot harm it easily. Some juvenile detention centres work with horses to enable adolescents to release negative emotions that frequently overwhelm them and lead them to seek alienation through alcohol or drug abuse, or sexual stimulation.

## 6. Nature: ecological integration and responsibility

Apart from contact with animals, the spiritual education of a child (or an adult) cannot be complete without seeing trees and flowers, feeling the morning dew, planting a seed and experiencing the joy of watching it grow. We should live in contact with nature, sleep outdoors with a tent or under the stars, learn to patiently climb a mountain and rush down light-footed (or with aching feet). We should learn to survive without technology for at least a few days every year, going camping or on a retreat. The more frequent the contact with nature, the better. If the school is next to a wood, as is the case of some rural schools, a great part of the curriculum can be designed experimentally so that students learn to ask themselves questions, to consider problems and create the resources needed to solve them. This educational approach based on identifying problems and seeking solutions is indeed also valid in town schools, but contact with nature is urgent because more and more children have lost this contact and may spend their entire childhood surrounded by asphalt and cement. We need to understand our fundamental relationship with the

earth and our absolute harmony with everything that is alive; to experience our ecological relationship as a spiritual relationship that does not imply fusion, but has a place for our integrated individuality. It is not a question of disappearing into the whole, but understanding oneself as part of a highly complex network that is very much alive.

## **7. Social commitment: the dignity of each individual and the scandal of injustice**

*“For he who doesn’t love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”* Although this is a Christian assertion (from the first letter of St John), many religions, and many the people who profess no religion, draw on similar statements to link spirituality to brotherliness. How can we be spiritual, that is, how can we recognize the undeniable dignity of each individual, and yet remain indifferent to social injustice? It is not possible.

Schools should bring their students face-to-face with the painful reality of poverty and exclusion; they should encourage students to commit themselves to creating a better world, each in their own way, without a model, contributing their own original and unique talents. To achieve this goal, taking part in charity or welfare work is not enough. We need to seek initiatives that reach out to the excluded (e.g. the Arrels Foundation), seeing in them people like ourselves: not just someone in need of help, but someone who can also give us the greatest gift – the gift of themselves as they are. They may have nothing else to give, but what they do have is greater than all worldly riches. Students should enter into contact with exclusion in the form of material poverty, but also in the form of chronic or invalidating illness. The contact should not be superficial; students should be accompanied by people who know how to help them discover the hidden treasure in every person and the gift of God that every individual is, regardless of their circumstances. The members of the L’Arche Community founded by Jean Vanier, for example, do just this.

## **8. Spirituality and religion**

Praying or meditating together with others can be done on an ad hoc or an ongoing basis. To do it in an ongoing way, a consensus must be reached: When to meet? Where? What shall be done? The larger the circle of people I am attached to the greater the need for organization to establish order. This forms the basis of the religious institution – experiencing the kind of spirituality that makes me strive to

meet others and commit to them, making the community experience a reality. The key question is, therefore, not whether the religious institution is needed or not, but what kind of religious institution we have or want to have. Who makes the decisions? How is it financed? How are the positions of power chosen, renewed and controlled?

Introducing students to different religions should be rooted in experience, taking into account the students' own environment, starting with the main religion if one exists, and reflecting on it both sympathetically and critically. It should be evaluated based on the criteria provided by the religion itself and criteria put forward by the students or from outside sources. Students should also visit a living community and share moments of prayer or celebration. By not restricting this to the main religion, students will also learn about other religions practised in their country. They can then visit at least one community of each (more than one would be better for them to realize the huge diversity that exists in each religion) and share moments of prayer, celebration and dialogue with some of the members.

## **9. Conclusion**

The reflections shared in this article have stemmed from my own spiritual experience as an adult and a Benedictine nun for the last twenty years, which make me who I am today, and which I believe would have been very useful to have learnt at school.