

## SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUTH WORK

### Response to the National Youth Agency consultation paper from the British Humanist Association, June 2005

#### **About the British Humanist Association (BHA)**

The BHA is the principal organisation representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people living in the UK. It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. It is committed to human rights and democracy, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society, and open and inclusive schools. The British Humanist Association has always taken a strong interest in education, especially religious, moral and spiritual education, and has participated in many official consultations and working parties.

The BHA's policies are informed by its members, who include eminent authorities in many fields, and by other specialists and experts who share humanist values and concerns. We generally confine our responses to consultations to those matters of most interest and concern to our members. As the BHA is not directly involved in youth work, our responses below are confined largely to matters of definition and inclusion. I hope they are helpful.

*Marilyn Mason, Education Officer, British Humanist Association, June 2005*

Questions relating to the whole report

#### **1. To what extent do you find the overall paper convincing? Where are its strengths and weak points?**

This is an interesting paper that raises some important issues and contains some very useful psychological insights. The BHA is keen to ensure that non-religious young people are not neglected in initiatives like this one and acknowledges that in many places this paper is admirably inclusive; for example many of the examples and quotations apply well to young people who do not have a religious faith.

However, the paper does seem to slide without comment or a clear line

of reasoning from open and inclusive discussions of "spiritual" and "spirituality" to rather less inclusive discussions of "spiritual practice" and religion. This may indicate that the authors think that these are all the same or sufficiently similar to require no further explanation, whereas a humanist would want to distinguish between them, claiming some aspects of spirituality as common to all thoughtful human beings, while spiritual practices and religion are not.

If similar conflation occurred in youth work practice, that would be very off-putting or even offensive to some non-religious or humanist young people.

**2. Are there any serious omissions from the paper, in terms of important literature or arguments, ideas and positions that are unjustly neglected?**

I think the authors would find *Promoting and evaluating pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development* (Ofsted, March 2004, [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)) very relevant and interesting – and more recent than the 1994 guidance cited in the paper. It grapples thoughtfully with definitions, and offers inclusive ones and attempts to distinguish “spiritual” from “moral” “social” and “cultural”. It also offers some guidance on good practice. Though its focus is of course schools, much of the guidance would transfer very well to youth work.

*Spiritual development, some issues for humanists* ([www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk)) may also be of interest if the NYA genuinely wants to include non-religious young people. You would be welcome to use this, or something based on it, as an Appendix.

If you would like an explicitly non-religious quotation on “spirituality” from a distinguished writer and philosopher to use in future documents, we offer the following:

“...there is nothing shameful about spirituality, but ... nobody has a monopoly on it. We should not allow the term to be kidnapped for the churches and mosques and confined for the use of their clients. Wonder at the stars, love of the wilderness, enjoyment of the arts, are a human birthright. We should encourage them and practise them. We should notice the uniqueness of human

personhood and the associated boundaries on conduct required by respect for that personhood.

Such respect should extend to the buildings, poems, songs and dances of our ancestors, even when they were in the service of beliefs we cannot share. Myths have their place, as do imagination and stories, and often have an application to the here and now.”

Professor Simon Blackburn, philosopher and vice-president of the British Humanist Association, writing in *The Sunday Times*, 4/4/04

**3. Are there any elements in the paper that could be further strengthened? Do you have additional evidence to support these? Are there significant nuances, angles or implications which have been neglected?**

We would suggest that, in line with good practice elsewhere and with human rights and anti-discrimination legislation, references to "faith" or "religion" be amended where relevant (i.e. where intended to be inclusive rather than specific to religion) to more inclusive terms such as "religion and/or belief" or "worldview" or "philosophy". For example the first section "The historical and faith context" seems in fact to be mainly concerned with values and character development, rather than faith.

It would probably be useful to be aware of and include some contemporary statistics on non-belief amongst young people. For example, 65% of young people are not religious, according to *Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12-19 Year Olds*, a 2004 research report for the DfES at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR564.pdf>

We would also point out that the Golden Rule (Appendix 2) is almost universal and common to those of all religions and none, as it is not a religious principle but a human one, based on reason, empathy and experience. A humanist version would be a useful addition to this Appendix.

**4. In the light of your reactions to the earlier questions and to the body of the paper, what further questions need to be asked to stimulate this debate?**

How far does this project want to acknowledge, affirm and encourage the values and spirituality of non-religious young people, and how much does it seek to draw them into some kind of religious life? This isn't always clear. Humanists would support the former and strongly resist the latter (as well as pointing out that it is unlikely to succeed on any significant scale).

Can a project of this kind contribute both to personal spiritual development and greater mutual understanding between young people with very different worldviews? We certainly hope so and suggest that explicitly acknowledging the shared human basis of much of "spirituality" would help.

**5. At this stage, what do you think are the main implications for future research, and for policy and practice?**

**6. Have you any suggestions as to how best to take this debate forward in the field so that it can best inform policy and practice?**

**Questions emerging from the paper to be addressed in the consultation**

**1. Can we define Spirituality and Spiritual Development?**

It's certainly not easy. The meaning seems to have shifted over the past half century from almost always being associated with religion to something more open and human-centred, and this has led to a lot of confusion. The definitions offered in section 2.9 and 2.12, for example,

are potentially very useful ones, as they seem to include the more serious reflective side of most people, whatever their religious beliefs. Few humanists would object to John Hull's definition, "a process of humanisation" (3.2), or the responses collated by Nigel Pimlott (3.3).

**2. If yes, what are the definitions? If no, can we get working understandings to forward the debate?**

See above. A good working definition should be clear and inclusive.

**3. Has Spirituality and Spiritual Development a place in the Youth Work Profession?**

Yes, if it is defined and furthered as, for example, in Appendices 5 and 7.

But it is important distinguish between different kinds of spiritual experience, and humanists will insist that all their aesthetic responses, finer feelings, emotions of awe and wonder, are not defined as religious emotions; humanists can feel a strong connection with the rest of humanity or respond very deeply to nature, and even to religious art and music, without any wish or need to identify this as a religious experience.

Some youth workers and young people may find the terminology of "spiritual" and "spirituality" off-putting or ambiguous.

**4. If yes, what does this mean in terms of Policy and Practice?**

Youth workers should be familiar with what is going on in schools on spiritual development and in subjects like PSHE, Citizenship, and RE. That would encourage complementary work. For example, as schools find it more difficult to offer the experiences of nature and the outdoors, or of practical / artistic / musical creativity that are aspects of spiritual development for many young people, youth work may be able to fill the

gap.

**5. What effect does it have in how we go about face to face youth work?**

**6. What do we have to put in place to integrate and develop this dimension in the youth work profession, for example, training?**

**7. How do we discuss, debate and forward these ideas in the widest possible context, for example, working with faith and religious communities?**

The widest possible context would include the non-religious too.

**8. If we don't think Spirituality or Spiritual Development is important, or don't like the concept, how else do we describe the humanisation dimension of the work and how can we express the self actualisation process?**

Humanists appreciate the concepts associated with the word, though have some reservations about its (mis)-use. Often when people talk about spiritual development, they are in fact meaning either one or more of the following: emotional development, character formation, aesthetic emotions, moral development, socialisation, growing thoughtfulness... It would sometimes help those in the field if clearer, more specific terminology were used. However, it is possible that only "spirituality" captures the amalgamation of all or most of these things.

**9. What are the other questions that need to be asked emerging from this process?**

How can this aspect of youth work contribute to social cohesion? How can youth work contribute to enabling dialogue between the non-religious and the religious (it is not quite enough to be "inter-faith")? As the number and variety of faith schools increases and some faith communities choose to separate themselves from mainstream society,

youth work could perhaps do more to bring young people from very diverse backgrounds together – but only if it is genuinely inclusive in ethos and practice.



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