

Creativity, culture and humanist spirituality

A humanist response to "All our futures" and to some aspects of the school curriculum today

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"To me, spirituality is what you feel when you're uplifted by a piece of music or a beautiful sunset." This was the response of a humanist to a question about spirituality, and it would be echoed by most humanists, perhaps with different examples but focusing on our deep emotional and aesthetic responses to the arts or to the beauty and wonder of the universe. If non-religious people can be said to have a any kind of "spiritual" life, and the word, if not the concept, is contentious within and without the humanist movement¹, it would be strongly associated with the inspiration we draw from the creativity of others, in both the arts and the sciences, and the sense of fulfilment we can achieve by exercising our imaginations and being creative ourselves. Human creativity and culture can embody the highest aspirations and achievements of humanity, and for many humanists, they are a major part of what makes life worth living. And because of our stress on human fulfilment and happiness in the here and now, humanists have generally favoured a liberal, humanistic school curriculum intended to allow the whole person to flourish, not just the future employee.

So I enjoyed *All Our Futures*², though it was the enjoyment of meeting old friends rather than the enjoyment of meeting new and challenging ideas. Much of what it says, about the importance of creativity and culture to our sense of identity and our values, and about the social and economic benefits of creativity, seems obvious. The disturbing things are that such obvious ideas apparently needed a high-powered National Advisory Committee to state them, and that so many of their sensible recommendations appear to have been shelved in some dark basement in Great Smith Street, possibly never to see the light of day again.

For the report seems to have made little impact on the latest revision of the National Curriculum, and may well be forgotten by the time of the next one. The new rationale, the Values and Purposes underpinning the school curriculum, does contain statements supporting creativity and culture³. All very laudable, but not precisely reflected in the framework and content of the National Curriculum, and likely to remain theoretical rather than actual, given the demands on time and resources of the core curriculum and initiatives such as literacy and numeracy hours, and the pressures of test and examination performance and league tables. Despite the recommendations of the report, the school curriculum remains prescriptive, hierarchical (some subjects are definitely more equal than others) and narrow, becoming ever more specialist as children move through the Key Stages. Drama, dance, music, sport, extra-curricular activities, school outings, have tended to be squeezed out by the more obviously measurable aspects of the curriculum and by the pressures on an overworked and under-respected teaching profession. And we shouldn't ignore the effects of all this prescription on teachers' creativity too.

A recent RSA-commissioned report⁴ painted a grim picture of the performing arts in particular being squeezed out of the curriculum by more utilitarian demands on school time. Thankfully, Art as a subject hangs on, though in the upper school only as an option, perhaps because it has achieved the status of a long-examined subject with a traditional place in higher education⁵. The RSA report said that current Government policy of concentrating arts education on the most talented was not the central issue – all children should be given the experience and vocabulary to enjoy the arts, and I think that any humanist would agree with that. *All Our Futures* supports this democratic view of creativity and culture.

¹ But this is not something I propose to discuss today. See my paper [Spirituality - what on earth is it?](#) if you want to know more.

² See <http://www.cypni.org.uk/downloads/alloutfutures.pdf>

³ For example: "The school curriculum should contribute to the development of pupils' sense of identity through knowledge and understanding of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural heritages of Britain's diverse society and of the local, national, European, Commonwealth and global dimensions of their lives. It should encourage pupils to appreciate human aspirations and achievements in aesthetic, scientific, technological and social fields, and prompt a personal response to a range of experiences and ideas. By providing rich and varied contexts for pupils to acquire, develop and apply a broad range of knowledge, understanding and skills, the curriculum should enable pupils to think creatively and critically, to solve problems and to make a difference for the better." And similar statements can also be found in subject rationales.

⁴ *Arts Education: Effects and Effectiveness* (RSA, October 2000), based on 3 years of research by the NFER

⁵ But even Art feels threatened - a newly qualified art teacher writes to the *TES* (29/9/00) sadly commenting on the diminishing time given to her subject in the exam-driven climate: "I have seen pupils who are not academically able succeed in relation to their peers in art work. I have seen pupils thrive on completing a piece of work of which they were proud and I have seen pupils who fit awkwardly into the school society use the art room as a refuge. I also recognise that people need a creative outlet, an opportunity to express themselves. Just because art does not improve your test results it does not mean that it has no value or purpose."

But it is in some ways a product of its time, stressing as it does the usefulness of creative and cultural activities in school for teamwork, problem-solving and self-esteem, and for employability. Perhaps, sadly, the writers were being pragmatic, and realised that this is the only way to sell creativity these days. As a result, I think they underestimate the affective and inspirational role of creativity in the arts and the sciences, and the life-enhancing aspect of creativity and culture that is so much valued by humanists (and others too, of course). But the report is admirably broad-minded in what it includes as culture, acknowledging diversity and admitting some of the difficulties of introducing high culture to children, and recognising the role of the arts, in particular, in self-expression and defining our relationship with the world. Schools can and should do more to give every child insight into and experience of this, in a range of contexts and at a range of levels. The report does recognise that many different school subjects can and do contribute in their own ways, to creative and cultural education. A Home Economics teacher (they do still exist) told me recently of the sense of achievement and satisfaction her subject can engender in statemented pupils, who can create something useful and pleasing relatively quickly in her lessons. And yet cooking is rarely seen as creative and has all but disappeared from the school timetable, and from many households. There is much in our daily lives that schools could help us to see as creative – and we would probably be happier and more fulfilled as a result.

Creativity at the highest level is something that many of us will admire and appreciate rather than practise. Appreciation too requires education, and we will not produce the audiences of tomorrow, or the informed and thoughtful arbiters of future scientific developments, if we fail to introduce children to the rich culture around them. But we have probably all got it in us to be creative in some way, and some pupils will undoubtedly become the pioneering scientists, the designers, performers and artists of the future. We make it much harder for them if we do not give them opportunities to begin young. Even those who are not so gifted will be left with skills and interests to sustain them in adulthood⁶.

What does all this have to do with Religious Education? In some ways, not much. For really inspirational creative experiences, I suspect most humanists would look elsewhere. Exercises in empathy and illustrations of artefacts, useful as they may be, hardly qualify. Nor would I wish RE teachers to feel obliged to take on drama, painting, music, dance, unless these happen to be strong personal interests. They are demanding to teach, requiring skills, enthusiasm, and organisation of time, space and resources that are outside most teachers' competencies, better left to specialists.

But RE can make some important contributions to the cultural development of a humanist. Firstly, as the report recognises, though I don't think it gives enough credit to the role of RE in this, we live in a multi-cultural society and we all need to learn about the beliefs and cultures of other people. Recent public debates on the nature of Britishness and Englishness have reminded us of the importance, and difficulty, of getting this aspect of education right. The report's section on Cultural Education (Part 1, 3, page 40) often seems to be recommending what I assume goes on already in good RE. RE is indeed the only place in the curriculum where a range of worldviews and beliefs, and the cultures that develop around them, are studied.

Understanding the beliefs of others, even when one does not share them, is a worthwhile aim, and one that many humanist pupils appreciate – though they would appreciate RE even more if it more consistently included a sympathetic attempt to understand their worldview too. Discussing other people's beliefs can, of course, help one to formulate one's own, another important aspect of RE for personal development and self-esteem, even for the non-religious, though we sometimes have to work out what we believe in the gaps left by RE, defining ourselves almost by contrast to what we learn about. Perhaps this counts as a creative act?

Another important aspect of RE, for this humanist at least, is that it can help us to appreciate the arts. Religious language and symbolism permeate our culture, and I'm glad that when I go to an art gallery or a cathedral I have some idea of what I am looking at because I had the typically Christian RE of my youth. Christian subject matter, after all, dominated European visual arts for centuries, and English literature is full of Biblical language and metaphor. When I was an English teacher, I could recognise the allusions, though I usually had to explain them to my students. But they are probably more skilful than I am at recognising and interpreting the symbols and language of other cultures and religions, because they have had a different and broader RE. These may seem rather instrumental justifications for RE, but for people like me – and there are many of us – these cultural justifications are important ones.

What I would like to see in RE is wider awareness that what some people call "the spiritual" can take many forms, and that some of them are not remotely religious. Only occasionally, in textbooks such as Heinemann's *Spirituality in Focus*, is non-religious "humanist spirituality" given due weight. Richard

⁶ The writer Philip Hensher recently described in *The Independent* (6/10/00) the effects of an education where the arts were very much part of the curriculum: "What their youth provided them with was an emotional resource, an understanding of art and theatricality that will always nourish and enrich their existence."

Dawkins, a vice-president of the BHA, in his recent book *Unweaving the Rainbow*, expresses effectively one variety of "humanist spirituality" (though he doesn't use the word) in his joy in scientific endeavour:

"Isn't it a noble, an enlightened way of spending our brief time in the sun, to work at understanding the universe and how we have come to wake up in it? This is how I answer when I am asked - as I am surprisingly often - why I bother to get up in the mornings. To put it the other way round, isn't it sad to go to your grave without wondering why you were born? Who, with such a thought, would not spring from bed eager to resume discovering the world and rejoicing to be part of it?"

I doubt that many school Science lessons convey this excitement, this sense of awe and wonder, this "non-religious spirituality", and perhaps it is asking a bit much of a subject called Religious Education - but humanists can go on hoping.