



association for
children's spirituality

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A Brief Introduction to the Notion of the Spiritual

Even to acknowledge the spiritual within much of the academic world at the present time is often to invite scepticism or even ridicule. "What, after all, is it? Can you define it?" These are the challenges constantly put forward. The only honest answer to this latter question must be a categorical, "No". The spiritual is describable but not definable for to define is to set limitations, to draw boundaries. By contrast it was Jesus of Nazareth who was reported as commenting that the spirit, "bloweth where it listeth". In other words it is a concept of constant motion or at least of potential motion which can on rare occasions be stilled. Its most common images are those of fire, wind and running water: they cannot be contained or made static without ceasing to be what they are. Likewise, an old Buddhist saying states that we cannot step twice into the same river.

Such images come from the world's religions but that does not imply that the spiritual is only confined to an overt religious categorisation. The Olympic flame, for example, represents the spiritual in competitive sports from the rowdiness of the rugby field to the sometimes still small voice of a cricket or croquet match. The spiritual is not confined to the religious but rather both belong to that realm we refer to as the metaphysical. And religion must not be confused with theology.

It was the secular German economist Ernst Schumacher who made one of the most pertinent comments on this subject in his 1975 book, *Small is Beautiful*, when he wrote,

The problems of Education are merely reflections of the deepest problems of our age. ... We are suffering from a metaphysical disease and the cure, therefore, must be metaphysical. Education which fails to clarify our central convictions is mere training or indulgence. For it is our central convictions which are in disorder and as long as the present anti-metaphysical temper persists the disease will grow worse.

It does and it has.

Jack Priestley

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These ideas are explored in depth in Jack Priestley's 1996 Hockerill Lecture: Priestley, J. G. 1996. *Spirituality in the Curriculum. Hockerill Lecture 1996*. Essex: Hockerill Educational Foundation.

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