

Rights, religion and poetry: Expressing the spiritual

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This article explores, through children's spiritual poetry, the development of self expression around spiritual themes. The pupils' work illustrates depths of thought and engagement that many children are able to express. Can RE teaching improve by accepting the responsibility to provide for the child's right to spiritual self expression?
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Rights and RE: the human quest

The United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child asserts not just the rights to life and security, but many rights that give meaning to life and offer participation to the child in the human quest. Such rights are beyond the basic essentials of life:

- Article 13: The child shall have the right to freedom of expression.
- Article 14: The child shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- Article 17: The child shall have the right to access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.
- Article 28: The right of the child to education.
- Article 31: The child shall have the right to participate fully in cultural and artistic life.

Claiming these rights for all children everywhere is a political aspiration. The

means by which such rights might be secured are primarily educational. In the UK, many assume that these rights are secure, but a constant commitment by teachers is needed to provide opportunities that make these spiritual, cultural, educational rights available to all. I believe that the responsibilities of those who teach include enabling free expression, thought, access and participation. The example that follows illustrates two things: that many teachers are enabling the human quest through RE, and that many children may be denied opportunities for such expression in our RE, where teachers' aspirations and expectations are low. My conclusion from this is that where RE seeks an open frontier with the expressive arts, including poetry, the capacity of the subject to touch the spirit and enable high levels of engagement and self expression is most likely to reach its potential.

Poetry as part of sacred text

Ambivalence about the visual arts is common in religion, but many scriptures are more at ease with poetry. From the Hymns of Guru Nanak and the Psalms of David, to the verse forms of the Dhammapada or the Sermon on the Mount, poetry is a revered art in many religious traditions. Perhaps the suspicion of images of the ultimate that is shared by different strands of Islam, Christianity and Judaism is allayed when it is through words that the image is expressed.

Poetry in religion is often used to set out the word of God to humanity, but even more often – in the forms called hymns – to articulate human responses to the ultimate or the divine. Thus the Psalms are distinctive in Jewish and Christian scripture because they express human responses to the Almighty rather than the revelations of God to humanity.

Addressing the weakness of personal learning in RE

In RE, a persistent strand of criticism of the subject is that it drifts to a dry fact-ism. Areas of attainment like learning from religion (in England or Wales) and the personal search for meaning (in Scottish RME) are weaker than the accumulation of information. The Professional Council for RE intends, through our Spirited Arts in RE strategy, to enable teachers to address this weakness.

PCFRE ran a poetry competition last winter. We called the competition 'Spirited poetry'. What we meant was the poetry that tussles with the big questions of life, kicks at the darkness or celebrates the verve of living. Spirited poetry asks awkward questions, dreams impossible dreams and yells angry thoughts. It sometimes rests easy in tranquil mood and sometimes it agitates. Atheists and agnostics can write spirited poetry just as well as Muslims, Christians or Hindus. The themes of spirited poetry can be multitudinous. We offered teachers and pupils a choice of four themes as starting points.

Life's Like...

This theme invites pupils to look at life from any angle they like, making metaphors and symbols. It's a popular activity: is life like a puzzle, a journey, a rat race, a disease, a gift of God or a poisoned chalice?

Faith

Noah trusted the promise of the rainbow. Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] trusted the voice of Angel Jibril. Who do you trust? Where do you put your faith? This theme invited pupils to reflect on their own issues and ideas about trust and faith – in God, or in humanity.

I wonder...

RE's obsession with puzzling questions is fertile ground for poetic imagination. Where are we from, where are we going, what are we worth and who can prove it? All the questions and all the replies are the wide territory for this theme.

Where is God?

Atheists say God's nowhere. Agnostics think he may be hiding. Feminists think he's a she. Believers – of many hues – may place the divine in the human heart, in the sacred space, in the running waves or in deep space. Reflections from all points of view are welcome here.

The themes were selected to be usable across wide age ranges, connecting with common RE themes in different ways, to encourage personal reflection upon religious questions and spiritual materials, and to focus thinking without constraining it. The results were remarkable, and have led to RMEP's anthology of children's and young people's spirited poetry, (Spirited Poetry, forthcoming, 2006) which will include about 100 poems. PCFRE takes pleasure in having been able in this way to promote creativity and imagination in RE and teachers of RE all over the country got their teeth into our four themes, enabling pupils to write some stunning stuff. We are grateful to the St Peter's Salltley Trust for their generous sponsorship of the competition. 17 winning poems are available to view on the web: www.natre.org.uk/spiritedarts

The competition was judged by Penelope Wilcock (published poet and Christian minister), Lesley Prior (RE teacher trainer and adviser) and Lat Blaylock (PCFRE Executive member and editor of RE Today). Winners were selected across the age range, and the poems for a published anthology were chosen: the standard of entries was very high indeed.

In this article, I've selected just four poems that, it seems to me, illustrate the potential of spirited poetry in RE to take some responsibility for offering children and young people the rights to access diverse culture, express themselves freely, pursue spiritual well being and participate creatively in cultural, spiritual and artistic life. These four examples are all reflections on the theme 'Life's like...'

For me, as a teacher and a teacher educator, these pieces of work are very challenging – almost scary: were there pupils in my classes who could have expressed themselves as well as this? What opportunities did I ever provide for them to do so? They are inspiring too: maybe not every pupil can write poetry like this. But these young people speak for more than themselves, because these kinds of spiritual thoughts run around the minds of many.

Life by Emma Handley, Age 6

Life is like a box of chocolates,
You never know what you're going to get.

Life is like a jack in a box,
You never know when it will pop out.

Life is like a snail,
You never know what is going on inside its shell.

Life is like a prayer,
You never know what it is going to say.

Life is like a new car,
You never know what it's going to look like.

Now which chocolate shall I pick?

Emma uses some well chosen metaphors, and her structure develops each one in a meaningful way. Their diversity shows what a creative girl she is. She approaches life looking for answers, but at ease with un-knowing too.

The Advantages of Mistakes

Marie Grace Genova, Age 13

Every move we make
Is a mistake

Like a painter
Use the brush you were given
And paint
To create your masterpieces
Life

Listen to
Your breath
Your heartbeat
What colours?
What shapes?
Designs?

Life is your mistake
Make mistakes
Blobs
Misdirected strokes

Beauty

This extraordinary poem rebels against all ideas of perfect rightness by using the painter's slips as a metaphor for life. With skill and challenge, Marie Grace warns the reader: if you never make mistakes, you'll never make anything. Beautiful lives begin with blobs and misdirected strokes. Not all adults, not many 13 year olds know this. One to make you think about the way imperfections are a teacher.

Life

Alex Gant, Age 13

Life is like a mystery,
No one knows its depths.
Life is like a roller coaster,
It takes turns right and left.

I wonder what life is like,
No one really knows.
No one knows where it really starts,
Or even where it goes.

Faith is like music,
It has its different views.
Faith contains no right or wrong,
You cannot win or lose.

“Where is God?” the whole world asks,
Is he real or not?
Is the God a he or a she?
This question’s asked a lot.

Life is like a butterfly,
It is enriched with beauty.
Life’s been made to make you happy
That’s its real duty.

From the starting point of mystery, Alex moves to consider the place of faith, and ends expressing his awareness of the fragile beauty of life. Sensitive use of language and reflection on his own experience enable this well structured poem to capture a flowing sense of meaning.

Life’s like music

These three clever septaines deal with life, birth and death through the well worked metaphor of music. The idea of God as conductor gives Matthew the chance to draw attention to the idea that ‘there’s a destiny which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we may’ (Hamlet).

Life’s like music

Matthew Woodcock, Age 13

Life
One melody
We must play
Until it fades away
And then inevitably
We all
Die

Birth
A symphony
Of great happiness
A new small instrumentalist
Brought into the
Harmony of
Life

Death
The end
Of a piece
By the conductor: God
That ends with
The final
silence

A direction for RE

These four examples, I suggest, demonstrate the value in RE among many pressures of curriculum time, subject expertise and marginalisation, of making space for spiritual expression. If not in RE, then where will the responsibility for meeting these kinds of rights be located in school? Also, these kinds of poems make RE teachers satisfied: they commonly comment ‘I never knew my pupils were thinking like this’. RE in 2006 in the UK needs to take the direction of creative depth.

Lesley Prior comments: “It was such a privilege to enter, even if only momentarily, into the private hearts and minds of such sensitive and insightful pupils and to savour the poetry which they had produced. Their honesty and capacity for

frankness frequently stopped us all in our tracks. The work, whether produced by young primary children or mature 17 year olds has the potential not only to challenge our own deepest held convictions and assumptions, but also to encapsulate them, often through the creative use of imagery and metaphor.”

In judging the poetry we were especially looking for spiritual depth, excellence in the use of language and an authentic voice from the entrants. We found all these in abundance. The pupils’ voice in education is sometimes stereotyped as negative, bored or disaffected. These pupils’ voices are thoughtful, profound, sometimes witty, alert to the spirituality of life.

Lesley Prior again: “There is little doubt in my own mind that the entries in this competition, whether winners or not, reveal that RE is alive and well in our schools. When it is taught imaginatively and creatively by teachers who are not merely slaves to curriculum content, but who are prepared to allow time and space to engage with ‘seriousness’, it can be the most vibrant and vital of subjects.”

LB, 2006