

H.A. Alexander, Reclaiming Goodness. Education and the Spiritual Quest

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Summary

Democracy, Education, and Spirituality

The aim of Alexander is to reclaim the intelligent heart of spirituality and the ethical soul of education. The bigger framework however is his concern for democracy. He is looking for “a compelling vision of the good while preserving the Enlightenment principles and values that are crucial to democracy”.

In the middle ages, philosophical reason becomes the source of truth in addition to revelation (10th century). Despite the well-developed synthetic religious philosophy of Scholasticism, around 1450 this turns into the division between rationalists and non-rationalists. In the 17th century the Enlightenment emerged. It advanced a new sort of rationality, based on the ‘skepticism’ of Descartes, “that questioned any premisses that was not ‘clear and apparent’, “a philosophy without presuppositions”. In that 17th century modern mathematics and science were founded and the neutral liberal society as well. This scientific revolution was translated to technology, industrialization emerged (18th century) and urbanization and secularization as well (20th century, western societies). However, along with this there were several counter reactions. Among them, modernity, with its Cartesian logic, Kantian ethics, and Lockean politics became to be criticized on the presuppositionless philosophy, by the postmodern philosophers.

The Enlightenment brought many benefits in the field of transportation and communications technology, biomedical research, food production, and financial management. It also advanced political and intellectual freedom. However, “enlightenment theories about knowledge, ethics, and religion require reassessment because they have failed to provide a spiritual vision of the good life”. Its scientific and technological knowledge became prescribing instead of describing, and it lacked higher values on which to base morality, religion and education. The political framework of the Enlightenment is a project of emancipation, searching for the good life, but lacking the concept. However, in order to act as an ‘moral agent’ in this open, liberal or democratic society, critical intelligence (to challenge doctrine), free will (to act responsibly), and the acknowledgement of fallibility (instead of arrogance) are necessary. These (also biblical) conditions are necessary for the ethical discourse on the good life, which should be holistic, pragmatic and synthetic.

Subjective, Collective, and Objective Spirituality

The quest for the good life (nowadays) is connected to spirituality. Spirituality is “a slippery term”. To Alexander however, it is about acquiring and living by a vision of the good. It is the quest for life’s meaning, a comprehensive response to the big issues of identity, community, morality, purpose, transcendence, and for that it is ethical and theological as well (preface x). In his opinion, several contemporary conceptions of spirituality are problematic in this way (52). In his analysis (three chapters), he distinguishes three sorts of spirituality.

“Subjective spirituality” locates goodness inside the human being. With these “subjective spiritualists” Alexander points at those individuals and groups of the fifties and sixties that have abandoned the cathedral churches and the synagogues, “in favor of smaller, more intimate communities that are less rule- and more relationship-oriented”, mourning “a loss of wholeness brought on by modernity” (56). In his analysis, Alexander distinguishes the “transcendental subjectivism” as “cultivating a balanced inner life that leads to unification with the godhead”, which by Plato took root in both Judaism and Christianity, reviving nowadays (Merton, the new Kabbalists, Buber). In “radical subjectivism”, especially present in the 18th

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and 19th century, the inner life is identified with nature more than with the human or divine other (Rousseau, Foucault, Rorty, David A. Cooper). Several arguments are offered to defend this inwardness. The idea of goodness however, requires “that we appeal to standards that lie beyond the self in history, tradition, community, or God”. Ethically seen, intelligence and a free commitment to a discipline, this means to a specific community of discourse or tradition, are also necessary, in order to become able to distinguish between right and wrong, and to communicate on this (71-72).

“Collective spirituality” locates goodness between us, this means, between the group members. Here we are confronted with the politics of spirituality, an important dimension of spirituality inside and outside the world religions. “Transcendental collectivism” is the more moderate position that follows Plato and views “the community as embodying a vision of the good that originates and receives legitimization beyond its borders” (liberation theology, the secularization of Jewish spirituality, religious experientialism and the new orthodoxy). In “radical collectivism” the moral vision is not preceding the communal bonds, but constructed by and inseparable from the social group (Rorty’s universal solidarity, effecting on the critical theory of Habermas, on multiculturalism and Post-Zionism). Several arguments are offered to defend this solidarity. The bonds of solidarity are attractive, but considering ethics, the critical intelligence, the freedom to choose and the condition of fallibility are strongly undermined. Alexander concludes that though language makes sense in particular contexts and some concepts are not translatable, we all live in multiple frameworks, undergoing many different influences all day. Dialogue is what we need, in order to avoid the strong relativism of the radical collectivism, along with faith in the possibility of a higher good and with the acknowledgement of our fallibility.

“Objective spirituality” locates goodness beyond us and has deep roots, in Hebrew Scripture and Plato as well. The objectivists “believe in a reality – rationality, tradition, or God – that lies outside of themselves, their communities, and even the confines of space and time”. Often these abstract concepts lead to the use of symbols, who are not “precise forms of communication” and often take on an aura of holiness that people confuse with what it symbolizes. “Fallible objectivism” recognizes “the existence of a transcendent reality that is the source of ethical vision”, but also sees the human language and symbolic expression as very limited, always to be questioned (Israelite prophecy, protestant existentialism with Tillich, Jewish existentialism with Buber). “Dogmatic objectivism” tends “toward a rigid view of the higher good, often represented in inflexible and infallible doctrines, texts, symbols, or rituals” (ultra orthodoxy and fundamentalism, and in this sense traditionalism and scientism). Some remarks are offered to defend this outwardness. But given ethics, the “unquestioning devotion to the ambiguous word of God is problematic. (..) If tradition cannot be questioned, if it is infallible – or the canon unassailable – then intelligence and free will are undermined” (133).

The radical forms of these three spiritualities lock us up in “the dialectic between rationalism and romanticism, between reasoned or rigid conclusions and emotionally motivated actions. This Enlightenment dichotomy results in a deeply conflicted personality that is divided against itself”, instead of the integrated personality that spirituality and the idea of goodness require.

Intelligent Spirituality

Our current spiritual crisis requires a conception of the good life that is ethical (chapter 2), holistic (with a shared vision on goodness that offers an integrated life), pragmatic (with the daily practice of virtues), and synthetic (creative interacting with differences). “This calls for intelligent spirituality which entails discovering ourselves in learning communities devoted to a higher good” (140). Within this framework, genuine learning and teaching can happen. One can develop an authentic identity (in contrast to narcissism) by discovering his personal way, taught and touched by a shared vision of goodness, acquiring the skills necessary for moral agency.

“The search for spirituality, then, involves a quest after a higher good that is grounded in intelligence and freedom rather than authority and servitude and that embraces doubt and

inquiry in place of dogma and definitiveness. This ethical ideal demands humility, (...) entails hope, creativity”, is fallible and “is discovered within the context of learning communities committed to transcendent moral teachings; it is found, in other words, in education” (150). At least four sorts of virtues have to be practiced: integrity (the inner life is in accord with one’s external behavior); humility (instead of arrogance and spiritual pride); literacy (be familiar with the ‘languages’, the ‘stories’ and the hermeneutics of the different aspects of the tradition; fulfillment (discover the path of learning in itself as a source of profound fulfillment). Critical thinking is also required, despite the ideology objection (critical rationality is just another ideology) and the indoctrination objection (if reasons are not neutral but subject to ideology, there is no longer a distinction between education and indoctrination). The critical spirit is, in contrary to many popular spiritual commitments, “one of the very conditions we must accept”, when our concept of spirituality “entails a quest for a higher, more elevated, more worthwhile, more moral life, and there can be no genuine moral life that is unintelligent” (162). This rational aspect is not in contrast with the spiritual inspiration, because it contributes to an emotional disposition that is grounded in a conception of what is valuable and what can be shared and communicated. “Only an intelligent approach to spirituality has the capacity to inspire”. Love, not merely criticism is the source of this intelligent spirituality. Apathy, not reason, is the enemy of spirituality.

Education

“Becoming educated is not about becoming rational for its own sake, but about becoming intelligent in order to be good” (172). A common critique is that educational institutes have become instruments of achievement or oppression and lost their moral focus. In this instrumental approach of education, goodness can be found in three places. It is inside of us: education must nurture this, and free it from external forces (deconstruction); it is in the collective: education must reconstruct the social life and especially awake the oppressed and the alienated (reconstruction); it transcends self, community, and self: education must reproduce the current adult society (reproduction). However, education “is less a matter of deconstruction, reconstruction, or reproduction than of initiation, renewal, and renaissance. It is dedicated primarily to the celebration of goodness and only secondarily to critical and instrumental reason. It is, in short, more a spiritual than a rational or instrumental value” (183).

“If spirituality entails discovering our best selves in communities committed to a higher good, then educating spirituality involves initiating new members into such communities and renewing the commitment of continuing members to their ethical visions. This is accomplished through the study, practice, and celebration of goodness” as “self-justifying and self-reinforcing”. The goal of this education “is teleological rather than instrumental and concerns the serving of a higher good”. This asks for a spiritual curriculum with the language, literature, and hermeneutics of an approach to the good life, “not only to be shaped and molded by it, but also to shape and to mold it”. In order to instruct this content, the virtue of humility is necessary. Spiritual pedagogues “need subject-neutral critical thinking skills that transcend disciplines and traditions”, and “pedagogic content knowledge”, this is “intuitions learned from experience about enabling others to inquire as well as the inquiry skills themselves”, and implicitly the encouragement of optimism, moral vision, freedom, intelligence, fallibility, hope, creativity, confidence in humankind, and faith in a higher good. The intention is not to manipulate, but to let the student take responsibility.

The rationale of this spiritual curriculum and pedagogy is “to strengthen the moral agent within each person” (187). Without moral agency “there is no goodness, no education, no moral discourse, indeed, no civilized life altogether”. It is important because without it “the very idea of importance is meaningless”. An outcome of such a curriculum lays in “the virtue of fulfillment”, a person that understands that he matters and can make a difference, and is deeply committed to a vision of the good. The assessment of such a curriculum should not be quantitative, but qualitative, judged as other intrinsically valuable cultural artifacts. Educating spirituality also asks for teachers, parents etcetera who are teaching by example. The student has to learn to act like an insider” – “the point of spiritual education is not to

objectify the good but to 'subjectify' it" – and as a more critical outsider as well. "Spiritual education entails not merely the study and practice of moral ideals, it also involves celebrating the good in daily life (..) by prayer, study, and the sanctification of the mundane". In this view, education is not about 'work' (homework, classwork etcetera), but concerns the joyful celebration of teaching and learning as holy acts. The primary task is "to deflect that potential evil within each of us by teaching us to renew goodness in our lives each day, each hour, each moment".

Liberal Education and Spiritual Renaissance

"Every democratic citizen is a potential spiritual educator. (..) This is why the concepts of education and democracy are so deeply intertwined, because education is the process of cultivating moral agency and ethical discourse, while democracy can be viewed as that society designed to protect them. There are, at least, three models of initiation into this view of democratic citizenship". State schools as the main source of education, with a separation of church and state, however they avoid an adequate vision of the good. State schools that are supplemented by particular communities or traditions, however they need greater cooperation. Independent schools (like Catholic parochial or Jewish Day schools) that address the whole child, however they should integrate this more with the democratic community as a whole. "Without the support of the communities in which they educate, however, schools cannot deliver spiritual and liberal education. North American Jewry can offer an example for other communities as well. "I propose a movement of spiritual renaissance and renewal in which adults and children – leaders, educators, parents, and students – take upon themselves the collective and individual commitment to become initiated into and to renew Jewish life through intensive study, practice, and celebration of Torah" (204). These communities should be organic, 'Gemeinschaft'-type communities "rooted in memory and meaning which are open to 'Gesellschaft'-oriented societies that embrace growth and innovation" and which are inspiring and challenging with a clear collective self-definition (some examples.) The task of liberal and spiritual education as well is not to reform, but to renew the community. "In the final analysis, investment in good spiritual pedagogy is investment in a community's highest and most sacred values and commitments. (..) If the education of intelligent spirituality is not our first priority, then the standards we might use to assess the value of other priorities lose their meaning. Those standards derive their significance from the conditions of critical intelligence, freedom, and fallibility that are at the heart of the process of spiritual pedagogy". To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God (Micah 6:8), is what is expected from people. "These are the commitment that stand at the heart of the free society that allows each to walk with his or her own God provided they are gods of goodness and truth rather than of emptiness, apathy, determinism, and despair" (212).

Review

1. Intelligent Spirituality

With his plea for intelligent spirituality Hanan A. Alexander offers an important contribution to the topic of 'education and spirituality' in the field of academic research and of the profession of education as well. By this, he gets spirituality out of the attractive atmosphere of mere feelings, individualism, and well-being, and puts it in the broader area of a responsible lifestyle in relation to the community on several levels. By stating that spiritual life concerns the quest for the good life, he clarifies how it is connected to the moral life and that it is essential to good education. However, what we miss here is the notion of discernment. In the schools of spirituality of Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism this is a crucial notion. Important to notice is that this critical reflection is not primarily asking for the morally good life, but for Gods will. This occurs on several levels: the spiritual school, its tradition and theology; the goals, means and practices of a specific community; the spiritual path of the individual, etcetera. Ceaselessly this question is asked: are we doing the right thing when we try to live

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our life's in accordance with the will of God, when we – as a community and as a individual as well - move along the path into resemblance with 'His' yet imageless, though loving Presence? When we bring in this notion of discernment, intelligent spirituality is approached on a more fundamental level. Strictly said, we don't need a kind of legitimization based on a concern for democracy and clarified with morality. Spirituality in itself is critical. Concern for the good is a consequence, and can only be accepted in a definition of spirituality when this is meant to give a very broad description.

2. *Spirituality: Forms and the Process of Formation*

Though the value of this work is without doubt, we would like to deepen out the issue of the definition some more. It is clear that Alexander approaches spirituality as a way of life that is inspired by religious traditions. Now and then, he tries to broaden the spiritual horizon a bit, but he depends mainly on the religious and especially the Jewish, and less the Christian, traditions. Strangely enough, he is not focusing on spirituality as a way of life that is about our relationship with God. Is he eschewing this, because of reasons of (religious) politics and public relations? Maybe that is partly the case. However, overall the book lacks a kind of sharpness on what spirituality can really be about, what also interferes with his examples and proposals. In my opinion, the research on spirituality and the practice of the profession of education would be served by a clearer view on the matter. Things will not become easier, but on the long track this will give more profit.¹ For now I would like to bring in a few topics. Firstly, when we talk about spirituality we have to make a distinction between the form and the process. Following the foundational research of K. Waaijman,² we can see that spirituality appears in different forms, throughout centuries and cultures. These forms can be divided in three basic groups: primordial spirituality (life itself is producing several forms of lived spirituality); schools of spirituality (groups and movements that have a special concern for the spiritual or even mystical dimension of their religion); countermovements (individuals and groups are touched by the Absolute in such a way that they don't fit in the cultural or religious framework anymore). At a single glance we can see that "Reclaiming Goodness" restricts itself to the basic form of spiritual schools, while it fails to explain the relation between spirituality and religion. Secondly, in their diversity the basic forms seem to focus on one point, the relational process between man and God (material object), as a process of transformation (formal object). This means that spiritual life is about meeting God and becoming influenced by his love in the several layers of our existence. The spiritual traditions, however, are also very clear about the infinity of the divine Presence and about the human incapability to keep their hands of clear-cut images. Therefore, it might be not a bad choice of Alexander to focus on spirituality as a quest for the good. It keeps the phenomenon manageable. Nevertheless, it will also be clear that the danger is that the phenomenon becomes restricted to the human moral management. The fact of the divine-human formation process is therefore a challenge to education that should be taken seriously. When we acknowledge this process as the core of our spiritual undertakings, we can contribute to a lifestyle and fundamental attitude that is opening up to the Presence of the Divine that is loving and critical as well. The history of so many individual life's and groups as well have shown that spirituality is not simply about an idea and some nice feelings concerning the Divine, but about becoming personal involved with the call that emanates from life itself, and that forges us into a life of reverence towards life as creation. Moral behavior then is not simply the response to a moral code, but a consequence and also a practice in order to grow into the virtue of reverence. Thirdly, when we take the divine-human relationship seriously, we cannot accept that the source of inspiration, or the dimension of the Absolute, is filled in with notions like "a nation" or "success", like Alexander

¹ Compare the problems the United Kingdom is facing nowadays. See Lia van Aalsum, 'Education – and What About Spirituality?' (Congrespaper July 2006, Winchester, is to be found elsewhere in SPIRIN). See also M. Chater, Child and Youth Spirituality, in: *Studies in Spirituality* 15 (2005), 251-265.

² K. Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Louvain xxx. See also for a quick impression the article 'Education – and What About Spirituality?'

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is doing (amongst others like “a god” or “the God of the bible”) by quoting Tillich and his “ultimate concern”. Seen from the practical side, it will not bring us in the field of spirituality, seen from the theoretical side it is not about spirituality at all.

3. The Importance of the Framework and the Teachers

Though we maybe can state, as Alexander does, that there is a growing interest in spirituality grounded in tradition, I think we have to be realistic and acknowledge that in our present western culture there is a strong appreciation of individualism, speed, and superficial information. We also have to admit that despite several commendable initiatives, there is still a big gap between spirituality and religion. For that, it is important that Alexander emphasizes the importance of a community, more specifically, of a learning community. As we explained above, partly this means a restriction of the spiritual phenomenon. On the other hand, as we shall explain now, it is a very important aspect of thinking about spirituality. Precisely because of the transforming aspect of the relation with God, people need frame works, patterns and models to grow in this relationship and become the beautiful human being one originally is. These frame works do not need to be religious in the strict sense of the meaning, neither the so-called schools of spirituality are necessary. However, when a person starts to get involved in a process of spiritual transformation, he needs a kind of structure and building stones in order to develop his spirituality. This truth is, even in spiritual circles, sometimes hard to accept. It also provides us with an important instrument for the implementation of spirituality in education. In addition to this, it makes clear that the role of the teacher is very important. Alexander mentions this more or less, in relation to the more encompassing learning community and in relation to the subjects of spiritual education. In my opinion and restricted to education itself, we cannot stress enough the importance of the teacher himself. Guiding our students in the field of spirituality is enormous demanding. The teacher himself needs to have at his disposal a considerable amount of knowledge of the theoretical basic aspects of spirituality as a phenomenon, of the spiritual tradition(s) he uses as a gate and even as a field of practice for his students, of the topic of spiritual guiding and with that of the processes of transformation. This so-called theoretical knowledge goes along with the experiential knowledge, fruit of practices the teacher took on by himself and of the spiritual path he is going by himself.

Alexander is linking spirituality to democracy; I would prefer to link it to life itself. Both approaches give an entrance to the field of education, opening up spirituality as an intelligent undertaking, belonging to the core of education. This kind of education is searching for the good, committed to the divine call that is coming towards us throughout cultures and religions of centuries, and flowing forth in a lifestyle of reverence, care and love.