SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE PUBLIC EDUCATIVE CARE OF CHILDREN: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF BIBLICAL AND DYNAMIC SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVES.

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Being a dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

Murdoch University.
I declare that this dissertation is my account of my research and contains exclusively work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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ABSTRACT

A useful model of spiritual development in the public educative care of children must: specify the meaning and nature of spirituality; clarify its relationship to an underlying ontology; identify in what sense spirituality is developmental; be consistent with a justifiable paradigm of human development; explain the rôle and status of such spiritual development within a secular system of educative care; and specify practical implications flowing from these matters.

Using narrative criticism within an evangelical framework, the biblical descriptions of spirituality and childhood were critically examined as a basis for such a model. Biblical spirituality was developmental and was identified with encounters, usually naturally mediated, between human spirits and God’s Spirit, and spirits which alienate from God’s Spirit. All children, without qualification of belief, community, rite or age, were identified as spirits who share a special relationship with God’s Spirit both ontologically and experientially. Biblical childhood was not defined chronologically but functionally by inability to take responsibility for one's own spiritual life because of openness to God’s and other spirits.

Principles of ‘magician systems’ in Dynamic Systems Theory parallel phenomena of human development and those commonly designated as spiritual. Consequently, a dynamic model of spiritual development is proposed which is consonant with biblical teaching and grounded in an established scientific paradigm. This indicates that spirituality is an inescapable aspect of any educative care setting or system and need not be introduced as though children lack it. Spiritually salient aspects of educative care will lead children to spiritual encounters which are derivative of a positive life affirming principle or fundamentally destructive and alienating. These aspects encompass the spiritual ontology of the setting, the children, the personnel, the physical environment, the nature and quality of relationships, the curriculum, religious activities, the nurture provided, and the wider context, all of which are of spiritual moment.
SOME NOTES ON LANGUAGE USE

Inclusive language is used except in direct quotations. The plural pronoun is used where gender is unspecified, though this leads to discrepancy in grammatical number. Because number is theologically relevant, that strategy is inappropriate for references to deity. In consistency with biblical usage, the male pronoun is used when referring to the Judaeo-Christian God. The possible offence to some women is balanced against that to some traditional Jewish and Christian believers by alternatives. This is acknowledged as a moot point. The Greek term ‘hypostasis’ is used in preference to ‘person’ when referring to Father, Son or Spirit to avoid the anthropomorphism inherent in the latter. More generally, ‘person’ is used as common terminology for the individual human (i.e., the singular of people) and could be substituted by ‘individual’, ‘human being’, ‘character’, or similar terms. The impersonal pronoun is employed for all uses of the word ‘spirit’, including the ‘Holy Spirit’,¹ because ‘spirit’ includes impersonal phenomena and, even in Scripture the Holy Spirit while ‘personal’, as are all hypostases of the Trinity, is not personalised in the same sense as the Father and the Son. The danger of creating a distinction between hypostases is recognised but is not intended. A distinction is made between ‘Christian’ as a reflection of the nature of God revealed by Jesus and ‘christian’ as representative of group membership or cultural identity related to that revelation. This is to allow description of situations such as people who do not identify as ‘christian’ but still share ‘Christian’ values.

Within quotations, American spelling has been altered to Australian usage for consistency with the general text; errors, marked ‘[sic]’, are uncorrected; and square brackets represent my authorial comment, except in a few cases where the source of the quote has used this device to comment on someone else’s text. References are uncorrected.

Though ‘schools’ are emphasised in the literature, the state also provides child care, family day care (FDC), preschools / kindergartens / child-parent centres, out of school

¹ Serious consideration was given to using the female pronoun for the Holy Spirit, as the New Testament (NT) Greek term pneuma is female. However, to use different gender specific pronouns for the hypostases of the Trinity would be unnecessarily contentious, and gender specification tends to be arbitrary. Latin spiritus, the derivation of ‘spirit’, is a male form.
hours care (OSHC), and the like which furnish an educational environment, even where that education is under a rubric of ‘care’. Except for direct quotations, when ‘education’ is used, it has a narrow sense relating to the deliberate transmission of ideas and attitudes, etc., and is never equivalent to ‘schooling’ as that gives insufficient weight to the inescapable ‘care’ function of the school. To express the broader rôle of state provided institutions for the young, the more fully descriptive term ‘educative care’ (ed-care) has been used. ‘School’ and ‘teacher’ are inappropriate to indicate any and all of the different institutions and personnel that offer educative care. Consequently, ‘educative care setting’ or just ‘setting’ will be used for the institutions, and ‘educative caregiver’ (ed-carer) to include qualified educators, support and untrained staff, and volunteers.

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