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Good Teaching, Spirituality and the Challenge of Encountering Cultural Difference in Australia

Glenn Morrison

Abstract
The essay aims to show that nurturing a spirituality of good teaching could provide a more committed and responsible attitude towards education and encountering cultural difference in Australia. Spirituality speaks of relationships, the search for meaning and of having a heart for another. Students demand that teachers should be many things such as passionate, engaging, intelligent, fun, challenging, fair and creative. The more we can develop meaning and a spirituality in teaching, the more we may meet these demands to attend to the students' enthusiasm, frustration, uncertainty, impatience, fears and dreams. Part I of the essay will explore some Levinasian-inspired ways how spirituality might coincide with good teaching. From raising the question, "What makes a good teacher?", the essay will touch upon Levinas' ideas of otherness, encounter and passivity as a means to develop the notion of transcendental knowledge and the ethical qualities of good teaching. Part II studies the connection between lecturing and Levinas' philosophy by way of examining misconceptions of encountering students from another culture and of developing a spirituality and response of ethics and prayer. Given the diverse cultural landscape in Australia, developing a responsible ethic and spirituality of openness towards encountering cultural difference in the classroom, can hopefully do much to inspire and re-imagine a profound sense of being Australian.

The connection between education and spirituality is not so simple. In a world of proofs, explanations and experience, the encounter with God could easily be ignored. Spirituality, on the other hand, gives the possibility to reflect about good teaching in a fashion 'otherwise'. When an educator takes us a prayerful, ethical stance, something beyond everyday thinking emerges. This something is the world of the other. Spirituality nurtures the gift of being-for-the-other; it puts the conscience into question not just in a gentle fashion, but also prophetically, challenging the self to grow towards the grave responsibility of being responsible for the other. Such a

radical turnabout in consciousness can have a huge impact in the education of the student. Spirituality, prayer and the desire for union with God, by way of faith, hope and love, can lead to an important revelation, namely that the other, the student, is sacred.

It is not easy to love one's neighbour. So much of the self gets in the way. The educator, nurtured and sustained by spirituality and love for God, is challenged to be more a reminder of Jesus the Christ rather than the ways of self-interest, pride and vanity. In the following reflection, I will especially make use of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), a Jewish and Talmudic thinker and educator, who in recent times has had a growing influence upon Christian theologians and the development of Christian theology. His thinking has also influenced the philosophy of education. By engaging spirituality and education with Levinas' thought, I hope to show how a Christian theologian's response to the world of 'good teaching' can learn from a Jewish philosopher. In this way, this suggests that Christianity should always be mindful of its proximity to Judaism and how both can learn from one another. Given especially their intertwined biblical, philosophical, theological and liturgical origins and identity, both Christians and Jews bear a responsibility to work together towards a future world of "Peace, peace to the far and the near" (Isa. 57:19) and becoming "a light to the world" (Matt 5:14). By setting out to be mindful of this ever-present dialogue, the possibility may even exist to go beyond dialogue to the world of the student and to finding a prayerful and ethical way to speak about education.

Part I Good Teaching and Spirituality

What makes a good teacher? We can provide a litany of qualities: commitment and passion, otherness and focusing on the students' needs, organisation and preparation, openness and sensitivity, courtesy and humour, ethics and personhood, confidence and clarity and being intellectually engaging and inspiring. These all seem to be qualities of a wise and ideal teacher. Yet, the question, "What makes a good teacher?" is one that leads us on to an ever expanding horizon.

I have had many good teachers, but perhaps the ones who have made a difference in my life have been those who have gone beyond themselves by showing a sense of personal concern and generosity. I will never forget when one philosophy lecturer who walked with me personally to the library and then enthusiastically researched for reference material with me. It was almost a joy for him to discover a book. This little incident seems to have given myself a more embodied sense of what it means to be a good teacher, namely the value of engaging with another with embodied feelings and generosity. Through the years, this experience has stayed with me.

Such personal experiences touch upon the spirituality of the human heart and mind and give evidence to the meaningful core of our existence and reality. These experiences evoke the transcendental qualities of our lives: the very unity of goodness, truth and beauty mutually engaging together. Exploring this transcendental sense, we can suggest that good teaching is like searching for beauty and the paths of truth veiled and unveiled within. Embracing the aesthetical good teaching provides a foundation for the emotions, heart and the imagination to literally come to mind, and so articulate a transcendental quality of knowledge. Or for example, good teaching

that places itself in the quest for truth, seeks to discover a rational yet humble way for reflection and problem-solving. In Christian theological terms, this represents the quest for Jesus the Christ: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt 11:3)

Importantly, the question, "What makes a good teacher?" creates a horizon for thinking, doing and becoming to the point that teaching is both a craft and a vocation. I am suggesting here that teaching is not just a method, but involves developing a practical wisdom shaped over years. Accordingly, teaching becomes a way of life, a quest for truth and a spirituality.

Discovering Connections between Good Teaching and Spirituality

There are three moments in which good teaching and spirituality might coincide. First, good teaching aims overwhelmingly to make contact with the student; second, good teaching seeks out the student's potential for learning. Finally, good teaching remains vigilant towards the student to grow in both knowledge and self-knowledge. These three moments touch upon spirituality by providing an underlying stance of encouraging the student towards being relational and committed. From this basis, we can begin to reflect on a variety of things: methods of learning; giving students meaningful activities; encouraging students to internalise questions; trusting students; understanding the dynamic between academic and non-academic students; and encouraging students to become self-directive learners. Accordingly, good teaching makes contact with the student, seeks his or her potential and remains ever vigilant to encourage the student's development of knowledge and maturity.

A spiritual approach may help to revision our stance towards our curriculum, teaching methods, assessment procedures, the environment of interactions with the students as well as the institutional climate. By possessing a spiritual approach for education, we are enabled to envisage a transcendental horizon for good teaching, scholarship, training for the professions and pastoral care to students. The horizon, for the most part, is beyond our everyday experience; it demands insight and reflection, change and perseverance. But it is something that gives us hope to encounter so much of the student that seems too unknowable. Hence, for example, using a more interactive and spiritual approach to teaching may help students move more efficiently from just remembering and understanding to higher level activities of applying, analysing, evaluating and even creating/designing. This will encourage the ability to apply their study to a variety of life-contexts in the hope of creating new ideas and horizons.

Understanding the emotions and trust is also another opening for good teaching and spirituality to coincide. When a learner sees the value of their learning, there must be a corresponding emotion. Emotions inform our human life with value and modify our ideas and senses with our uniqueness and personality. They accompany us in our search for meaning and truth. Given that trust is an important quality of truth, when a learner trusts that the outcome of learning is obtainable, he or she engages the possibility of encountering the truth of their learning; a transcendental opening that leads the person to greater knowledge and meaning.

In a Levinasian sense, one of the temptations of knowledge is the fall into objectivity, that is to say, mechanical ways of behaving and categorising people “in general”. Learning from Levinas, one can suggest that developing a spiritual approach to

knowledge may in fact help to safeguard personhood and dignity. For example, it may help not to categorise and reduce students as an object of the fulfilment of generic graduate attributes. Rather, we can see that these attributes can be very much part of the ongoing "lived experience" of the student with the teacher and other areas of the student's life. Accordingly, good teaching that takes into account graduate attributes, for example, must not just mechanically focus on developing intrinsic motivation and deep learning, but also keep its eyes on spirituality: a foundation for meaning, self-discovery and personhood. In other words, developing a relational and spiritual approach to graduate attributes could very well bring a sense of transcendence to the ongoing learning experience of the students.

Examples of graduate attributes include being reflective and personal; engaging in critical thinking; being creative, imaginative, curious and innovative; possessing communication skills and sensitivity; and lastly, maturing in self-awareness or self-discovery. In the context of spirituality and personhood, perhaps the most important graduate attribute is "self-discovery". The 20th century Catholic theologian and spiritual writer, Thomas Merton, emphasised the following: "The function of a university is, then, first of all to help the student to discover [him or her] self: to recognise [him or her] self, and to identify who it is that chooses".[1] This seems to suggest that the graduate attribute of self-discovery speaks of a developing spirituality or meaning of life that flows over into our personal and social worlds. Self-awareness leads us to becoming intellectually curious and creative, and certainly deepens our knowledge and experience, as we shall now turn.

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[1] Thomas Del Prete. *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1990), 31.

Knowledge and Experience

Let us consider three different types of knowledge: declarative, procedural and conditional. The relationship between these levels are important because it signifies an important movement from facts (declarative knowledge) to practice (procedural knowledge) and finally to discernment or a deeper level of understanding (conditional knowledge). Thus, we find a model of knowledge that creates a focus on the reality of knowledge, that is to say, knowledge progresses through the objectivity of facts, the creation of facts into procedures and connections, and finally the conditions of possibility and the very meaning for the procedures to take place.

However, these three levels of knowledge together seem to focus on reality rather than a type of knowledge that is both foundational and infinite. We need to guide and test the process and reality of knowledge. In other words, I am concerned to investigate a type of knowledge that brings together spiritual existence (such as self-discovery and transcendence) with education. Hence, I would suggest another category of knowledge, namely transcendental knowledge, which places emphasis on spiritual existence as a foundation and framework for the other three levels of knowledge. Such transcendental knowledge can be exemplified by qualities of beauty, truth, goodness and unity. Looked at as a whole these transcendental forms of knowledge draw their being from love. Having a sense of spirituality might lead to encouraging students to develop a sense of such love, a very mystery that overwhelms our body, emotions and consciousness.

Spirituality demands a certain other-centredness or ethics of prayer. In another sense, spirituality is the product of a fruitful self-discovery, and crucially, the discovery of

(and responsibility for) the other in our midst. When the other, the student, comes to mind beyond our everyday experience of interpreting their identity and judging their behaviour and level, we might just be surprised to encounter something more valuable and even unknowable. A major outcome of spirituality is, for example, being able to reflect on life experience and express a vision of human personhood within the context of the revelation and mystery of the other, the student. It would be my hope that personal experience and judgments would not be the main determination, but rather the encounter of mystery with the student that may guide teachers towards a deeper understanding, wisdom and service of love.

Drawing from the philosophy of Levinas, I want to also suggest that the passive nature of the encounter between the teacher and student is perhaps of greater import to appreciate the encounter in teaching and learning. Let me offer some points of reflection on the notions of encounter and passivity for especially adult learning.

Encounter and Passivity

Encounter as passivity produces an openness towards an infinite horizon of knowledge. Or in simpler terms, a passive encounter allows people to be more "in touch" with one another. In contrast, the self that prioritises its own ideas, values and goals may ultimately loose contact with others. This suggests that a passive encounter of openness gives teaching, learning and knowledge a more inter-subjective foundation rather than an egoistical one. Given that there is always a temptation for the self to seek its own importance before and over others, I want to suggest that a deeply passive encounter would help to free people to make contact with one another's dreams, passions and hopes. Consequently, the search for developing a

more relational existence would provide a foundation for self-discovery (spirituality) and its integration into good teaching practice (otherness).

A passive encounter would further encourage a dialogical approach in which the teacher-student relation actually produces a third partner, namely, for example, a relation with other students who perhaps feel isolated or marginalised. Hence, by reaching out to one student, we might find ourselves better able to encounter either more challenging students or those who may feel marginalised. An encounter with one student may be an example of initiating contact with others and thus allow them to articulate and share their fears, needs and desires. Consequently, the passive nature of encounter helps to provide an environment of hospitality and openness in which students might be encouraged to articulate meaning and passion in the quest for knowledge.

Taking into context spirituality, an important question arises: *How might I encourage the students to develop spirituality in the classroom?* There can be a high level of student uncertainty in the experience of learning. However, if the student can be engaged to think critically (reflect) on their historical, cultural and biographical (including their religious) background, then this may provide some opening to begin to appreciate the importance of growing towards self-knowledge and its connection with spirituality. Talking face to face with the student in a reflective way and listening to them opens a space for dialogue. In such an encounter of openness (passivity), we can nurture the spirituality in the learning process as the student comes to a deeper self-knowledge. Let us explore a little further the idea of passivity and its connection with spirituality.

Developing a sense of spirituality can evoke an abrupt change or radical turnabout (let us say, conversion) in regards to one's personal experience, process of critical reflection and individual development. Such conversion denotes the experience of passivity. For example, the spiritual writer, Jack Dominian, writing over 20 years ago, provides a context to perceive how the idea of passivity might play a part in transforming learning. Under the heading of passivity, he reflects:

> The dependent person may be passive but the passive person need not be dependent. A man or woman may feel shy, remain quiet, unobtrusive and let others handle initiatives. He or she is pleased to follow. But such outward passivity may hide an inner furnace of burning energy which gradually erupts. Men and women are promoted to offices and positions which transform them. The hesitant, indecisive man/woman gradually assumes initiative and authority and may take others by surprise at their hidden potential. The transformation may be overt. Silences are converted into an articulate outspokenness. Indecision is changed into discriminatory activity. Mistakes are made, of course, in the process: but the path is upwards towards greater confidence and the desire to undertake far more onerous tasks once the latent capacity has been discovered.[2]

Dominian writes from the point of view of spiritual awareness in the midst of a second journey: the mid-life transition or crisis. This seems to be a context that could well stretch towards founding a spiritual horizon for good teaching. For example, the ability to unlock the hidden potential of students is no doubt the mark of a good teacher. Motivating through inspiring curiosity or dialogue, for example, may lead to an environment of trust and hospitality. However, to a large extent, the student remains unknown, and the extent to which we might be sensitive enough to listen to

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[2] Gerald O'Collins with an afterword by Jack Dominian, *The Second Journey: Spiritual Awareness and the Mid-Life Crisis* (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1985), 91.

the student's hidden potential may need a whole transformation also in the teacher's approach. Quite often, transformation for both students and teachers can occur through the practical act of sharing experiences, that is to say, through intimacy, friendship and equality.

The process of sharing experiences is very common to theology and particularly pastoral theology and spirituality. As a group learning experience, sharing experience encourages the group processes of cooperation and communication skills. Inspiring an environment of trust between the teacher and students could be a starting point. Furthermore, even formulating questions for reflection about good teaching could make a positive impact, such as asking oneself, "How could teachers begin to think 'otherwise' and learn to approach students from different cultures?" And indeed this will be our focus to address this question in Part II that follows. So now, let us approach this question in the context of lecturing and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, whose writings themselves offer a bridge between education and spirituality (the ethics of prayer).

Part II: Connections: Lecturing and the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Levinas sets out to think of philosophy/humanism 'otherwise' in terms of responsibility for the other, justice, mercy, peace and ethics. His thought provides education scholars a pathway into the world of spirituality, personal development, responsibility and the conscience. This results in challenging new perspectives for curriculum design and development. Given that Levinas' philosophy is of unusual complexity, let us look at two lecturer's reflections on encountering students of

another culture as a starting point to apply Levinas' ideas to such encounters in education.

The following two statements are examples of "fundamental misconceptions of Far Eastern Education methods":

> So far as Far Eastern (China, Japan, Korea) students are concerned it is a truism that, raised in a conformist educational system, they are happier with memorizing and reproducing information that with problem-oriented and more active teaching strategies.
>
> Students in Hong Kong … expect lecturers to teach them everything they are expected to know. They have little desire to discover for themselves… They wish to be spoon fed and in turn they are spoon fed …[3]

On the face of these comments, both lecturers may seem quite averse to introduce certain approaches and innovations to teaching such as problem based learning, reflective discussions, investigations, collaborations and teamwork. Here we recognise the prima facie danger of the violence of stereotyping the other.[4]

Following Levinas, it seems quite obvious to begin to think 'otherwise' than the habitual way we may tend to reduce others, who for example come, from another culture. This is especially pertinent for Australia given our diverse cultural background. In terms of presage and situational analysis, if we have a background that is not open to others from another culture (presage), then diagnosing this by way of re-designing the curriculum (situational analysis) represents a positive step for personal change and responsibility (Levinas' humanistic perspective) in an

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[3] John Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Maidenhead, Berkshire: SRHE and Open University Press, 2003), 128.
[4] Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 128.

environment of teaching and learning.[5] Consequently, Levinas' thought could prove of especial import for an Australian curriculum awareness, design and development.

Emmanuel Levinas emphasises teaching specifically in three ways: as a relation with the personal other, a conversation and an ethical relation.[6] For Levinas, teaching reflects an encounter with the other's face. The idea of the face, the very reception of the other in our midst, like idea of infinity that overflows our consciousness, is beyond our everyday experience. In more manageable terms, Levinas' ethical ideas of the other teach us that there is so much about the student that is unknowable. As a result, for example, when we reduce a student from another culture to a product of our own prejudice, we can violate the student's integrity and inhibit his/her possibility to develop and learn.

Sharon Todd is the leading scholar in the area of Humanism, Education and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. She has written a number of articles and the book, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis and Ethical Possibilities in Education*.[7] In her article, "'Bringing more than I contain': ethics, curriculum and the pedagogical demand for altered egos", she summarises Levinas' perception of

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[5] Curriculum presage factors refer to past activities and experiences (background), ideas and forces (organisations) that influence decision-making in curriculum development. In contrast, situational analysis signifies the awareness of such ideas and forces (namely, the process of analysing the context of curriculum development for the purpose of re-designing new curriculum and/or keeping curriculum up-to-date). The application of presage to situational analysis deepens the possibility for curriculum change and development by providing meaning to the context of the curriculum. In terms of the Levinasian approach, the meaning will be guided by a view of responsibility and personal development. See Murray Print, *Curriculum Development and Design* (Crows Nest, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 25-26 109-110.

[6] Levinas reflects: "The approach to the other … is … to receive for the Other beyond the Capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is … an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain." Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1996), 51.

[7] Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

education as "Bringing more that I contain". Teaching does not in essence become 'maeutics' (focusing on ideas and domain of reason), but involves a whole process of conversion and transcendence; a radical turnabout of encountering the face of the other. Todd reflects: "… teaching is only possible if the Self is open to the Other, to the face of the Other. Through such openness to what is exterior to the I, the I can become something different than, or beyond, what it was; in short, it can learn".[8] Accordingly, rather than the teaching facilitating the birth of knowledge in the student, the social relation with the other gives rise to learning and change.

Levinas' philosophy of humanism and ethics challenges the teacher to approach the student with openness, generosity and humility. Giving the priority of the ethical and social relation for education rather than the objectivity of knowledge testifies that the human first is personal and in need of face-to-face relations. Consequently, when encountering a student from another cultural background or even from our own, we may become more other-centred and seek to journey into his/her world. In terms of work-related practices and developing a spirituality of ethics and prayer, this means that the encounter with the student should involve (i) first being relational; (ii) acknowledging that the student is ultimately beyond our knowledge and judgments; (iii) recognising that our judgments can be violent and wrong; (iv) being attentive towards our attitudes in curriculum development (situational analysis); (v) recognising that teaching involves both a personal transformation of the teacher and of the student; (vi) contemplation, that is inviting a prayerful disposition to nurture the work of God in the soul towards a praxis of faith, hope and love; and (vii) enabling the state of contemplation (prayer) to be articulated as a relation of ethical

[8] Sharon Todd, "'Bringing more than I contain': ethics, curriculum and the pedagogical demand for altered egos", *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 33:4 (2001), 437-438.

responsibility. Altogether, these points emphasise that personal relation and development (love and spirituality) precedes knowledge and reason.

Conclusion: 'Imagining Otherwise' - Good Teaching in the Australian Cultural Milieu

Is it truly possible to think of the connection of spirituality, philosophy, good teaching and Australian culture? In a world in which we rationalise others as commodities and seek to reduce them as possibilities for profitable undertakings, developing a Levinasian-inspired spirituality, in contrast, can deepen our sense of personhood and value of others. Students need to be seen as people in search of meaning, valuing education and developing life skills. The more students can develop in self-knowledge and self-discovery, the more they can take responsibility for their learning and the sharing of it. The more a teacher is passionate about learning, the more she or he can inspire and give the gift of knowledge not through habits of expressing ego-desire and self-importance, but by way of nurturing personhood, meaning and transcendence. Good teaching involves having a heart and passion for knowledge; to generously share it until it overflows and becomes beautiful, good and true. Teaching is a gift and when we appreciate its quality, the gift endures and remains a sign of hope, trust, wisdom and goodness for all to partake and be inspired.

The education of the human person is essential for wholeness and well-being. Our quest for meaning and truth can follow a crooked path, but we might find some direction by aligning our education practice towards a horizon of goodness and spirituality. From a Christian theologian's perspective of learning from Levinas, developing a sense of spirituality can produce a significant rupture and radical

turnabout in good teaching practice. A spiritual stance reaching to the foundations of teaching and learning might give rise to a hospitable, generous, engaging, responsible and a more embodied environment. Yet, spirituality always asks more. Consequently, towards such a spiritual horizon, there lies hope to envision a transforming readiness for good teaching to reflect on its approach towards meaning, self-discovery and responsibility for the other.

Levinas' thinking teaches the importance of imagining how to relate towards others 'otherwise'. In this context, possessing the philosophical wisdom of imagining the world 'otherwise' is perhaps something which Australians are innately good at. The Australian theologian, Tony Kelly writes:

> Whether we are particularly religious or not, I find myself surmising that our primary need is for a 'philosophy' in the original meaning of the word, 'a love for widom'. I would think it is one of the main contributions the Judaeo-Christian religious community should be aiming to make. ... As I said previously, Australians are positioned in a space, geographical and historical, where it is possible to take the longer and deeper view, to imagine the world otherwise.[9]

Australians are perhaps more articulate to imagine the world 'otherwise,' by employing an ironic and sardonic humour; it is "wisdom in a lower key".[10] Often this is used to protest against injustice, the pretensions of others and to uphold the sense of equality. Acknowledging this Australian trait is important. At a more hidden level, it reveals how vulnerable and sensitive Australians are deep down. Though self-reflection and knowing just a little bit more about how vulnerable and sensitive Australians are, could be enough to again think 'otherwise' to re-imagine the relation with others coming from another culture. For the lecturer and teacher,

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[9] Tony Kelly, *A New Imagining: Towards an Australian Spirituality* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1991), 73.
[10] John Thornhill, *Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation* (Newton, NDSW: Millenium Books, 1992), 133-134.

giving time to meditate on one's own identity, habits and ways could initiate a prayerful and contemplative disposition of encountering the cultural difference of others in the classroom.

So where Australian humour unites with humility, reflection and openness, Australian educators may truly begin to 'imagine the world otherwise' and realise just how vulnerable and sensitive we all are. And this is the stuff that spirituality is made out of: discovering meaning, seeking transforming and encountering the very transcendence of the other and of the Absolute Other, God. To 'imagine otherwise' will always remain an ongoing journey, worth undertaking. Where there is faith, hope and love for the other, there will be a quest for understanding and even an unfolding of the meaning of human being and personhood. In this way, we can begin to envision how philosophy, theology and spirituality might have something important to say about good teaching and approaching world of the other.