

JOHANNES L VAN DER WALT & FERDINAND J POTGIETER**THE ORIGINS OF RELIGION AS AN HISTORICAL CONUNDRUM:
PEDAGOGICAL AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS
AND CHALLENGES****Problem Statement**

For the last five years we have been involved in a research project entitled *Creating Dialogic Space*. The project aims at determining to which extent conditions such as the presence / absence of social justice, the creation / lack of social and human capital, respect / non-recognition of human rights, the (non-) recognition of individual and group values and so forth, impact on the dialogic space: the space in which people may enjoy the freedom to educate their children, and for their children to be educated in accordance with the educators' preferred spiritual, religious and value system(s). Some of the research went into the notion of the fully educated individual, the organic person, the person of noble character, with integrity, which would be the upshot if the dialogic space were optimally utilised by all educators concerned.

A significant part of the research also revolves around the concepts / constructs of religion and / or spirituality. We initially discovered that all manifestations of religion showed the same basic structure, with spirituality at its epicentre or core, but later concluded that the "numen" (the numinous) seems to lie even deeper than spirituality. These investigations led us to understand that we could not evade the issue of looking at the *origins* of religion. Understanding the roots of religion and spirituality is a precondition for a more accurate grasp of the purpose and function of religion / spirituality in life, and in creating the dialogic space in particular. We engaged in this project with a measure of apprehension because of the nebulousness of the terrain. In this paper, we explore two sets of implications and challenges flowing from our understanding of the roots of religion and spirituality. After giving an account of what we understood to be those origins, we reflect about its pedagogical as well as its research methodological implications and challenges.

Origins of religion and spirituality

Ojowuro (2010: 21-22) concludes that "the list of ... theories and opinions [about the origins of religion] are [sic] ... numerous..." and that "...no answer could at this age pin down with accuracy, how the first religion had ... evolved ..., for the ... reason that we were not a part of the first generation of humans that started the earliest religion [...] the huge gulfs that existed between the first human generation that sets off religion and the generation that developed documentation skill are ... too wide apart". According to Ojowuro (2010: 23), the human being's persistence with investigations into the taproot of religion is an indication "that religion had actually evolved with man"; no "normal human being existed on earth who ... would not accord the ultimate recognition to the amazing wonders of nature" and as a result, "the human consciousness would ... give deserving gratitude to the powers behind these brilliant creations," thus "opening the sequel of man's religious worships to this day". In addition, the abundance of nature may have given cause to

an early belief that “God (was) revealing himself to humankind”. Fear (of natural phenomena and disasters) may also have played a role; the earliest human beings “would have devised some ways and means to appease the powers they ... envisioned as the controllers of these natural tragedies, [in order] to guarantee the protection of their life from its disastrous rage” (Ojowuro, 2010: 24). This lends credibility to the Roman poet Carus’s theory that fear inspired human beings to create gods for their protection.

Ojowuro (2010: 24-25) sought the roots of religion even further back. The very first human beings capable of rational thinking probably reflected about their own existence, and would have probed into the nature of the powers that gave them life. In due course, they would have felt anxiety about the powers that moved the sun through the skies, the return of the sun every morning, the power that created the air that they breathed, made plants germinate, animals give life, thunder to crash, rain to fall, and so on. They would occasionally break out in adulation and mystical incantation to glorify these magnificent powers; they would sacrifice animals to appease the powers and to find continued security of life. In brief, Ojowuro (2010: 27) contends, the earliest human beings would have concluded that “these powers are truthfully higher authorities with more superior powers than they possessed. Consequently, they would have initiated the reverence and worship of these powers, out of ... gratitude, respect, fear and the feel of affection for the astounding beauties of the wonderful creations that these higher forces have perfected in the world. [...] The gods of thunder, fire, the atmosphere, and all other forces of nature would have subsequently emerged out of his inventions and fancies. ... he would afterwards convert all the ethereal elementals of Mother Nature into deities, and religiously adore them as gods and goddesses.” In this manner, polytheism became the first religion of the ancient world.

Gradually, as Monaghan and Just (2000: 126) posit, many of the world religions seem to have begun as revitalization movements of some sort, based on the vision of a charismatic prophet firing the imaginations of people seeking a more comprehensive answer to their everyday problems. Charismatic individuals, however, seem to be less the key to the long-term success of religions than the development of a group of supporters able to institutionalize the movement. Institutionalisation may take many forms: spiritual priests claiming superiority for their religion over all others, persecution of and discrimination against those who believe differently, the formulation of doctrine and dogma, the development of theology as a scholarly discipline, religious denominations, and the evolution of religious institutions. Ojowuro (2010: 37-38) decries the fact that these later developments “have been imposed upon the gullible minds of ... followers as the word of God ... [by means of] story-telling [that] accesses the human psyche not at the intellectual but at the emotional level...”

Three even later developments can be discerned. The first is embodied in the thesis of John Calvin, namely that all people possess the *semen religionis* in their hearts and minds since the moment of their conception and birth (Calvin, III, 1; Duvenage, 1951: 39). All the other trappings of religion grew from this original seed. Secondly, in recent years, greater attention has been bestowed on the spiritual roots of religion and religious experience (Waaijman, 2000: 1-2), to the neglect of all the other aspects of religion (including dogma, doctrine, religious institutions,

theology). At the deepest level, religions have a spiritual dimension: all people share primordial questions at a deep spiritual (emotional) level though the answers they find to these questions, expressed in terms of ritual, can be quite diverse. The spiritual level, as Abdool, Potgieter, Van der Walt and Wolhuter (2007: 547) found, is a “subjective experience that points to an orientation towards (inter alia) an intrinsic religiousness: it is deep and very personal to the individual; it symbolises the individual’s quest for values and depth, and describes how he/she relates their beliefs and actions towards god(s) and otherness, to their own being and core values, and then expresses them in religious practices. De Muynck’s (2008: 1-2) analysis of spirituality leads him to conclude that spirituality denotes a search in which experiences of inspiration and transcendence, and personal conviction, are connected with concrete every day existence. Spirituality symbolises the human being’s quest for meaning, depth and values, and describes how a person relates his or her actions and behaviour towards the Absolute (that is, how a person shows obeisance to and worships that which is regarded as imperishable, unchanging, eternal, indestructible, sacred and meaningful, the ultimate source of all meaning) and towards others, his or her own being, core values and practices. Spirituality can also be seen as the mystical face of religion, as the fountainhead of divinity, the source and essence of the soul (Van der Walt, Potgieter & Wolhuter, 2010: 37).

The third development is described in the works of MacArthur (1993), Banks (2011) and others. Banks (2011: 17) speaks of the “renewal of an old attack on religion”. The “old” attack came from influential thinkers such as Freud, Feuerbach, Marx and Fromm (refer Banks, 2011: 61-130). According to Freud, the invention of religion can be ascribed to the human being’s innate fear of nature, relationships and death. People invented religion and the notion of god(s) because of deep-seated fears in a threatening world and of the resultant need of security in a world that they could not control (MacArthur, 1993: 11-12). The “new” attack comes from what Banks (2010: 11) terms the “new Atheism”: authors like Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Michael Onfray. While only a small percentage of people seem to believe in no god at all (around 4.4% atheist, and around 16.4% “other non-religious” in a world-wide poll in 1991; refer Blanchard, 2011: 19), the attacks coming from those critical of religion seem to have evoked considerable interest (Banks, 2011: 11). While, for instance, Sam Harris (2010: 148 ff.) does not deny the existence of religion as such (in the form of faith, belief, rites, rituals, prayers, institutions, holidays and so on), he agrees with psychologist Bruce Hood that people’s susceptibility to religious ideas can be ascribed to the fact that they tend to develop phobias for “evolutionary relevant threats (like snakes and spiders) and because of the fact that their minds have evolved to detect patterns in the world they tend to detect patterns that are not actually there. Because of a cognitive scheme known as “supersense” they infer “hidden forces in the world, working for good or ill. On this account, supersense generates beliefs in the supernatural ... and such beliefs are thereafter modulated, rather than instilled, by culture.” The criticism can also take the form of a semantic controversy: was the word “religion” derived from *re + legare* (to read again) or from *re + ligare* (to be tied back again, figuratively speaking to “live in bondage because of one’s religious preferences”); the tension between *religiens* (“to be careful”) as opposed to *negligens* (“to neglect”)?

Pedagogical implications and challenges

Our main concern is with the education of the organic, whole, noble individual, the person with integrity, who will be an asset to his or her community. For this ideal to materialise, the creation of a dialogic space is a *conditio sine qua non*. This is a space where educator and educand can interact freely, willingly and norm-driven for the purpose of leading the latter to higher levels of “educatedness”. Our investigations into religion and spirituality so far have revealed that these constructs form inherent “furniture” of the dialogic space, irrespective of how they are defined, or their origins (roots) construed and described. Educators should resultantly reckon with them in creating and using the dialogic space.

Investigations into the origins of religion and spirituality cast more light on the dialogic space itself. In the (post-modern) times in which we live, religion and spirituality take an altogether new form (Parkin, 2011: 154-158): they refer to a “whole supermarket” of religious experiences. Everyone’s religious tastes can be satisfied. All these experiences “have a spiritual edge that becomes part of [the educand’s] belief system” (Parkin, 2011: 155). This has implications for education. King (2007: *passim*) claims that human religious experience requires intelligence, a capacity for symbolic communication, a sense of social norms, realization of “self” and a concept of continuity. Not only do the spiritual needs and “tastes” of the educator have to be taken into consideration, but also those of the educand. What would it take, in terms of religious and spiritual experiences, for the latter to become a fully educated person, an organic, noble person with integrity? Since spirituality and numinous experiences lie at the heart of being human, all educators are required to focus on these aspects of the education of young people. As for those who are critical of religion, especially in its more organised, institutionalised, formalised and dogmatic manifestations, they should keep in mind, as Parkin (2011: 158) reminds, “it is impossible not to be spiritual”, i.e. to put one’s faith in some or other deeper source (also refer Van der Velde, 2011: 8). As human beings, all of us are spiritual. Educators critical of organised and mainstream religion should instead resort to their personal value systems, which one way or another, are in themselves rooted in some or other form of spirituality and / or numinousness.

Research methodological implications and challenges

The subject that we addressed in this paper poses a number of challenges to historians, historians of religion and education in particular. It is difficult to reconstrue the origins of religion and spirituality for the simple reason that no written record of those events exist, and because of the vagueness of the oral tradition (refer Armstrong, 2009: 3 ff). We only have a number of reconstructions of the roots of religion and spirituality, and these vary from naïve to critical of religion and spirituality, especially in terms of their modern forms (i.e. organised, institutionalised and dogmatised). It is furthermore difficult to trace the roots of the human being as a religious / spiritual being. Theories and scientific approaches range from conservative creationism through intelligent design to Darwinist views.

The research methodological problems intensify when one engages in a study of religion and spirituality as such. Few other subjects evade examination like these because of their nebulousness and minimal amenability to empirical scrutiny. Also

education, particularly the diagogic space, is difficult to grasp and describe. It furthermore will remain a challenge to be pedagogically prescriptive because of the personal nature of education and of the respective value systems that undergird it. In sum, understanding and describing the complex composed of the constructs religion, spirituality, the numinous, the organic (whole, noble person with integrity) and the form of education required to deliver an organic person to society, is a daunting task for historians of education. We have so far taken only a small step on this journey.

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