
Democracy & Education

Teaching Spirituality as Ontology in Public Schools

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Abstract

In “Democratic Foundations of Spiritually Responsive Pedagogy,” Lingley worried that talk of spirituality is taboo in U.S. public school classrooms. Lingley pointed out that the dominant narrative demands silence on the topic. She wanted to make the case for spiritually responsive pedagogy as vital to an inclusive democracy. I begin this responsive essay by describing Lingley’s argument, and then I strengthen her argument through my work on relational ontologies. When we equate spirituality with ontology, we realize it is impossible to avoid teaching spirituality in our schools, for we begin passing on to our children our fishing nets to help sustain them within our families and communities as soon as they are born (one could even argue prior to birth). That passing on of basic categories of Being, through our various ways of describing our/their world, begins in the home and continues in our schools. I am in agreement with Lingley’s aim, and I find her work an exciting contribution to discussions on democracy and spirituality.

This article is in response to

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IN MY LATEST project, *Relational Ontologies*, I (Thayer-Bacon, 2017) further develop the metaphor of a fishing net that I (Thayer-Bacon, 2003) first began using in *Relational (e)pistemologies*. The fishing net represents the epistemological and ontological theories that we weave together for our children, to help give meaning to their experiences and to sustain them in their lives. The Ocean represents infinity in this metaphor, what James (1909/1996) refers to as “pure experience,” and I capitalize the term *Ocean* to emphasize its spirituality. I describe the epistemological threads we use to help us determine what we catch up in our net as the warp threads, and our ontological threads as the weft threads.

There are multiple kinds of epistemological and ontological nets we can design, maybe even an infinite variety, some more effective than others, in terms of the amount of Ocean life they are able to catch up; some are more beautiful, some more durable, or some more particular to their sought-after catch. Whatever

epistemological and ontological net we use, however fine the weaving, there is so much more in this vast Ocean of pure experience than our nets can ever catch up. When we cast our nets, much will overflow the tops, as well as spill through them and escape back into the infinite Ocean. We catch things in the net that we do not want, too. We cannot divorce ourselves from epistemological and ontological questions; they sustain us, for they form the very weaving of the nets we use to catch up our everyday experiences and give them meaning. Epistemology concerns us with how we

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make sense of our world in terms of what criteria we use to decide what to leave in and what to discard from our nets, what counts as “knowledge” worth keeping based on what standards we use to make those decisions, while ontology is what we use to give meaning to what we capture in our nets in terms of the basic categories we use to describe this flowing Ocean. Besides the Ocean, the Sky, the Land, and the Wind have all served as symbols of infinity in various parts of our world, as well as God, or Great Spirit. Indra’s Net, rhizomes, trees/grass, even spider webs have served as examples of net metaphors that we use to help us represent the words we use to catch up concepts and make sense of our daily experiences in this infinite world.

Another word for *ontology* is *spirituality* in the sense that first being (Being, or what Heidegger [1927/2008] referred to as *Dasein*) is not tangible or material and is primal to our survival. *Spirituality* is a term that many associate with *religion*, whereas *ontology* does not necessarily have that connotation. I want to caution us against equating spirituality with religion, for religion is connected to particular religious expressions such as Judeo-Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist traditions. These are various ways to weave one’s weft threads in our fishing nets. I use the terms *ontology* and *spirituality* as synonyms, to emphasize how significant these weft threads are; they are what help hold our worlds together and give meaning to our lives. However, I do not want to bring along with this description of weft threads a particular religious affiliation, although certainly anyone’s particular religion serves to give meaning to their lives and shapes their fishing net.

In “Democratic Foundations of Spiritually Responsive Pedagogy,” Lingley (2016) defines *spirituality* as

engagement in a search for purpose and meaning; an orientation of faith in regards to something larger than oneself. . . ; a capacity for self-aware consciousness, experiences of awe, love, and transcendence; an interest in ethical or moral commitments; and a disposition of wonder and inquiry. (p. 7)

That is a huge definition, maybe too large, but I think she is seeking to get at the same thing I am with my fishing net and Ocean metaphor and the equating of spirituality with ontology. “Engagement in a search for purpose and meaning” certainly points to how our epistemological and ontological nets help us make sense of our booming, buzzing, aromatic experiences, and noticing that our nets are limited and incapable of capturing all that is the Ocean of pure experience helps us realize there is “something larger than oneself” that many refer to as “transcendence.”

Lingley (2016) worries that talk of spirituality is taboo in U.S. public school classrooms and that we treat “spirituality as a subjective, unknowable construct,” including “a conflation of spirituality with religiosity, aversion manifesting as suspicious judgment, and enthusiastic recognition followed by risk-taking through personal disclosure” (p. 2). Lingley points out that the dominant narrative demands silence on the topic. She wants to make the case for spiritually responsive pedagogy as vital to an inclusive democracy. Let me begin this responsive essay by describing Lingley’s argument, and then I strengthen her argument through my work on

relational ontologies. When we equate spirituality with ontology, we realize it is impossible to avoid teaching spirituality in our schools, for we begin passing on to our children our fishing nets to help sustain them within our families and communities as soon as they are born (one could even argue prior to birth). That passing on of basic categories of Being, through our various ways of describing our/their world, begins in the home and continues in our schools.

I am in agreement with Lingley’s aim, and I find her work an exciting contribution to discussions on democracy and spirituality. I am grateful for the invitation to respond. I seek to help make some of the ontological (spiritual) threads of the United States’s public schools more visible and thus help us consider the need to mend them or possibly even replace them as we continually re/weave our nets for our children.

Description of Lingley’s Argument

Lingley (2016) seeks to disrupt silence around spirituality, a silence that she suggests the dominant narrative demands. Her concern is that democratic educators need to engage in spirituality discussions to counter the mind/soul binary that exists in U.S. public schools. She makes the case that the dominant narrative makes the mistake of equating spirituality with religion and then insists that separation of church and state (the U.S.A.’s First Amendment in the Constitution) means teachers should have no discussion of religion in public schools; therefore, there should be no discussion of spirituality. Lingley turns to Dewey and Noddings to frame spirituality with democracy, and then she turns to Freire and hooks to frame spirituality with social justice. She seeks to describe a critical construct of spiritual responsive pedagogy.

Lingley (2016) shows us that Dewey (1934) argued for a distinction between unquestioning religion and religious inquiring in *A Common Faith*. Dewey makes the case that the secular/spiritual split is a false dualism and that religious inquiry that is active engagement is a universal common good and the anchor for educative experiences in a democracy. Living a democratic life cultivates spiritual growth, and spiritual growth cultivates democratic life. Lingley argues that Dewey’s description of a *common faith* was a way “to lay claim to the aspects of our humanity that allow us to experience transcendence of self-interest, awareness of interconnectedness, appreciation of the sacred, and pathways for comprehending meaning” (p. 9).

Noddings embraces Dewey’s invitation to situate spirituality within democratic education, as Lingley (2016) shows us through an interview in which Noddings participated, in 1998 (Halford, 1998/9). Noddings expresses concern that school administrators do not know the limitations of the First Amendment in the U.S. Constitution (separation of church and state), and this accounts for their fears of responding to student spirituality in schools. Noddings describes spirituality as central to our lives, and says that it is shameful to neglect it, for it contributes to the development of the human psyche. Later in her essay, Lingley turns to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social-ecological model of human development to add to the argument that spirituality is important for development of the human psyche.

In terms of spirituality's connection to social justice, Lingley (2016) shows us that Freire (1997) clearly describes his faith as a resource that energizes and sustains him and gives him hope in his work for social justice. Yet, Lingley notes that Freire's Christian belief (liberatory theology) are ignored by others who engage in discussions of his work. She finds Freire an important example of someone who heeds the call, which he describes as "a higher calling," to serve those who are marginalized and oppressed and credits his spirituality with sustaining him in his social justice work. The same is true for hooks (1994), who includes Freire as one of her spiritual teachers, along with the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Like Freire, for hooks spirituality is "both a rationale for her political work and . . . a resource for transcending and surviving political oppression." (p. 5). Lingley doesn't describe what I find very powerful about hooks's Buddhist perspective, the lesson she learned from Thich Nhat Hanh, that people (teachers) need to heal themselves before they can hope to help heal others (students). Without going through that healing process, it is too easy to inflict one's own pain and suffering on to others. Lingley does highlight that spiritually centered activities that help students learn deep listening, mindfulness, and lovingkindness complete critical awareness, and complement rational foundations of democratic pedagogy. Like hooks, she is not arguing that spirituality replaces critical reflection, but that it completes it, deepens and complements it.

Lingley (2016) turns to my (Thayer-Bacon, 1996, 2003, 2008) democratic theoretical framework to situate the relevance of spiritual responsive pedagogy. I find her description of my research project and resulting themes of shared responsibility, authority, and identity to be a fair description. She is right to suggest that I imply spirituality is needed, although I do explicitly discuss it in 2003, and by 2008 I have clearly realized that the U.S. public education system is harmful to many students enrolled in our schools due to its lack of willingness to make room for varying spiritual views. My call for a "differentiated politics of difference" supports Lingley's desire for a spiritually responsive pedagogy as a means to enacting relational, pluralistic democratic pedagogy, and I am happy to be a resource and ally.

In her final section, Lingley (2016) describes the benefits of what she calls "spiritual responsive pedagogy," such as reduction of alienation and a strong sense of personal agency through integration. She tackles the problem of the debate between "*religion* and *spirituality*" and the difficulty of defining *spirituality* as red herrings that may be more about the dominant culture not wanting to relinquish control of the public school curriculum. She asks: How can we help teachers to be able to do a good job with addressing diverse spiritual perspectives but does not seek to answer that question in this essay. She describes her four principles of spiritual responsive pedagogy as guides and again connects these principles to the values of acknowledging spirituality, supporting healthy spiritual growth, and holding space for a diversity of spiritual perspectives. She ends with the promise of spiritually responsive pedagogy. Her spiritually responsive pedagogy principles are, in summary:

- 1) A teacher's knowledge of spiritual development should reflect an understanding of the complex alchemy among

spirituality, cognition, physical maturity, emotion, and social contexts.

- 2) The integration of curriculum, instruction, and assessment that is invitational of spiritual ways of knowing and supports positive developmental trajectories for healthy spiritual growth.
- 3) Acknowledgement of spirituality as part of the teaching and learning process.
- 4) Being spiritually responsive as a democratic teacher calls for differentiation and inclusion informed by a critical spiritual paradigm that holds space for a diversity of spiritual perspectives.

Spirituality We Currently Teach

I (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, 2008, 2013, 2017) argue that our public schools already teach about spirituality/ontology, that it is impossible not to do so, and that we have never separated church and state. The early development of private religious schools (e.g., Catholic, Jewish) in America stands as evidence of the recognition that our public schools were perceived by diverse citizens to have a form of curriculum and instruction that was based on Protestant Christian spiritual beliefs. Parents chose to send their children to different schools, even if it meant that they had to pay twice (taxes and tuition) for the opportunity to have their children schooled by other shared values. They still do this today. As the Protestant Christian ontology has become muted in public schools over time, more fundamental Christian private schools have developed. As the Muslim population has increased in the United States, more Muslim schools have begun. As First Nations have gained control over their schools, they are now guided by Tribal Councils. What I think Lingley (2016) wants to argue for is a reweaving of our (U.S.) epistemological and ontological net to make it more inclusive of diverse ontologies. Let me illustrate what I mean by contrasting the possibilities that Lingley points to with what exists in current school systems in the United States, based on the fishing nets used by Euro-Western colonists and settlers who have undergone continual refinement.

Key threads I want to draw our attention to in this section are ones that have developed from principles that were brought to the North American continent, and to other continents as well, from various parts of Europe. These principles were introduced throughout the world through European colonizers, although it is important to recognize diversity in terms of ways they were expressed (what they caught up in their nets) and how the nets have been expanded and amended to embrace more in various settings. They have adapted to differing conditions in different, specific locations.

Contrary to indigenous spiritual beliefs that humans have shared responsibilities as stewards of the land, for example, and the principle that human beings need to find ways to live in harmony with Nature, caring for it and thanking it for what it gives us to keep us alive, European explorers traveled to various parts of the world seeking to claim ownership of the land and to thank God for his gifts to them. The idea that people can own land, and later water, and now even air (in China air is being sold), is tied to an idea that Nature is here to serve men. This is a guiding thread that can be

traced to Europe, and in particular to the development of science under the influence of scientists such as Sir Frances Bacon (my partner's namesake). I purposely use the term *men* in my description, as ecofeminists have made the case that the concept of "having dominion over the Earth" is a male concept that developed from early Christianity with influence from ancient Greece. Daly (1978/1990) developed this argument through the tracing of spiritual beliefs prior to Christianity and ancient Greece, to help us see their influences, and Merchant (1980) traced the history of Euro-Western science in several research projects, from an ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminists have made a strong case that men included women and children in the categories of those placed below them in a hierarchy that placed the Judeo-Christian God at the top of the hierarchy. Deloria Jr. (1995) has traced this history as well from a First Nations perspective.

From ancient Greece, developed over centuries in Europe, we can see influences of the belief in land ownership as it became tied to the importance of material wealth. People began to gather, maintain (one could say horde), and inherit wealth, in the forms of land, homes, animals, crops, jewels, money, even people, generated by the labor of their families, villages, and larger communities, but also from the labor of people conquered and turned into slaves, for example. The desire for wealth can be witnessed today in the form of people competing against each other for limited resources, and believing that they deserve to keep what they have, rather than share it with others in need. Principles of hard work, and the labor of that work leading to material wealth that one has earned and therefore deserves as a reward for the hard work, have developed in the United States into the meritocratic values of competition, capitalism, and individualism, for example. As a result, we have people today who are extremely wealthy, individuals with more wealth than entire nations, and less than 10% of human beings hold the vast majority of the Earth's wealth, while over 90% of human beings live in poverty or close to it (Klein, 2014). The wealthy believe the myth of merit, that "I deserve what I have as it is based on my hard work," and they ignore the contributions of so many others to help produce the products of wealth, as well as the sheer luck that comes their way by being born into wealthy families that afforded them so many advantages (Rancière, 2005/2006).

From Judeo-Christianity we can follow a thread that describes what happens to us, good and bad, as "God's will." "God's will" has led some people to believe they are "chosen," God's children, and for others to believe they are "saved." These spiritual beliefs in specialty, uniqueness, and having earned protection from God's wrath have developed into judgments that others who do not include this thread in their ontologies are lacking somehow and that they are: inferior, sinners, primitive, less intelligent, backward, even savage. Judgments of superiority have led to beliefs in manifest destiny, that it is God's will that we should have _____, fill in the blank, for we deserve it, and were used in "civilizing missions" that justified colonization. This belief in superiority has also been expressed in the value of competition, and the idea of social Darwinism, the survival of the fittest. This belief in moral superiority can be seen today in the suspicion of evil intent placed on people who do not embrace Judeo-Christian beliefs, for

example, people of Muslim faith, and the belief that the pious can determine who should be allowed to immigrate to the United States and who should be turned away as dangerous threats and potential terrorists. From a First Nations perspective, in hindsight, the Pilgrims and other early immigrants to the Americas certainly should have been turned away as dangerous to their ways of life; the "revolutionary patriots" for the establishment of a New World would be viewed as "terrorists" by those who had lived on the American continent for a long time.

Let's look at one more thread the United States seems to have inherited from Europe that was brought over with our Puritan immigrants, the Pilgrims. Our concept of time is very much forward thinking. Contrary to both African philosophy and First Nations philosophy—which treats planning in terms of three generations forward (the future), the current generation (now), and three generations ago (the past)—Judeo-Christian time is measured in terms of progress, toward the future (Judgment Day). Buddhists do not measure time in this linear way either; theirs is cyclical, and infinitely repeating. Time is described in terms of spirals, and circling around back to a time when we were not aware of having a self, or an ego, or of perceiving ourselves as separate from others.

We, Euro-Westerners, think of time as forward moving, and we equate that forward movement with progress. We tell our stories of the past as "outdated," "old-fashioned," "regressive," just as we tend to relate to our elders as "out-of-touch" and "conventional" or "traditional." We have developed more and more refined ways of measuring time and more accurate timekeepers, as technology has "advanced." We measure how productive we are in terms of efficient use of time, and while we used to have a pattern of time "slowing down" in warmer climates or warmer times of the year, where people had the habit of sleeping or at least resting during the heat of the day, that has changed as we have gained greater ability to control the temperature in our vehicles and buildings and turn lights on against the dark. Now we have indoor heat and air-conditioning, and we can maintain a steady temperature in our homes, recreational, and work places so that slowing down is no longer a necessity. Now we have lights that can stay on throughout the night. We go faster and work more, all in the name of "saving time." This allows us to accumulate more material wealth, but the cost is high, in terms of our physical and spiritual well-being as well as the depletion of Earth's resources.

My point is that it is impossible to *not* teach our children some form of spirituality/ontology, as we give them our fishing nets to help them survive in the infinite Ocean, until they become one with it again. It is easy to describe how the above threads are taught to our children at home and in school, through an exploration of examples that come from everyday, common experiences. Our lessons begin at home and continue right into our schools. I will use just one example here to illustrate my point.

At home, how we spend time with our children matters, in terms of sharing with them our joys and wonders, as well as our fears and sorrows. If we seek to be outdoors, hiking, swimming, gardening, fishing, they will learn to feel comfortable and enjoy it as well. One of the most powerful forms of instruction we use for

school children concerning their relationship with nature is to separate them from nature. We bring them inside and keep them in climate-controlled buildings. It is becoming more difficult to find schools that teach children about the nature that surrounds them, in their natural settings. Mainly our children are learning about nature from books and films, and observations in aquariums or zoos, much more indirectly than they used to be able to learn through direct experiences. The “direct experiences” they receive now are by using tools such as magnifying glasses, microscopes, and dissecting knives, to look at nature stained and magnified and placed on a slide or in a petri dish, if they are fortunate enough to have that kind of equipment. Maybe they have the chance to take a field trip to a museum that has engaging activities and tools for making observations. Then we assess them through their lab reports and with a multiple-choice test to see what they have learned. And do not forget, our children are spending more and more of their time in school spaces learning about nature in these kinds of ways.

Hopefully from this one common, ordinary experience that connects homes and schools we can understand how we pass on to our children key ontological threads that we weave for them and teach them to apply, as we seek to help them make sense of their experiences. The threads not only help them give meaning to their world, these threads help determine what experiences they catch in their fishing nets, versus what spills out through the net and over the top. We also teach them what to throw away, that we do not want them to catch in their nets. It’s not that we are not allowing spirituality to be taught in our public schools, but rather that we need to take a close look at what we are teaching, critique those everyday lessons, and seek to develop more inclusive approaches. Lindley’s (2016) principles will help us reach that aim. Meanwhile, we should anticipate that parents will continue to have concerns about the spiritual values being taught to their children in public schools. Those values are not neutral; in fact, I argue that they are subtractive of, or even poisonous to, others’ spiritual values. As long as parents have the option of alternate places to educate their children that more openly support their own spiritual values, they will seek these out, and/or help to create them, as I did for my children. For a democratic society always in the making, that may be the best we can hope for, to help make sure those options are open and available for all (Thayer-Bacon, 2013).

Conclusion

In this essay, I offered the example of an epistemological and ontological fishing net to help us understand the philosophical concept of *ontology* and the powerful role ontology plays in our lives. Much of the net we give our children, the future generation,

was woven for us by our elders, the past generations, but it also contains threads we contribute, re/weavings we make for them, as the current generation. My hope with this response is that I have made it easier for us to see threads in the epistemological and ontological nets we cannot help but use in our daily lives, and understand their influences. I hope we can pay closer attention and notice what all is spilling out of our nets, and through our nets, and even what we are catching in our nets that we do not mean to catch. We can be grateful for the life sustaining nets our ancestors have woven for us, and seek to help maintain them for future generations. But, we must try to notice the harms they cause as well, and seek to repair these.

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