Cross-Curricular Spiritual and Moral Development: Reflections on the Charis Project

David Smith

Since 1994 an innovative curriculum development project has been underway at the Stapleford Centre in Nottingham, England. The Charis Project has been developing Christian resources for promoting moral and spiritual development across the curriculum, seeking ways of accessing and highlighting the integral moral and spiritual dimensions of subject teaching outside the province of religious education. In what follows I would like to outline some of the difficulties encountered during the process of working on these materials and some of the attempted resolutions of those difficulties, thereby highlighting issues which are of relevance to Christian curriculum development in general. The perspective offered here is a personal one, growing out of the experience of working on Charis Deutsch and Charis Français (hence the bias towards examples from Modern Language materials in what follows), and should not be taken as a definitive account of the project. Before turning to the curriculum development process itself, it will be helpful to sketch the context which has made the project possible and which has helped to shape its particular approach.

`Spiritual Development' in the UK Context

In recent years there has been renewed public discussion of the spiritual and moral dimensions of the school curriculum in the United Kingdom. Many factors have contributed to the rise of this discussion - concern for an eroding Christian heritage, a widely shared (though not uncontested) perception of serious moral decay among the nation's youth, political claims to the moral high ground, "nostalgia for the past, when trains ran on time, there were long, lazy shadows on village greens, the sound of leather on willow and ladies cycled to church on Sundays," 1 and no doubt others. While the spiritual and moral dimensions of education have long been part of the stated aims of education in educational legislation, a significant change in a recent spate of government documents 2 has been the new insistence that moral and spiritual development are to be seen as whole school, cross-curricular concerns rather than (as has traditionally been the case) largely the preserves of Personal and Social Education and of Religious Education.

This insistence has been given concrete force by its incorporation into new arrangements for the inspection of schools, along with the accompanying drive for all schools to develop and be accountable to comprehensive mission statements. One of the "central tasks" of the new system of inspection inaugurated in the 1992 Education (Schools) Act is "to inspect how well schools promote the `spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' of pupils." 3 Recent literature from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) consistently emphasises that "spiritual development is emphatically not another name for religious education...[it] is a responsibility of the whole school and of the whole curriculum, as well as of activities outside the curriculum." 4

It was in this developing context that the Jerusalem Trust agreed to fund a three-year project, the purpose of which would be the development of curriculum materials which

- were identifiably Christian in character
- were for curriculum areas other than religious education
- would be usable not only by Christian teachers or Christian schools, but by teachers in state maintained schools

The materials which were to be developed aimed to:
- enable teachers to respond to the challenge of educating the whole person
- help teachers to focus on the spiritual and moral dimensions inherent in their subject
- encourage pupils towards a clearer understanding of Christian perspectives on the fundamental questions that arise in all areas of knowledge
- contribute to the breadth, balance and harmony of pupils' knowledge and understanding" 5

The first phase of the project developed materials for the 14-16 year-old age range for English Literature, French, German, Mathematics and Science. The next phase is developing materials in other curriculum areas and for other Key Stages (age ranges). In what follows I would like to outline four issues which had to be faced in one way or another during the first phase of the project, and which, I suggest, must be faced by any Christian attempt to develop curricular materials promoting spiritual development.

1. From Trivia Quiz to Fruitfulness - The Role of Scripture

A basic question for Christian curriculum materials in subjects other than religious education is that of the proper use of the Bible. Is it adequate, appropriate or even necessary to add Bible verses to curriculum materials in order to make them "Christian"? If (as in some existing Christian materials for teaching languages) learners are asked to read a passage from the Bible and then are presented with questions focusing on the grammatical structures exemplified in the passage, has anything happened which is necessarily any more spiritual than if the passage had been from a newspaper? Might such an exercise even devalue the sacred text? If learners are presented with mathematical problems focusing on, for instance, sales figures for Bibles at a Christian bookstore, what are they actually learning about the Bible?

It seems to me that at least some Christian curriculum materials are in danger of giving the impression that the Bible is a kind of trivia quiz handbook, a loose collection of sayings which can be almost randomly extracted and pasted onto educational materials in order to spiritualise them. The motive is (I assume) good, but I wonder whether the method does not actually undermine that motive - is Scripture presented as an authoritative, integral text with power to transform lives, or rather as an interchangeable, disintegrated collection of aphorisms to be appropriated for whatever external purposes (grammar practice, addition, etc) might occur to us?

In the development of materials for French and German teaching, the use of biography was one way of addressing these questions. One German unit, for example, tells the story of the White Rose, a student resistance group in Hitler's Germany. At Munich University in 1942 a small group of students began to write and duplicate tracts expressing opposition to Hitler's regime. These were then distributed in various German cities by mail or by being left in public places. After a short period, the group were caught by the Gestapo and its core

members were immediately put on trial and executed. Various motives led to the move to resist Hitler; one of them was the discovery in the epistle of James of the admonition to be doers of the word and not hearers only (James 1:22). In part through this text the group were provoked to act on their convictions. At least one of the group underwent a Christian conversion during the time of their growing opposition to Hitler. What makes this unit of work relevant to the present discussion is that in this historical train of events something of the authority and fruitfulness of Scripture, which became one of the provocations towards active resistance of evil, become visible.

This focus on fruitfulness, on the fruitful effects of people's engagement with the Bible in various areas of their lives, is in principle applicable to other curriculum areas. A great deal of literature reveals responses by both authors and characters to biblical truth; such responses are explored in relation to Shakespeare's Macbeth in the English materials developed by the project. One mathematical example is work on giving and tithing (including calculating proportions of gift to income). Since so many people engage in such practices, why should they be less valid in the Mathematics curriculum than shopping? This question of validity is the second issue which I would like to discuss.

2. "This is not what I was hired for!" - The Question of Curricular Legitimacy

Closely related to the above discussion of the role of Scripture is the question of curricular legitimacy. There is a thin line between, on the one hand, materials for teaching Mathematics which aim to expose a spiritual dimension of such study, and materials which teach theology using Mathematics merely as illustrative material, somewhat in the manner of a sermon illustration. This has sometimes been referred to as the issue of integration versus pseudo-integration - exploring the very real faith dimensions of all human activity versus downgrading other areas of study to handy raw material to be used in support of another, more narrowly religious agenda.

This does not mean that religious belief must be absent from other curriculum areas, but rather that it can arise for consideration in ways which are integral to each area - where, for instance, it has significantly shaped a certain work of literature, mathematical development, or historical event. It has been important to the conception of the Charis materials that they should be materials which promote spiritual and moral development in English or French teaching, forming a valid part of the task for which teachers of English and French are paid, and not a way of exporting the contents of religious education into other curriculum areas.

In French and German this meant additionally that the materials must be culturally legitimate. An additional problem with simply using Bible texts for language exercises in French is that these texts are not originally French texts, but translations from Greek and Hebrew, and that they therefore do not embody French culture, although they have helped to shape it. It was necessary to find themes within the scope of the potential legitimate material for a French or German course - themes such as the White Rose episode described above, which is still a live part of recent German history; themes such as the founding of the L'Arche communities for mentally handicapped adults by Jean Vanier in France, communities which provide a Christian alternative to institutionalisation. Another unit offers work based on the theme of truth-telling, its core material being provided by interviews with French teenagers about their attitudes to dishonesty. Faith and spirituality are as real in other cultures as in our own, and can therefore be fully legitimate aspects of

learning about those cultures - in fact to teach about Germany as if those aspects were absent (as most course materials do) is a distortion.

In English Literature likewise one does not have to look far to find the formative presence of faith commitments. It is striking that some universities are offering courses designed to remedy the lack of knowledge of the Bible among literature students, given that so much English literature cannot be adequately understood apart from the Bible's influence. In the Charis units for English Literature, study of Shakespeare's Macbeth raises issues such as Macbeth's moral decline and its causes, the role of the supernatural and whether its influence is unavoidable (fated) or bound up with human responsibility, and the then accepted `kingly virtues' and to what degree they are shown or not shown by various characters. Some degree of knowledge of Christianity and the Bible is closer to essential than to incidental for an understanding of Macbeth.

In Mathematics, units on themes such as the use and abuse of averages (When are averages appropriate? What does it mean to be `normal'? How does this relate to pressure from peers to conform?) or the idea of infinity open up a spiritual or moral dimension of mathematical study. That these dimensions are not external to but rather interwoven with Mathematics is suggested by units which focus on the concrete human context in which Mathematics has developed. For instance, the historical development of probability theory was in part a response to the need to calculate life expectancy for the purposes of offering life insurance; a unit based around John Graunt's `bills of mortality' shows how mathematical development has been literally intertwined with issues of life and death. If Mathematics is a human activity, and human existence is an integrated whole, then not even Mathematics is impervious to the moral and spiritual dimensions of existence.

3. Spiritual and Cognitive Development - A Dangerous Pairing

It quickly became apparent when work began on the French and German materials that there was a real danger of sending a message which we definitely did not want to send - that spiritual development was correlated to intellectual development and was more relevant to the academically more able or more advanced. This was because of the different levels of linguistic sophistication involved in activities designed for different levels of ability. Reading and reflecting on poems and stories in the target language which presented spiritual themes seemed a more realistic goal for more able students; students with poor comprehension skills and a small vocabulary often end up being given more mechanistic things to do in the foreign language classroom - filling in gaps in sentences, matching words to pictures and the like. This difficulty was therefore more acute in foreign language materials than in English and Mathematics materials, since in the latter cases students are operating in their mother tongue.

We became very concerned to ensure that there was a possibility of spiritual response at all ability levels in a given unit of work. One unit, for example, includes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem `Wer bin ich?' (Who am I?), which reflects on the gap between others' perceptions of him and his own inner experience while in prison. 6 The poem was too difficult for less able students, so the following strategy was developed. 7 Students are first presented with a collection of German adjectives which could be used to describe someone's character - honest, determined, foolish, serious etc. After some familiarisation with the vocabulary, they are asked to draw a circle round any words which others have used to describe them, a

square round any which they would use to describe themselves, and a triangle round any which they would not use to describe themselves at present but which represent qualities to which they aspire. Once this is done, the sorted vocabulary can then be used by students to write a simple imitation of Bonhoeffer's poem, using a framework provided. In this way a meaningful and thoughtful personal response becomes possible without the necessity of access to complex linguistic structures. Other strategies have included the use of poems and dreams which express spiritually meaningful ideas in concrete language, and the inclusion of questions looking for responses which show meaningful reflection but which can be expressed in very simple language, such as `which character in this unit is most like you?' Efforts to develop such strategies to make the material accessible in meaningful ways to students already point ahead to the question of method.

4. Methodology and Content - From Friction to Symbiosis?

The fourth issue relates to one of my longstanding concerns. If writers of Christian educational materials give careful attention to content, making it interesting, accessible and integrally Christian, without giving at least as much thought to questions of methodology, the results can be an approach which delivers Christian content by methods which both undermine that content and sit uncomfortably with a Christian view of the learner. At one of the early meetings of the modern languages writing team I raised the question of whether, if we had been given funding to develop these materials in the 1950s, we would have produced materials with impeccable Christian content yoked to a mechanistic behaviourist methodology based on the assumption that learners are so many nervous systems responding in predictable ways to stimuli. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of methodological questions; 8 instead I offer three simple observations.

First, as students pass from classroom to classroom they are socialised into certain ways of responding to materials and activities in particular curriculum areas. They acquire settled expectations as to what will and will not be asked of them as they study different subjects, and as to which aspects of their personhood will be brought into play. As teachers, we even work to get our students accustomed to our practices, to teach them how to tackle our particular tasks and to respond to our specialised teaching practices. Their response to a new activity becomes in some measure a conditioned response.

The relevance of this process to the present discussion became jarringly clear to me in my own classroom when I first tried out the German unit of work about the White Rose resistance group. One activity presents a set of sentences which are quotations from various sources either about or from the time of the execution of the arrested students. The task is to match each sentence to its most likely source. One of my most able students sat looking at this task in puzzlement for several minutes before calling me over and declaring "I can't do this." As we talked it became clear that the problem was not that she did not understand the German sentences. The problem was that in our usual textbooks it was almost always the case that if students were asked to match language items at the level of individual sentences then the criteria for matching would be mostly linguistic. She was therefore looking for linguistic clues - personal pronouns to be matched with verbs, the two parts of a separable verb and the like - which would solve the puzzle for her. Once I had explained that for this activity she was being asked to think about what kind of person was most likely to have expressed a given attitude or opinion, she was able to complete the exercise without further difficulty. If a concern for moral and spiritual development across the curriculum challenges

the tasks and methods used by the teacher, this will also cause discontinuities for the learner which may make evident the limitations of established procedures. Openness to change becomes essential for both parties.

Second, it seems to me that the kinds of methods which make room for moral and spiritual dimensions cannot be those which aim at maximum control over the student's responses. Some methods tend to favour predictable student responses in order to exercise maximum influence over a pre-programmed learning process. Spiritual and moral development are, I suggest, not matters of clean prediction and control; a spiritual response to a particular learning activity cannot be forced or guaranteed. It is always open to the pupil to complete the activity in an unreflective, mechanical way, with minimum personal involvement. Moreover, if a response is a determined outcome of a mechanistic process, it is doubtful to what degree it can still be described as moral.

Curriculum materials can, however, either close out opportunities for spiritual and moral response or create spaces which are conducive to such responses occurring. The latter kind of materials will almost by definition not be made up entirely of activities which have straightforward right or wrong answers. They will include activities and questions which allow a personal response which may be very varied - how do you judge the value of a gift?; devise a role play in which you reunite two friends who fell out (over what?); can you trust your conscience?; is there any way in which Macbeth is a great man? They will, in other words, allow alongside other kinds of response some space for an open-ended response.

Thirdly, however, open-ended personal responses should not be taken to be incompatible with activities which aim to help students to learn the subject matter of the course, as if subject teaching and spiritual and moral development could only take place alternately. Take, for example, the following activity from the Charis French materials, part of a larger unit of work exploring some of the symbolic associations of bread. Students are presented with nine boxes arranged in a diamond pattern and with nine words below them which are to be cut out - bread, money, water, family, friendship, faith, education, television, love (all in French, of course). (see figure 1) Students are to work in pairs. One partner is to choose one of the words and place it on the grid, saying in French, for example, `I think the most important thing is bread.' The other student then takes another word and places it on the grid, perhaps moving the first student's word - `No, I think water is more important than bread.' The activity is to continue until the students have negotiated a shared hierarchy of values.

Looked at in terms of spiritual/moral response, to the degree that students have taken the activity seriously they have had an open-ended opportunity to consider and discuss their basic priorities in life. At this level there is no right or wrong solution. Looked at in terms of language learning, students have engaged in repeated practice of comparative and superlative phrases, following model phrases supplied. In fact, looked at in terms of language practice the activity is similar to an exercise asking for a list of examples of comparative or superlative sentences. The two kinds of response, the one open-ended and personal, the other aiming for correctness, are interwoven and simultaneous. What is enabled by the activity is a multi-layered response.

Conclusion

Working with the ideas of spiritual and moral development is not the only way to approach the development of Christian resources across the curriculum. The Charis materials do not, moreover, represent the only possible approach to spiritual and moral development in the various curriculum areas; indeed it is hoped that the publication of the Charis materials will stimulate others, including individual teachers, to discover other approaches and develop further materials. I have, however, tried to suggest that there should be a common note sounding in such a diversity of efforts. That common note would rise from the patient, persistent, imaginative effort to find ways of allowing spiritual concerns to move beyond the role of window dressing to a more thorough and fruitful integration with both content and methodology across the curriculum. If the Charis materials contribute something to this effort, a significant part of the project's goals will have been met.

REFERENCES

1. A. Brown, Spiritual and Moral Education: Where Does Responsibility Lie?, Westminster Studies in Education, 16 (1993): 22-8, p.25.
2. In particular the 1988 Education Reform Act, the 1992 White Paper Choice and Diversity, the 1992 Education (Schools) Act, and the 1993 National Curriculum Council discussion paper on spiritual and moral development.
3. OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education), Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development, February 1994, p.1, 5.
4. OFSTED, Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development, p.8.
5. Quoted from the introduction to each volume of the published Charis materials.
6. This unit appears in the second volume of Charis German materials, published in the summer of 1997.
7. Full credit should go to Helen Brammer for this idea, for the French values game described below, and for a steady flow of good ideas for making the Charis French and German units accessible to low ability learners.
8. For a little more discussion, see my Can Modern Language Teaching be Christian?, Spectrum, 25:1 (1993): 25-38.