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Book Review

Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies

Heewon Chang and Drick Boyd (editors)
Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2011.
ISBN: 978-1598746266
Paperback, 266pp., AUD \$37.09.

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This book explores spirituality in many aspects in the context of higher education, as the title suggests. However, Chaplaincy, as understood in Australian universities, is a notable omission. I found myself nodding a lot and fixing sticky arrows to quite a few points which I wanted to come back to as they were very pertinent to the fostering of spirituality in the University environment.

The definition of spirituality chosen by the editors on the second page of the first chapter “the human spirit, fully engaged”¹ is complemented by five other varied definitions in other chapters of the book. The author of the last chapter asserts: “Reviewing the literature based on ‘spirituality’, one quickly notes that the term has no commonly agreed-on phenomenology” (p. 200). Whereas each author is able to discuss a personal view of spirituality, the flavour of the book as a whole is a smorgasbord of approaches and emphases. This makes for richness, but I wonder whether it is possible to draw any overall conclusions, since each is working from a nuanced perspective.

Where “spirituality” is open to interpretation, “autoethnography” is more firmly delineated. Chang, in the first chapter of the book, makes a clear and fairly concise statement about it. By way of definition, she says: “The autoethnographic study of spirituality requires a systematic inquiry through which autobiographical data enhance the understanding of the social context” (p. 22). Autoethnography is a relatively new discipline, so its practitioners still operate mostly within the same fold, it seems; thus permission is now given for the author of scholarly texts to reflect on his or her own experience and draw conclusions from it, as opposed to the previous convention that the scholar’s personal or subjective experiences be absent from the work he or she publishes. There are rules, of course. It is not just self-indulgent autobiography!

The contributors comprise a wide ranging cross-section of American university teaching staff whose interests and experiences are very broad indeed. They describe a multitude of ways of being expressive of their personal spirituality in several different university contexts – secular, pluralistic, faith-based. Not surprisingly, all contributors were immensely positive about the benefits of being able to integrate their personal spiritual expression with their duties, and all reported that not only were their own lives much enriched by the freedom to be themselves, but that the outcomes for their students were also enhanced, not only in terms of their personal development, but also in their academic achievements.

¹ Attributed to Benefiel, M (2005), *Soul at work : Spiritual leadership in organisations*, Church Publishing, New York.

The layout is very user-friendly. The chapters are grouped in three sections after the introductory chapter by Chang. These are clearly outlined in the Table of Contents, and introduced by a short statement of purpose in each case to introduce the section: Spirituality and Personhood, five chapters, Spirituality and Teaching, four chapters, and Spirituality, Scholarship and Outreach, four chapters. Each chapter is headed by a short synopsis which is a well expressed indication of the content. The chapters themselves are varied in style. I found some of them a bit pompous. It's a long while since I came across the words "vouchsafed" and "eschew" in my every-day reading, but there they were! And this gem: "I was convinced that it was important for me as a budding scholar to celebrate my positionality and voice my epistemology from that positionality rather than pathologising my intersectional experiences" (P189). However, there were, fortunately, also many examples of clear expression.

Each chapter was followed by three questions aiming to give the reader an opportunity to engage with the material presented in the chapter. Nearly all the questions expect the reader to apply it to his/her own life and /or practice of teaching. If entered into seriously, preferably in a group context, the resulting conversation could be extremely productive and inspire serious application.

All chapters were thoroughly referenced. Where brief explanatory notes were appropriate, they were included. Because autoethnography is a relatively new discipline, I checked the reference lists, expecting the authors to be rather inbred in their referencing of each others' works. However, I was surprised and pleased to find that every contributor had a very diverse collection of references; naturally some key works appeared in a number of reference lists, but on the whole, there was a wide range of resources offered. The enquiring reader would have material for a very long time if following up all the leads for further reading.

The comprehensive index was accurate as far as I tested it. However, the word "Chaplaincy" did not appear, nor "Campus Ministry", nor did I find any entries that may have expressed the same function by a different term. I did not note any reference to such roles or services in the text, which focused on the teaching function of the authors in their dealings with students. There was one reference to "Workplace chaplaincy" which suggested that the provision of such was a likely source of fruitful research. So from the point of view of tertiary Chaplains, there is not a lot of material directly helpful in the chaplaincy context, unless it be to infer the need of the teaching staff for support in their personal spiritual journey which may now be being given permission to emerge in their published material. It was also interesting to read of the diverse ways in which spirituality is given expression, and may be food for thought for developing strategies for outreach to students and staff in Australian universities.