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George MacDonald and Spiritual Development

John Pridmore

The aspect of the work of George MacDonald which has particularly interested me in recent years has been its bearing on the question of what is meant by “spiritual development.” By law, schools in England and Wales are required to promote the spiritual development of their pupils and school inspectors must report on how well they do so. It is by no means obvious what schools are asked to do in promoting spiritual development, nor is there much guidance about how they should set about the task, nor are there clear criteria for inspectors to use in assessing how effective a school is in this area.

The most contentious issue in the debate about spiritual development as a curricular requirement is whether a coherent spirituality requires the framework of a religious tradition. Here, I believe, George MacDonald helps us. His spirituality is expressed in parallel “discourses”—sometimes he talks about God, sometimes he doesn’t. The first discourse articulates an understanding of spiritual growth and nurture in the familiar terms of traditional Christian piety—albeit that of vigorous dissent. In the many volumes of his novels, poetry, and sermons, MacDonald continues to employ familiar religious vocabulary, speaking of God in conventional terms with great fervour and eloquence. His fiction is a pulpit from which is spelled out in traditional terms the spiritual lessons to be learned from the salutary experiences of the prodigal sons and daughters who, typically, are the protagonists of the tales he tells. The spirituality of these many pages of MacDonald’s work is firmly grounded and boldly expressed in the terms of a truth-claiming religion.

But we encounter a second and parallel discourse in MacDonald’s work, another way of exploring the same theme of human formation, the path to our highest good which our educational legislators refer to in the catch-all phrase “spiritual development.” This is the discourse of his fairy tales and fantasies. In *Phantastes*, his finest fantasy, as much as in *Weighed and Wanting*, his greatest novel, MacDonald is preoccupied with spiritual development, with the nature of human flourishing and with what fosters or frustrates it. Yet in *Phantastes*, as in all his fairy tales and fantasies, he largely dispenses with traditional religious terminology and makes few traditional religious assertions or truth-claims.

The inference I draw from these strikingly contrasting genres in MacDonald’s work is that neither the language of faith, claiming to declare what

has been revealed, nor the language which dispenses with traditional religious terms is privileged in its capacity to express the spiritual dimension of human experience. The alternative discourses are neither incompatible nor is one to be reduced to the other. Both are vehicles to express what ultimately lies beyond utterance, that which continues to beckon the individual beyond whatever stage of the spiritual journey he or she has attained and which validates our attempts, in whatever discourse we use, to allude to it. **[end of page 1]**

Of course, in turning to fantasy MacDonald is not rejecting the validity of traditional religious discourse. Far from it. In adopting a “non-theistic” discourse he is neither denying nor affirming the religious account of things which elsewhere he commends so persuasively. The parallel discourses, the “theistic” and the “non-theistic” are compatible and complementary. Neither has the last word. To educate the spirit of the child we may well talk about God, but we do not have to.

The issues raised in this paper are explored more fully in:

Pridmore, John. S. “Talking of God and Talking of Fairies: Discourses of Spiritual Development in the Works of George MacDonald and in the Curriculum.”

International Journal of Children's Spirituality 7 (1) (2002): 23-35. **[2]**