

O Man of Two Visions: The Harmony of Secular and Sacred Knowledge
William Barnes, M.S.

Citation: Barnes, W. (2004). *O man of two visions: The harmony of secular and sacred knowledge*. Paper presented at the Forum for Integrated Education and Educational Reform sponsored by the Council for Global Integrative Education, Santa Cruz, CA, October 28-30. Retrieved [date], from <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/CGIE/barnes.pdf>.

This paper sets out a perspective that harmonizes secular knowledge and sacred knowledge, or knowledge derived from a Holy text and from which can be derived a paradigm of spiritually-based knowledge. The author believes that if education is to become a power for transforming children and society it would do well to inculcate such principles and abilities into children. But to do this, educator's must themselves possess such qualities.

“...religion must be in accord with science and reason. If it does not correspond with the scientific principles and the processes of reason, it is superstition. For God has endowed us with faculties by which we may comprehend the realities of things, contemplate reality itself. If religion is opposed to reason and science, faith is impossible; and when faith and confidence in the divine religion are not manifest in the heart, there can be no spiritual attainment.” (1)

In any society those who control the knowledge structure have great but not unlimited power. In Europe, before the advent of the scientific revolution, religious authorities strove to suppress emerging scientific knowledge because it upset their rooted dogmas about the world which they had reasoned from study of their Holy Book. Religion had turned from building force into a stiff-necked, narrow-minded and intolerant bigot, closed to any impulse but its own. The open highway of holiness had become a mechanical treadmill of moral exhortation and abstract law, unfeeling, indifferent, merciless and cruel with no way to evolve. Revolt was the only liberating attitude to take toward this perversion, and, betrayed into defiance, starting in the sixteenth century with the pioneers of the Scientific Revolution, Western thinkers, did just that—in the name of a new religion, reason and secularism. Over time and through the success of science, religious conviction, spirituality and faith were replaced by an abiding rationalism, a religious devotion to the factual. For in every sphere the secular mind's preoccupation, its drive and advance, is fueled by what Robert Coles calls “the world's growing body of factuality.” (2)

Today, in the same places where science heroically threw off the yoke of a perverted religion, secular authorities have marginalized sacred knowledge so to keep the influence of religion and spirituality out of public spaces and again narrow the knowledge base of human understanding. Religion and spirit have become so rationalized that the supernatural dimension has nearly been lost altogether. For when the secular separates and stands apart from the sacred for too long, there develops a fierce, militant, rational humanism, as intolerant of religion as religion was of it. Intellectually, humanism inevitably shades into materialism, the belief that the real goals of human beings are material. It is such a “dogmatic materialism, claiming to be the voice of ‘science’, that seeks systematically to exclude from intellectual life all impulses arising from the spiritual level of human consciousness.” (3) Hence secular epistemology says it deals not with “metaphysical” questions, these being only imaginary fictions from its perspective.

Both situations exemplify the principle that people do not learn when they believe they already know. The greatest enemy of real knowledge is not ignorance but the illusion of knowing. As dogmas of truth, science and religion can only be mutually exclusive and antipathetic. But as knowledge-systems they can become complementary and harmonized. I want to show how this can be true.

Secular knowledge, basically scientific in method and humanistic in belief dominates our thinking today, and dominates our education. In such a world it is hard to believe in and understand spiritual realities. But there is, too, a real hunger for it, a need to again expand the knowledge-base that humans may profitably use. The mechanistic, materialistic paradigm is exhausted, and a holistic movement is emerging to reconnect the secular and sacred realms and make knowledge and experience whole again. Such movements take many forms, but most of them take either nature or human reason to be their God.

On the one side, there is the exploration and celebration of the off-beat, the weird, and the unexplainable. These range all the way from various back-to-nature movements, to obscure religious sects, to palmistry, numerology, tarot cards and astrology charts, to cult followings of shows like X-files and cinematic dramas, and the more disjointed art movements in such favor earlier in this century, such as Dada. These were and are explorations of human irrationality resident at the base of subjectivity, what many have come to call, following Jung, the individual or collective unconscious. They continue the tradition of getting secret knowledge from “dark” sources, the archetypes at the biological level of being.

Within the more rationalistic world of science and philosophy, the exploration is toward a unified conceptual understanding of the natural and human worlds. This goes either back to revive myth, or forward to the ends of the earth in global perspectives. Thus we hear contemporary philosophers of environment speaking of “deep ecology”—the hypothesis that the planet itself is a living, breathing and self-regulating organism, a conception based upon a return to Gaia of early Greek mythology. In another branch of investigation, the sacred has been defined in such global abstractions as “the pattern that connects” of Gregory Bateson (4) and the “noosphere” of de Chardin (5); that is, the integrated fabric of mental process that envelops all life. Systems Theory has built up powerfully integrating ideas that identify certain universal processes at work that constantly create and recreate the world and ourselves at the mineral, biological, and intellectual levels.(6) All such abstractions are conceptual myths or containing forms.

But what is common to them all is the attempt to expand the knowledge world—to resacralize or re-enchant the world after hundreds of years of trying to demythologize and disenchant it. But they do this from within essentially secular paradigms and assumptions. This sort of secular spirituality is the kind of thing the mind comes up with when it perceives something larger than or outside itself, but doesn’t want to call it God.

So, these fascinating, insightful and, to be honest, helpful ideas are driving toward a unifying vision by seeking to penetrate into spirit. But the unity of knowledge does not fold within a unified perspective but unfolds from a unified vision. To understand higher spiritual realities we

must surrender secular assumptions about what is or can be real, what matters and why, else spiritual assumptions will make no sense, or poor sense. To surrender does not mean to throw them out altogether, but to surrender their stranglehold on understanding.

A holistic education is a holy one. All things are holy when the whole is complete. Ideal education, therefore, can draw no sharp line dividing sacred and secular concerns, for all things in this world are shot through with sacred mysteries, and are surrounded by spiritual dimensions. All education, therefore, is one, because all learning is one. It is one because education exists, finally, not to serve the interests of the state and not just to train students for their vocation. It exists to develop the whole person – heart, soul and intelligence, for serving the common good by seeking knowledge and acquiring virtues. The sacred and secular, religion and science and art, will be in harmony, when secular learning is infused with a spiritual dynamic and moral value. We have already seen that today science is exploring the sacred as some kind of unifying pattern holding the world together. The secular then fits within the larger universe opened to perception by acknowledgment of the sacred. How is such perception opened?

The Sacred

Given what has just been said, it is clear that the fundamental question facing secular understanding is to distinguish between the humanly imaginary and the spiritually real, between what is irrational and what is super-rational. For to the ordinary rational mind, these two, the impulses of instinct and the impulses of spirit, feel similar. As indicated, the essential problem with the strictly secular paradigm of knowledge is that it recognizes only two worlds, the world of Nature and the world of humans. In this view, humans build civilized structures from the raw material of nature, using their mental capacities of imagination and thought of which the highest expressions are art and science. Whatever is spiritual in this paradigm is actually another name for human subjectivity. Besides nature and humanity there is nothing, because there is nowhere “real” to locate it. Beyond the subjective is a spectral world populated by wishes and hopes, a “consciousness” that can only be named imaginary, fantastical, unreal, all in your head, or madness, because individuals are shut up within their own subjectivity, and what they believe to be spiritual realities are only their own projected mental images.

The sacred dimension is an objective world standing apart from human conceptions of it. This transcendent spiritual dimension is objective to human beings, but not objective within ordinary space and time. That is, it is not physically objective. Its objectivity exists in interiority, which links it to human subjectivity, of course. But it is better to say that subjectivity is linked to it, as the drop is linked to the ocean, the mirror is linked to the light. This inner objectivity of the world is not perceptible by the outer senses, only by the inner faculties of mind and heart. The sacred is the integrative dimension, for it completes the world and our understanding of it by unfolding potentials outward into actual existence.

A truly spiritual paradigm of knowledge, then, recognizes three worlds: the materially objective world apprehended by the senses and comprehended by thought; the human world of culture and society that we create, including objective and subjective dimensions; the revealed world that is opened to us by the prophetic utterance, the spiritually objective world.

The relationship of these three worlds to each other is this: humans bring forth the middle world of culture and civilization from raw material provided by nature but under the direction of the ordering principles of the revealed world. An Aristotle might say that nature is the material cause of civilization, revelation the formal cause which shapes its natural and human material; human society is the final cause, and human work, in its broadest sense, is the efficient cause.

The revealed world is the prophetic utterance found in a sacred text. The Prophet's knowledge is not learned but given. That is, He claims to reveal knowledge that is taught Him from a Divine Source. It is knowledge of a transcendent dimension of human archetypes and universals, which cannot be accommodated to the categories of ordinary, secular life and reason. This knowledge is not primarily experimental, but experiential. Sacred knowledge is the repository not so much of factual and logical-propositional knowledge, as of wisdom, specifically spiritual and ethical or moral wisdom. Thus it is first principles not precedents.

When the truly sacred enters the world it does not enter into established human understanding but remakes and transforms it. It is creative, but not of things or insights directly. It creates and recreates contexts for human thought and experience which other sources of knowledge can not provide external proofs to validate. It is what secular knowledge points to but can't itself become. That is, secular knowledge is embedded in or derives from the sacred .(7)

The human mind has always been conscious of an order of spiritual values from which society's moral principles, laws and rules are derived. All the world's religions confess the truth that there is an eternal reality beyond the flux of this material one. An encounter with the sacred, what many call a religious experience, reveals to the experiencer something of what reality is and how one should act in relation with it. Thus sacred knowledge is grounded in what many call a mystical understanding of what is of ultimate value in human life.

If we ask: Should schools concern themselves with the sacred? The answer is: "By all means, yes!", but with some provisos. Religion when it is good is society's deepest consciousness of itself. But generally speaking today religion is not good. This is because it has become a set of dogmas or antiquated moral injunctions. Yet, if children are to obtain a comprehensive understanding of their world and themselves, schools have an obligation to teach, not religion per say and certainly not its dogmas, but what religion tells us about the mysteries of human existence and the fundamental principles of life. These must include an awareness and understanding of the sacred dimension.

But education is both a theoretical and a practical discipline. It needs to have methods to test and employ, some way to get ideas into actions, provide the means to transform the world and human beings. If spiritual education is central to education it must show why it should be there. That is, it must teach students how to participate in the development of the spiritual knowledge system by learning what are the special functions involved in understanding the sacred. It must teach, that is, how to make the invisible visible.

Transforming the World: Making the Invisible Visible

As human beings are biologically equipped to perceive the outer, natural world given to their senses and the conceptual world through their intellectual faculties, they are, too, equipped to perceive the revealed world of the Holy Books through their spiritual powers and faculties.

I propose that the following three spiritual powers, distinct from but not separated from the intellectual and bodily powers, are central to spiritual education. These three powers are: faith, vision and creativity.

By faith I do not mean a belief that has little evidence, but which is nevertheless supported by religious authority. I mean faith as both a psychological attitude toward life, and as a power of action. I will deal with only the first of these here. Faith as action I will discuss later.

Regarding faith as an attitude, educator Daniel Jordan states that: “Basically, faith refers to an attitude towards the unknown or unknowable which ultimately enables one to approach it in a way that something more of it becomes known. (8) Further, he says, “faith means a loving of the unknown or unknowable--an attraction to whatever is unknown and a capacity to approach it.” (9) “Being attracted to the unknowable is the essence of faith,” he says. (10) Faith is what another psychologist calls “the power of expectation.”(11). In another related sense, faith drives us toward what Abraham Maslow calls “peak experiences.” (12)

In any case, faith is of “ultimate concern” (13) to us, for we put our faith in what we perceive to be the greatest power. Thus what is our ultimate concern is what we really are or want to be, or want to acquire. It represents the deepest, most important part of us, and is our power to transcend. As the manifestation of this urge toward transcendence through what psychologist Gerald May calls “willingness,” (14) faith is a creative act, for it mobilizes the faculties of mind, will and feeling, focusing and harmonizing them to achieve some goal. That is to say, faith acts as a teleological principle and perspective.

This means that it is faith that founds, rather than being founded upon, one’s fundamental outlook on life. Fundamental assumptions about life and experience don’t rest on supporting arguments, but generate such arguments. They are foundation of one’s noetic structure. One can only argue from a fundamental presupposition, not to it. But as a pedagogical principle, the attitude of faith as attraction to what is unknown must encourage questioning. For there is no way to learn other than by questioning, and we only question that which we don’t know.

Hence faith, as I am describing it, is a necessity for human thought and understanding of a comprehensive kind; that is, there are epistemological necessities to having it. Faith makes reason reach beyond itself toward transcendence by risking itself in new encounters with the unknown. The will to bridge the gap between our understanding of the whole and the whole itself, called Reality, gives rise to faith which generates creative acts that advance knowledge, creating an integrated, holistic pattern as the foundation of a new paradigm of understanding. (15)

Real faith is a risk, but not just of an idea or belief but a risk of self. It is not just a change of perspective but a change in the relation between oneself and the world. It is not, therefore, a state

without tension, or where tension is resolved. Faith is fraught with tension for it separates one from his fellows. But faith as conscious knowledge is vision, for vision is the chief aid to understanding.

Vision

If faith is the tacit sense that the super-rational, supernatural inner world exists and is the drive to understand it, then vision is the power that perceives, or looks into that world.

Vision is direct perception. The visionary sees new possibilities, potentials, avenues of advance and development. But let us be clear: A visionary does not see things that are not there. That is, the visionary does not see more in something, but more of it. He does not put his imagination into anything, but uses his imagination to perceive.

Great artists and scientists down through the ages have this power to perceive, so to speak, behind objective appearances and the mind's flux of impressions, to some "essence" informing the object, some quality of seeing that makes things, even momentarily, clear and important. Objectively, in such moments of heightened, intensified perception objects of perception are transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism. Subjectively, the usual psychological distance between subject and object is shortened or obliterated and a kind of oneness with the object of perception is attained, a sense of union that is traditionally described as ecstasy that carries an electric charge to the mind which we call inspiration. It is an understanding that "This is the way reality is", that reality has unveiled itself. This "religious quality" of art, says Rollo May, is "why many artists feel that something holy is going on when they paint, that there is something in the act of creating which is like religious revelation." (16) Or as the distinguished historian of art, Sir Kenneth Clark, says: "...works of art are not created by will, but from some far deeper condition of spirit, that is really very close to the impulses which propelled the various movements in religion." (17)

Most children have this power, but secular education systematically trains them out of it. But we must regain it, must renew the arts as "applied spirituality." This can only be done by reconnecting with the sacred.

Vision is nourished by and reflects the creative processes of the Word. The powerful symbols of the prophetic utterance embody sacred meanings and generate an ethos that is essential to the search for and discovery of meaning and interpretation of experience, that is it fuels faith. The prophet's metaphors aid vision because they generate, not just locate the mind within, a mental field of sacred intelligence. Thus the virtue of the Creative Word is a fusion of the moral, which means it has the authority to compel behaviors based upon experience, and the energetic, to generate a greater abundance of inner life. The moral aspect gives form where there would otherwise be simply unprincipled creative power, creating, destroying and recreating. But vision must also be aesthetic. Vision's sense of immediate certainty; the kind of "Aha!" experience that many artists and scientists have when a knotty problem's solution suddenly comes to them, is "elegant", that is aesthetically pleasing to the mind.

Symbols are the language of vision, not its content. Its content is ultimate truths. Yet vision needs symbol (i.e. pictures and music, stories and accounts, principles and poetry, myth and metaphors) to form into an object of understanding, to be a communicable intuition. Without symbols, in which the experience of holiness is communicated, vision vanishes either into concepts and explanations, or, more likely, is dismissed as merely a hallucination. With the proper symbols vision becomes charged with enthusiasm—a word that means “filled with God.” It further unites the intellectual, emotional and volitional aspects of the human intelligence for it is, above all, joyful.

In vision is seen the spiritual reality of things. An individual’s experience is a part of humanity’s collective advance in perception and knowledge, for his subjective experience is analogous to an objective truth, either spiritual or natural. Thus it can become truly creative.

Creativity

By creativity I mean vision plus work fired by faith. Creativity is the realization of vision, the confirmation of faith. All human potentialities drive toward actualization. Faith is the driving power, for it is concerned with what is ultimate, which is perceived in vision. But there is no faith without participation. There is no way of having the content of faith except in the act of faith.(18) The act of faith is the creative act. Creativity is the application of intellectual and manual power to bring harmony, proportion and contrast to the enthusiasm of vision.

Let us remember that we called work the efficient cause in the transformation of human experience. But the best kind of work is more than mere labor, whether for remuneration or not. The kind of work I mean has an inner spiritual dynamic to it, a dynamic that springs pure from within the individual, and which is termed “a calling.” If what psychologist James Hillman believes, namely, that “what children go through has to do with finding a place in the world for their specific calling”, then educators should pay attention to this principle. (19)

The idea of a calling and devotion to labor in the calling has its roots in the western religious tradition. (20) Every individual, from this view, has two callings, one general and the other personal. The first is the primary task of spiritual self-development, the holy work of self-perfectioning that everyone must do. The second calling is the seeking after occupation, or what occupies ones time because it occupies ones full attention. Within one’s calling personal spiritual development is inseparable from ones labor, for work is seen as a form of worship.

To link faith, vision and creativity we must see education, in part, as educating children to seek their calling, to pursue it faithfully when they find it, and, finally to fulfill their calling in creative acts. Any work done in a spirit of service to the larger good can be part of the calling. As Oliver Wendall Holmes stated: “Every calling is great when greatly pursued.”

But corollary to the creation of self is the transforming of the world—that is, that pattern of meaningful relations that the individual participates in—because society and the individual, the person and his environment, are organic. Whatever changes occur in one creates changes in the other. Thus, in creativity each individual participates in the evolution of humanity.

Concluding Remarks

Abdu'l-Baha stated: "Progress is the expression of spirit in the world of matter. The intelligence of man, his reasoning powers, his knowledge, his scientific achievements, all these being manifestations of the spirit, partake of the inevitable law of spiritual progress and are, therefore, of necessity immortal. (21)

Traditionally, educators are in the position of authority, not just in relation to the materials that they teach, but also as one standing between the unformed child and the already formed society. And in this position of authority the teacher initiates his charges into the world as it is. They must conform in order to fit, to find a place, to contribute a share to that world that pre-existed them and which will outlast them.

But not today, for the world as it is is passing away and a new world is not yet clearly in view. We sail through the choking smoke and flying debris of an exploded civilization to what shore? We navigate not from what is ahead but from what is above, not from a horizon but from the stars. What is the authority for such a voyage? Who is in command, and by what right? For we must understand that with the decline of established order comes a breakdown in potency of all the authorities of that order, so that power is left directionless but still potent and thus greatly destructive. Yet in that historical space between the not yet gone and the not yet born, between the vanishing and the emerging, real freedom exists, and we must seize the responsibilities that such freedom gives to those living here in the first light of a dawning world.

The essence of our task is not to harness the knowledge of the past and present it better, or simply in new fashion, or package it in more suitable ways for today's media-saturated minds, for the past no longer shines any light either on the present or on the future. The essence of our task is to bring the future, the uncreated world of faith into the present where it may be melted in the heat of vision, and forged on the anvil of experience by the hammer of work. This is the work of civilization-making, and there is no one else to do it.

We must, then, create an education of transformation, an education of risk and sacrifice, the risk to make the world sacred again. We are collectively called to this work. It will take centuries, to be sure, but we are privileged to be founders, initiators and groundbreakers. We must be the first to exemplify the principles of faith, vision and creativity.

Notes

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14. See *True to This Earth*, (edited by Alan Race and Roger Williamson, Oxford: Oneworld Publications.1995) for a discussion of how faith is an operating force in various social, political and legal contexts of social action and thought.
15. Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*. NY: W.W. Norton Company. 1975. p. 69.
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17. Tillich's, *The Courage To Be*, discusses this point brilliantly.
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19. See Max Weber's classic study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* for the best discussion of this relationship.
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Biography

William Barnes is married with three children. He graduated with degrees in Communications and History from Michigan State University, but has worked in education for more than thirty years. Most notably, he was principal of Daystar International School in Japan, a small private school devoted to introducing spiritual principles into all facets of the school's life. He has had numerous essays published in magazines and scholarly journals in the areas of education and social analysis, and for four years was a featured writer on education for Herald of the South Magazine. He is a member of the board of directors of International Educational Initiatives, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating and disseminating materials that foster global principles in every level of education. Currently he serves as Executive Director of Desert Rose Baha'i Institute.

Contacting information:

5688 Tweedy Rd.,

Eloy, AZ. 85231

Phone: 520-466-7961

<http://www.iei-world.com>