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Sociocultural Perspectives on Children's Spirituality

Tony Eade, 2022

Oxford, Oxford University Press

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Oxford Bibliographies is an online database for institutional subscribers. It describes itself as 'a seamless pathway to the most accurate and reliable resources for a variety of academic topics. Written and reviewed by academic experts, every article in our database is an authoritative guide to the current scholarship, containing original commentary and annotations'. Oxford Bibliographies cover a vast range of topics, including Childhood Studies, of which Eade's entry is a part.

The format of all entries is the same. They begin with a general introduction to the topic, followed by sections focusing on a specific theme. Each section offers an overarching narrative and lists up to 10 relevant citations with a short commentary about each text.

Eade's introduction sets the scene, providing a succinct description of key themes in the field. These include the tendency to focus on individualistic approaches, dominated by 'Western' scholars, and reference to the ongoing debates about the definition of spirituality and its relationship to religion. Eade alerts the reader that while the bibliography 'attempts to identify sociocultural research, the boundary is not always clear cut,' and articulates the reasons why. Given these complexities about identifying appropriate texts, generating themes for the sections was undoubtedly a difficult task, but Eade devised the following headings: Defining and Describing Spirituality; The Relationship between Religion and Children's Spirituality; What Children's Spiritual Development of Growth Entails; Approaches to Researching Children's Spirituality; Specific Features of Children's Spirituality; Children's Rights, Agency, and Voice; The Importance of Culture and Traditions in How Children's Identities are Formed; Social and Cultural Factors That Affect Children's Spiritual Growth; Barriers to Children Manifesting Their Spirituality and to Their Spiritual Growth; Spaces and Environments to Nurture Children's Spiritual Growth; and Experiences, Activities, and Programs Designed to Nurture Children's Spirituality. These headings serve the reader well, facilitating a coherent journey through key areas. They are equally effective for those who want to immerse themselves in every aspect, and for those who prefer to dip in and out of different sections accordingly.

The difficulties in identifying sociocultural approaches become increasingly apparent as the article progresses, which Eade articulates at each relevant stage. For example, when introducing the section 'Social and Cultural Factors That Affect Children's Spiritual Growth', he states that most research does not consider those factors in any depth. Similarly, Eade acknowledges that some texts cited in the section on 'Specific Features of Children's Spirituality', and in 'Children's Rights, Agency and Voice', are not explicitly based on sociocultural approaches. However, from the supportive annotations, the reader can easily discern how they may be pertinent to the topic. Despite this challenge of fluid boundaries, Eade has made apposite choices when selecting his references. Across the article, he incorporates texts published between 1989-2021 which are diverse in nature, including policy, reports, a published lecture, journal articles, authored and edited books. With regards to the latter, Eade offers helpful advice on which chapters are relevant. The result is a bibliography which not only focuses on sociocultural factors but also provides those new to the field with a comprehensive introduction to seminal and other useful works on children's spirituality as a whole.

Readers of annotated bibliographies can be forgiven for thinking that they are simple to compile. After all, they are effectively a summary of reading in a given field, organised into themes, annotated with the author's comments. Yet compiling one is not an easy task. Readers may well argue that a certain publication should have been included, or that another should have been excluded, perhaps because it is not sufficiently aligned to the topic. Yet the issue of inclusion and exclusion (applicable to bibliographies irrespective of their subject matter) is compounded when, as in this case, the topic itself is difficult to define, but Eade is fully cognisant of these circumstances.

Although bibliographies differ from book chapters and articles in purpose and format, for example by not making a specific argument and not having a conclusion, they still provide insights into the state of research in the area. Here, Eade regularly identifies omissions in the field, such as the lack of research: in non-Western cultures; on the effects of gender and ethnicity/race; and on systematically exploring the differences in spirituality across age groups, especially with very young children. In so doing, the work also provides a useful, overarching critique and identification of areas for future research.

The fact that articles on different aspects of children's spirituality are included in the database is welcome, and Eade's addition is a valuable one. He has provided a carefully crafted overview of relevant literature, which provides a detailed roadmap for all who are interested in the sociocultural aspects of children's spirituality - both newcomers to the field as well as those who are already familiar with it - alongside a critique which identifies future avenues for research. Overall, Eade's bibliography certainly aligns with the publisher's intention of being an authoritative guide to current scholarship.

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