

No faith in FE professionalism?

We print here an edited version by Joel Petrie of his article 'The FE Apostate's Tale', published as a chapter in Bennett, P. and Smith, R. (eds) (2018) Identity and Resistance in Further Education. London: Routledge

The discourse that followed the 'professionalism war' - the dispute ostensibly between FE's then professional body, the Institute for Learning (IfL), and the sector's lecturers - and the subsequent reforms, had echoes of the long-standing use of religious metaphors in education and FE. The prevalence of religiously metaphorical sectoral language may suggest the possibility of a 'faith' or ideology which could be the basis of a shared professionalism; but alternatively the notion of professionalism may be too contested by FE 'apostates' for sectoral unanimity.

The IfL was created in 2002, attracting 266 subscribers in its first year. This limited professional interest may have reflected a sense that the IfL was encroaching (potentially deliberately and strategically) on the role of the sector's principal trade union, NATFHE. Further, the IfL's stated emphasis on professionalism divorced from key issues of industrial relations such as pay and conditions was deeply problematic. The FE professionalism landscape in England shifted radically in 2007: parliamentary regulations were introduced which required lecturers to register with the IfL; and within a year it had 200,000 members. In 2010 the government withdrew subsidised funding for membership, meaning lecturers would need to pay fees themselves. There was a very public campaign against this imposed tithe, and an ostensibly independent review of professionalism by Lord Lingfield which ultimately resulted in the revocation of the 2007 regulations including mandatory IfL membership. By 2013, IfL membership had collapsed, and ultimately in October 2014 the IfL passed its legacy (some might

argue a toxic bequest) to the Education and Training Foundation (ETF).

In the interim the then minister with responsibility for the sector, John Hayes, proposed a modern 'guild' approach within FE, with an associated emphasis on the rediscovery of 'craft' as a dynamic of professional learning. He additionally stressed that this FE Guild should be an employer-led partnership (the IfL had, at least rhetorically, been committed to being member-led). Lingfield endorsed the establishment of an FE Guild, and further proposed an FE Covenant: 'we see the Covenant as an important means towards securing the success of a Guild and something to which all Guild members should formally consent' (Lingfield, 2013:4).

Medieval craft guilds had both occupational and spiritual attributes, pursuing pious goals as benevolent and religious societies. The quasi-religious language of the Hayes Guild proposal with Lingfield's associated Covenant was a new development, and is notable given that FE is in the main and avowedly a secular sector. Ultimately the ETF absorbed the remaining functions of the IfL by establishing within its structure a new professional association - the Society for Education and Training (SET); and the notion of an FE Guild, with its potentially exclusive professional connotations, was dropped. The proposal to establish an FE Guild is a sectoral footnote, but it nevertheless remains pertinent as an example of how religious metaphors often feature as part of the ideology of educational discourse.

Metaphors of faith have regularly informed the analysis of education. Jauhiainen and Alho-Malmelin

(2004: 459) argue that in order to understand education 'analogies have been sought from one of the most ancient and "natural" products of human culture, religion'; education has been analysed in terms of ritual, ceremonies and symbolic objects. Freire's famous metaphor of liberation (in part through education) as childbirth belongs to a system of Christian religious metaphors, which additionally include secularised religious metaphors such as 'vocation', 'conversion', 'communion', 'incarnation', and 'salvation'. Illich characterised the school as a ritual of initiation, introducing the neophyte to sacred consumption in which academic priests mediate between 'the faithful and gods of privilege and power, a ritual of expiation which sacrifices its dropouts, branding them as scapegoats of underdevelopment' (1974: 44). Ball famously argued that education reform brings about change in teachers' subjective existence, which represents 'the struggle over the teacher's soul' (Ball, 2010: 217).

The idea of vocation ('to call', from its Latin root *vocare*) is used in both secular and religious contexts. In a secular framework vocation implies a social mission, and in a specifically post-compulsory context Daley describes the vocational passion of students embarking on FE teacher training programmes; highlighting their 'love of subject and their need to make a difference to people's lives; they wanted to pass things on or pay things back, they discussed social justice and the love of working with people' (Daley, 2015: 13). Perhaps one of the longest-standing metaphors associated with FE relates to its ability to offer second (or third or fourth) educational chances, in particular to students who may have been unsuccessful in their earlier schooling. There is something redemptive in this discourse, which mirrors the Christian tradition, and this redemptive quality was articulated by Kennedy (1997) in *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, who argued that FE has invariably given second chances to those who were forced by necessity to make unfulfilling choices, or who had been labelled as failures.

Of all the UK educational sectors, FE's role and impact is described most in terms of social justice, hope and transformation; and the metaphor of transformation has a resonance with faith-derived discourses. For Halpin 'education is essentially a future-orientated project concerned to bring about improvement, specifically *growth* in the learner's knowledge and understanding, successful teaching requires its practitioners to teach with hope in mind' (2001: 405-6). The current UCU-funded *Further Education - transforming lives and communities* project suggests that transformation in the context of FE is about providing an environment where

learners flourish in democratic critical spaces based on respect; learners who have often been silenced and marginalised entering FE are offered choices and hope which streams into their personal and public journeys. It should be noted that metaphors such as transformation are also widely colonised by senior managers in FE to assert institutional values and promote organisational change: the lived experience of transformation that follows is often less than wholly positive for both staff and students if it entails redundancies, the closure of adult classes, and an increasingly aggressive managerialism.

The prevalence of religiously metaphorical FE language may suggest the possibility of a shared sectoral faith or ideology, which could in turn inform a common professionalism. However, the evidence of the ideological dynamics of the professionalism war suggests that sectoral values are contested and far from universal. In 2015, his reflection on the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta led Coffield to 'produce a Bill of Rights for the teaching profession . . . The thirteenth century barons insisted on 63 clauses, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg' (2016: 85); and at his keynote at the inaugural Tutor Voices conference Coffield invited delegates (tongue firmly in cheek) to join him in nailing the Bill of Rights to the door of the Education Ministry. This linkage to Lutheran reform may suggest a situation in which even when educators share a faith it may be at odds with institutional or government visions, rendering them sectoral 'apostates'. Apostasy may be defined as the renunciation of a religion, or the adoption of beliefs contrary to those previously held; but it may also be used metaphorically to describe the renunciation of nonspiritual values, and is used in this latter regard for the purposes of the discussion of professionalism and the fundamentally ideological nature of the IfL dispute.

The aspirations for a more democratic, activist model of professionalism articulated by FE apostates at the height of the professionalism war remain live, current issues. However, the landscape of FE professionalism itself is increasingly fractured: the days of the IfL's 200,000 strong professional membership are long gone; and its inheritor, the ETF / SET currently has only 15,000 members. More recently the College of Teaching, a professional body seeking to attract mainly school teachers, has confirmed its intention to recruit from within FE. A former college principal recently suggested in the TES that this could both render SET redundant and enhance FE teachers' status as members of a professional organisation that works across all education sectors, arguing that teachers are teachers wherever they teach, and a College of

Teaching open to teachers across sectors is what is needed. It remains to be seen if this transpires, but there may be a sectoral move towards greater unity, manifested in the 2017 decision by the NUT and the ATL to form the NEU (National Education Union), which could prefigure a genuinely cradle-to-grave educational trade union.

Meanwhile trade union concerns in relation to professionalism continue to be reflected in regular conference motions to UCU which consistently argue that attempts to professionalise the FE sector often adopt a deficit analysis: assume we are not professional; lack a democratic ethos; and promote managerialist, neoliberal policies; and call for a notion of professionalism that is democratic, representative, egalitarian, campaigning, non-mandatory and independent of government, employers and bodies representing colleges; and capable of challenging them all. Indeed Tutor Voices, a grassroots professional association, was established by lecturers, with these proposed characteristics. The history of the British labour and trade union movement is linked with Christianity; and according to the Labour prime minister Harold Wilson it owes more to Methodism than to Marx. In this context, FE professionalism too may have a residual religious legacy - a heritage which would contradict Shaw's famous aphorism that all professions are a conspiracy against the laity. Indeed in the current neoliberal context FE professionals are peripheralised, and hardly represent a priestly class collectively machinating against lay congregations. Instead, in FE's current alienated state they may be non-conformists, if not Marxists: unwilling apostates in their own profession; but the successful opposition to the IfL may tentatively suggest the potential of collective ideological agency.

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