

**Justice Feeds the Soul: A Response to Olga Bogdashina's new book
'Autism and Spirituality'**

October 28, 2013

By Caroline Henthorne

Abstract:

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My research field is how autistic people grow in faith. The spiritual lives of autistic people is an area of research which is in its infancy and which is yet to develop a canon of literature. So I noted with interest that Olga Bogdashina's new book is 'Autism and Spirituality'.

Sadly the book is just another volume that can be added to the mountain of misinformation on autism. An area of pseudo-research with a huge cannon of utterly worthless literature, which the scholar must climb over in order to study any aspect of autism.

The book gets it wrong for a number of reasons. Firstly, it uses a non-standard definition of autism. Olga Bogdashina equates autism with intense world syndrome (p 33). This means that she sees all aspects of autism as behaviours which result from sensory overload. The autistic person as someone who is overwhelmed and so withdraws into an inner world. Sound familiar? Yes, it's the old chestnut of autism being an avoidable developmental shut down, resurrected from the school of psychoanalysis, but now wearing pseudo-scientific clothing – the new black is an ensemble of genetic and environmental factors which are said to lead to withdrawal.

'So what?' I hear you say. 'Yes, it's annoying when we pick up a book and it turns out to be about 'autism' and not autism. But why not simply put it in the blender?' (You say blender because from experience of such books you know they won't fit in a domestic shredder).

Because the book looks credible. It's written by a professor whose field is 'autism'. And not all readers will spot the book's un-typed inverted commas.

And because the author's definition of autism allows her to consider autistic people to live in a different reality, so our spiritual experiences can be taken with a pinch of salt. Curious but not something that needs to be taken seriously. Feel like a lab rat yet?

The second thing the book gets wrong is its unclear. This is perhaps a good thing. Poorly expressed misinformation must surely be less dangerous than well expressed misinformation. Surely? But nothing which is poorly expressed can serve a reader with an information processing disability. The autistic person is being talked about, not spoken to.

See if you can make sense of this. In the book the word subconscious has six, or maybe seven, different meanings. One, the part of the mind Temple Grandin is quoted as says autistic people think with, that is sensory experience not language (p 62). Two, a part of the brain which stores and retrieves memory, specifically implicit perception, such as things we see without paying them attention (p 99 and 131). Three, a part of the self which processes bodily responses to sensory triggers (p 128 and 135). Four, the part of the self which processes emotions (p 142). Five, the word subconscious is used inter-changeably with the word nonconscious to mean a part of the self calling the shots without our consciously knowing it (p 143). Six? Later this part of the self, or perhaps, a different part of the self, is referred to with inter-changeable usage of the words subconscious and unconscious. The unconscious is part of Freud's model of the mind where we hide desires from ourselves (p 146). Six/Seven. A process people are not aware of by which one person's soul can have direct communication with the soul of another person (p 202).

'So what?' You say again. This time louder. 'Who cares about a book on 'autism' which is badly written?'

What is and is not conscious in autistic people is central to Olga Bogdashina's claims about autistic spirituality, so her lack of clarity about the subconscious is not just poor drafting, it makes her argument ambiguous. She has hidden some outrageous claims behind a smoke screen of ambiguity which is particularly impenetrable to autistic readers.

And how are these ambiguous claims supported? The third area where the book gets it wrong is that the evidence brought forward to support the books claims makes no more sense than the claims themselves. Research from a number of different fields is used in a mash-up of methodologies and aims. There is an attempt made to use science as a prop for the validity of spirituality (p 46). I'd say that was proof of the existence of the wrong question.

Of particular concern in the book's evidence base is the way autistic writers are quoted out of context. The book really gets respecting autistic voices wrong. On page 33 Olga Bogdashina claims to have written a book which describes what autism, '...feels like from the inside.' She does not claim to be autistic. No one who is not autistic can write about autism from the inside.

Her so-called insider view is based on reading autobiography written by autistic people. She has selected quotes by classing as autistic anyone who perceives the world differently and ignoring the writing of people who have autistic behaviour but see the world in the same way as the general population. The selected quotes are then taken out of context. The sources quoted are people describing their lives in general not their spiritual lives.

'So what?' You say again, this time tongue in cheek. 'If the evidence is dodgy surely that's great, it can't support the outrageous claims'. But on the other hand, autism is a field were there is a new half-baked treatment approach to combat very day. Pseudo-science needs to be challenged. But how do we do that in a book where the claims the evidence supports haven't been made clear. All we can say is that we don't understand how the evidence can support claims which are themselves ambiguous, and of course we are people who struggle to process information and maybe we shouldn't be expected to understand anyway.

Lastly, the book gets talking about autistic people with respect very wrong indeed. The sensory experiences of autistic people are likened to experiences non-autistic people can have by using drugs (p 88). Which leads to the view that autistic people's daily lives are some kind of hippy trip.

It gets worse. Autistic people are seen as having easy access to experiences which are not just different but spiritual. So here's something you can add to your 'to do' list, finding the psychedelic answers to everyone else's' problems.

One autistic person quoted is Gunilla Gerland. I doubt she would see her autism as equivalent to drug use. In her book 'A Real Person' she discusses using drugs as she coped with being so socially lost she was

unaware that she was in an abusive relationship. She didn't want to live in an alternative reality, she wanted to make sense of her life.

'So what?' You say for the last time. 'It's a truth universally acknowledged that no one who is not disabled has any clue how to write about disability. Maybe the book has something to say on spirituality'.

A word of caution. Can someone who doesn't know how to respect me offer me enlightenment? Oh no I forgot, the stance of this book is that autistic people are extra specially spiritual and so have the task of offering enlightenment to everyone else.

Here's how it happens. "What makes autistic individuals more open to spiritual experiences is their sensitivities: sensory, emotional, cognitive and spiritual – all caused by fundamental differences in their neurobiological development". (p 12).

So that means. Firstly, that I have extra sensitive sensory experiences and this makes me more open to the spiritual. Well according to National Geographic women have more sensitive vision than men seeing more variations in colour than men do. Should we conclude that women more open to the spiritual than men? [<http://news.nationalgeographic.co.uk/news/2012/09/120907-men-women-see-differently-science-health-vision-sex/>].

Secondly, that I have more sensitivity emotional experiences and this makes me more open to the spiritual. Next time you see someone crying because their team lost tell them they are on their way to having a spiritual experience.

Thirdly, that I have different cognitive experiences and this makes me more open to the spiritual. Yes, seeing precisely how many fragments of glass are lying on the road is more open to the spiritual than realising that there has been a car crash and calling an ambulance.

Fourthly, that I have more sensitive spiritual experiences and this makes me more open to the spiritual. Go figure.

And just in case you still hope that the book has something to say on spirituality. I have to tell you the book isn't even clear what spirituality is. A summary of different views is offered on page 44 which states that spirituality has three parts, "religious devotion; being fully aware of one's "species-being"; and being aesthetically or ethically aware". As a human-being I am unsure why any definition of spirituality would equate aesthetics with ethics. But never mind. The summary is not referred to again.

'Ok'. You say. 'Point made. Want any tips on stacking blender parts in a dishwasher?' Just a minute. We can't just ignore this. Anyone can make any kind of claims about autism and spirituality if they write a book in which they use a non-standard definition of autism and are not clear on the definition of spirituality which they are using. Are we going to let Olga Bogdashina do that to our community?

Wait until you hear the claims she makes about autistic spirituality. Here's an example, apparently, autistic people's atypical empathy (pp 68-74) means we can commune with a wide range of non-human life forms (see quote from Stillman p 77). I am not convinced that being able to communicate with animals is spiritual any more than the skill of keeping small children entertained is spiritual. It is the skills of relating to a form of life that thinks in a way which you don't. I am not convinced that communication with angels is a common experience for autistic people, or an experience exclusive to autistic people. I do question why the label, spiritual, is stuck equally on having had a connection with life forms as different as cattle and angels.

The claims about autistic spirituality are outlandish. What is outrageous is the list of our supposed bedfellows who are said to share our hyper spiritual abilities. For example, on page 188 Olga Bogdashina says that autistic people, among others, are "...more prone to these [spiritual] experiences

because of their differences in perceiving and processing information..." the others listed as being similarly prone are, "... people with psychosis, schizophrenia..."

Likening the experiences of autistic people to the experiences of people who are mentally ill equates autism and mental illness. It gives validity to the outmoded view that autism is a form of psychosis and classes our atypical experience as mad.

I know you've given up and now have no intention of reading the book. Sorry, I haven't finished. I need to tell you that the book is also outrageous because of the way it describes the development of the self in autistic people (apparently our selves are under-developed) and how our under-developed selves are supposed to develop their spirituality.

Olga Bogdashina believes that autistic infants withdraw from a world which overloads their senses and that this means they do not fully develop a self. The under-developed self is given a moral dimension.

On page 215 she says that a less developed ego leads to a selfless view of life. It is nonsense to claim that under-development is superior to full development. But what disturbs me is that autistic people are being patronised. First we are said to be under-developed, and then due to this under-development automatically assumed to be moral. A backhanded compliment if ever I heard one. Unless the author intends to develop her sense of morality by having a lobotomy.

The book ends with a reluctant discussion on how the autistic self develops its spirituality. Olga Bogdashina would like us to stay as mystic children. "Several features of spirituality have been identified in children...nurturing spirituality in children implies helping them remember the experiences of early childhood, before they were conditioned out of them by cultural traditions...in...autism, the conditioning does not work..." (p 189).

If growth must happen it must hurt. On page 82 Olga Bogdashina says that suffering is necessary for spiritual growth. This idea is especially toxic when applied to disabled people. It implies we are in particular need of growth, and that we can be left to struggle alone because this is good for us.

There is then a discussion on spiritual growth which was not the result of new research with the autistic population and offers no new insight on how autistic people can develop their spirituality.

In fact we end where we began. On page 242 Olga Bogdashina suggest that "In some cases, they [autistic people] have no control over their 'unusual' experiences and will need help from those who can explain what is going on, and why, and teach them strategies to be in control". This statement is followed by "Helping others to nurture their spirituality will help us all to rediscover our own sense of the spiritual".

The idea that autistic people find the world bombards them with sensory data and so withdraw into themselves, only to find that in their inner life they have a propensity to have bizarre experiences, which are themselves overwhelming, means that the autistic person far from having privileged access to spiritual experience is in fact trapped in a nightmare.

It would have been better for the author to have realized this at the outset and abandoned writing about autism as withdrawal. But no, autistic people are going to be taught to control their experiences, with the help of non-autistic people who have never experienced what they are experiencing, and who are motivated by using our distressing experiences as a template for developing their spirituality.

I'm not hiding Olga but if you seek me I won't offer you enlightenment.

Caroline Henthorne is conducting PhD research at Durham University into how the Christian Church can support autistic people to grow in faith.

