

Spirituality in education

Legal requirements and government recommendations

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1944 to the mid-1980s: changing perceptions of spiritual development

An education that contributes to pupils' spiritual development has been legally required since 1944. The 1944 Education Act (section 7) required the local education authority for every area to make available for all pupils an education that would 'contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community'. In a parliamentary discussion that preceded the Education Act (*Hansard* July 1943) it was recommended that the teacher of religion was to develop a spiritual relationship with his pupil. Agreed syllabuses of this era show that Christianity was the religion that was to be taught in school religious instruction lessons. Pupils' spiritual development would therefore take place in a Christian context.

Some three decades later, however, a government document drew attention to the fact that the word 'spiritual' was no longer used solely in a Christian context. Initially, *Curriculum 11-16* (DES 1977a) simply listed the spiritual as one of eight 'areas of experience', alongside the aesthetic and creative, the ethical, the linguistic, the mathematical, the physical, the scientific, and the social and political. These were to form a framework for a common curriculum for secondary schools. The *Supplement to Curriculum 11-16* (DES 1977b) then offered a definition of each of the first seven areas. When it came to the question of the spiritual, it gave two definitions.

The first argued that the spiritual might be defined in terms of inner feelings and beliefs that 'throw light for some people on the purpose and meaning of life', and are always 'concerned with matters at the heart and root of existence'. It allowed for the fact that although some might claim that these beliefs and feelings led to a knowledge of God, for others they might be concerned simply with human striving and longing for perfection. This definition thus focused on a non-religious or secular understanding of the word 'spiritual'. The second definition confined the spiritual to the religious domain. It suggested that the spiritual is 'concerned with everything in human knowledge or experience that relates to a sense of God or of gods'. By offering both a secular and a religious definition, the *Supplement to Curriculum 11-16* suggested that pupils' spirituality could be developed in both religious and non-religious contexts.

The School Curriculum (DES 1981) clearly linked 'the spiritual' with religion when it stated that RE was to 'provide an introduction to the religious and spiritual areas of experience'. However, a later government document, *The Curriculum from 5-16* (DES 1985a), disconnected spirituality from religion altogether. It described 'spiritual education' as being concerned with feelings and convictions about the significance of human life and the world. There was no suggestion here of any link between spiritual education and religious education.

1988 – 2000: the Education Reform Act and government perspectives

The 1988 Education Reform Act

In spite of difficulties of interpretation, the 1988 Education Reform Act did not allow the question of pupils' spiritual development to be ignored. It both repeated and expanded the requirements of the 1944 Education Act. It required that a school curriculum should 'promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and of society' (1988: section 1.2a). Thus the 1988 Education Reform Act required the individual school, rather than the local authority, to 'promote' - a word that suggests positive action on the part of the teacher - the five (rather than four) named areas of development in both the individual pupil and in 'society'. The addition of the word 'cultural' and the substitution of the word 'society' for 'community' suggested a context wider than merely the local community. It seemed that a school must now, through the promotion of the spiritual development of its pupils, contribute to the spiritual development of the nation.

In the years preceding the Education Reform Act Britain was variously described as predominantly (though mainly privately) Christian (Habgood 1983), religiously pluralist (DES 1985b), and secular (Edwards 1974, Lyon 1985). If schools were to contribute to the spiritual development of the nation they would therefore be required to promote in their pupils a form of spiritual development that would be considered appropriate by Christians, by members of other religions, and by secular members of society. This would clearly be no easy task.

The National Curriculum Council

The National Curriculum Council's (1993) discussion paper *Spiritual and Moral Development* offered guidance to schools in this matter. The paper stresses that the areas of spiritual and moral development are not confined to religious education and collective worship but can relate to every area of the curriculum and to all aspects of school life (NCC 1993: 2, 6, 7). The paper defines the word 'spiritual' as 'a dimension of human existence' which 'applies to all pupils'. The term should be seen as

applying to something fundamental in the human condition which is not necessarily experienced through the physical senses and/or expressed through everyday language. It has to do with relationships with other people and, for believers, with God. It has to do with the universal search for individual identity, with our responses to challenging experiences, such as death, suffering, beauty, and encounters with good and evil. It is to do with the search for meaning and purpose in life and for values by which to live (NCC 1993: 2).

Although not excluding religion altogether from spiritual development, the paper puts a strong emphasis on a non-religious interpretation of the word 'spirituality'. It lists (NCC 1993: 2, 3) the 'many aspects of spiritual development' as beliefs, a sense of awe, wonder and mystery, experiencing feelings of transcendence, search for meaning and purpose, self-knowledge, relationships, creativity, feelings and emotions. A brief description of what might be included under these headings is given. Whilst it is recognised that 'beliefs' might include religious beliefs, there is an emphasis on developing understanding of how beliefs shape people's lives and personal identity. Whilst 'experiencing feelings of transcendence' might give rise to belief in the existence of a divine being, they might equally give rise to belief in one's inner resources. 'A sense of awe, wonder and mystery' might simply mean being inspired by the natural world or human achievement. 'Relationships' might include developing a sense of community. 'Creativity' might include expressing innermost thoughts and feelings through art or music, or exercising the imagination. Thus spiritual development is seen mainly as the development of personal self-awareness.

The discussion paper notes that some people find explanations for the listed experiences and feelings in the teachings of their religion, and observes that 'indeed there is evidence to suggest that the majority of people in Britain have some belief in God' (NCC 1993: 3). In spite of this assertion, the discussion paper does not make any suggestions for promoting the spiritual development of pupils in such a way as to encourage this belief in God. It is suggested that steps to spiritual development might include

recognising the existence of others as independent from oneself; becoming aware of and reflecting on experience, questioning and exploring the meaning of experience; understanding and evaluating a range of possible responses and interpretations, developing personal views and insights, applying the insights gained with increasing degrees of perception to one's own life (NCC 1993: 3).

In this ten-page document on spiritual and moral development which acknowledges the 'in the main Christian' requirement of the 1988 Education Reform Act (NCC 1993:6), the word 'Christianity' appears only once, 'God' twice, and 'religious' or 'religion' just thirteen times apart from references to 'religious education' as a subject in the curriculum. The discussion paper states that religious education may refer to the teachings of the major world religions, giving most attention to Christianity, but its major role is to be in ensuring that pupils are challenged by 'ultimate questions' (NCC 1993: 6). There is no mention of the contribution that Christian spirituality or indeed the spirituality of other religions might make to pupils' spiritual development. Definitions of spirituality focus upon self-awareness, personal experiences and inner emotions. The emphases of the discussion paper suggest that religious education is to have little to do with a pupil's spiritual development.

The National Curriculum Council's (1993a) *Spiritual and Moral Development: A Discussion Paper* was re-issued by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority as *Spiritual and Moral Development: SCAA Discussion Papers, No. 3* (1995). Clearly this was to be government's official interpretation of spiritual development.

The Office for Standards in Education

Further advice on promoting pupils' spiritual development was offered in response to the requirement of the 1992 Education (Schools) Act (section 9.4d) that inspectors report on pupils' 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development'. The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) produced a succession of booklets (1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1994a) to provide guidance and criteria for inspection in these areas. In these it became clear that the area of spiritual development was proving particularly difficult to inspect.

In the discussion paper, *Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development* (1994a) OFSTED begins by offering a definition of spiritual development. Citing the definition that had appeared in the revised *Framework for the Inspection of Schools* (OFSTED 1993a), OFSTED states:

Spiritual development relates to that aspect of inner life through which pupils acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth. It is characterised by reflection, the attribution of meaning to experience, valuing a non-material dimension to life and intimations of an enduring reality. 'Spiritual' is not synonymous with 'religious'; all areas of the curriculum may contribute to pupils' spiritual development (OFSTED 1994a: 8).

Spirituality is thus to be understood as relating to the inner life, the experiential, and the non-material, and it is stressed that 'the spiritual' is to be thought of as something distinct from 'the religious'.

Having defined 'the spiritual', OFSTED confesses that it is difficult to inspect spiritual development. It explains that 'The difficulty of inspecting pupils' "spiritual development" is part of a wider conceptual difficulty. ... if spiritual development is about a unique inner life it is not easy to inspect'. OFSTED (1994a: 9) suggests, therefore, that inspectors assess a school's provision for pupils' spiritual development, and this is to be recognised in terms of the school's 'values and attitudes', 'the contribution made by the whole curriculum', 'religious education, acts of collective worship and other assemblies', and 'extra-curricular activity, together with the general ethos and climate of the school'.

Although stressing the need for inspectors to focus upon schools' provision for pupils' spiritual development and the difficulties in evaluating pupils' spiritual development, 'where we are concerned with attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviour', OFSTED offers some suggestions. As evidence of spiritual development pupils might demonstrate, for example,

knowledge of the central beliefs, ideas and practices of major world religions and philosophies; an understanding of how people have sought to explain the universe through various myths and stories, including religious, historical and scientific interpretations; behaviour and attitudes which derive from such knowledge and understanding and from personal conviction, and which show awareness of the relationship between belief and action; personal response to questions about the purpose of life, and to the experience of, e.g., beauty and love or pain and suffering (OFSTED 1994a: 9,10).

The emphasis throughout this document is upon the difficulties in assessing pupils' spiritual development, difficulties that spring primarily from the lack of a clear definition of the term. The discussion paper reveals a tension between the acknowledgement that spirituality can be linked with religion and the need to separate it from religion, the latter to enable the assessment of the spiritual development of pupils with no religious belief. As with the National Curriculum Council's discussion paper, the main thrust of the thinking is that spirituality is to do with an individual's questioning about the meaning of life, and the exploration of one's inner feelings.

In the subsequent *Handbook for the Inspection of Schools* (1994b) OFSTED proposed that spiritual development 'be judged on how well the school promotes opportunities for pupils to reflect on aspects of their lives and the human condition through, for example, literature, music, art, science, religious education and collective worship, and how well pupils respond' (OFSTED 1994b: 21). The order in which the

subjects are presented stresses a cross-curricular approach, with an implication that religious education and collective worship have a lesser role to play.

Circular 1/94, Religious Education and Collective Worship

If the preceding documents understood 'spiritual development' almost exclusively in secular terms, *Circular 1/94, Religious Education and Collective Worship* (Department for Education 1994) returned it to a religious context. Although referring schools to the National Curriculum Council's discussion paper for guidance in their understanding of spiritual and moral development (DfE 1994: paragraph 1, Note 2), the circular stresses that religious education and collective worship are to 'make an important, though not exclusive, contribution to spiritual, moral and cultural development' (DfE 1994: paragraph 4). The circular states that these activities offer 'explicit opportunities for pupils to consider the response of religion to fundamental questions about the purpose of being, morality and ethical standards'. Pupils are to learn from religion's responses and from them 'develop their own response to such matters' (DfE 1994: paragraph 4).

The circular refers in several places to the fact that Christianity is to be taught 'in the main' (DfE 1994: paragraphs 7, 16, 26, 31, 38), and states that religious education and collective worship are to play an important role 'in helping to promote among pupils a clear set of personal values and beliefs' (DfE 1994: paragraph 9). Thus, Christianity was clearly expected to make a major contribution to pupils' spiritual development. The circular drew attention to the fact that most agreed syllabuses for religious education would have to be revised, and referred agreed syllabus conferences to the new national model syllabuses.

The 1994 Model Syllabuses for Religious Education

The *Model Syllabuses for Religious Education* (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority 1994) linked spiritual development clearly with religion. The *Introduction* to the model syllabuses stated that religious education should help pupils to 'enhance their spiritual, moral, cultural and social development by ... responding to [the fundamental questions of life] with reference to the teachings and practices of religions ... [and by] reflecting on their own beliefs, values and experiences in the light of their study' (SCAA 1994: 4).

The model syllabuses suggested specific ways in which pupils might 'enhance their own spiritual and moral development' in the context of 'learning from religion', the second of two proposed 'attainment targets'. For example, Key Stage 3 pupils may enhance their spiritual development by 'considering questions of meaning, e.g. the existence of God and the problem of suffering'. Key Stage 4 pupils may enhance their spiritual development by 'considering the value of silence, prayer, meditation and ritual for human life and for themselves' (SCAA 1994: 40, 58).

The suggested programmes of study for each key stage listed the topics selected to represent the key beliefs and practices of the six 'principal religions' of Britain. To ensure that the 'in the main Christian' requirement of the Education Reform Act would be met, Agreed Syllabus Conferences were advised to include the first sections on Christianity as mandatory in new agreed syllabuses. These sections include the topics or themes identified as central to the Christian faith by the working party for Christianity, members of which were in positions of leadership in all the major Christian denominations. Themes or topics for study can be grouped throughout under the Key Stage 2 headings, 'God', 'Jesus', 'The Church', 'The Bible', and 'Christian Ways of Life'. These would therefore be the topics to which, in the context of being taught Christianity, pupils would need to 'make their own response' in order to 'enhance their own spiritual development' (SCAA 1994: 4).

SCAA and the 'Education for Adult Life' conference

In spite of the proliferation in the early 1990s of government-sponsored documents referring to pupils' spiritual development, SCAA's subsequent consultations with a wide range of bodies involved with young people revealed 'concern about a lack of focus on pupils' spiritual and moral development and its consequences' (SCAA 1996: 4). SCAA therefore convened a conference entitled 'Education for Adult Life: the spiritual and moral development of young people'. The conference report, published under the same name and as *SCAA Discussion Papers: No. 6*, stated that there was broad acceptance of the description of spirituality in the NCC 1993 document (see above), although 'some delegates took the view that spirituality is neutral in itself, becoming meaningful only when developed within a belief system that gives a coherent view of the world' (SCAA 1996: 6). This belief system might be religions or secular, but

would give young people a language and conceptual framework within which to understand their own spirituality. Spirituality was defined by delegates first as ‘the essence of being human’, other definitions focusing on different aspects of the ‘inner life’ and ‘ultimate values’. Just one in a list of eight definitions suggested ‘a response to God, the “other” or the “ultimate”’.

It was noted that young people’s spirituality could be developed by religion, thinking, prayer, meditation or ritual, or by feelings of awe and wonder at nature, through positive relationships with other people, or through negative experiences such as suffering mental or physical pain (SCAA 1996: 7). However, when placed in the context of education it was stated that Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and Muslim delegates believed that ‘providing regular times of stillness and quiet and opportunities for contemplation are central to spiritual development’ (SCAA 1996: 12). The subjects of young people’s reflections should be their interdependence with others, consequences of actions, learning from experience, self, and role models. Neither God nor religion appeared in this list.

Further attention was given to ‘spiritual and moral development across the curriculum and beyond’, with personal and social education (PSE), economical and political awareness, and citizenship education proposed as possible routes. Although it had been noted that spirituality could be seen as ‘the source of the will to act morally’, the greater emphasis of the conference was on the issue of pupils’ moral development and the need for ‘national assent to core values’ (SCAA 1996: 18). Subsequently SCAA set up the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community. In 1997, following extensive surveys of schools and other organisations representative of the whole population, the Forum drew up a ‘Statement of Values’, later incorporated in *Guidance for Schools: the Promotion of Pupils’ Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1997: 34-35). In the *Preamble to the Statement of Values* it was noted that the values do not include religious beliefs, principles and teachings, though these are often the source of commonly held values. Under the heading *The Self*, the first of the four ‘contexts’ for the specific values, is the statement ‘We value ourselves as unique human beings capable of spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical growth and development’. Yet there is no further reference to religion or spirituality.

Spiritual development in the 1990s - summary

From this review of the government-sponsored documents of the 1990s, it seems that government supported the promotion of both religious and non-religious spirituality in the classroom. On the one hand, the National Curriculum Council (1993a) and OFSTED (1994) focused on schools promoting the development of a non-religious spirituality, on the grounds that this would be appropriate to the majority of pupils, who would come from non-religious backgrounds – an inclusive approach. On the other hand, *Circular 1/94* and the 1994 model syllabuses suggested that pupils’ spiritual development might be assessed in terms of their personal responses to religious teachings. There were therefore strong arguments for post-1988 schools to promote spiritual development from both perspectives.

Spiritual development in the third millennium

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2000

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority launched the new millennium by producing a non-statutory assessment scale for RE. *Religious Education: non-statutory guidance on RE* (QCA 2000) locates promoting pupils’ spiritual development not in RE, which is to contribute to personal, social and health education (PSHE), citizenship education and the development of key skills and other learning skills, but in ‘learning across the curriculum’ (QCA 2000: 2). In this document spiritual development is to do with pupils’ responses to ‘questions of meaning and purpose in life, and questions about the nature of values in human society’ (QCA 2000: 13). It seems that the impact of the ‘Education for Adult Life’ conference, which set out to address concerns for pupils’ spiritual and moral development, resulted in spiritual development being transposed into values development.

The Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales

In Wales the new millennium saw spiritual development located in personal and social development. In the *Personal and Social Education Framework* (2000), produced by the Qualifications, Curriculum and

Assessment Authority for Wales, the spiritual is identified as one of ten key aspects of PSE. Within the spiritual aspect pupils are to be helped to develop their personal insights, beliefs and values, the ability to reflect on their experiences, ponder the deeper questions of life, seek for meaning and truth, recognise the human experience of transcendence, and the sense of awe and wonder evoked by the natural world, by the mysteries of life and death, by the limitations of human understanding and, finally, by response to a divine being. Clearly, the emphasis here is on secular interpretations of the spiritual. Reference to the divine is added almost as an after-thought.

The Office for Standards in Education 2004

OFSTED still found that inspection of pupils' spiritual development remained difficult since 'spiritual' could be interpreted and expressed in different ways. In *Promoting and Evaluating Pupils' Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development* OFSTED described spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development as 'crucial for individual pupils and crucial for society as a whole ... the heart of what education is all about' (OFSTED 2004: 4).

It referred back to the NCC's 1993 discussion paper, SCAA's 1996 *Education for Life* document, its own 1994 definitions (for all these see above) and similar statements in its subsequent inspection handbooks. It summarised these as indicating that pupils' spiritual development is about having opportunities to reflect on life's fundamental questions and 'special moments' in their lives, and about developing self-awareness and understanding of the world around them and spiritual questions and issues.

OFSTED concluded that an inclusive working definition of spiritual development was needed, one that would be meaningful in all types of school and acceptable to people of all faiths and no faith. It proposed three principal elements:

- the development of insights, principles, beliefs, attitudes and values which guide and motivate us. For many pupils, these will have a significant religious basis.
- a developing understanding of feelings and emotions which cause us to reflect and to learn
- for all pupils, a developing recognition that their insights, principles, beliefs, attitudes and values should influence, inspire or guide them in life (OFSTED 2004: 11).

OFSTED then put the three elements together and proposed this definition:

'Spiritual development is the development of the non-material element of a human being which animates and sustains us and, depending on our point of view, either ends or continues in some form when we die. It is about the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning and purpose. It is about the development of a pupil's "spirit". Some people may call it the development of a pupil's "soul", others as the development of "personality" or "character".' (OFSTED 2004: 12).

Inspectors were to judge how well schools developed these characteristics in pupils, and how well pupils developed as a result. OFSTED then offered a list of 'characteristics of development' in pupils, followed by a list of what schools could do to encourage such development. The pupil list describes skills such as developing awareness, respect, empathy, ability, appreciation, understanding, and so on. The school list is all about giving pupils the opportunities to develop the skills. Both lists could in fact apply to any area of the curriculum. When beliefs are mentioned (once in each list) it is acknowledged that these may or may not be religious. Overall, OFSTED 2004 placed spiritual development firmly in a secular framework.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004

In *Religious Education: the non-statutory national framework* (QCA 2004), the promotion of pupils' spiritual development is firmly located under the heading, 'Learning across the curriculum: the contribution of religious education. The national framework states that 'religious education provides opportunities to promote spiritual development through:

- discussing and reflecting on key questions of meaning and truth such as the origins of the universe, life after death, good and evil, beliefs about God and values such as justice, honesty and truth

- learning about and reflecting on important concepts, experiences and beliefs that are at the heart of religious and other traditions and practices
- considering how beliefs and concepts in religion may be expressed through the creative and expressive arts and related to the human and natural sciences, thereby contributing to personal and communal identity
- considering how religions and other world views perceive the value of human beings, and their relationships with one another, with the natural world, and with God
- valuing relationships and developing a sense of belonging
- developing their own views on religious and spiritual issues.’ (QCA 2004: 14).

The national framework thus addresses the question of promoting pupils’ spiritual development by linking spirituality with religion – a return to spirituality’s 1944 roots.

However, whilst the promotion of spiritual development can include reflection on the origins of the universe, life after death, good and evil, beliefs about God – all major themes of religion – there is no suggestion that pupils might make a personal response to these issues. Pupils are to value relationships, consider how others, including those with a religious faith value others, the natural world and God, and, in a separate bullet point, develop their own views on religious and spiritual issues. There is a subtle difference here from the statement of the 1994 model syllabuses, which stated that pupils were to ‘enhance their spiritual development’ by responding to the fundamental questions of life ‘with reference to the teachings and practices of religions’ (SCAA 1994: 4). The national framework suggests a certain distancing from direct engagement with religious belief, a suggestion which is born out by the national framework’s description of attainment target 2. Here, ‘Learning from religion’ is concerned with ‘developing pupils’ reflection on, and response to, *their own experience* and *learning about religion*’ (QCA 2004: 34, my italics). Pupils are to respond to their own experience, whatever that might be, and respond to learning about religion. They are not encouraged to take on board any particular religious attitude or belief. By contrast they are to ‘value relationships’, arguably a moral value which is clearly considered beyond dispute. It is interesting in this connection that the next bullet point states the development of their own views in relation to religion and spirituality but not morality. Moral values are treated differently.

There is an echo here of the ambivalence of the government-sponsored documents of the 1990s, where on the one hand, the National Curriculum Council (1993a) and OFSTED (1994) focused on schools promoting the development of a non-religious spirituality, an inclusive approach, and on the other hand, *Circular 1/94* and the 1994 model syllabuses suggested that pupils’ spiritual development might be assessed in terms of their personal responses to religious teachings. The national framework appears to have taken a step back from the latter position. The emphasis of the framework is on a spirituality that is focused on personal experiences and values, rather than a spirituality that develops from direct engagement with religion.

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales

Concern for the role and status of religious education has now been taken up by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) which, in September 2005, in response to the London bombings of 7/7, published a proposed National Strategy for RE. The relevant draft document draws attention to the many decades of under-resourcing for RE on the grounds of ‘prevailing liberal/secularist assumptions that [RE’s] subject matter is withering, with RE a mere reminder from another century’. The paper points out that Muslims and Christians alike want schools and colleges to pay greater attention to ‘deeper questions of meaning and purpose in both personal and social life and to religion’s part in them’ (REC 2005: 1). A new approach to developing religious spirituality in education seems to be needed. The paper calls for major funding for a strategy that aims to rectify the long-term shortfalls in provision for RE, in particular the need for major improvements in the training of specialist teachers at all levels. Whilst this is clearly and urgently needed, a further focus needs to be on encouraging religious education to offer pupils the opportunity, if they so wish, to develop their spirituality in a religious context.

Conclusion

The tracking of successive government's views from 1944 to 2004 on pupils' spiritual development reveals a constant tension between secular and religious approaches to spiritual development, fuelled by an overarching desire for schools to provide a spiritual development that is inclusive, available to all. This has resulted in an emphasis on secular definitions of spirituality in the context of pupils' education, and difficulty with locating spiritual development within religious education. Whilst documents from various government-sponsored bodies have provided schools over the years with a wealth of guidance on how to promote non-religious or secular spiritual development, guidance on how to promote pupils' spirituality in the context of religious education has been unclear, and remains so in this the third millennium. It seems that pupils are not to be encouraged to engage with religion in any personally meaningful way, merely to engage with learning about religion. In light of the events of 7/7 and the alarming increase in acts of terrorism around the world, perhaps now is the time for religious educators and faith leaders to produce a national strategy for a religious education that focuses on the 'ultimate good' in the world's major religions and encourages pupils to seek a religious faith for themselves.

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