



Shaman, Prophet, Sage: Deepening the Meaning of Spirituality and Social Justice for Teachers' Practice

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MARY EASTHAM

Massey University

INTRODUCTION

The shaman, the prophet and the sage are classical archetypes of the teacher. They refer, respectively, to the aim of healing (both physical and psychical), the search for truth and justice, and the quest for goodness and holiness. In every religious tradition of the world, these archetypes represent crucial dimensions of the whole person, although each tradition has its own unique emphasis. True to its roots, the Western prophetic traditions have tended to emphasize justice. In using these categories, we borrow from the treasure-houses of meaning and value that have evolved in the wisdom traditions of East and West, while attempting to avoid the sectarian snares set by any one institutional religion.¹ That these categories are inclusive and comprehensive, not divisive, is important in teaching spirituality and social justice in a secular, religiously pluralist society like New Zealand.²

This article is divided into two parts. The first part will situate each archetype of the teacher in its cultural context, and describe the kind of spiritual teacher each archetype represents. The second part will explore how each archetype can enrich the discussion about spirituality and social justice in teachers' practice.

THE SHAMAN: ARCHETYPE OF THE HEALER

The shaman is the primordial religious personality (*homo religiosus*) usually associated with animism and nature religions. Indeed, the Earth is the primordial religious reality and a symbol of the whole. Shamans derive their healing authority from the community and nurture it in communion with the cosmos.³ Psychologically, the shaman is probably the most balanced person in the community, the master of the threshold between this world and the world of the spirit. Although the shaman can be a herbalist, a singer or a poet, the primary role of the shaman is *to rescue the lost soul* in order to restore equilibrium to the community. A lost soul is someone who suffers from such a profound loss of meaning and value that he or she can no longer find their way without the intervention of a healer. The lost soul does not have the strength to defeat the forces which have taken control of his or her life.

Because shamans often have the gift of 'second sight', an advanced intuitive ability, they can look into someone's eyes and see straight to his or her soul. Indeed, to heal the lost soul, they must make the dangerous journey into the underworld (*psyche*) in order to understand the evil forces afflicting the person and pull them out into the light of day. This means concretely that shamans actually take the illness upon themselves in order to transform it.⁴

They are strong enough to bear the burden of another's illness – sometimes genuine insanity – because their own soul is intact. They have already made the healing journey in their own life and emerged on the other side. The history of religions calls the shaman *the self-healed healer*. Furthermore, when shamans are involved in a healing, the entire community supports them. In the history of religions, it has always been recognised that when a person suffers from *soul-loss*, something is very wrong with the moral and spiritual fabric of the community. The community must summon, therefore, the powerful healing forces of the cosmos and the ancestors so that when shamans make the perilous journey to the underworld, they do not get stuck.⁵

Why would a shaman get stuck in the underworld? Because evil is endlessly fascinating. There *have* been evil shamans, men or women of psychic power who decide to use their extraordinary psychic ability to gain power over others.⁶ If a good shaman becomes aware that he or she has been tainted by evil, they must undergo ritual purification, as in the sweat lodge of the native American traditions. In his classic work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes the ritual initiation of a young boy called by the community to become a healer.⁷ The ritual initiation is often a vision quest in which the neophyte goes out into the wilderness, fasts and undergoes a series of physical tests of endurance in order to unlock the deep secrets of the psyche, or soul. Under the guidance of an elder who has made the journey before him, the neophyte is often administered hallucinogenic drugs in order to fathom the depths of his psyche – a fearsome realm of great power. Here the neophyte confronts his demons, his fears, his mistakes, in short, all the negative attitudes and emotions that can entrap him and short-circuit his centres of spiritual energy.⁸ Here also he discovers his totem animal (spirit guide) who will be a source of strength for him throughout his life. The goal of the ritual initiation or vision quest is to have a profound *experience of spiritual death and rebirth*, that is, an experience of personal transformation. After this experience, the neophyte returns to the village. The experience has changed him forever. He now takes his place as a healer, and his life's work is to help others make the journey in order that they too may become whole.⁹ In the history of religions, the shaman is the repository of the community's healing wisdom and is always in touch with the healing forces of the cosmos, using the forces of nature as symbols of death and rebirth.

I have stated above that from the perspective of the history of religions, when a person suffers from *soul-loss*, something is wrong with the moral and spiritual fabric of the community. This fact brings us to the role of the prophet who performs the two-fold task of discerning the will of God for his/her people and working for justice.

THE PROPHET: ARCHETYPE FOR JUSTICE

A prophet is regarded as a teacher or interpreter of the will of God, or one who advocates and speaks innovatively for a cause, such as a prophet of the new order. From a history of religions' perspective, the prophet is identified with the *historical* traditions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. These traditions view the divine as transcendent, apart from the world and yet acting personally within human history. That God is at work within history and that a prophet can discern the will of God places a great emphasis on discernment, responsibility *and*

interpretation. For this reason, these traditions are associated with literacy and the written word.

We often think of the prophet as someone who can predict future events. Actually, the prophet predicts the consequences of evil deeds in the present because he or she adequately interprets the signs of the times and makes the connection between the moral failures of the present moment and their future consequences. Theirs is the work of critical inquiry and historical discernment. The prophet is a person of action. He or she emerges during turning points in history when old forms of thought are decaying and new ones breaking through. Since the former have become legitimated in economic, political and religious institutions, they are vested with power and influence. They may also be identified with the will of God and thus resist any historical or cultural critique. The most astute prophet will challenge people to understand that social institutions are both an expression of the Spirit in history¹⁰ *and* the product of accident and chance, cause and effect. History, sad to say, is written by the victors.

Within each of the traditions named above, the prophet calls the people to their highest ideals. Each in his own way challenges their adherents to be a people set apart, to cherish their identity, and never to compromise their values. It is when the people betray their highest ideals that disaster befalls the nation. Conversely, when people work to eliminate social evils in their midst, both the person and the community achieve well-being.

Whenever God is disclosed within history, people are involved in an act of interpretation. This interplay between reason (interpretation) and revelation (the tradition) is at the heart of the science of hermeneutics. Indeed, the term *hermeneutic* is named for 'Hermes,' the Greek divine messenger. Hermes performs the indispensable task of mediation and interpretation. He is engaged in a two-way conversation which brings the values and wisdom of the tradition into a creative encounter with the religious and political issues of the day. Prophets perform a *hermeneutical* task in attempting to retrieve the life-giving kernel of the tradition and make it new.¹¹ The crisis of the day challenges the tradition to grow and develop so that an adequate response might be made. This is a description of the 'hermeneutical circle'.¹² The prophet advocates and speaks innovatively for a cause (a prophet of the new order). In this way, the prophet is linked with the struggle for social justice which can be defined as just conduct, fairness, the exercise of authority in the maintenance of right, and to treat people fairly or appropriately.

Consider the legacy of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In words and deeds, he touched the centre of the American constitutional tradition and made it new. As he stood at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial, he called on black Americans to go up with him to the mountain top and look out on the Promised Land. At once, he became the new Moses and the new Lincoln,¹³ the author of the Emancipation Proclamation. He called the American people back to central premises of the Constitution which enshrined the moral ideal that all men are created equal under God. The Civil Rights movement brought into creative encounter the liberating message of the Exodus and the vision of equality in the American constitution. King's vision has not yet been perfectly realised but it represents both hope and promise for the American people.

THE SAGE: ARCHETYPE OF THE SEEKER

The sage is generally associated with the Eastern traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, although the mystical traditions of Judaism (Hassidism), Christianity (the Neo-platonic *via negativa*) and Islam (with its various schools of Sufism) include this kind of religious personality as well. The sage dedicates his/her life to the search for truth, holiness and enlightenment. Theirs is a renunciation (ascetic lifestyle, strict diet and celibacy) undertaken to purify the spirit from the cravings of the body. Theirs is the path of meditation (Eastern traditions) or contemplation (Western traditions), taken so as to increase levels of spiritual, moral and intellectual awareness and ultimately to discern reality from illusion. The sage may live apart from the world (monastery, ashram, desert, mountain, hermitage) or spend part of their life engaged with the affairs of the world and another part as a renouncer. In Hinduism, for example, the normal progression of the adult life is child, student, householder and finally renouncer.

The relationship between master and disciple is crucial to the spiritual development of the sage. In the Eastern traditions, this relationship is primarily dialogical. A favourite technique is to ask questions for which there are no logical answers, like the famous puzzles called *koans*. A Zen master might ask: 'What did your face look like before you were born?' The purpose of this question is not to get a 'correct' answer, but to 'blow out' the ego, which is regarded as the major obstacle to attaining enlightenment. In his classic work, 'Crest-Jewel of Discrimination' (*Vivekacudamani*), the Hindu sage Shankara defines ego as 'the self-consciousness which arises when the mental organ identifies with the body.' (Shankara, 1947: 47). To attain un-self-consciousness, mind, heart and body must all be purified of illusions and cravings. According to Shankara (1947), cravings block the flow of life-giving energies to the highest levels of mind and heart:

The more a man satisfies his cravings in the objective world, the more his cravings will increase. But if he controls them and ceases to gratify them, the seeds of craving will be destroyed.

(p. 79)

In the *Platform Sutra* of Hui-Neng (638-713), this famous Dyana (Zen) master recounts his own training, which provides an excellent introduction to the non-dual intuition (e.g., see Cleary, 1998). This is a way of thinking which often seems very 'Un-Western', peculiar to Eastern spirituality, and yet (as contemplatives like Merton and Panikkar insist) it is deeply akin to the trinitarian insight in Christianity. At its simplest, non-dual just means 'not this/not that,' *neti, neti*. If the first eye is the eye of the senses (which the shaman's experience opens), and the second eye is the eye of the mind (which the prophet's expression relies upon), then this is the opening of the third eye, the mystical intuition that reality transcends our mental categories. In non-dual thinking, all ideas and preconceptions are carefully put to one side or the other so that an 'emptiness' or 'openness' – so to speak – emerges where new insights may show themselves.

Now we must turn to the way these ancient archetypes can enrich the meaning of spirituality and social justice in teacher practice today. In what way can teachers fulfil a shamanic role for their students? How can teachers

embody a prophetic function as they work toward social justice within the educational institution and wider society? How does the archetype of the sage open up possibilities for new insights in education?

THE TEACHER AS SHAMAN: RESTORING BALANCE, MEANING AND PURPOSE

As noted above, the shamanic mode of teaching is about *restoring* meaning, value and purpose in our lives. It is necessary when an individual and/or a culture suffers from *soul-loss*, a profound mental, emotional and spiritual malaise. The shamanic is therefore a therapeutic dimension of spirituality and social justice. In *Teacher as Shaman*, Clifford Mayes argues that the shaman, which he describes as the 'wounded healer', is a powerful psycho-spiritual image from which to reflect on three dimensions of suffering that give birth to great teachers: the *vocative*, the *interpretive* and the *transferential*.¹⁴

1. The *vocative* refers to the spiritual experience of 'being called' to a higher purpose. In that the teaching profession is decidedly not a lucrative career option, the *vocative wound* is the call to touch others' lives in order to help them to become better people.
2. The *interpretive* refers to every teacher's experience of intellectual limitation. Most teachers realise that their knowledge is limited to certain areas of expertise. The *interpretive wound* is the refusal to deny or conceal limitations, even when our knowledge and therefore our authority has been challenged publicly.
3. The *transferential* refers to the psycho-spiritual wounds that students and teachers transfer onto one another. This means that a student or teacher *transfers* onto one another inappropriate feelings from a significant person in their lives. The *transferential wound* entails coming to terms with the wounds we have received from our own parents so that we do not unwittingly inflict them on others.

If the image of the shaman, that is, the self-healed healer, begins to shape the imagination of teachers, a powerful psycho-spiritual dynamic may be released that will catalyse healing both in their lives and in their students. This is because the self-healed healer has begun the hard work of self-awareness in order to understand more clearly about career motivations as well as intellectual, emotional and moral strengths and weaknesses. This kind of work is profoundly spiritual because once we begin the journey of self-knowledge, we begin to encounter our 'shadow' side, which in Jungian psychology is that part of ourselves that we despise and thus cannot face. For that reason, we unconsciously project it onto others, and in the process, do a great deal of emotional and psychological damage, especially if we are in a position of authority. A life-giving authority then becomes a 'power over' another. The teacher as shaman is a catalyst of healing and transformation. They put students in touch with their ability to transform life's hurts into greater self-awareness, compassion and forgiveness. Just as they discovered a new sense of meaning and purpose in their own lives, they help students discover it in theirs.

THE TEACHER AS PROPHET: HOPE AND PROMISE FOR JUSTICE SAKE

Our discussion of the prophet emphasised the visionary role as well as the advocate for justice. We also explored the task of hermeneutics which is an essential dimension of the prophetic role. This is because the prophet stands within the tradition and challenges people to live up to its highest ideals. In *The Ethical Teacher*, Ivan Snook (2003) compares the present market model of education with the egalitarian model which attempted to give everyone a 'fair go' in the vital areas of education, health, housing and superannuation:

As the 'market model' has advanced, the 'fairness and participation' model has declined. Equity has ceased to be a major consideration and its inclusion in school charters is now optional. Democratic participation has been downgraded in a number of practical ways. Of particular concern is the increasing dominance of the business sector.

(p.175)

Note that the 'fairness and participation' model resonates with a vision of the common good where the welfare of the whole takes precedence over the rights of the few to pursue their own interests.¹⁵ We might say, therefore, that the economic and ideological reforms caused a kind of *soul-loss* in New Zealand since a clear result was a greater fragmentation between social classes and an ever-growing gap between rich and poor. Study after study indicated that children were the most hard hit, along with the Māori and Pacific Island peoples, solo mothers with dependent children, the elderly, and so on.¹⁶ Studies have also indicated that education is becoming a tool for socialization into a very different vision of New Zealand, inconsistent with the egalitarian and communitarian principles of social democracy (Snook, 2003).

How then does the teacher take on a prophetic role and also hone prophetic skills in the classroom? The slogan 'the medium is the message' provides useful insights.¹⁷ Genuine teachers embody the prophetic dimension by being themselves critically aware. The prophetic teacher advocates for the common good of all by examining how his/her school attempts to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students in its community.¹⁸ Teachers might also introduce students to a simple kind of structural analysis which challenges them to examine the gap between theory and practice. In almost every economic and political situation, students can learn to ask the question: *Who benefits? Who loses?* Students may themselves discover that 'individuals' are embedded within groups which reflect class interests. The common good of all can only be achieved if the wealthy and powerful enter into solidarity with the most vulnerable groups in society, and these groups are conscientised to become agents of their own destinies. Prophetic teachers must see their role as one which encourages students to liberate themselves from social and cultural prejudices so that students can liberate others.

Our present cultural crises may challenge us to formulate completely new responses that we can scarcely even imagine just yet. This brings us to the role of the sage, for the sage is about catalyzing the unexpected, the totally new, the spontaneous vision that lies beyond our rational categories. This will be the most challenging dimension for teachers, but it is absolutely vital at this moment in our evolution as a people.

THE TEACHER AS SAGE: THE POWER OF EXAMPLE, THE OPEN HORIZON

The sage teaches goodness and kindness by direct example. The sage is the elder whose life has become an integrated whole, a role model for the young whether discovered in a formal educational setting or not. In the earlier discussion of the role of the Zen master, I pointed out that the purpose of the *koan*, the riddle or puzzle, was to 'blow out' the ego so that a totally new insight might emerge that was not dependent on a particular world-view.

An interesting example of this intuition is R. Buckminster Fuller's 'mistake mystique'.¹⁹ Fuller was an American architect who invented the geodesic dome, modelled on nature's own geometry, and just about the only structure that survives earthquakes. Fuller believed that houses built on this model would be both inexpensive and durable. Fuller did not complete his course of studies at Harvard because he refused to be intellectually straitjacketed by their programmes. But that did not stop him. On his own, he designed and patented his ideas, and during his lifetime was awarded more honorary doctorates than any other living American. Fuller coined the phrase 'mistake mystique' to describe his own model of teaching. He fervently believed that conventional teaching stunted intellectual growth because teachers rewarded only the 'right answers'. Thus, students might be afraid to take risks, to venture into uncharted areas, because they would be afraid of making mistakes. Because this approach discourages creativity, Fuller suggested that teachers reward all the mistakes the students could find in their own thinking – or that of the 'teacher'! – because learning from those mistakes was what would pave the way to new insights ... especially if the subject-matter at hand was a project to benefit humankind as a whole.

To what extent can teachers embody the sapiential or mystical dimension? Recall that the sage dedicates his or her life to truth, holiness or wholeness and enlightenment. The sage is consciously forming the next generation to face the challenges of a time that will be very different. The traditional teaching model here is dialogical, one-on-one, but these lessons can be exhibited. Most of the books of the 'Masters' – Confucius, the Upanishads, Shankara, the teachings of the Hassidim or the Zen Masters – are precisely such dialogues between teacher and pupil. To function in this way – at once concretely dealing with the student at hand and offering a universal exemplar – the teacher's focus must be on the next generation coming to its own wisdom, not just on promulgating his own particular doctrine or dogma. The true elder needs to have come through whatever crisis middle adulthood has thrown at him and emerged on the other side if he is to embody a spirituality of generativity, not stagnation.²⁰ The care of the next generation must be the primary concern.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed how the typology of shaman, prophet and sage might deepen and enrich the teaching of spirituality and social justice for teacher practice. Since they are the classical archetypes of the teacher, it is essential that all three somehow become part of teachers' practice. If not, some vital dimension of the person has surely been neglected. There can be serious repercussions for the health and human development of the person and society.

First, the spirituality of the *shaman* makes us aware of the relationship between spiritual illness and mental, emotional and physical illness. The shamanic also makes us aware that all illness is an effect of a culture that is out of balance. Indeed, our present global, economic and cultural forces socialise us into becoming people who are competitive, acquisitive consumers instead of responsible citizens, and every social institution is caught up in this pathology – the family, the school, religious institutions, and government. If the shamanic dimension is neglected, the whole concept of *soul-loss* is not even named, much less addressed. When this happens, people and the society at large begin to project onto the religious and cultural ‘other’ the deep-seated illness that they cannot face in themselves.²¹

Second, the spirituality of the *prophet* is imperative at this time in our moral development as a people. We live in an age of acute crisis: political, economic and cultural. Teachers must articulate a vision of hope and promise that is worthy of capturing the moral imagination of the next generation. Young people must be able to dream so that they can see the crisis of the present moment as an opportunity for change, growth and renewal. If not, the young will continue to turn in on themselves – in cyberspace, drugs, consumerism, etc., and even suicide.

Finally, the spirituality of the *sage* is urgently important at this moment in history. For the sage is smart enough to know that he does not know, and so remains open: open to the unexpected, open to surprise, open to the possibilities of a bright new day. If the spirituality of the sage is not a dimension of teachers’ practice, teachers themselves may become locked into habits, prejudices, and rote ideologies that no longer give life. That would truly be a disaster, for there is nothing in all the world which can replace the power of the teacher – to heal, to give hope, and to bring forth new life.

ENDNOTES

1. The phrase ‘witness stops dialogue’ (cf. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, 1979, pp.232-233) illustrates the difficulties many people encounter when attempting to dialogue with people who are not interested in understanding religious ‘others’ but only in converting them. A religious studies approach includes ethics and spirituality and takes the ‘belief of the believer’ seriously, without proselytizing.
2. Cf. Denise and John Carmody, *Ways to the Centre: An Introduction to World Religions*, 1984 for a very readable introduction to the religious dimension of the person.
3. Among many works on this topic, the classic treatment remains Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 1972; cf. also Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives*, 1979 for a contemporary ‘chorus’ of actual shamans telling of their work.
4. In the Christian narrative of crucifixion, Jesus of Nazareth takes on a shamanic role. Another shamanic element in Christianity is the descent into the underworld on Holy Saturday to rescue the lost souls.
5. Cf. Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, 1972, ‘Schizophrenia – the Inward Journey’, pp.207-240. Also, Reichard, *Navajo Religion: A Study of Symbolism*, 1974, cf. especially ‘Theory of disease’, pp.80-99, and ‘Theory of curing’, pp.104-119.
6. One recent example of an evil shaman in modern cinema is the *diablero*, the devil or the demon in the film *Missing*.

7. Cf. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949/1968. Campbell believes that young men today need rites of initiation as much as they did in tribal societies. Initiation rituals enable young men to discover their masculine power in constructive ways – rather than belonging to gangs, or drink driving, or participating in other activities which might endanger their lives and the lives of their friends. Rites of initiation are important because young men can be a very destructive force in society.
8. Cf. Carolyn Myss, *The Anatomy of the Human Spirit: The Seven Stages of Power and Healing*, 1997 for a complete discussion of the seven chakras in the human body. The chakras are centres of spiritual energy which run from the spine to the top of the head, pp.68-70.
9. Examples of good shamans in modern cinema are *The Green Mile* and *The Sixth Sense*. In *The Green Mile*, the prisoner on death row has the gift of 'second sight' and the gift of healing, both physical and spiritual. In *The Sixth Sense*, the young boy brings healing to souls trapped in the underworld and their families.
10. The phrase 'Spirit in history' is Hegelian. Cf. Claude Geffre, *A New Age in Theology: The Marriage of Faith and History and the De-ghettoization of Christian Thought*, 1972. Geffre writes: 'For Hegel, history is a theophany of God because history is a totality already completed'. A 'theophany' is a manifestation of God to humans by actual appearance in the form of a man. Hegel believed that history is moving toward freedom.
11. Cf. Roy Howard, *The Three Faces of Hermeneutics*, 1982, pp.1-35 for a complete discussion of the history of hermeneutics in the Humanities.
12. Cf. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, 1975, p.74. Tracy writes: 'The category "hermeneutic circle" articulates the task of interpretation to be the effort of one subjective consciousness (the interpreter) to understand another consciousness (the author). This understanding of the hermeneutic task is not merely informed by historical consciousness. In fact it is fully determined by the psychologizing tendencies of that consciousness'.
13. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (1863) freed African American slaves after the Civil War (1861-65). Note also the two elements of hermeneutical retrieval in King's famous Promised Land speech – Moses and Lincoln. It is prophetic rhetoric at its best.
14. Cf. Clifford Mayes, 'The teacher as shaman', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 2005, Vol. 37, No.3, 329-238.
15. Cf. Ivan Snook, *The Ethical Teacher*, 2003, 'Ethics and Politics', pp.169-187 for a complete discussion.
16. Among others, cf. Jane Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment: A World Model for Structural Adjustment*, 1995, 'The Social Deficit', pp.271-297, and the New Zealand Churches' Agency on Social Issues (CASI) social justice statement: *Making Choices: Social Justice for our Time: An Initiative of the Church Leaders in 1993* (www.casi.org.nz/statements/decsjs.html).
17. The term 'the medium is the message'; cf. H. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964.
18. The Quality Public Education Coalition (QPEC), founded in 1997 following the Conference 'Competing Visions in Education' at the Pastoral Centre in Palmerston North (11-13 April) is a grassroots political organisation that has consistently challenged the government to return to the values of equality and fairness for which New Zealand has been renowned.
19. Cf. R. Buckminster Fuller, *Intuition*, 1972, pp. 89-97 for a discussion of the 'mistake mystique'.
20. Cf. Diane Papalia and Sally Olds, *Human Development*, 1992, p. 450 for a good discussion of Erik Erikson's stages of generativity versus stagnation.
21. Cf. Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*, 1957, pp.89-106, and 107-113.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARY EASTHAM

Massey University

Mary Eastham is the President of the Association of Practical Theologians in Oceania. Her work in New Zealand has gravitated between the Academy and the Church. She has tutored in Human Development Studies and Health Education at Massey University, and was Co-ordinator and Tutor for the Massey Graduate Diploma in Subject Studies for Teachers (Christian Education) from 1997-2006. She was a facilitator for a Pilot Project for the Development and Application of a Development Model in Values Education in 2001. She was a Relieving Teacher at Hato Paora College in Feilding in 2000, and was a tutor for Creative Journeys, a Programme for Special Needs Adults in the same year.

Mary was Catholic Tertiary Chaplain for the Diocese of Palmerston North from 2001-2004, and was Director of the Pastoral Centre in Palmerston North from 1996-1999. From the conference, 'Competing Visions in Education', held at the Pastoral Centre in April 1997, The Quality Public Education Coalition was launched.

Mary has a doctorate in Religious Studies and Religious Education from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and her research interests include: Ethics, Religion and Public Life, and Spirituality and Social Justice. She has published articles in these areas.