**Creating the condition for doubt. How might questioning and critical thinking inspire children’s spiritual development?**

**Abstract**

Doubt, in much of Kierkegaard’s writing, is the inspiration for faith. Illustrating doubt in terms of the suspension of totality, the negation of certainty, and subsequent reflection, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Philosophical Fragments*, both authored pseudonymously by Kierkegaard, consider how individuals might learn on the strength of their own personal contingency within the remits of pre-existing structures and systems. After exploring Kierkegaard’s ideas in these texts, this article considers how the four dimensions of Hay and Nye’s concept of relational consciousness might provide the conditions for questioning and critical thinking, which form a part of doubt. Drawing on examples from practice, it is proposed that children’s spiritual development might include doubt in order to effect change in the lives of learning individuals and on a wider scale.

**Introduction**

It might be suggested that doubt is diametrically opposed to what we understand spirituality to entail. When one surveys the canon of literature pertaining to children’s spirituality, it is clear that concepts such as meaning-making (Hyde, 2010: 94), identity (Webster, 2005: 5-6 ), connectedness (de Souza, 2010:3), and awe and wonder (Hay and Nye, 2006: 71), are amongst others, the foundation of children’s spiritual experiences. A wealth of published research indicates how such spiritual concepts contribute to their holistic development and sense of place in the world. Such findings certainly promote the positive aspects of spirituality, which in a variety of professional disciplines are now encouraged for well-being, wholeness and positive mental health (Eaude, 2009; Westerlund, 2016). This article argues however that when examined on a more philosophical level, each of the concepts listed here provide the opportunity not only for holistic development, but for questioning and critical thinking. Doubt is explored here through the lens of 19th century Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard. It is considered as a positive aspect of existence, therefore significant in children’s spiritual development.

**Doubt**

One of the hallmarks of Kierkegaard’s writing was his reticence to align himself with any knowledge considered to be fixed. Rejecting the authority of the Danish Lutheran church, his subsequent thinking became opposed to the acceptance of inherited theological or philosophical ideas as truth (Gardiner 1988: 10-12). Opposing the ‘direct’ manner in which dogmatic principles were transmitted in the church for example, his interest lay in how learning for faith might be indirect, reaching no conclusions (44). Additionally, he wrote in reaction to the school of Danish philosophers who were almost entirely influenced by Hegelian philosophy. He refuted their claim that Hegel’s phenomenological system could be taught directly and be fully understood (Tubbs, 2005: 214). Whilst not attacking Hegel per se, such a resolute interpretation of the system was an anathema to Kierkegaard; thus, seeking to illuminate the error of this view, his writing wrestles with certainty and promotes doubt.

It is necessary to note that doubt here does not equate to disbelief. Kierkegaard did not lose his faith in God. Yet his writing does include an aspect of loss. This loss, promoted by doubt, is the loss of totality and universality. For Kierkegaard, faith does not only equate to belief in a system or set of statutes. As suggested in *Fear and Trembling*, any claim to total understanding is really misunderstanding. Instead, faith involves a leap into the unknown (1985:42). As highlighted by Peter Roberts (2017: 839):

Doubt is often viewed in a negative light, as something to be avoided, but when understood in relation to the principle of openness it takes on a different character. An expression of doubt can be an indication of integrity – an honest admission that one does not know. Admitting to doubts can also signal a willingness to examine one’s own views critically and to change.

Kierkegaard’s doubt is illustrated in a number of ways. First, his indirect approach avoids any promotion of certainty. For example, his writing does not follow any traditional philosophical or theological style. A number of his ‘aesthetic’ texts’ aim to present opposed outlooks on life from the inside. This means that Kierkegaard’s ideas are explored through the actions and encounters of a number of characters in real-life situations. Through this indirect writing, readers are given the opportunity and space to draw their own conclusions regarding the motivations of these characters and apply their own meanings. Furthermore, texts such as *Repetition, Fear and Trembling* and *Stages on Life’s Way* are authored pseudonymously. Writing under different masks and guises, Kierkegaard addresses his readers indirectly, distancing himself from what is presented, again to allow them to respond personally to each text (Gardiner, 1988: 44).

For instance, under the guise of Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling,* Kierkegaard’s doubt is manifested in the suspension of certainty: In suspending his own author identity, he is reduced to silence. The voices of philosophers and theologians are also silenced as readers are encouraged to avoid resting on inherited belief systems and take the risk of venturing into the unknown. This text considers the fate of the biblical character Abraham. In the story located in Genesis 22, Abraham is called by God in faith to sacrifice his son Isaac as a gift offering in an act of obedience. In this act, he is led to suspend what is ethically acceptable (temporality/morality) in response to his passion for God (faith). This is his leap of faith. In making this leap, he ‘waives his claim’ to what is morally correct in temporal terms and acts on the ‘strength of the absurd’ (1985: 45). Through the presentation of this story, Kierkegaard allows his readers the opportunity to suspend their own certainties in relation to what they have previously learned about the text. They should make the leap away from what is accepted, to embrace the unknown. In his own historical context, this notion was indeed absurd; however, his intention was to allow readers to understand faith personally on their own terms.

Following the leap, there is a return. Abraham is given a reprieve as God intervenes. Whilst contemplating an act of terror, willing to suspend morality for the absurd, Abraham returns to his temporal situation transformed. In the suspension of the ethical, he encountered God the absolute (Kierkegaard, 1985: 72). Paradoxically, in the return to temporality following the suspension of accepted meaning, the reader might now understand absolutely – but this understanding is reflective of his or her personal contingency, as opposed to pre-determined stipulations.

Due to the religious nature of much of Kierkegaard’s thinking, doubt here, illustrated through the leap of faith, seemingly concerns the suspension of religiosity. Indeed, scholars of children’s spirituality have in some cases applied a similar view, including evading the acceptance of doctrine and dogmas as Absolute, preferring to adopt a more ontological stance (Erricker and Erricker, 2000: 73; Tacey, 2004: 38-9). Nevertheless, doubt here might also include making the leap away from other pre-determined, non-religious systems such as market-driven consumerism which in turn fuels the homogenisation of identity. For example, one might consider how often practitioners encourage children and young people to critique their desire to wear the same brand of trainers, or encourage a critical space within which to explore identity on a deeper level. However, considering the role of doubt in learning, it is clear from *Fear and Trembling* that with the learner as an active participant and not a voyeur, such learning might be authentic and transformative. Yet, as suggested by Gillian Rose in *Mourning becomes the law*, this should ‘leave us unsafe’ (1996:48).

As well as being indirect and including the suspension of inherited truth, Kierkegaard’s doubt also concerns negation. In *Either/Or*, the first of the ‘aesthetic texts,’ the ethical protagonist is a transfigured romantic who negates immediacy to know himself more authentically (1974: 159). He recognises the illusion of the presentation of truth as a totality (148), moves beyond the here and now to choose its negation, and this becomes his truth. This character’s knowledge is based on self-reflection in relation to negation and as such allows his contingency to be an influence on his learning. Much like Abraham, he accepts that this choice will include loss and pain; yet in this choice, he is transformed (149).

Gardiner notes that as ethical learners supersede the immediate, it is through self-realisation that they come to any truth (1988: 53). It is important to note that ethical learners make the choice *within* the moral and intelligible frameworks provided by the practices and institutions of society, therefore negation does not equate to rejection. Nevertheless, as this self-realisation results from negation *and* reflection, learners are aware of their own contingency and the role that this plays in determining what might be true. The learner fulfils his or her potentialities as a ‘free and purposive being’ (56), in negative relation to, but not rejecting of that which has already been presented immediately.

Kierkegaard’s indirect writing and pseudonymous identity allow the reader to ‘go his own way’ (Tubbs, 2005: 216). The spiritual teacher does not interfere with the learning of the student. The process of negation and reflection described in *Either/Or* is reminiscent of the notion of agency in children’s spirituality.

Brendan Hyde describes agency as ‘the ability of children to understand their world and act upon it’ and highlights how through engagement with the artefacts of their lives, learners are able to ‘influence learning and construct meaning for themselves’ within their own cultural contexts (2010: 94). Agency has an ontological basis, reflected in the writings of Marian de Souza who suggests that it might ‘enhance spiritual expression through intuitive, imaginative and creative responses that stem from deep within the individual’ (2010: 35). Agency is also explored by Adams, Hyde and Woolley who propose that this idea is effective in allowing learners to take risks, share their views and describe their experiences so to empower and raise self-esteem (2008: 38-9).

All these suggestions place the child or young person in the centre of learning, allowing them to reflect on their experiences and thus determine their own meanings. Often, children’s spirituality is deemed as inclusive of, but not determined by religion, and in some cases, the two are divorced entirely. The former might equate to any of the Kierkegaardian analogies described above; nevertheless, it is clear that whilst the relationship between Christianity and the individual in Kierkegaard’s writings should be renegotiated, religion is never fully rejected. Therefore, a Kierkegaardian expression of doubt, whilst promoting agency and criticality against the backdrop of a dominant paradigm, does not fully reject the paradigm; rather it renegotiates the individual’s relationship with it. In terms of the example presented above, it might be suggested that young people are not discouraged from wearing a popular brand of trainers but encouraged to question their reasons for and consequences of this choice, for a deeper understanding of their own identity and sense of place in society.

Therefore, it is suggested here that the notion of doubt might provide a template for questioning and critical thinking not only as children explore their relationship with external structures and ideas such as the religious, but to also allow them to critique the influence of other pre-determined notions such as culture, values and identity.

**The condition**

When providing the opportunities for learning based on the negative and unknown, it might be suggested that teachers create the condition that allows them to question and critically reflect. The condition concerns both the role of the ‘teacher’ (or professional adult involved in the child’s care) and the space (tangible or intangible) in which learning takes place. In Kierkegaardian fashion, neither are fixed or stable, yet as *un*fixed and *un*stable, they create the means by which children might negotiate different aspects of life authentically.

The notion of condition is presented by Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Fragments.* Interestingly, although a pseudonym is applied to the authorship of this text - Johannes Climacus - Kierkegaard himself appears in the credits as ‘responsible for publication;’ that is, as the editor. According to Gardiner, a reasonable assumption for this inclusion might be the acknowledgement that Kierkegaard himself is presenting the dilemma outlined in the text as worthy and necessary, whilst still allowing readers to draw their own conclusions (1988: 70). The sub-heading of this text is presented as a question: ‘Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness?’ (Kierkegaard, 1974: title page). In other words, its enquiry considers whether a learning individual requires tradition and thought in order to know God. The question intimates that the author seeks to ‘suspend’ historical, epistemological and conventional beliefs and practices in favour of uncertainty, but at the same time does not reject these. Rather he asks his readers to think again.

Here Kierkegaard explores how a learner comes to the knowledge he or she has, and the condition in which learning takes place. He proposes that for learners to obtain truth, the ‘teacher’ must bring it to them. But this teacher is not didactic. ‘He’ interrupts. In theological terms, this act of giving is represented by the incarnation of Christ. Within an historical trajectory in which the nature of the God of the Torah, the Law and the Prophets was understood in terms inherited and developed over time, God as eternal entered human temporality as Christ. This was to illuminate the potential personal relation that humanity might now have with God. Whilst the incarnation represents what Kierkegaard calls the ‘Absolute Paradox’ (1974: 46), as it is impossible for human cognition to understand it, this mystery reveals how Christ’s negation of eternity, taking on the limits of finite existence, created the condition in which individuals might experience the eternal. As a result, they might come to experience an authentic and personal faith. What was formerly ideal and presupposed, that is, based on memory and inherited retelling, became real, inciting the interruption of ideality and inspiring a new relation.

In the incarnation, the eternal entered the temporal to take on the limits of finite existence (Gardiner, 1988: 76). Accordingly, in spiritual development, the ‘teacher’ should also provide the condition necessary for understanding the truth in a personal way (Kierkegaard 1974: 17) by interrupting totality, and opening up the space for doubt. Thus, learning through doubt is meaningful to learners not only in terms of their historical and cultural heritage, but also their contingent lives. In response to the question posed by Kierkegaard, having an ‘historical’ consciousness in learning about ‘God’ or other inherited concepts is important in providing a framework within which learning might take place. However, it is the suspension or negation of this heritage, and reflection on it in the light of one’s personal continency, that creates the condition in which questioning and critical thinking (doubt) might take place.

Learning in Kierkegaard is not just about gaining knowledge, but about being transformed through reflection. Here the transformational force is referred to as ‘the God’ (1974: 19) who interrupts what is already accepted. ‘The God,’ acting as the condition for learning, prompts learners to be reminded that they are in error in their own immediacy. When they receive the truth made accessible by ‘the teacher’, and they reflect on this in the light of their own contingency, they can be transformed (23).Thus, it might be suggested that the suspension, negation and interruption of not only religious but other inherited forms of knowledge, within the condition that allows for reflection and the development of new meanings, validate questioning and critical thinking as important aspects of children’s spiritual development. This involves a pedagogical process which is described briefly now.

**Critical pedagogy**

In this context, the notion of critical pedagogy is used with caution. Within the literature of children’s spirituality, it seems that this means different things to different people, with contrasting views sitting under its umbrella. For instance, Andrew Wright proposes that his own notion of critical pedagogy aims to allow students to embrace ambiguity in religious education (Wright, 2001:133). In so doing the paradox of any perpetuating metanarrative is identified and evaluated, allowing for the critique of both historical and personal perspectives. Yet, he is also fundamentally doctrinal. In an earlier text he writes:

authentic faith is rooted not in self-reflection leading to an unmediated experience of a Unitarian God but in a relationship with the Trinitarian God dependent on the mediation of revelation through scripture and ecclesiastical tradition (Wright, 1998: 72).

On the other hand, Clive and Jane Erricker, well-known critics of Wright and also proponents of critical pedagogy, are suspicious of a doctrinal approach, and promote the exposure of what they perceive to be the illusion of the absolute truth claims of Christianity (2000: 45-58). Their preference is indeed the self-reflection that Wright rejects - that children’s personal and emotional involvement in their own experiences will allow them to develop their own epistemological positions (90). Clive Erricker further draws on his understanding of Kierkegaard to support his claim that the in promotion of children’s spirituality, epistemology should not succumb to what reason demands, but lead children ‘into the complexities, paradoxes and ironies of undecidability in order to wrestle with faith’ (2007: 54). This of course might underline what has already been highlighted from Kierkegaard here. Nevertheless, other than determining that there should be no claim to authority on the part of religious doctrine, and that equally teachers of religion should lay aside what has been ‘decided in advance’ (55), Erricker does not give any suggestions as to how his critical pedagogy might be put into practice.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard notes how faith is gained at the nexus of the understanding with the paradox (2009: 129). This happens in a moment when the self is surrendered and the paradox is accepted (125). Immediacy is lost to the other (eternal/absolute) but through the loss, the eternal intervenes. This means that any form of critical education should involve not just the negation of established or inherited truths or beliefs as in the case of Erricker, or the negation of self-reflection as in the case of Wright; it might rather involve a negation of the negation. Nigel Tubbs describes this as such:

The double reflection of inwardness is both the thinking of the universal and the relationship of the subject to that universal. Through the latter he becomes conscious of the negative, for truth is only as it appears to him – that is to say, it is subjective, and thus precisely its universality is negated for being known. If this then, is the truth of the content – that it can only be known negatively -it is this truth that has to be taught. Yet is cannot be taught directly as if it were positive knowledge. So, Kierkegaard says that in his relation to his knowledge, the subjective thinker is as negative as he is positive (2005:225)

Of course, Tubbs is gender specific in relation to the learner as described by Kierkegaard in

*Philosophical Fragments*, therefore there is no bias on his part. He concludes by describing how

the negation of universality and the subsequent negation of subjectivity ‘keep the wound of the

negative open’ (225); this acknowledges the space created by the negation of the negation, and

whilst painful and risky, allows for learning in its most authentic sense. This spaceinspires

questioning and critical reflection, so to renegotiate a more personal understanding of (historical)

knowledge, and take this learning forward into the learner’s personal experience. Nevertheless, as

observed in the story of Abraham, there is also a return, allowing the learner to once again engage

with the historical consciousness, but in a transformed state. A story here should illustrate this in practice.

An interruption took place following a choir field trip undertaken with some of the older children in a Primary school. During the trip the children were all very careful not to throw away their crisp packets as their whole school recycling scheme had recently extended to including such items. All were duly kept together and the next day placed in the recycling box in the Junior area. However, during class the following morning, where the children were learning about Space, one child became quite agitated. Having an additional need, it is usual for him to remove himself from class in times of stress. Yet in this instance, he took himself into the library for a purpose. He needed to deal with what was on his mind: recycling. As the bell went for lunch, he came back to class with a letter written to the organisers of the choir concert, urging them to encourage *all* participants (6,000 children) to recycle their empty crisp packets, as he was aware that in such a context, there would have been a lot of plastic waste.

This interruption (not of the lesson, but of the child’s engagement with the lesson) made both children and staff aware that what was significant in that morning’s education was not what the children had learnt about Space; the real (and more meaningful) learning was that inspired by a child who was actually disengaged with what was required by the pre-determined curriculum. Indeed, we might go as far as recognising that this child was in fact the teacher. The negation of the curriculum and interruption of the lesson facilitated the personal response of the child. On his return to class, he was transformed and able to encourage the transformation of others through his renewed vision and willingness to pass this on.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the light of this, having created the condition for personal learning, it might be acknowledged that the teacher cannot predict how the children will respond. This inspires a sense of risk. It involves a leap away from expected outcomes, but allows children to learn in a personal and meaningful way. This is not easy. However, as making the leap might include letting go of what has been presented as ‘true,’ what then becomes true will have more significance to learners.

**Questioning and critical thinking**

Writing from a Kierkegaardian perspective, Roberts asserts that questioning is an essential aspect of critical pedagogy. He also posits that questioning need not be debilitating. Allowing for the acceptance of some ideas and the moving on from others, he suggests that the discomfort of questioning (2017: 839), allows for a less linear education, but a more enduring education of ‘observation, reflection, and action’ (840). This also has Freirian overtones, and as outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this recognises learners as always being in process – in a state of becoming – one’s education never complete (Freire, 1996: 160). Questioning is also personal, and in reaction to the mainly performative paradigm evident in many countries today, Roberts acknowledges the authority of subjectivity. This puts the status of the teacher at risk. In fact, Roberts asserts that one should ‘sacrifice oneself as a teacher’ (841). Yet according to Tubbs, the learner who questions is both student and teacher (2005:234): and the teacher struggling with presenting the truth as absolute, creates the condition for doubt.

As suggested in the introduction, it is proposed here that different aspects of children’s spirituality might provide the opportunity for the creation of the condition which inspires doubt and informs personal and transformative learning. Taking each aspect listed at the outset, it is suggested that practitioners might embrace doubt when considering children’s spiritual development. The four aspects correlate with the four dimensions of relational consciousness, a concept identified by David Hay and Rebecca Nye (2006: 109), which, including four different relations, encompasses what spirituality holistically entails.

*Meaning-making (child-God consciousness)*

One afternoon, following a session of hymn singing in Catholic Primary school, a six-year old child asked if God is real. The teacher retorted ‘of course he does,’ thus closing down any opportunity for the child to question or explore the possibility of the existence of God, and disallowing any notion of doubt. Of course, it is not the remit of the Catholic teacher to instil in children a rejection of the host religion; neither can one provide empirical proof that God exists. However, in the sense that doubt here refers to negation and suspension rather than rejection, an opportunity was missed for the child to develop his own meaning of what ‘God’ might mean.

It might be suggested that, as in the previous story, this child was ‘the teacher’ who provided the interruption of inherited meanings to create a space in which he and his classmates might explore their ideas about ‘God’. This might involve asking questions, with other children contributing their own thoughts. It might involve drawing, writing or creative play. Brendan Hyde writes about how children weave ‘threads of meaning.’ This suggests that additional to drawing on traditional religious views of God, participants in his research ‘seemed to draw on an eclectic range of concepts and ideas to develop a personal framework that enabled them to make meaningful connections with the Transcendent and others’ (1998: 108).

When learners play an active role in attributing value and giving meaning to the character of any nebulous phenomenon, it does not become devalued – it becomes more meaningful. Grix (2004: 61) writes: ‘social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors.’ In this case the actors are Catholic children who too often are presented with ‘truth.’ Yet it is well documented (Coles 1990, Hay and Nye 1998, Champagne 2001, Hart 2003, Adams 2011) that when given the space, children might develop their own profound meanings regarding what is within and beyond, these often becoming more real to them than that of which adults might teach.

*Identity (child-self consciousness)*

When asked to write a description of their lives in the future, a class of eleven-year old children suggested that they might live in a big house (in London or New York), be famous (mainly a footballer or pop star) and have a lot of money. The children were then asked to write about the values they might have and how these might affect their lifestyles. This was more difficult as the children found it hard to equate values such as kindness and goodness with the seemingly ego-centric aspirations presented initially. In the space created by the interruption of their previous ambitions, they were able to reflect on effects of the positive values of society and consider the kind of people they would like to become. The opportunity for the children to suspend their ego-centric aims, and reflect more deeply and ethically, resulted in revised ambitions for the future.

As opposed to the interruption incited on the part of the children in the previous examples, here it was the class teacher who instigated the interruption. However, following the suspension of what the children felt were ‘accepted’ ambitions, and reflection on these in the light of exploring values, in their return to considering their life goals, changes (mainly for the better) were applied. In exploring ambitions and values the children had to critically evaluate their own identity, their own sense of worth, and whether conforming to an expected life trajectory might bring happiness and success. This led towards the realm of existential questioning, which Hay and Nye propose promote identity and morality (2006: 117).

Questions such as ‘who am I’ and ‘why am I here?’ direct children’s thinking beyond their immediate selves or external expectations. Scott Webster similarly promotes the idea of existential questioning as part of spiritual development. Drawing on Kierkegaard himself, he suggests that such questioning might also include ‘what am I?’ or in other words ‘what is the meaning of my very being? This relates to purpose and how the individual relates to others (2004: 11). He writes:

many youths, in order to publicly display their personal identities, often dress to imitate the images of their popular others and readily apply labels to themselves as being punk, cool, hip and so on. However, at best these practices only provide superficial identifications, which may or may not indicate what personal identities might be (2005:6).

In establishing authentic personal identity, Webster suggests that identification ‘how’ might be utilised in favour of ‘is’ (2005: 7), thus allowing young people to not only determine identity by what they might be or become, but by how they live

This again leads to criticality and questioning regarding dominant yet unseen values and influences in society. According to Rowan Williams, it is in critical reflection that the individual can move forward. This involves the negation and renegotiation of the self in relation with societal influences. He, as Kierkegaard, posits that it is the recognition of the significance of tension between the two that is the essence of self-development and writes: ‘I can only be where I truly am by recognising that there is no fixed place where I am’ (2000: 145). Here the developing self is always in question. The imperative is the individual thinking about thinking, checking against uncritical expressions of ‘reality’ so to provide material for a telling and retelling of the self (2000: 145-7).

*Connectedness (child-others consciousness)*

Children in an upper Primary school class have a strong sense of justice and consciousness of the implications of their actions. Following a class discussion regarding how they might promote an environmental message, it was agreed that they would write a song, in class, with the support of the visiting music teacher. The teacher followed her usual pattern for writing songs, but what followed surpassed her expectations. Having been asked to contribute ideas for lyrics and a melody, starting with one child, the ideas seemed to spiral, subsequently encompassing all children, and collectively ‘birthing’ a song. However, the contributions did not stop there. Not satisfied with just a song, children now led the way in suggesting that the song should form a protest. They would make banners and t-shirts; they would change the song’s middle section to a chant that they would shout out repeatedly at the protest. They would perform the song in assembly then line the school path and protest to parents and visitors on their way out of school. They would record the song onto a CD which would then be sold, with proceeds going to an environmental charity. They would then see how to license the song so they could sell it to other schools, again to raise money.

Having started with one idea, that is to write a song, the collective effort of the class interrupted the lesson plan, and as a whole unit, they developed their own enterprise. The teachers followed suit and supported these ideas, but at no point did they lead the way. According to de Souza:

if a person is deeply connected to their deepest self and to others, to self-knowledge, a sense of their place in the social order and, in turn, this connectedness helps them to make meaning of their lived experiences and provides them with a sense of purpose (2010:3).

Here the ‘doubt’ came in the children’s negation of individualism. What was achieved collectively could not have been achieved alone. Furthermore, following the negation was a return. In their return to the regular curriculum and events of the school day, there was an increased sense of self-esteem amongst a number of children; behaviour in class improved significantly and several children felt more empowered to speak out.

*Awe and wonder (child-world consciousness)*

Following a music lesson, in which eight year- old children explored different Creation stories from different religions, the class engaged in a discussion with the teacher about what they had learnt. One child commented on how thinking about the world had affected him personally. He explained how the activity made him understand how precious the world is and how we should work hard to keep it protected and clean. He then also began to talk about himself, recognising that he is quite insignificant yet has a responsibility towards the world. He seemed to be quite moved when he considered how powerful certain aspects of the world are, such as waterfalls and fires, but reflected that he can make a difference. He also explained that he was sorry for not being good and that he would try improve his behaviour. The creative activity suspended any formal learning on the part of the teacher, yet through the reflection, critical questioning and determination to make a change, this child evidenced Abraham’s leap of faith in a brief but significant moment.

This sense of being moved is described by Halstead and Outram Halstead as awe. Awe takes one by surprise. It involves fear as well as wonder. It concerns a deeper and wider sense of mystery than that experienced in the everyday. As such it might equate more closely with religious experience, but not exclusively so. The authors suggest that trees being uprooted in a great storm or the repeated crashing of waves on the shore, both inspirations for awe for example, require an active and personal response (2004: 165). Considering the self in relation to the awesome events of the natural world, one might critically appraise one’s behaviour and morality, question the meaning of life, and reflect more deeply on beauty, love and pain (166). They write: ‘Awe provides perspective and a deeper understanding of one's place within the broader scheme of things ‘(166).

Halstead and Outram Halstead do consider awe in relation to the divine and suggest that in response to feelings of awe, individuals might be more receptive to ‘divine law’ (2004:166). This implies that it is a learner’s feeling of awe in response to a sense of the holy or mysterious that allows them to understand more fully what might be presented as truth through religion or other forms of education. Spirituality sometimes pertains to the ‘wow’ factor of life. This is described by Hay and Nye as wonder and awe, and is experienced in the child’s relationship to the natural world (2006: 116). Wonder might be inspired by everyday events such as ‘when a match is struck’ or ‘water coming out of a tap’ (71-2). The authors argue that these events might become the stimulus for children’s contemplation of mystery, for which no easy answers are provided; they might allow the child to consider the aspects of life that are beyond explanation.

Rather than locating mystery in a religious world detached from the real lives of learners, the experience of mystery as suggested here might be a daily occurrence. This reflects the suggestion of Rudolph Otto in *Idea of the Holy*, that mystery invites reflection on the holy, and that the holy can be expressed in everyday consciousness (Otto, 1976: 15). Thus, affective categories of spirituality described by Hay and Nye, such as flow (2006: 68-9), tuning (68), the felt sense (70), and imagination (72-3) all exemplify how mystery might be inspired as the starting point for spiritual growth. Again, in line with the story presented here, each category contributed the child’s engagement with the activity, interrupting formalised learning to create the condition in which wonder and awe inspired change.

**Conclusion**

It is widely acknowledged that children’s spiritual development includes some form of transformation (Hay and Nye, 2006:135; Privett, 2009: 109; de Souza, 2010: 31). Abraham’s leap of faith led him to re-evaluate himself in relation to the absolute and live differently as a result. The interruption of totality, evidenced in the incarnation of Christ, allowed for the potential of each individual to experience the absolute personally, thus transforming perceptions of inherited belief. In this article, within the condition created by the interruption, doubt, illustrated as questioning and critical thinking is proposed a template for learning and spiritual development. This doubt inspires a sense of risk. It involves a leap away from expected outcomes. Yet it has the potential to effect change – on a personal level, local level, and indeed wider - and thus is presented as a way forward for the development of children’s spirituality.

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1. This story is an adapted extract from Wills, R. (2020) Learning beyond the objective in Primary Education: Philosophical Perspectives from Theory and Practice. Abingdon: Routledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)