

Reclaiming Icons for a Post-Pandemic Christian Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article posits a way forward for church-based Christian Education following the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. Drawing on the writings of Kierkegaard, it is proposed that both a “leap of faith” and an “interruption” of linear learning might establish a more authentic way of relating to children’s spirituality. Including examples from practice, the icon is visited as a pedagogical tool that inspires possibility and wrestles with fixed ideas to inspire new meanings for children today.

Keywords

Pedagogy, Kierkegaard, icon, parable, interruption

Introduction

During the first Covid-19-related lockdown of March 2020, in England and beyond, many acts of Christian worship took place online. This included the live streaming of services, prerecorded sessions, and social events taking place on Zoom or other interactive platforms. In relation to children’s ministry, a broad spectrum of provision was evident, ranging from little or no content, through more family-based activities, to online T.V. channels specifically devoted to children. At the time, it was widely recognized that to capture children’s engagement within the online space, and thus keep them connected to the church community, sessions needed to be active and engaging (Holmes, 2021) and it is fair to say that through games, quizzes and action songs, learning was fun. However, pedagogy reverted to or certainly reinforced a linear method of ministry which includes predetermined outcomes for learning.

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This posed a problem for pedagogy, not least for those whose determination over recent years has been to provide a reflective space for children in relation to their personal spiritual development (Bellous, 2021; Robinson, 2020).

The disruption caused by the pandemic brought about an interruption within everyday life, opening a chasm of uncertainty and fear in a myriad of aspects of lived experience (Rathakrishnan et al., 2022). It caused a sense of groundlessness and an acceptance of the unknown, while yet providing the opportunity to revisit how to work and live, and to reflect on what is valued as important. The rhetoric among Christian educators during this time was that “we can’t go back,” meaning that the interruption should inspire new ways forward for teaching and learning. Yet in 2023, three years on from this initial burst of online activity, children find themselves back in the physical space of the Christian community and it is questioned here whether, as pre-pandemic activities resume, teachers have drawn upon the opportunity afforded by the interruption to reevaluate the pedagogical practices of previous and/or lockdown times, and consider if the groundlessness and unknowing that affected our daily lives might be applied to learning. From the position of speculative philosophy, Rose (1981) notes that the condition of the possibility of experience is the condition of the meaning of experience. This might be considered a template for Christian education in post-pandemic times.

Written for an audience of influencers within children’s ministry such as trainers in children’s work within colleges, and directors of para-church organizations that focus on work with children and families, this article aims to reflect that while the opportunity for a paradigm change brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic has not been fully utilized, the interruption caused by lockdowns might instead serve as a metaphor for teaching and learning going forward. Through the lens of Kierkegaard, the discussion posits how a leap away from certainty in teaching might in fact promote authentic learning and continues to consider how the rupture of established methods might encourage a revised approach to learning in this context. With examples from practice underpinned by the ideas of Williams (2000), the icon is visited as a pedagogical tool which allows for groundlessness and uncertainty in a critical relation with Christian teaching and tradition.

The Leap of Faith

In *Fear and Trembling* (1985), Kierkegaard describes “faith.” Faith here is characterized not by possession but by a movement of loss and return. Using the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis chapter 22 as an illustration, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes de Silentio describes how, in response to a call from God, the protagonist deigned to sacrifice his son. Although this action was against ethics and human goodness, Abraham was prepared to suspend each immediate reality for eternal consequences. At the final moment, God gave Isaac a reprieve, allowing Abraham to replace him as the sacrifice with a ram. This “teleological suspension of the ethical” (Kierkegaard, 1985, n.p.) which in

Kierkegaardian rhetoric is the “absurd,” to modern sensibility is both horrific and objectionable. Yet in this inexplicable situation, Abraham encountered God. Through the leap of faith away from certainty, letting go of his own ideas on morality, and in his return to the ethical world, he was able to experience the infinite in a real and personal way. He was thus able to understand God’s promises to him more authentically.

The purpose of this illustration here of course is not to advocate suspending morality. However, it does shed light on the inadequacy of a linear movement of learning. de Silentio claims that the linear movement does not inspire faith but is a substitute for faith (Kierkegaard, 1985). In this model, learners sit comfortably with what they believe in accordance with what has been taught. Learning is finite grasped through immediacy. On the other hand, in the light of Abraham’s example, the author argues that authentic faith development concerns the unknown. It pertains to belief and action on the strength of a leap away from certainty, beyond any finite knowledge or representation. Learning individuals as such come into an experience of God that is not defined externally but is authentic to who they are in their Being (Heidegger, 1962) and in the light of their lived experience (Wills, 2018). For pedagogy, it follows that educators should be willing to sacrifice the claim to agreed meanings concerning the contents of faith to allow for a personal encounter with the infinite. This might mean suspending lesson plans or curriculum objectives when necessary to open the space for exploration and a new experience of God.

One Sunday the Bible reading in Sunday School was from the book of 2 Kings, in which the prophet Elijah prays that the oil of a generous widow would not run out, so she could feed herself and her son; indeed, it did not. To highlight the power of prayer today, the teacher described an illustration from the book *The Hiding Place* (Ten Boom, 1971) in which Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie, while in prison during World War Two, prayed to have enough vitamin drops to keep them healthy. They found that the jar only ran out of drops when it was no longer needed: a miracle. In disbelief, one of the children said “that’s not true” following which a lively discussion ensued regarding God’s reality, the power of prayer, and the role of the miraculous. Putting the planned lesson to one side and hearing the thoughts and experiences of others in the group, this young person’s perception of God loosened, leading him to consider that faith could be relevant in our lives here and now, while still recognizing his disbelief. Through the suspension of the agreed learning outcome, a middle space opened to allow him to question and explore what this Bible story might mean. He did not grasp the contents of faith, but through his doubt, he allowed Spirit to inspire a meaningful learning experience.

To return to *Fear and Trembling* (1985), and in relation to the story of Abraham and Isaac, it is important to note that this Biblical event included paradox and pain. Pain is recognized as a necessary part of the process before the leap of faith is made. On several occasions, the anguish of Abraham’s choice to sacrifice his son in response to God’s call is made clear. Within the contradiction of the sacrifice is

Abraham's love for Isaac and his fear of God, and within the action comes the paradox of duty and right (Kierkegaard, 1985).

Similarly, for the teacher who embraces this idea, the paradox of suspending what is held as immediate truth, and the pain of the loss of certainty, must be embraced. The suspension of the ethical highlights the relation of knowledge to the knower to be a difficult one and this presents a riskier means of teaching. What this means in practice is that teachers should acknowledge the leap away from expected outcomes, allowing learners to experience God the infinite in a real and personal way. Making the leap might include embracing nurture rather than transmission; it might also involve wrestling with ideas and concepts provided by the faith context in the light of one's personal ideas and experiences. Furthermore, it might include the risk of letting go of one's own opinions to allow the learners to unfold their own. For Kierkegaard, authenticity in learning leads the individual away from a purely cognitive understanding of the faith to an experience that will "exist in it" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 378).

The Interruption

As already noted, in the linear progression of learning, faith development involves aspects of finite learning. Before the pandemic, and again increasingly again now, much of children's work in the UK might be characterized by models of ministry which though logos, slogans, and curricula are recognizable to many (e.g., Messy Church, Godly Play, and PowerPack Ministries). To support faith development there is a plethora of excellent resources available that include ways for learners to engage with the Biblical metanarrative and contents of faith. However, such a resource-based approach might be also considered finite. While deeming engagement with Biblical narratives to be crucial in post-pandemic pedagogy, it is suggested here again that the linear method of ministry might be reevaluated for a more authentic learning experience.

As stated above, the Covid-19 pandemic brought about an interruption to the lives of all people globally. In relation to the current discussion, the interruption might be referred to as a rupture which breaks open previously valued practices to bring about new and relevant purposes. In light of this, the current discussion moves to consider, through the lens of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (1974), how in authentic learning, the absolute intervenes, or interrupts, to bring about a moment of meaningful encounter for spiritual development and personal faith. This moment is brought about by the intervention of Spirit, which is the basis for authentic spiritual learning.

Kierkegaard's conundrum, and that which forms the basis of his thinking in *Philosophical Fragments* (1974), is the God-man relationship and here he is at pains to consider how this is encountered and "known" in human existence. This time using the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, who according to Tubbs is the pseudonym of his philosophical doubt (2005), Kierkegaard considers that "God" or "Christianity," cannot be known objectively, or immediately. In this, he was

writing in opposition to the philosophers and religious leaders of his day who endeavored to promote a presupposed notion of “God” as object to the individual Christian. Within this belief in what is deemed as objective truth, there is no room for doubt; however, it is doubt, or uncertainty, that Kierkegaard considers essential for authentic faith (Wills, 2019). Kierkegaard prefers to “suspend” historical, epistemological, and conventional beliefs and practices in favor of uncertainty regarding the absolute (God). The absolute cannot be known objectively, but *can* be experienced in the suspending, or interruption of objectivity.

For the current discussion, this means that resources which promote a linear movement toward the grasping of the contents of faith place limitations on spiritual learning, since “God” becomes known through representation with finite properties. However, in learning for authentic faith, the interruption which suspends objective or fixed meanings regarding such properties means that these are not dismissed but reevaluated in relation to subjective knowing, that is on the grounds of the *a priori* spiritual awareness of the learner. The teacher who allows for this process comes to the individual as an equal and communicates on level terms with the child; indeed, in the process of learning and relearning, both adult and child might each be deemed a spiritual learner.

It is important to note that objectivity is not interrupted here so it might be dismissed. The contents of Christianity are still the building blocks of authentic learning. However, when the fixed meanings concerning these contents are interrupted, reevaluated, and understood in the light of subjectivity, in turn, these contents can impact on the learning individual in a personal and meaningful way. In this, according to Collins, Kierkegaard gives “a moral and religious meaning to subjectivity” (1983, p. 140), meaning that learning is not divorced from the essential beliefs of the Christian faith, but might embrace a more personal relation with them. It also means that teachers and learners are guarded against the sentiment implicit that if anything is possible, then the possible can become anything. This learning process, rather than being linear, has a circularity, as both the contents and the learner impact the other for a renewed understanding of each. Tubbs (2005) names this “subjectivity’s subjectivity” which prevents truth becoming fixed, yet also prevents the infiltration of liberationist views, suspicious of metanarratives in relation to the agency of children as spiritual learners (Erricker & Erricker, 2000).

This is illustrated somewhat by the research of Rizzuto (1979). Her idea of a middle ground created between two positions recognizes and accepts the circular process already introduced. As a clinical researcher and practitioner in psychological and pastoral care, her project *The birth of the living God* focused on people’s images of God. Grounded in the lives of patients who revealed concepts of God that changed and evolved according to their life experiences, she suggests that one’s relationship with or image of God might be a transitional object relation. In this respect, the truth of an image of God lies in the space between the personal and the traditional.

In relation to pedagogy, through the interruption, Spirit gives the condition for unknowing, reveals the gift of eternity and in the moment brings learners into new

understandings. This is the moment when the contents of Christianity are not grasped but reevaluated on the basis of the interruption. This affects a change in the individual. It affords encounter. Learners however are not only given the truth but also the condition for learning the truth. The condition is created when teachers make the leap away from the immediacy of knowledge, to allow Spirit to open the gap between objectivity and subjectivity, to wrestle with issues of doubt and truth, and to inspire within the middle space, the possibility of a personal spiritual encounter with the absolute.

Reclaiming Icons

It is not the assumption here that the average child or young person in our churches is overly familiar with traditional icons featuring saints and apostles, the Holy Family, and the Madonna and Child. It is also not the intention here to advocate the introduction of such icons into Children's Ministry. Icons to children today might be highlighted as the symbols of Christianity that are more accessible, for example, songs, stories, rituals, and prayer. Yet, in the light of Kierkegaardian theory, the idea of the icon can provide a template for a way of working with children that provides the condition for spiritual exploration. Martin (www.eliasicons.co.uk) writes of icons: "The pictures are not there just to be looked at as though the worshipers were in an art museum; they are designed to be doors between this world and another world, between people and the Incarnate God."

The icon prevents the construction of any definitive meaning in itself. It is not the role of the icon to teach but to inspire. In religious iconography, this is indicated by the smallmouth that encourages silence, the use of reverse perspective giving a sense of movement indicating dynamic learning, and finally, the prominent eyes that draw you into the spiritual realm (Martin, www.eliasicons.co.uk). Icons are not to be observed, as in the traditional way of looking at art, but to be a means of accessing the middle space between the self and the absolute.

Rev. Dr. Rowan Williams has written about the loss of the icon in contemporary history in terms of cultural bereavement. It is his thesis that reimagining the role of the icon might serve to provide a "window into an alien frame of reference that is at the same time the structure that will make definitive sense of the world we inhabit" (2000, p. 2). Therefore, in spiritual terms, when the icon allows the individual to experience the realm which is beyond the everyday, the everyday will be transformed. Letting go of preconceived ideas of the subject matter, the learner relinquishes the idea that the icon is a "motionless phenomenon" (Williams, 2000, p. 185). Instead, the movement toward the source or center of the image allows the image in turn to "bear down" upon the individual to allow for self-examination and critical reflection.

For Christian education, Williams (2000) posits that it is out of the tension between one's experience of the absolute and the refusal of fixed representations that the Christian icon emerges. In this context, he writes about the iconography of

Eighth Century Eastern Christianity as a tool for Christian learning. Never viewed in profile, the characters (and scenes) depicted in the icons are not intended to be representations, but rather point the individual in a direction toward new perceptions. As the nexus of self and God, Williams proposes that these images invoke surrender to the absolute who illuminates the self and other relation to provide new meanings. Letting go of preconceived ideas of the subject matter, the icon acts as a window to the non-contingent world, and in the condition of possibility provided by the movement between the individual with the icon, Spirit intervenes to inspire a revisiting and retelling of contingent and inherited “truth.”

As a transitional object (Rizzuto, 1979), the icon can allow for the creation and recreation of meaning in this middle space, resulting in new and authentic meanings. It can be a template for a new way of teaching and learning, and by drawing on inherent principles such as silence, ritual, and engaging personally with Scripture, it might inspire the kind of learning that goes beyond any immediate aim, objective, resource, model, or method. It is possible to draw on a wide range of Christian symbols and features that can also become the window through which the absolute can intervene. In conclusion to this discussion, the role of the parable as an icon will be explored.

The Parable as an Icon

It might be suggested that the Christian story or parable provides an opposite illustration for the idea of the icon. Rarely providing any meaning regarding his telling of the parables, Christ encouraged his hearers to create their own meanings. Locating the stories in the world of his followers (several parables include sheep, vineyards, journeys, and employment), he allowed them, in the light of interplay with the stories, to reflect and so inspire meanings that were relevant to them. Spirit, as teacher, allowed for creative reflection. Similarly, the parable today might also provide an example of the icon that inspires the loss of certainty in learning and allows learners to reflect on meanings in order to afford authenticity in faith.

When learners hear or read a parable or Bible story in its entirety and original form, creative interplay (in the form of artistic activity, or just listening in silence), allows learners to reflect on what it might mean for them. They draw on their own experience or knowledge of the situations of the main characters as well as their prior understanding of Christ and his ministry to inspire meaning-making. These reflections can never be subjective or total since in this perspective, the absolute intervenes. It is the learner’s reflection on the parable on the strength of the leap of faith to the absolute that allows for authenticity in learning, and it is suggested, the life of faith. An example from practice here serves as a conclusion to this article and locates children in both the center of this discussion and in ways forward for pedagogy.

On a Christian camp, a group of children aged 7–11 listened to a reading of the “The Lost Sheep” (Luke 15) on DVD, with the reader dressed up as a shepherd. Following the reading, the children in small groups were invited to handle artifacts

from the story, including “precious” items such as jewellery and money. They were then asked to remember a time when they were lost or when they lost something precious, recalling their emotions and actions. Finally, they were invited to consider what Jesus’ story meant for the people of his time and for us today. The children’s responses were various and unique, and the leaders were astounded as to the insight provided, such as the story being an analogy of Jesus’ sacrifice and the idea that there are no outsiders in His kingdom.

The verbatim presentation from the Bible allowed the children to draw on the story in its original context. Using the objects and reflective questions, the story took the “leap” into their own experience to interrupt previously determined meanings and provide the starting point for reflection in the middle space. This then influenced their view of the story as they moved forward. The formulation and sharing of ideas promoted a circular movement which also allowed this learning to inspire others, including those responsible for leading and teaching. Each individual learner was able to take the learning forward in their own lives and it might be argued that each, in the moment when Spirit intervened, was transformed.

Concluding Remarks

The premise of this discussion is that as an icon, a Bible story or Scripture can become a window that allows learners a glimpse of what God might be communicating in each individual’s own time and place. The response to this is open-ended, therefore, not preplanned and can allow for engagement with meaning based on the individual identity or situation of the learner. The discussion does not propose to negate the use of preplanned resources or curricula but suggests that Bible Stories, lesson plans, and the contents of faith might be considered as icons, the meaning of which is relevant to each particular moment. As an icon, the groundlessness of engagement might allow the space for God to intervene in a way that is meaningful and transformative. In light of the interruption afforded by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is proposed that leaders and directors of children’s ministry need not organize or plan tightly knit active programs, as much as they might be fun. Going forward, it might be enough for children and families to read the Bible together, relationally, with no agenda or conditions, in a safe space, to be collectively restored.

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