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From Darkness to Light: Children Speak of Divine Encounter

Pauline Lovelock (Independent researcher) and Kate Adams (Bishop Grosseteste University, UK)

Abstract

Studies have shown that children share both positive and dark spiritual experiences. The former dominates the literature but whilst the need to address the dark side of spirituality has been raised it has not, as yet, been dealt with as widely as the more positive aspects (de Souza 2012). This paper draws on an empirical study with 44 children aged 8-11 who were interviewed in school after visiting a sacred space. Three key themes arising from their conversations are covered in this paper: divine encounter; physical feelings and fear. It is argued that the most appropriate way of understanding these phenomena is to draw on different fields and disciplines, notably although not exclusively theology, psychoanalysis, psychology and neuroscience are considered. The paper concludes that it is important to recognise both the light and dark and the blurred boundaries between them, in addition to different ways of perceiving them, in order to understand the whole child.

Key words

Children's spirituality; dark spirituality; holistic education; spiritual experience; angels

Introduction

The notion of humans encountering the divine is an enduring one which has been with us since ancient times, from the Greek gods toying with mortals to Scriptural accounts of God and angels communicating with people. These images are not confined to history. On a daily basis, millions of people around the world pray to a God or higher power whilst others report a range of encounters with divine beings, from glimpsing the afterlife during a near death experience, seeing a deceased relative through to direct communication with God (Rankin 2009).

Whilst such encounters are a central feature not only of many of the world's religions, they are also situated in contemporary spirituality texts which have been classified variously as 'New Age' or 'personal development'. However, with some exceptions, the majority of material relates primarily to adults and to experiences which they deem positive in nature. This is despite the fact that a smaller body of literature, both academic and popular, demonstrates that children also report divine encounters (see Coles 1990; Hoffman 1992; Hart 2003; Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008; Newcomb 2008; Burpo and Vincent 2010). This paper is predicated firstly on the arguments that children's spiritual voices need to be heard and the range of experiences needs to be recognised and respected. The second argument is that both the light and dark need to be addressed, albeit that there can be blurred boundaries between them. Thirdly, it proposes that the best way of understanding their divine encounters is through an interdisciplinary approach.

Divine encounter from different perspectives

Studies of children's spiritual experiences remain relatively small but are being explored from different perspectives. Texts which discuss a variety of types of experiences include those by, among others, Coles (1990), Hoffman (1992), Hart (2003), Hay and Nye (2006), Adams Hyde and Woolley (2008) and Adams (2010). Other research has focused on experiences of a specific nature. For example, Adams (2003) and Potgieter, van der Walt and Wolhuter (2009) have researched children's spiritual dreams, many of which involve communication with a divine being. Harris (2013) later explored how dreams can be used in the classroom through project based learning. Pettersen (2015) entered into dialogue with children about angels, which she argues can be used as a tool for entry into a spiritual pedagogy. Her work builds on reports of children seeing and/or interacting with angels, particularly guardian angels, as reported by authors including Hart (2003) and Adams (2010).

Whilst the definition of a spiritual experience remains highly debated and contested, empirical studies such as these show how children from different countries and cultures report a 'divine encounter'. This may have been with a being to whom they attribute a name such as God or Allah, to an angel, or to a person who they believe is related to the divine (sometimes a messenger) such as a holy figure.

In the majority of cases reported in the literature, children experience these in a positive way, finding them comforting or consoling, sometimes in times of worry or anxiety. However, some children are unsettled or even frightened by them. In an earlier text, the second author of this paper, Adams (2010) argued that adults need to give attention to the darker side of children's unseen worlds as much as the positive; that dreams in which a child reports hearing a divine message of reassurance should not be considered without also recognising its opposite force in the shape of a nightmare about a religious or spiritual entity. It is this darker side of spirituality which, de Souza (2012) observes, is under represented in the literature. She maintains that whilst it is important to recognise the joy and awe and wonder in many areas of spirituality, it is equally important to acknowledge the dark elements: an argument with which we concur, particularly in the quest to truly recognise the wholeness in 'the whole child'.

Children from a range of cultures report encounters with the divine and it is important to interrogate these from a range of different disciplines and fields. Traditionally these have been located in theology. For example, the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all refer to divine-human communications in their respective scriptures and holy texts, particularly in relation to God and angels. Whilst most scriptural accounts of this nature refer to adults, The Call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3) in the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament is an example of God speaking to a child in which Eli understood that Samuel had heard God's voice and told him to speak to God if he heard His voice again. Samuel complied and on the fourth calling, engaged in a conversation with God. The Hebrew Bible / Old Testament and the Qur'an also contain narratives of God/Allah communicating with Joseph/Yusuf through dreams which contained visual symbols which needed to be interpreted (Genesis 37ff and Sura 12 respectively) whilst the New Testament book of Matthew refers to angels sending messages through dreams (Matthew 2:12, 2:22; 27:19). For many religious people, such communications are thus founded in their respective teachings. However, as de Souza (2012) observes, in the western world, the concept and language of spirituality has moved out of religion and theology to include studies in the secular domain, and this shift highlights the importance of considering fields and disciplines outside of theology which can illuminate different ways of understanding the same experience. A useful example of a divine encounter that can be viewed from different perspectives is a Near Death Experience (NDE). Whilst the majority of cases are reported by adults, children also

experience them (Morse 2001; Burpo and Vincent 2010; Sartori 2014). Kellehear (1996) describes the western image of an NDE as a time when a person's heart stops beating and resuscitation begins. On becoming conscious, they often provide a narrative of having undertaken a review of their life, moving through a tunnel and encountering the divine or deceased loved ones. However, he notes that NDE reports in other cultures involve different imagery. Kellehear's (1996) observation reminds us of the importance of anthropological approaches to interdisciplinary work, to recognise that our own cultural standpoint is not the only way to view an experience: not only of an NDE but also of other types. Here, religious beliefs in the afterlife cross over with the medical profession, both of which can illuminate different elements and viewpoints relating to divine encounter.

Berryman's (2004) work is a good example of how different disciplines combine in the general area of spirituality. He is a clergyman who also works in the area of religious education and developed Godly Play. He also draws on neuroscience's understandings of the limbic system as well as theology, and the development of language and non-verbal gesture. He asks if children can know God if they do not have advanced language and argues that it is before language that children have their most natural forms of divine encounter which often occur during play. Peake (2016), a neurologist whose work is informed by quantum physics, also addresses the question of young children appearing to be spiritual. He states that the brains of children aged under three are bicameral, the left and right side of their brain still being formed. This, combined with the release of a chemical called Dimethyltryptamin, which generates a 'sensed presence' or 'inner voice' may explain how young children appear to be 'spiritual' in spite of having limited language to describe their experience (Peake 2016).

In dealing with dark spirituality, again different fields and disciplines are useful for understanding them. de Souza (2012) provides a helpful summary and analysis of how Jung's psychoanalytic notion of the shadow side of human nature needs illuminating, and how his views have influenced contemporary writings on the dark side of spirituality. Practitioners such as teachers, who are not trained to deal with children's fears are often understandably cautious about instigating discussions which may give rise to children's expression of trauma (Adams 2009). However, psychiatry and psychoanalysis play important roles in helping to understand children's fears. Heuscher's (1963) psychiatric study and Bettelheim's (1976) Freudian-influenced works on traditional European fairy tales illuminate the important role of fear in childhood more broadly. Bettelheim (1976) argued that the dark elements of these, embodied in the stories collected by the Grimm brothers, featuring witches, abandonment and death, enable children to manage their fears in a safe way. This, he proposed, enabled them to gain a stronger sense of meaning and purpose and facilitate emotional growth. Therapeutic counselling gives further insights into fear. Kubler Ross (1983), a Thanatologist, and Thorne (Mearns, Thorne with McLoud 2013), a Person-Centred counsellor, both argue that children should be allowed to discuss dark issues and also be allowed to cry which assists the healing process. This principle of enabling children to manage fears safely, such as through stories, and to share them, can also be applied to spiritual experiences which may generate similar responses.

In order to consider the value and nature of these different disciplinary approaches, these encounters need to be collected from children in ways which enable them to give expression to their spiritual voices(s). Their spiritual voice(s) are often lost in materialistic societies where, despite a rise in the child's voice within a rights agenda, the spiritual is often less valued and many children fear sharing their spiritual experiences due to a fear of ridicule or dismissal (Adams 2009; see also Hart 2003; Hay and Nye 2006). This study continues the tradition of giving children a spiritual voice(s) in a safe space,

which also acknowledges both the positive and darker elements of what they may share. In addition to adding to the literature on empirical studies of children's spirituality, this paper specifically focuses on their divine encounter, proposing interdisciplinary approaches to understanding their experiences – both light and dark. It is original in that part of the data collection was undertaken in a sacred space, which itself had implications for perceptions of light and dark.

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was undertaken by Lovelock (2015), enabling rich data to be gathered and the children's voices to be heard. The study involved children aged 8-11 who attended four primary schools in the east of England, all of which were church schools. The nature of the final sample was determined by those who consented to participate, rather than being a deliberate faith-based group. However, its composition may indicate that the church schools who were approached were more comfortable with the research focus than those schools with no faith affiliation who were invited to participate but chose not to.

Ethical approval was granted¹ and informed consent was subsequently given in writing by the head teacher of each school, staff and parents of the children who were interviewed. Children's verbal consent was gained on the interview tape prior to the interview being conducted. Child protection policies were carefully adhered to throughout.

The research was conducted by Lovelock, who visited each school during lesson time to discuss children's understandings of 'the sacred'. One week later, the teachers took the children to a sacred space (a place of Christian worship) for a one-day visit where they could experience silence and reflection. Another week later, Lovelock returned to the schools to follow up their memories and reflections of the day. At this point approximately ten volunteers from each school were sought to take part in individual semi-structured interviews.

In total, 44 children gave their informed consent to be interviewed. The sample consisted of 25 girls and 19 boys of which 17 identified themselves as marginal Christians only attending church at Christmas and weddings, 15 as practising Christians, 11 as Secular and one child as a practising Muslim.

The interviews were based upon open questions seeking children's responses to sacred places and their own spirituality. They included:

- What memories did you take away from the sacred space?
- What makes a place holy?
- How did you feel about being silent?
- What thoughts came into your mind during quiet times?
- Considering Mind, Body and Spirit, if our mind is what we think with and our body what we run around with, what do you think our Spirit might be for?
- What do you think might happen to us after we die?

¹ The research ethics committee at the University of East Anglia granted permission for the research to take place as part of a larger study which Lovelock subsequently completed at the College of Teachers in London, UK, leading to the award of Doctoral Fellowship of the College of Teachers (DFCOT).

- What did you like or dislike about the atmosphere in a sacred space?

Group interviews with children have acknowledge advantages which include feeling comfortable due to being with their friends and hence less intimidating (Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher 2010; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2013). In her pilot study, Lovelock used this approach but found that children felt uneasy being open about spiritual and religious matters, largely because of fear of being teased by others. This notion of fearing ridicule or dismissal is well documented in the spirituality literature (see Hay and Nye 2006; Adams 2010). Hence for this main study, Lovelock interviewed children on a one to one basis. This enabled Lovelock to focus on the individual needs of each child and potentially for them to feel safe in discussing personal issues (Tisdall et al. 2010). Children were undertaking class work and some drew pictures during the interviews.

Findings

Data were analysed using a thematic approach (Gibbs 2007; Cohen et al. 2013). Fifteen key themes emerged which were, in order of recurrence:

God talk (100%; n=44); Candles (100%; n=44); Well-being (97%; n=43); Heaven and Angels (91%; n=40); Belief in a soul and the afterlife (86%; n=38); Calm atmosphere (82%; n=36); Sense of sacred space (80%; n=35); Music (77%; n=34); Spiritual Experience (66%; n=29); Death talk (59%; n=25); Sacred smell, incense and candle wax (48%; n=21); Physical feeling (43%; n=19); "I prayed" (39%; n= 17); Fear (32%; n=14); Candle Anxiety (14%; n=6).

This paper focuses on the finding that 66% of children reported a spiritual experience, either during the visit to the sacred space or in other places, even though this was not a question posed by the researcher, and 43% described this as involving a physical feeling. The element of fear also emerged in a third of the children's discussion. Together, these elements enhance our understanding of children's experience of divine encounter and sacred space. Hence three key themes are explored here: (1) Divine encounter (2) physical feeling and (3) fear.

In order to ensure that the child's voices are conveyed authentically, each section begins with their narratives, prior to subsequent analysis. Their names have been fictionalised.

Divine Encounter

A recurring theme, when speaking of the Divine, was for the children to express a belief in the protection spiritual beings such as God and angels, who they believed interacted with them directly particularly in times of anxiety. Commonly these communications gave sensations of overwhelming peace and harmony. For some children there was a direct communication with God, with children reporting hearing God's voice talking to them directly, saying "Do not be afraid" and giving them courage. For others, God's presence was evident in other forms such as Jesus, angels or deceased relatives. Prayer was a common means of children's communication with God, exemplified by Poppy, who said "I felt it was easier to talk to God, I felt close to God". Ann had an epiphany, saying,

"I lit a candle and it was like Wow! And like, Oh my God He's there with you, and like you can't see Him but he's real, He's really there. I never knew that before. God is really real!"

Aeliyah, the Muslim girl, felt there was no difference being in Church or Mosque as they were both sacred places. “God is in both places,” she said, “I speak to God and I believe I am heard.” This was a belief echoed by Georgia who also aligned the sacred space with a divine presence, explaining that she believed God was in church, based on her feeling that there had been a channel directly to God whilst there.

Direct communications with angels were also regularly reported. While talking to the researcher, one child drew a large angel looking down from heaven. The angel had a message ‘Believe in yourself’ and at the bottom of the picture she drew herself with her long hair wearing a red dress. Close behind her she drew a grey figure; the two figures looked as if they were joined together. Above this she wrote ‘Guardian Angel’. She explained everyone has a guardian angel who walks with them for protection. She said, “Guardian angels are with you on earth throughout your life, you can ask them to help you make right decisions or have courage to do something new. Each angel has a name and is assigned to you.”

Several children reported angel sightings in their bedroom while siblings and parents slept unaware. In each case, only the child saw the angel. Children reported having conversations with their angels. A girl aged 9 explained about her nightmares, saying my “‘Aunt Angel’ comes to me when I am afraid.” Similarly, Ben referred to his deceased grandfather who still protected him in a similar way. He whispered that his grandfather had died two years earlier but he “still comes and sits on my bed, we look at his watch together”. The boy had been given his Grandfather’s watch following his death. The watch no longer worked, having stopped at the time of Grandfather’s death and could not be restarted. Ben’s Grandfather did not speak, only smiled, but Ben felt comforted that he was still caring for him.

Emily, aged 9, recounted her angelic protection in the context of a Near Death Experience she had when 4 years old whilst in hospital. She saw an Angel sitting on her hospital bed and reported that, five years later she still regularly sees the angel who she believes is protecting her and has never left her.

The sacred space

Ahead of their time in the sacred space, Lovelock advised the children that there would be some periods of silence. This resulted in feelings of calm and well-being as well as some more difficult, darker times, discussed below.

For some children, the church was seen as a place where the veil between heaven and earth was thin, describing it as a portal to heaven, through which angels and the discarnate could travel. David said “You can see each other and hear each other in churches”. When asked to whom he was referring, he replied “Jesus, God and the disciples, they are in the rising smoke, from candles and incense”.

David’s mention of candles was a recurring theme. Another child spoke of a spiritual time lighting candles saying, “White candles remind me of churches and holy places. I loved the white light because it is holy. God is everywhere and the light reminds me of God.” However, six children expressed anxiety about candles with Maria being afraid of lighting them after a house fire which had killed some of her relatives.

One boy commented that when he was in the sacred place, “When I was silent just then, I heard a voice in my head, was it Jesus I heard, I have never heard the voice before?” There were references to Saints being present in church. Thomas insisted that the living can see and hear the saints at any time in church, “They do meet here” Diane confirmed. “We could pray to Saints to help someone in trouble.” She went on “Church is a place where you can talk to God and He will talk back to you” but also mentioned that God could be spoken to anywhere at home or in the presence of someone who is ill and needing help.

Children said they sensed the presence of deceased relatives in sacred places, as well as at home. Katy said, “In church the dead people you remember are close to you but you can’t feel them, you can sense them. It is not frightening because it is not like a stranger, it’s in your family, like in your heart”. She explained she could feel the presence of her discarnate relative sitting next to her in church, having “come to see what was happening on earth and have a rest in the pew.”

Physical Feelings

One phenomenon reported by 43% of the children was a physical reaction as part of their spiritual experience. The majority spoke of feeling a rise in temperature, a sensation of warmth without external heat. Only two spoke of a drop in temperature. Poppy wrote, “I felt cold inside because it made me think of my cat and all the people who have died in my family”. Other examples include, “It’s normally cold in church. I went in and felt warm. I didn’t feel cold. I mean it was really warm” The church was freezing and the children’s breath could be seen in the air as they spoke. Martha said about the feeling, “I can’t describe it, you get that lovely feeling in your heart... it was really warm.” She added the church became warm when the heater was put on, but this was Winter and there was no heater”. Meanwhile, whilst these children described outward changes in temperature, Cath said “I felt warm, happy and calm. I felt it in my soul.”

Several children reported a tingling feeling, which they could not explain. whilst Mike who described himself as secular, spoke of a “jibbery” feeling. He said,

“I lit a candle and then I felt a bit weird somehow... I thought about Joseph, Jesus and Mary, and stuff ...when I am outside of church I am not religious but when I am in church I am a bit religious. What happened to me was unusual, I don’t want people thinking I am weird.”

Wendy described a feeling of butterflies in her stomach, saying “Every time I think of God or Jesus I get a butterfly feeling. I got it today, it feels nice”. Wendy said she had first had a similar feeling on her fourth birthday. However, this time she was thinking of her two deceased uncles who had both died young, but she believed were being looked after in heaven. At the time she felt the world was spinning faster than usual.

Of all the physical sensations that children described the ‘glazed eye’ is the most visible to an observer. During the period of silence, Lovelock observed several children with their eyes glazing over, staring into space. She noticed how some responded to adults’ questions in that time but later had no recollection of the conversation. As the state passed, some stated that they felt calm and safe, with some mentioning an encounter with God.

Of the 66% of children who reported a spiritual feeling, not all of these were physical. Frank described a ‘magic moment’ of awe and wonder, when his prayer flower opened in water. He described his

prayer as “flowing out to everyone who could hear it in their minds and see it in their brains”. Ellie described the feeling as one of love. She wrote, “We have a spirit, a soul inside us, which makes us have feelings, I understood God. I felt like he was giving me a new heart”

However, it is important to note that not all of the feelings described were easy to express. For example, Tom held rosary beads for the first time and asked “Today when I held the beads I felt filled up in a way I had not felt before, does this always happen?” Some described feeling ‘beyond time’ in these moments, as time appears to stand still. Stella, who described herself as secular, who highlighted being alone in a sacred place as special, “I just felt like I was on my own. I was quiet, I felt unusual and I didn’t know why I felt that way?”

Fear

The data above, if presented alone, could inadvertently present a biased impression that children’s divine encounters are all positive in nature. However, children described fear which took different forms and related to different aspects of life, including a fear of churches. A small number of children feared judgement if they entered a church. Sam told how his father had warned him that if he ever entered a church he would be struck down. Two other children spoke of spiritual warfare, one believing the devil was in the church fighting angels whilst another boy believed when he entered the church his soul would be made to do something he did not want to do, like be assigned to save someone from drowning in the future, but forfeiting his own life in the process.

Several children asked “Are the angels in the church watching and waiting for us?” Two were worried about going into the church. Chantelle said “I do not want to meet a real angel in there, everyone who meets one is usually terrified’ whilst James commented “I don’t want to go into the church because that is where God speaks to people. I don’t want him to speak to me!”

Several asked if the church was haunted, by ‘dead people or ghosts which live in old buildings’. Martin associated his fear with funerals, explaining that

“When a coffin is taken into a church the door is shut, after the priest has spoken, a portal opens and the body is taken up into heaven, then quickly shuts again”.

Martin preferred to keep the door open when he went to church, to stop the portal opening and risk being taken to heaven prematurely when he was not ready to go.

Similarly, when Lovelock explained that there would be a time of silence during the visit to the sacred space, some were apprehensive and a ten-year-old boy, Robert, reported a frightening premonition which he had previously encountered during a time of silence. He recalled arguing with his brother over the sharing of building bricks. The bricks collapsed on his brother killing him. He saw his brother’s spirit rise up and be captured by an evil spirit which trapped it in a dustbin. Martin was shaken, believing this was a premonition of his brother’s death for which he would be responsible.

One child described a frightening Near Death Experience which had befallen him, during which he was speeding down a tunnel with monsters trying to drag him into caves. “I do not want to die”, he said “because I do not want to go back in the tunnel, the devil is there.”

The serious nature of children's fears are discussed below, but it is also important to note that in some cases what caused anxiety for adults did in fact give comfort to children. Examples included children's reports of talking to the deceased or hearing their voices or, smelling their tobacco smoke or perfume. Notwithstanding the importance of fear and its implications for those involved, it is also important to recognise that in some cases children are consoled by experiences and feelings which adults may be worried about.

Analysis: understanding children's experiences and fears

This section focuses on exploring how interdisciplinary approaches can enhance our understanding of the data presented, arguing that one approach alone is insufficient.

When analysing children's Divine Encounter, the natural disciplinary home would often be considered to be Theology. As noted earlier, the Judeo-Christian and Islamic faiths all teach of God's existence, as well as that of angels, and respective scriptures refer to means of divine-human communication. Such accounts are not, of course, confined to scripture but also appear in other forms, not least in the narratives of adults and children through the ages (Rankin 2009). One interpretation of the children's narratives of communicating with God and/or angels therefore, is that they are genuine religious / spiritual experiences. However, the very nature of religious belief and the existence of the divine have long been contested and following recent developments in neuroscience, some have entered the debate in relation to the notion of these types of experience within the field of 'Neurotheology': the scientific study of the neural correlates of religious or spiritual beliefs, experiences and practice. A divergence of views has emerged.

Beauregard and O'Leary (2007), using research on the brain activity of Carmelite nuns during spiritual states, alongside other data, argue that there is evidence that people in profound spiritual states are in contact with an external reality. Newberg, a neuroscientist, collaborated with Waldman, a therapist, to collate data from brain-scan studies, in a large-scale survey of people's religious and spiritual experiences, and analyses of adults' drawings of God. They argued that prayer, meditation and spiritual practice benefit well-being through changing the brain, which is possible due to its plasticity. Newberg personally remains uncommitted as to whether or not God exists, proposing that in his view, it does not matter (Newberg and Waldman 2009).

There are, of course, many other ways of understanding a report of a divine encounter. For many, including those taking an atheistic stance, there is no divine element; psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1933/1995) proposed that belief in God relates to a need for a father figure who can offer protection; whilst many adults, including parents, pass children's accounts off as works of the imagination (Adams 2010). Which viewpoint is taken will of course depend on a personal worldview, but each discipline or field can illuminate different elements and in some cases synthesise to illuminate understanding.

The notion of physical feelings accompanying religious and/or spiritual encounter reported by children in this study has been recorded by adults throughout history. One example lies with the 14th Century English mystic Richard Rolle who reported the sensation of warmth, writing 'I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth too, not imaginary, and it felt as if my heart were actually on fire. ...but at once I realised it came entirely from within, that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful, but was the gift of my Maker' (Mayes 2016, p. 86).

The feeling of time being distorted, which several children mentioned in this study, is evident in different fields, described by poet T.S. Eliot (1971) in *Four Quartets* as moments when time appears to stand still. He wrote: 'To be conscious is not to be in time'. Contemporary psychologist, Hart (2003), applies this concept to children who can often be 'not in time'; linking to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow during which children are absorbed with sense of time being transcended and is cited elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Hay and Nye 2006; Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008; Surr 2011; Wills 2011). These concepts link to Wendy's experience captured in this study of the earth was spinning faster than usual; this was accompanied by a physical sensation of butterflies which, again has been reported in other studies including Wills' (2011) exploration of the spiritual nature of singing, citing a five-year-old girl who describes having butterflies when she sings.

In addition to the positive elements of the children's experiences from different perspectives, the darker elements also lend themselves to interdisciplinary approaches. In relation to religious experience, theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto (1923) identified the numinous as common to all religious experience, across cultures. He argued that the numinous is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the tendency to invoke fear and trembling at the same time as fascination. The children's sense of fear in some cases may be understood in this way. However, many of the children expressed fear of the *possibility* of an encounter or anxiety about the church as a place – issues which need further discussion.

Bettelheim's (1976) notion of children being frightened from a safe distance, such as through fairy stories, continues into contemporary culture various media such as television programmes, films and computer games deliberately scaring children. These influences were observed in this study. One boy was afraid of ghosts, stating that they would be like those on a computer game which he played (*Resident Evil 6*) in which ghosts rushed around the world capturing people.

Others were scared of churches and angels, some citing a long running children's science fiction television series entitled *Doctor Who*. The show features characters called The Weeping Angels, which are modelled on Victorian graveyard statues of angels. These statues come to life when no one is looking at them even in the moment of a person blinking, and then turn to stone as soon as they are being watched. Charles (2011 p. 7) analyses their role in the series, stating 'the most dangerous and terrifying monsters are the ones which are so obviously under our noses that we fail to notice them'. The Weeping Angels are superficially innocent and yet, from a Freudian perspective 'are revealed as the irresistibly dynamic avatars of the repressed drive towards death'. The creator of the Angels, Steven Moffat, commented that he has always been scared of statues and that he finds 'taking the familiar thing and making it different, sinister, odd is genuinely scary' (Charles 2011 p. 11). Arguably, Moffat has been successful in engendering fear in what is a highly popular television series. However, for some of the children in this study, these fears had moved beyond the thrill of an evening's entertainment in the safety of a home, and into the external world. Media studies, therefore, alongside more general socio-cultural approaches, offers some insights into how these children may have been influenced by a range of conceptions of sacred space and beings. These contrast with other children's experiences of angels as comforting and protecting, particularly in the form of guardian angels (see Hart 2003; Adams 2010; Pettersen 2015) and serve to highlight how adults should not take assumptions for granted; that for one child an angelic figure can bring immense consolation whilst for another it can bring intense fear. The same appears to apply to the notion of a sacred space, in this case, a church. These findings lead us to two important conclusions. First that that it is essential to

listen to children and hear their accounts of spirituality; and second, that whilst children's spiritual experiences are often clearly demarcated along a light and dark continuum, there can be grey areas in between. Fear emerging from an experience; fear of potentially having an experience; fear which is 'safe', emanating from a media image; a similar phenomenon experienced differently by two different children... However, these encounters may be understood, from whichever preferred discipline or combination thereof, all of these elements are bound by one factor which is the need to listen to the child's point of view.

Moving forwards

This paper has argued that different disciplines and fields are valuable in understanding children's divine encounters, both light and dark and those hovering inbetween. Certainly, a religious person may believe that a theological perspective alone is sufficient to explain a child's encounter with God or other divine being, but with increasingly fuzzy boundaries between religion and secularism, neuroscience, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis amongst others, there are increasing numbers of ways to understand one phenomenon.

A limitation of this study is its small sample size, meaning that generalisations cannot be made. However, findings broadly align with that in other studies as cited above, adding more empirical data to the small but growing body of evidence on children's spiritual experiences. Furthermore, following this study, Lovelock conducted a second project (not yet published) involving 650 children in the same age group specifically directed towards children views on bereavement, death talk and fear. This showed triangulation with the original study presented here.

The divergent accounts offered by the children in this study are indicative of the individual and personal nature of spiritual experiences and offer cautionary tales of how the darker elements may be obscured by the experiences which reside in the light. It is natural for researchers, particularly advocates of children's spirituality, to focus on the positive aspects not least because they are valuable and special for children; these often signify important and defining moment in children's paths to make meaning and shape identity. But so too can the darker moments, which may serve similar functions and in some cases require support from specially trained adults.

Rizzuto (1979 p. 4), a psychoanalyst, when writing of adults' belief in God stated, 'I must accept their belief as a reality to them. Any other point of view would do violence to the phenomenon studied'. Her view may also be applied to the children in this and other studies; but applied equally to both their comforting and exhilarating divine encounters but also their dark counterparts, both those representing frightening experiences and those which had not taken place but also those they feared might happen. In order to truly respect the whole child, this study reminded adults to be mindful of light and dark in young people's spiritual worlds and to support them accordingly.

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