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Icarus Ignored: Understanding Mundane Spirituality Through Young People's Prayer

Introduction

The philosopher Pirrie notes how Bruegel's painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, and Auden's poem about the painting, *Musée des Beaux Arts*, both illustrate not only that 'the tragedy of Icarus' is presented as 'unfold[ing] against the banal and mundane world around them', but also that 'tragedy in all its calamitousness is [itself] but a form of 'going-on' in a largely indifferent universe' (Pirrie 2019, 45). Icarus – the story goes – created wings so he could fly heavenwards, but drowned as he flew too close to the sun (as his wings melted), and would have also risked drowning if he flew too close to the sea (as his wings would get waterlogged). Is young people's prayer, similarly, trapped between experiencing the burning heat of the sun if it 'flies too high' and getting waterlogged in the earthly sea? We think not. This article explores the importance of mundane spirituality in young people's prayer, bringing together the 'worldly' and the 'divine' rather than seeing them as (risky) alternatives. We therefore ignore – or go beyond – the metaphor presented in the Icarus narrative.

There are many easy stereotypes when it comes to how children and young people (hereinafter ‘young people’) see prayer. Central to a number of the stereotypes is the idea that young people only concern themselves with apparently trivial matters (minor illnesses or broken friendships) and especially with somewhat selfish requests for gifts – such as a new bike¹. They get ‘waterlogged’ by flying too low. In contrast to those views, there is a more spiritual version of young people’s prayer as floating up heavenwards – and risk melting. Hesba Stretton’s popular Victorian book, *Jessica’s First Prayer* (Stretton 1867), combines elements of both stereotypes, with the heroine’s first prayer being:

O God! I want to know about you. And please pay Mr. Dan’el for all the warm coffee he’s give me. (Stretton 1867, 58.)

What might be called religiously conventional prayer generally involves praise of God and requests for ‘religiously approved’ good things. Books of prayers from different religious traditions (e.g. Groner et al 1993, Ibrahim 2010, Rock 2003, St John 2004, Scindia 2009) represent well this heavenly approach. What the ‘new-bike-oriented’ and the ‘religiously conventional’ stereotypical views on prayer seem to have in common is a distinction between what might be called a divine spirituality and a non-spiritual mundane, the ‘religiously approved’, divinely spiritual, prayers (such as those related to God/gods) and the ‘inappropriately’ and non-spiritual mundane prayers (such as requests for new bikes). The mundane in prayer is discouraged, for example by the much-repeated saying, that ‘God

¹ There is a long history of noble petitionary prayer: what is described here is the more selfish or apparently trivial requests for material or sporting success, what Mason, following Weber, describes as prayer ‘intended to persuade a spiritual power to grant worldly favours’ (Mason 2015, 26).

answers all prayers, but sometimes the answer is *no*' (as in Walsh 2008, 22). In other words, young people are encouraged to 'fly high' into the spiritual. The risks of ignoring the worldly in spirituality, along with the risks of 'flying high', both contribute to the position put forward in this article.

Here, we draw on two empirical research projects on young people's spirituality and prayer, one in the UK and one in Israel. Those projects both suggested that the 'mundane' plays a more important part in young people's experience of prayer, and that it is far from trivial or selfish – and is not necessarily an 'unspiritual' dimension of their lives. In other words, conventional views of young people's prayer may be missing a vital element that might be called 'mundane spirituality', as in Wong's account:

[T]o me spirituality is the capability of and the disposition to transcendence and raised awareness, including relational consciousness (and human qualities and their manifestations associated with transcendence and raised awareness), with these terms being understood both in their mundane and profound senses. (Wong 2006, 76.)

Wong justifies his choice of focusing on 'mundane' spirituality as he is concerned with addressing 'most people' and 'not just ... a few spiritual geniuses' (Wong 2006, 76). We are going further, and exploring what young people's views of prayer tells us about the spiritual significance of the mundane itself, with 'mundane' referring to the two central meanings or 'material' and 'quotidian'². In exploring the worldly and everyday aspects of spirituality, we

² These two overlapping meanings are also captured in dictionary definitions of mundane, of 'pertaining to this world, as contrasted with heaven' and 'of or pertaining to everyday life' (SOED 2007).

are drawing on spiritual traditions that find spirituality in or through, not beyond, the mundane and material world, especially those exploring *relational* spirituality. We are trying, that is, to save young people's spirituality from its Icarus position of being torn between heaven and earth, heading for a fall. As the poet William Carlos Williams notes, whilst Icarus' fall is unnoticed, the scene is set in Spring, when 'the whole pageantry / of the year was / awake tingling' (Williams 1976, 212). Young people themselves may be more 'awake tingling', spiritually, whilst in or considering prayer, than might be expected.

Young People Talk about Prayer

Here, we provide accounts derived from two quite distinct research projects. One was a project exploring spirituality through prayer in Jewish religious high schools in Israel, the other was exploring the possibilities of spiritual development in English schools which had set up 'prayer spaces'³. Notwithstanding the contrasting school and national contexts, we believe that the young people themselves described in their own ways a valuing of what we describe as forms of 'mundane spirituality'. It is the contrast between the contexts and religious backgrounds of the young people involved in the two projects that makes the elements of commonality interesting and valuable. Discussion of prayer in educational contexts is more often focused on the 'heavenly-oriented' praise or the 'earthly-oriented' petition, whilst children and young people in these projects both described a more conversational preference that indicated a sacred in the mundane that is not petitionary.

³ The approaches can be contrasted with the valuable research of Langford (2015) which analyses the prayers of young people in terms of 'prayer types'.

Spirituality in Jewish Religious High Schools for Boys

How do Israeli religious high school students talk about prayer? Do they see prayer as the opportunity to enliven the mundane or as focusing on the connection to the spirit (in their view this means God) while ignoring the mundane as a central component of their prayer focus? The following research (reported in full in Kohn 2018) focused on the experiences of twenty young people aged 16-18 during prayer services in four Jewish religious high schools for boys in Israel. These high schools are all boarding schools where young people live on campus during the week and go home for most weekends. In order to appreciate the young people's experiences of prayer it is important to understand the context in which these schools operate. The religious educational system in Israel is supervised by an authority within the Israel Ministry of Education called Chemed. The ethos of Chemed is that it is committed to provide an education that is based on the principles of the Torah and Jewish Law and the observance of its commandments. Educating towards belief in God is a cornerstone of Chemed's ethos⁴. The provision of prayer services in schools is seen as part of this commitment to Jewish law as daily prayer is considered a religious duty (Nissel 2001). About 25% of all those in schools in Israel belong to the Chemed system. Nearly all the students interviewed come from religiously Jewish orthodox homes. As do the vast majority of students in these schools. This means that they have been imbued from a young age with a culture of Jewish religious practice. Participation and practice of daily prayer rituals is part of their religious milieu.

In Israel, some scholars have focused on the challenges faced by educators in the

⁴ <http://edu.gov.il/sites/Hemed/Pages/homepage.aspx>

implementation of prayer worship in Jewish religiously orthodox schools, and some of the reasons for these challenges. Steinsaltz (1996), for example, claims that prayer can only be taught within the perspective of educating for belief in God and for a prayer service to be successful it must include the opportunity for the young person to develop a connection between himself and God. Religious schools, he posits, do a good job in teaching prayer literacy but do not do enough in developing the spiritual world of young people. As such there is a dissonance between the formal act of prayer recitation and the spiritual world of the young person. Steinsaltz's conceptions of prayer education were clearly evident in the discussions with the young people in this research.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study followed a qualitative research model. This type of research tries to capture what participants experience on the topic in their own words. Twenty young people between the ages of sixteen and eighteen were interviewed using semi-structured questions prepared in advance utilizing the model suggested by Patton (2015). In order to maximise the validity of the research, observations were conducted during prayer services. The interview data was analysed using a method of categorisation which identified the core recurring topics in one interview and then extrapolated and compared them to other interviews.

Three research questions formed the basis of student interviews:

- 1 What are the goals of and purposes of school prayer in the eyes of these students?
- 2 What are the challenges they experience during the course of school prayer?
- 3 What strategies would they suggest to address them?

Findings

When asked about the goals and purposes of school prayer these young people first and foremost describe prayers in school as the opportunity for a spiritual experience in which they strive to connect to God. Rarely do they feel such an experience, but they strive towards this.

In the words of one:

In most prayer services I don't feel close to God – I feel it was hardly worth it but occasionally it does it for me – and that is awesome.

Another young person offers a different insight into the goal of prayer in helping him in developing his connection to God.

Prayer offers me the greatest opportunity to connect to God. We don't have any more miracles as we had in Biblical times. Then we saw God in all his power. Today prayer is the only way we can connect to Him.

Meanwhile, another offers a different perspective on the place of prayer in his school day.

Prayer is difficult because he has to 'make room for God'.

I know when I get up in the morning, I have to 'break' my sleep cycle in order to pray – so too during the day I have to 'break' my free time to make room for God. That makes prayers so important.

It would seem that these young people are ‘flying high’, ignoring the mundane as a central component of their prayer focus. But a deeper reflection on some of the responses points to a more nuanced approach in which the mundane seems to play an important part in achieving a spiritual connection to God through their prayers. A particularly thoughtful response, for example, mentioned an interesting theological issue with prayers.

I really have difficulty praying to God. To whom am I actually praying? Who is this invisible being I am talking to? Other religions have various visual images to pray to or guide you in your prayers ... but we have nothing ... it is really difficult to pray in the Jewish religion! I am saying words I don't connect with to a Being I don't connect to.

It seems this young person would value a physical object to enable him to reach spiritual heights. A mundane piece of art or image would support him in his ability to achieve the positive prayer experience which he is seeking. Utilizing and enlivening the mundane as an aid to spirituality is of particular interest here.

A similar mundane-spiritual approach to prayer was highlighted in discussions about how the prayer services could be made more meaningful. One respondent, for example, suggested that the monotony of repeating the same liturgy can be at least partially addressed in the following way.

I remember the time we prayed together on the top of a mountain during a school trip. It was amazing. We all got up early to see the sunrise, climbed together to the top of the mountain and prayed – I felt close to God, perhaps the first time in my life. I wish we could do these trips more often. I know I can't pray like that in school every day but a few

times a year in a different environment would be great.

For this young person, the physicality of a mountain, with its awe-inspiring views and at special times, enabled him to reach the 'high places' in his search for God in prayer. Again, the mundane is a conduit to enable the prayer in his spiritual quest.

There were a number of responses which highlighted another aspect of prayer. The desire to develop a relationship with God. Unlike those students already mentioned who wish to 'connect' to God, these young people wanted to develop a 'relationship' with him. For example,

When I pray I usually don't want anything from God. I just want to talk to him. To tell him how I feel, a bit like talking to a friend who really cares for me.

And another respondent

I have a problem with reading prayers from the siddur (prayer book) It forces me to say words I do not really want to say. I just want to talk to Him in my own words, perhaps he will talk to me too.

Here we have interesting responses which seem to point to a different direction. Prayer seen as an opportunity to develop relationships. Not connecting to a transcendental God 'up there' but a God who is a friend, who talk to me as I talk to him. Here spirituality is defined in 'mundane' terms. The desire to build a two-way relationship with God – not to connect to him but to 'be' with him in dialogue.

The centrality of relationship building was a theme in other responses too, and with teachers. One respondent talked about the positive relationships he has developed recently with his religious studies teacher which has helped him in finding more meaning for his prayers and create a deeper connection to God.

For the first time I feel I am being listened too, my teacher is trying to understand where I am coming from, what questions I have both in understanding the text and about God and most importantly he is not forcing me to do anything ... I have some time for myself ... that for me means everything.

These thoughts are reminiscent of Drelich (2017), who researched high school prayer in a Jewish school in New York. He found that, with supportive teachers, young people wish to create their own relationships with God. They value those prayer groups that allow time for students to enter their own 'spiritual time' and come close to God. One respondent commented:

I need time to reflect and think about myself, about what sort of person I can be. My teachers understand that I need my space – that is great

Here we therefore find another aspect of the mundane-spiritual concept at play. Not only do physical objects, such as an image or a mountain, contribute to the spiritual quest but human relationships do too. A supportive teacher who shows care and sensitivity to a young person encourages, even unwittingly, his desire and ability to connect to God through prayer. These relationships are developed not only with others but also within oneself.

In summary, while some of the discussions with young people focus on their desire to connect directly to God through prayer, others show how the ‘mundane’ including physical objects and the development of relationships with God, with others and with oneself contribute significantly to their spiritual quest.

Young People’s Spiritual Development in Prayer Spaces for Schools in the UK

The second piece of research explored spiritual development experienced in ‘prayer spaces’ that were set up in UK schools with the support of the *Prayer Spaces in Schools* organisation. (The organisation also supports prayer spaces in more than thirty other countries around the world, but these were not researched by the authors of this article.) The prayer spaces were temporary events (perhaps for one or two weeks of the school year) set up, typically, in a school classroom, with various activities – mostly led by young people – that ‘enable children and young people, of all faiths and none, to explore ... life questions, spirituality and faith in a safe, creative and interactive way’ (<https://www.prayerspacesinschools.com/>). There is ‘a range of creative activities that encourage personal reflection on issues such as forgiveness, injustice, thankfulness, big questions, identity and stillness’, and the prayer spaces are ‘run by a trained team of local Christians from a church or an organisation as a service to the school’ (Phil Togwell, leader of the prayer spaces organisation, personal correspondence 2018). Activities include ‘prayer walls’, ‘thankful play dough’, ‘fizzy forgiveness’, ‘forgiveness stones’, ‘letting go’, ‘name that feeling’, ‘mirrors’, and ‘cardboard home’ (from the ‘top ten’ prayer activities, at <https://www.prayerspacesinschools.com/topten>). These and similar activities have been used in different ways in schools, over many years, and exemplify the history of ‘experiential’ work in both RE (as in Hammond et al 1990) and spiritual

development (as in West-Burnham and Huws Jones 2007).

Methodology

A qualitative research model was used in this study, too. Two linked research tools were used. One was a questionnaire offered to students in all schools involved with *Prayer Spaces* during 2016-2017. 555 students aged 7-16 in 24 schools completed questionnaires, answering questions on themselves and on their experiences in the prayer space. The 24 schools included six primary (i.e. for children up to age 11) community schools, ten primary schools with church foundations, one prep school (covering ages 7-13) with a church foundation, three secondary (i.e. for children and young people aged 11 upwards) community schools, one independent school with no religious foundation (an all-age school, but with responses from those aged 11 upwards), two secondary schools with religious foundations, one independent school with a religious foundation (an all-age school, but with responses from those aged 11 upwards). In the questionnaires, 40.4% of the pupils self-identified as Christian, 2.9% Muslim, 1.4% Hindu, 0.7% Sikh, 0.4% Jewish, 15.3% Atheist, 7.2% Spiritual But Not Religious, 5.8% Agnostic, 2.2% Humanist, 10.1% Prefer Not To Say, and 13.6% were 'other' (e.g. 'either Christian or Muslim', 'Buddhist and Christian', 'don't know yet', 'none').

In questionnaires, six question themes were used:

- 1 Whom did respondents meet and think about in the prayer space?
- 2 What (if any) conversations did respondents carry out in the prayer space, 'in your head or out loud'?

- 3 What new thoughts or feelings or insights did respondents have, and any new ideas, when involved in the prayer space?
- 4 In what other ways have respondents changed as a result of visiting the prayer space.
- 5 What was the best thing was about the prayer space?
- 6 How could the prayer space be made better?

The second tool used was a semi-structured interview: 71 students and 15 staff in seven schools were interviewed. There were interviews with six pupils and four staff (two teachers, two teaching assistants) in one primary community school, 31 pupils and three staff (teachers) in three primary schools with religious foundations (six of the pupils were in an independent prep school), 24 pupils and four staff (three teachers, one headteacher) in two secondary community schools, and 10 pupils and four staff (three teachers, one chaplain) in secondary schools with religious foundations (six of the pupils and two teachers were in an independent prep school). Of the pupils interviewed, 45% self-identified as Christian, 55% as either belonging to other religions or non-religious or preferring not to say.

The interviews explored four question themes:

- 1 What was the best thing was about the prayer space?
- 2 How could the prayer space be made better?
- 3 Using 20 sample responses from questionnaires, interviewees were asked whether any of those were things they thought about, and why?
- 4 Did interviewees have any other reflections on the use of the prayer spaces that they would like to tell us?

The research set out to evaluate the contribution of the activities to the spiritual development of young people, based on an approach to spirituality described as ‘relational’, connected to the work of Hay on ‘relational consciousness’ (Hay 2007, 14, and Hay with Nye 2006) and to the advice given by various UK-based curriculum and inspection bodies such as the work on young people’s ‘relationships with one another, with the natural world, and with God’ (QCA 2004, 14) along with ‘[a]n awareness of oneself’ and ‘[r]ecognising and valuing the worth of each individual’ (SCAA 1995, 3-4)⁵. This approach is summarised in a working definition of spiritual development as helping to enhance relationships with the self, with other people, with the world (in constituent parts or as a whole), and, as appropriate, with the sacred and divine (Stern 2009, 1-21). Examples are provided here of what young people said under each of the four dimensions of spirituality explored.

Findings

Examples of self-reflective experiences include the young person who explains the very idea of relationships with the self:

I think it’s like a conversation that you’re having with yourself because it sort of saying one thing in one half of your mind and you’re saying it again in your other half which I quite like

Arendt describes such conversations well, as ‘[t]hinking, existentially speaking, is a solitary

⁵ This research is methodologically distinct from that of Francis et al (2018), which explores the relationship between prayer and spiritual well-being, but the approach to the meaning of spirituality is similar.

but not a lonely business; solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company' (Arendt 1978, 185). She continues, describing this as exemplifying the '*duality* of myself with myself', such that thinking becomes 'dialectical and critical because it goes through this questioning and answering process' (Arendt 1978, 185). When asked what they thought about and with whom they had conversations in the prayer spaces, 46% of young people referred to themselves – more than to any other category (i.e. other people, 'the world', or the sacred and divine). One respondent described an activity:

I can't remember what it was called but it had lots of mirrors in, and it was asking us questions about ourselves and what we thought of ourselves. ... I think that helped a lot of people, and it helped me because ... it made you think of the good things about you. ... A lot of the time you think about what's bad about you and what's good about other people, but it helped you think about what is good about yourself.

One young person described 'a conversation in my head about what peace is and what forgiving is all about', whilst others talked about their regrets: 'I was thinking about saying sorry to everyone I might have been disrespectful to'.

The second biggest category of responses referred to relationships with other people – 35% of all responses. An adult said 'I ... notice the children: ... they all talk about lost family members up in heaven', adding 'a few got quite upset actually'. Young people agreed, describing thinking about 'My Aunt who previously died', 'my grandad who has long gone in 2015', or 'missing my mums uncle because he is dead'. Of course they also talked about living people and their relationships with them: 'forgiving lucy for always falling out with her', 'I thought about my parents and how I've let them down sometimes', 'Dear mum I just

want to say sorry because I said I hate you’, and ‘I thought about my Nan who has Alzheimer’s and ... those who don’t have as much as me and my brothers and sisters’.

Less often mentioned, but still significant were mentions of relationships with ‘the world’ (in part or as a whole), apparent in 8% of all responses, and the sacred and divine, mentioned in 6% of responses. The world was comprehensively addressed by one respondent:

I was wondering about saving the world. saving animals and dog, cat.

The link between children’s spirituality and pets has been established by a number of scholars, particularly in relation to death and the afterlife (e.g. Higgins 1999, Adams 2001, Champagne 2008), which also speaks to the many mentions of dead relatives in the previous section. Adams, in her research on children’s dreams about God found that in such dreams, children ‘were comforted by meeting deceased pets and relatives’ (Adams 2001, 104). Animals and pets (alive as well as dead) also emerged as the most significant of the ‘world’ themes in our research on prayer spaces.

my mum my dad my whole family and of course my friends and cat!! I love my cat

In the study of religion and spirituality, the study of materiality has gained an established place (Meyer et al 2011). We considered how the various materials and objects within prayer spaces affected young people’s experiences, and how this may inform their spiritual development. In interviews and questionnaires, young people reflected on the significance of the objects found within prayer spaces. From the questions ‘it was good because...’ and ‘the prayer space could be made even better’, young people often reflected on the material

dimensions of prayer space noting the various objects which were particularly important to them. Food used in activities was mentioned by a number of young people ('I thought how delicious the bread was'), whilst objects such as beads and stones were also highlighted as what made prayer spaces good for them:

I liked the stone activity because I wanted to keep my thoughts and that way I was able to keep them.

the beads were a good stress reliver and the sand helped me think

It is worth noting that there was no mention of manufactured 'possessions' – phones, computers, money, clothes – it was all *personal* or *natural*. Hay with Nye (2006) also observed an appreciation for the natural world with their participants, noting the importance of children's sensory connection with the environment which our findings would also support. A number of young people also reflected on 'the world' more broadly. The following respondent distinguished ways to help the world from ways to help the community, and considered these to range from small to big, and to religious and non-religious ways:

I had a conversation in my head with myself thinking about what I can do in the world. I asked myself: What can I do to help my community and the whole of the world? My response was endless some small things, some big things, some religious, some not and some of them I realised that I do any way for example: give money to the homeless, sponsor people for runs or charity events and even as small as picking up mine and other peoples litter.

Mentions of the sacred or divine, God or gods, were reasonably common but certainly did not dominate either the questionnaire responses or the interviews, and represented a significantly smaller category of responses than had been expected – a small minority of responses even of those self-identifying as religious. And only 1% mentioned the sacred or divine as ‘the best thing’ about the prayer spaces, although 5% mentioned the sacred or divine as a reason *why* it was the ‘best thing’, and a similar 5% suggested something to do with the sacred or divine that could make the prayer space even better. Stringer, in his work on prayer in contemporary society, explores the nature and variety of individual’s experience of prayer. He observed how his participants spoke to the ‘non-empirical other’ and how this non-empirical other may at times be God and at other times, a deceased relative or other being. Stringer found that the communication style of such prayers is often informal, intimate and conversational, so he wants to move away from analyses of prayer that suggest ‘that intimacy inevitably leads to immanence, or that transcendence implies intensity’ (Stringer 2015, 79). The young people’s relationship with the sacred or divine in prayer spaces also demonstrates such complexity, with their experiences of prayer being *both* mundane (in either or both the material and quotidian senses) *and* transcendent in character. They reported experiencing both a relationship with God as transcendent and as an active ‘doing’ God with whom you can have a conversation. Responses typically reflected an ‘everyday’ relationship with God which was informal with some young people reflecting on this as being relaxing. One described the best thing about prayer spaces:

Mine would probably be like it’s there every year probably, ... you write down a question that you would ask God if He could actually answer back to you ... Why did you pick some people instead of the trillions of others that could have been placed onto earth? And like – what was the creation of jellyfish for, because they do nothing ... What’s the

meaning of life so a question you would ask God if you could really ask Him and He could answer you.

Another said 'it's just like you and God are just like you can relax and you can then just go out feeling more relaxed about things'. One reflected on how the prayer space encouraged a different way to communicate with God.

It's like you don't you're not necessarily putting your hands together and praying normally you find different ways to show that you are talking to God a bit like more active ways of doing it, so it's not necessarily just sitting in your room all night and praying before you go to bed, it's basically if you need it in schools it's there for you.

A small number also mentioned how engaging in prayer spaces has changed their practises or beliefs, noting they may attend church more, pray more, or confirm their faith.

I have changed by going to church more and by praying every night before I go to bed.

I have started to think about god.

I now think about other people's feelings, I believe in god, Jesus.

I've got on better with my sister, not argued so much and really feel like I understand the bible a bit better

In summary, the young people in these schools – a mixture of schools with and without a

religious foundation – relatively rarely described what might be thought of as the stereotype of prayerful activities, and yet were positive about their experiences and described in various ways what might appropriately be called ‘spiritual development’ (and see also Cheetham 2000 on similar descriptions of formal school-based ‘worship’ activities in the UK). One respondent said clearly ‘I find it difficult to believe in prayer but it made me look carefully at me and my life so you don’t necessarily have to link it to religion you can just look at yourself’. Prayer spaces stimulated activities that were predominantly mundane in their focus on self-understanding and relationships with (living and dead) friends and relatives, with a smaller but important group of responses referring to nature in general, and animals in particular, along with responses mentioning positively other material aspects of their practices. It is not possible, from this evidence, to describe in detail the extent to which such mundane thoughts were understood as routes to the divine or sacred, but there is a sense – reflected in responses from both young people and adults – of a ‘sacrilising’ or ‘enchancing’ of the mundane, something that conventional ‘collective worship’ activities seem to have failed to do (Pirrie 2005). The evidence is significant of an experience of mundane spirituality being recognised by young people in these UK schools, through engagement with relatively informal and voluntary, mostly self-directed, activities of various kinds.

Discussion

While the two studies discussed in this paper focus on young people’s experiences of spirituality through prayer services and prayer spaces in different geographical, religious, cultural and educational contexts, we believe there is much in common between them. While the Israeli religious schools tend to focus on the concept of prayer as a ‘high-flying

experience’, many young people are struggling to find this spiritual route meaningful or accessible. Some are searching for the physical mundane object, either manufactured or natural, that will help them in their spiritual quest. Others will be trying to form meaningful relationships with teachers and peers as part of their spiritual experience. And a few will be looking inward, reflecting on who they are and what they would like to become. Those participating in the UK prayer spaces share similar experiences. What is common to all is an understanding of what we, inspired by Wong (2006), have referred to as mundane spirituality. Finding the spiritual in and through the earthly and everyday world of objects, nature, people and relationships – including ‘mundane’ relationships with the sacred or divine.

What is particularly interesting is the character of the developing relationships, whether in Israel or the UK. Some of the Israeli students, from a Jewish religious orthodox background, talk about prayer within the framework of a dialogue with God, but it is a dialogue of an ‘everyday’, mundane, kind. The UK students participating in prayer spaces describe a wider range of relationships, including with the world of animals and nature. But both groups emphasise relationships – and even the relationship with the divine is described in mundane terms – to talk to God as a friend. To be in dialogue with Him.

This dialogical nature of prayer is reminiscent of Buber. For Buber, ‘to learn more precisely what spirit is ... [i]t must ... be sought out where it is still a *happening* ... [f]or the spirit in its original reality is not something that is but something that happens’ (Buber 2002, 229).

The ‘happening’ of the spirit, in Buber, bridges.

Spirit is not in the *I*, but between *I* and *Thou*. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe. Man lives in the spirit, if he is able to respond to his

Thou. He is able to, if he enters into relation with his whole being. Only in virtue of his power to enter into relation is he able to live in the spirit. (Buber 1958, 57-58.)

This relational sense of spirituality, bridging people (in the example given), is described by Friedman as held in common by writers such as Marcel, Camus, Jaspers and Rosenzweig, writers who, like Buber, see ‘dialogue, communication, and the I-Thou relationship not as a *dimension* of the self but as the existential and ontological reality in which the self comes into being and through which it fulfils and authenticates itself’ (Friedman, in his introduction to Buber 2002, xv). Dialogue between people is central to Buber’s idea of humanity and spirituality, but the sense of dialogue goes well beyond the human. He writes, albeit briefly, about the relationship of a person to a tree (Buber 1958, 19-20), and to a horse (Buber 2002, 27), in a sense that suggests these are edging towards the dialogic. And he talks of people’s relationship to God as being the end-point of all dialogue. *I and Thou* starts with a quotation from Goethe:

So, waiting, I have won from you the end:

God’s presence in each element. (Buber 1958, vii.)

So all the ‘mundane’ relationships in the world are also (or can also be) sacred, for Buber.

Conclusion and Implications for Spirituality in School

What are the implications of all this for those concerned with spirituality in schools? There are several implications of this theorising and the evidence from the empirical research that

could be helpful to educators in this school system. Firstly, it seems that allowing or encouraging young people to move away at times from the fixed liturgy and assist them to focus on themselves as self-reflecting individuals may be a helpful exercise in transforming the service into a more spiritual experience. In the Israeli context, this was expressed in part through frustration at ‘regular’ prayers, whilst in the UK, contrasts were made between the more informal prayer spaces and more formal ‘collective worship’ (Stern and Shillitoe 2018).

Secondly, utilizing the physical world around the young person is a powerful vehicle to unravel the spiritual. Convening prayer services in a venue in which the young people can marvel at the mysteries of nature and reflect, could be a spiritual experience that would make the services more meaningful for them. Mountain-top prayer was suggested in Israel, whilst the physical organisation of the prayer spaces in the UK were commented on positively by many.

And thirdly, perhaps most importantly, allowing or encouraging young people who wish for connection with the sacred or divine to be able to talk with God⁶, to be in a state of dialogue and relationship with Him (and not simply or primarily as an act of praise or as a request for worldly benefit), can be another avenue for making more meaningful spiritual experiences. The development of the relationship is not only from human to divine. We have seen how connecting to the sacred or divine can also be experienced as active – as interactive – by a number of respondents, describing what might be called a spiritual quest both in relation to

⁶ To be more religiously inclusive, but stylistically clumsy, we would say ‘God or gods’ and ‘Him or Her or them’ in this sentence, and at a number of points in this article. We have chosen the simpler terminology here, but intend the great inclusivity.

what is described as God but also in relation to other people. Encouraging and fostering the possibility of such 'ordinary' or 'mundane' relationships, amongst young people and between young people and their teachers can be a catalyst for more meaningful prayer within the Israeli religious school system and the UK school system. Giving young people greater agency, when it comes to prayer, seems to have been important to Israeli and UK respondents alike.

The choice for schools, it seems, is not between the mundane and the spiritual, the Icarus choice between heaven and earth, but between a passive, isolated, unconnected unspiritual experience of young people (even whilst praying) and an active, relational, and therefore variously transcendent spiritual experience (perhaps through prayer). Icarus' choice is ignored, as the mundane may itself be the means by which spirituality is experienced. Young people may be, like Williams' description of the Spring, more spiritually 'awake tingling', whilst engaged in school-based prayer-related activities, than might be expected.

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