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Kate Adams

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# Navigating the spaces of children's spiritual experiences: influences of tradition(s), multidisciplinary and perceptions

Kate Adams

Centre for Research and Knowledge Exchange, University of Winchester, Winchester, UK

## ABSTRACT

Children across the world report similar spiritual experiences. Empirical studies suggest that most resonate with the children's traditions; a finding which should, in theory, afford them a safe spiritual space. However, a number of factors can situate them in a less certain place. The paper uses the metaphors of trees imbued with different shades of light, from the vivid, shimmering and opaque to the invisible, to illustrate the types of spiritual spaces in which children find themselves. Their location is shaped in part by connection or disconnection with traditions, alongside wider cultural forces. Three navigation tools are used to show how children may move between these spaces: the spiritual experience and its relationship with traditions; the influences of multidisciplinary approaches; and children's perceptions of their experiences. The paper concludes that these metaphors and tools may be a useful way to understand the spiritual spaces in which children find themselves.

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## Introduction

A spiritual experience or encounter can be an intense and impactful moment in a child's life, often shaping their beliefs long into adulthood. They may manifest as an occasional yet pivotal event or as a more regular occurrence embedded in the routine of daily life. Examples include an intense dream believed to bring a divine communication; a sighting of a deceased loved one; a meeting with a divine being; a constant companion unseen by others usually known as an 'imaginary friend'; a guardian angel who sits beside a child's bed each night to protect them whilst they sleep; or, for a small minority, a near-death experience (Adams 2010; see also Rankin 2008 for a more extensive list oriented towards adults' experiences).

All of the aforementioned children's experiences are represented in various, sometimes disparate, literatures including the academic (e.g. Coles 1990; Robinson 1996; Hoffman 1992; Hart 2003; Scott 2004; Hay and Nye 2006; Adams, Hyde, and Woolley 2008; Potgieter, van der Walt, and Wolhuter 2009; Pettersen

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**CONTACT** Kate Adams  [kate.adams@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:kate.adams@winchester.ac.uk)  University of Winchester, Sparkford Road, Winchester SO22 4NR, UK

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2015; Lovelock and Adams 2017) and the commercial/Mind Body Spirit genres (e.g. Newcomb 2008). Some experiences take the form of systematic studies whilst others appear as illustrative narratives in wider discourses on children's spirituality; some are focussed on one type of experience such as dreams (e.g. Potgieter, van der Walt, and Wolhuter 2009); others are adult recollections (e.g. Hoffman 1992; Scott 2004); whilst some studies engage directly with children about a range of experiences (e.g. Coles 1990). However, despite their different approaches, collectively they offer significant insights into children's experiences and in so doing, provide a doorway into exploring how tradition(s) and culture(s) shape and influence both the encounter itself and adults and children's interpretation of it.

This paper presents an original contribution to the field by exploring the relationship between children's spiritual experiences and traditions through the lens of space – the spiritual spaces which the children and traditions occupy and the fluidity of those spaces. Using the metaphors of trees enveloped in different shades of light, the paper argues that a child can inhabit various spaces along a continuum, from vivid spaces which afford certainty and confidence through to an invisible space, undetectable to others, which may effectively erase the experience from existence.

The children's journeys through these spaces are explored through the influences of three key elements which can serve as navigation tools to understand their positioning within a space:

- The nature of the children's spiritual experience and the relationship with traditions;
- The influence of multidisciplinary approaches on understanding experiences and shaping spaces;
- The children's perceptions of their experiences.

As the paper works through these elements to illustrate the nature of the different spaces and their complexities, conflicts and tensions, each is exemplified by empirical evidence from various studies. This process of exemplification affords children their spiritual voice(s) – voices which often go unheard. The metaphors for these spaces are interwoven throughout these sections to illustrate how children may move in-between them. This is undertaken with the overarching aim of offering an original and accessible framework within which to better understand how children might find themselves positioned in the world of spiritual experiences. This framework may be useful for a range of academics and practitioners in the field, including those in education, social work, chaplaincy, arts and psychology.

### **Metaphors: trees and light**

The central metaphors for these spaces are trees – and children – imbued with different shades of light and darkness. Trees are chosen for their integral

connection with the earth, as life-giving and symbolic of both growth and death. A feature of many myths and religious scriptures the world over, the tree has long represented a myriad of spiritual ideas. These include the Tree of Wisdom under which Buddha achieved enlightenment, the Tree of Knowledge in the Biblical creation narrative, and Yggdrasill, the World Tree, which links earth and heaven and all life according to Norse mythology (Greene and Sharman-Burke 1999). The connection between trees and the spiritual world is also found in Celtic, Swedish and Japanese mythologies as well as those of Ancient Greece and Rome where they were believed to be the home of the Dryads (nymphs) (New World Encyclopedia 2015). Light is a symbol which is widespread through religions. Becker (Becker 2000, 177) notes that it represents God, spirit, the immaterial, life and happiness. Furthermore, it is 'frequently encountered as a border of darkness', which can indicate mystery, misfortune or 'spiritual dullness.'

In addition, these metaphors have also been chosen because of their relevance to children. Trees, forests and light and dark are all familiar symbols to children, presented to them from an early age through stories in books and other media such as film or video games. Fairy tales provide a traditional source of these symbols; Gadd (2014) notes how heroes and heroines of fairy tales are often trapped in forests in darkness, where they need to overcome evil to reach the light.

Furthermore, as will be discussed later, the notion of dark spirituality (de Souza 2012) is highly pertinent to the field and requires further exploration; darkness is thus a relevant metaphor here too. The metaphors, which are embedded in the following images (Figures 1–4), may therefore have the potential to also be used with and by children, who may be able to recognise themselves in the relevant spaces. In so doing, the paper offers an original approach, based on research, to enabling adults and children to visualise and describe their positioning in relation to a spiritual experience.

Figure 1 depicts the image of a child sitting against a majestic, ancient tree, drenched in strong sunlight. The figure represents the most vivid of spaces in which we might expect that a tradition(s) and wider culture should, arguably, give children a solid grounding. It is symbolised by a strong, old tree whose roots dig deep and wide, affirming its lineage, anchored to the earth for sustenance, as it simultaneously reaches up towards the heavens, providing home for wildlife and offering shade and protection. Here, the child should find a secure home: a safe haven under which to sit, back rested against the bark of the trunk, supported by it and protected by the canopy of the hanging branches. The space is brightly illuminated yet leaves filter the life-giving sunlight, also giving sanctuary from the falling rain as their tradition(s) validates their experience.



**Figure 1.** The vivid space.

Photo was taken by Soloway/123RF. Stock photo. [https://www.123rf.com/photo\\_43192171\\_little-boy-reading-a-book-under-big-linden-tree.html?term=boy%2Bsitting%2Breathing%2BBlinden%2Btree&vti=lbbtw8uz03r8jdmdu-1-2](https://www.123rf.com/photo_43192171_little-boy-reading-a-book-under-big-linden-tree.html?term=boy%2Bsitting%2Breathing%2BBlinden%2Btree&vti=lbbtw8uz03r8jdmdu-1-2) Accessed 14 October 2018

In this vivid space, the child has confidence and clarity in their experience and understanding of it, supported by the tradition(s) and culture(s) to which they belong.

Figure 2 illustrates the second image, that of a protective canopy under which a child is further supported as they walk towards a brighter light offering increasing insight and clarity. The sunshine glimmers through the leaves, shedding light on the pathway taken by the child and their companion. The image represents the shimmering space, whose light imbues different qualities of openness, questioning and enquiry. The child is accompanied by a supportive other who, irrespective of their opinions of the veracity of the experience, is conscious of the need to respect the child's views. The traditions and wider cultural influences may or may not correlate in their entirety, but there is a sufficient underpinning for the child to feel validated and nurtured on their journey to making meaning.



**Figure 2.** The shimmering space.

Photo was taken by Lorraine Cormier. CCO Creative Commons, free for commercial use. <https://pixabay.com/en/father-son-walk-child-boy-family-2770301/> Accessed 1 September 2018

In this nurtured space, with the warmth of the shimmering light, the child is not alone, finding support from others and/or their traditions. Perhaps with some doubts or questions, they nevertheless feel comfortable to share them with others, enquire and express any doubts freely without fearing judgement.

**Figure 3** illustrates the opaque space, seeing the darkness slowly descending, altering the visibility of the tree. The image represents the opaque space in which the tree's shape is clearly recognisable but a little less tangible to the naked eye as the light fades. The shadows cast by the ensuing dusk obscures its silhouette a little, and that of the child, in some cases indicative of apprehension, anxiety or fear.

In this opaque space, with light becoming blocked, some uncertainty may have crept in. Any underpinning tradition(s) is still present, but the dimming light casts some doubt and/or disconnect. A confusion, perhaps emanating from conflicting perspectives, gives rise to a child's introspection and a sense of liminality, with no obvious person to turn to for guidance and support.

The final image (**Figure 4**) sees the trees descending into the mists. The picture represents the invisible space in which the sight of the previously tangible tree, once so clear in the intense sunlight, fades rapidly into obscurity. Alongside its neighbouring trees, it still exists, but its downwards roots and upwards links to the heavens are enveloped in the swirling fog as its visibility dissipates.

The child too has dissolved into the mist, disappearing from sight; others' disinterest, doubt, cynicism or outright rejection have weighed heavily, and the tradition(s) become so far removed, that both the child and their encounter drift into invisibility, as if the experience had never taken place.



**Figure 3.** The opaque space.

Photo was taken by StockSnap. CCO Creative Commons, free for commercial use. [https://pixabay.com/get/eb30b60d29f4043ed1534705fb0938c9bd22ffd41cb218409cf9c879a5/people-2572105\\_1920.jpg?attachment](https://pixabay.com/get/eb30b60d29f4043ed1534705fb0938c9bd22ffd41cb218409cf9c879a5/people-2572105_1920.jpg?attachment)  
Accessed 1 September 2018



**Figure 4.** The invisible space.

Photo was taken by Stefan Schwehofer. CCO Creative Commons, free for commercial use. <https://pixabay.com/en/fog-pine-trees-mysterious-571786/> Accessed 1 September 2018

These [Figures 1-4](#) and spaces are not intended to be exhaustive or restrictive in their categorisations, but rather symbolic of different spaces which children may commonly find themselves situated in. Throughout the subsequent interrogation of the influences of three key navigation tools on children's spiritual experiences, these figures are interwoven to illustrate how the themes can potentially impact on the spiritual space or spaces which a child may inhabit.

### **The nature of children's spiritual experience and the relationship with traditions**

Notwithstanding the fact that the literature on children's spiritual experiences is still a developing area, as noted above, the various literatures suggest that even when children from different countries and cultures share similar experiences, there is a tendency for them to be mostly rooted in their respective traditions. This first navigation tool is intended to provide insight into the importance of this relationship, which is illustrated by two specific types: encounters with angels, and dreams with a perceived divine connection.

First, children's encounters with angels are a common recurrence across different studies (see examples in Hoffman 1992; Hart 2003; Newcomb 2008; Adams 2010; Pettersen 2015; Lovelock and Adams 2017). Pettersen's (2015) enquiries with children aged 3–5 in Canada elicited descriptions conforming to Christian imagery of angels, with faces, bodies, wings and halos. In all but two references, children referred to them as female. Pettersen (2015) also found that most referred to angels as family members (mostly female and usually their mother), assigning them a nurturing role, consonant with the western concept of the guardian angel. The alignment with gender and family

members was also present in Newcomb's (2008) work, who noted that children reported angels taking different forms according to the nature of the situation. For example, when the child needed healing, the angel was often reported as taking a female form, and when the child needed protection, the angel was said to assume the appearance of a warrior.

The concept of the guardian angel, combined with the depiction of a human form with wings, was also observed by Hart writing in the USA (2003), my work in the UK (Adams 2010) and that of Newcomb (2008), who collected narratives from around the world. For these children the alignment with the Christian tradition (even if the children were not Christian themselves) may place them initially in a vivid space: what they report is consonant with their respective country's underpinning historical traditions and contemporary cultural images. As Underhill (1995) observes, whilst Ancient Greek and Roman art depicted winged figures with human bodies, there was no separation between gods and the natural world; the gods came to earth, with no significant need for intermediary messengers. It was not until the earliest Christian art that angels were portrayed as adult males, and as time progressed, artists began to ascribe them wings and halos.

Today, such 'traditionally' Christian images of winged beings are propagated through cartoons, Christmas cards, internet, social media and adverts – embedded in both religious and secular cultures alike. Whilst children report angels taking different appearances, such as family members (see Newcomb 2008; Pettersen 2015), this image still resonates with the earlier Protestant notions and contemporary wider cultural narratives such as angels taking the form of a human being who arrives to offer help. Hence, where children's reports of angels resonate with such depictions, they potentially find themselves in a vivid space.

A second example of where experiences are similar across different groups of children, but also resonate with respective traditions, lies with children's divine dreams; these are dreams in sleep which the child believes has a divine source and/or in which the child encountered a divine being. This type of dream has a rich heritage in traditions across the world from ancient civilisations such as Egypt, Greece and China through to the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic faiths (Bulkeley 2008). Inherent in these traditions is the belief that the divine uses dreams as a vehicle for communicating with humans.

Whilst studies into the experiences of adults who report this type of dream have been ongoing for decades (e.g. Charsley 1973; Azam 1992; Curley 1992), those with children have been far fewer. This is despite the fact that these dreams have been highly significant for some children, and more often experienced than may be generally realised.

In my larger investigation, I questioned 505 children from Christian, Muslim and secular children aged 9–12 to ask if they had ever had a divine dream. Of those, 109 (22%) children reported at least one, and the dreams had many commonalities in their themes including precognition, instruction, warning and reassurance.

All conformed in some way (e.g. dream type, content, or interpretation of the dream) to findings in either psychological studies of dreams and/or to dreams recorded in the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Quran and/or Hadith, respectively. However, it was noticeable that any specific imagery pertaining to religious beliefs conformed closely to the child's respective cultural background: mosques only appeared in Muslim children's dreams; only Christian or secular children dreamt of a church; and only Christian or secular children dreamt of God as a bearded man. For all of these children, their location may have been in a vivid space. This is not surprising, although several children from these different backgrounds shared the same classrooms, neighbourhoods and friendships, all seeing mosques and churches as they went about their daily lives. Furthermore, most learnt about major world religions in compulsory Religious Education lessons, often in the same classroom.

The alignment of imagery perhaps, therefore, represents a much deeper relationship with tradition which goes beyond the more superficial cultural environment. In a study with 260 children aged 12–13 in South Africa, Potgieter, van der Walt, and Wolhuter (2009) elicited similar findings with 19% ( $n = 49$ ) reporting a divine dream. Similar themes to those in my UK study were evident, such as precognition, instruction and reassurance. However, there were some differences in their work which may represent differences between UK and South African cultures and traditions, such as fear of an eternity without God and fear of God's wrath.

In these examples of angels and dreams, there was clear alignment between the individuals' traditions and their experience. However, even when an encounter falls outside of their own tradition, the relationship to their environment is usually clear. For example, Hyde (2008) – in a wider study – explored children's spirituality in Catholic primary schools in Australia. He found that whilst children clearly drew on their Catholic heritage when discussing spiritual and religious matters, there were also examples of influences outside their faith background shaping their experience and understanding of the events, such as reincarnation and astrology. This convergence enabled children to make sense of their experiences (Hyde 2008). In this way, for some children, the experience sits in a liminal space between different, sometimes unrelated traditions, albeit that they converge only via passing references on the internet, a conversation, a mention in a book or in a Religious Education lesson in school.

Hyde's (2008) Australian study exemplifies that it is not only crossovers of different religious traditions which occur, but also combinations of the secular and 'spiritual-but-not-religious', such as 'new age' and 'mind, body, spirit' ideas which can create and influence children's spaces, perhaps moving them from a vivid space into one of the other, less clear spaces. A lack of clarity is particularly the case when mind, body, spirit notions are involved, for they are often drawn from spiritual traditions from around the world. One example is the increasing popularity in the west of eastern practices such as mindfulness. A child may not need to have a full understanding of a religious and/or spiritual concept; rather,

they might only have briefly come into contact with an idea which resonates with them in order to give meaning to their experience.

### **The influences of multidisciplinary on understanding encounters and shaping spaces**

The field of spirituality, by its very nature, draws on work from different disciplines including religion, philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology, education, arts, social work, etc., although many authors elect to locate their work only in one discipline. In this second navigation tool, first I will use the divine dream to demonstrate how using multidisciplinary approaches to studying children's spiritual experiences provides insights into a phenomenon. At the same time, the underlying principles of working with and learning from different disciplines can also create as many certainties as uncertainties, thereby influencing the spaces in which children find themselves. Secondly, in this section, I consider multidisciplinary approaches more broadly to show how different explanations of spiritual phenomena can affect the spaces children find themselves in.

As noted earlier, divine dreams have a long history, having been recorded since ancient times (Bulkeley 2008). Their roots are therefore firmly in religion and for many believers, a divine dream needs no further explanation or validation. The respective holy text or other teaching may be entirely sufficient to anchor their experience in a vivid space.

Psychoanalysts, however, bring a different element to the conversation. For Freud (1900/1999), children's dreams were simply manifest (undisguised) wish fulfilment. Should a child dream of God, a Freudian view would thus interpret the dream as a desire to communicate with God or a father figure. Taking a Jungian (1936/1969) psychoanalytical approach would draw more deeply on the meanings of dream symbols and archetypes, and include Jung's recognition that many 'big dreams' – those which have a significant impact at the time and a lasting effect on a child (or adult) – also often have numinous qualities (Adams 2003).

In contrast, for a neuroscientist such as Hobson (1992), the content of a dream has been generated by the random firing of neurons. In his view, any patterns or meaning attributed to a dream are placed upon it afterwards by the waking brain.

Where an individual subscribes to one particular theory, tradition or discipline, they are afforded a vivid space in which to experience and reflect upon it. It provides reassurance and grounding. Yet multidisciplinary provides different perspectives and layers for exploring spiritual experiences, some of which will be deeply contested, particularly by the person reporting the experience. Nowhere more so than in spirituality or religion is this contestation evident. For example, an adult Christian who believes that a particular dream was a communication from God, may well respect the neuroscientific or psychoanalytic explanations and even adhere to one of them to account for the majority of their dreams. However, they may reject those theories in the case of this unique

dream, which they believe to be fundamentally different in essence and source to their others.

In addition to multidisciplinary approaches, one intention of interdisciplinary approaches is to explore how different stances, methodologies and evidence might converge to move thinking and outcomes forward. In the spiritual and religious arena, there are constantly evolving discussions as evidenced in the emerging field of neurotheology, which explores the relationship between the brain and religion (see Sayadmansour 2014). Furthermore, wider discussions are played out in the public arena in high profile debates on the relationship between science and religion by protagonists such as Richard Dawkins (see Dawkins 2017).

Such discourses, of course, also filter into everyday conversations and influence adults and children's thinking about spiritual experiences. A particular example comes from psychiatry which may, depending on other symptoms, associate seeing things which others can't, and hearing voices which others can't, as indicators of mental illnesses. In this medical model, having visual hallucinations may be recognised as a symptom of bipolar disorder, substance abuse or personality disorders (Mental Health Foundation 2018a) whilst auditory hallucinations may fall within a diagnosis of schizophrenia depending on other indicators (Mental Health Foundation 2018b). That said, such experiences are also recognised within psychology and psychiatry as symptoms of the grieving process when the subject of the experience relates to a deceased person (ibid). However, many health professionals agree that not all who report seeing, hearing, smelling or being touched by someone or something which no-one else is aware of are necessarily suffering from mental ill-health (Mind 2016; Rethink Mental Illness 2016). In a study of 6–18 year olds ( $n = 95$ ) in the Netherlands, who were attending a clinic for support with auditory visual hallucinations, researchers found that whilst all suffered from stress, only 11.6% had a psychotic disorder (Maijer, Palmén, and Sommer 2017). The complexity of this relationship between mental illness and religious and spiritual experience is beyond the scope of this paper, but is highlighted as an issue which affects adults' responses to children's reports.

For adults, these discussions about how spiritual experiences might be interpreted can be complex. Adults' views, and perhaps their own confusion emanating from such alternative explanations, are often detected by children and can lead to a move from the vivid space to one of the others. But it is not only adults' interpretations that are essential in creating the space: what of younger children who are not fully aware of these different disciplinary approaches?

### **The children's perceptions of their experiences**

This third navigation tool firmly places the child and their spiritual voice(s) at the centre of the conversation. Children are soon alerted to the fact that many adults and peers are sceptical or dismissive of their experiences (Hart 2003;

Scott 2004; Hay and Nye 2006; Lovelock and Adams 2017). Phrases such as 'it's just your imagination', often framed innocently, can nevertheless place a fragment of doubt into a vivid space. An experience which might have been intensely profound, meaningful and 'real' to the child can be viewed differently (as within a multidisciplinary approach): they realise that it can also be interpreted as a figment of their imagination, a chemical reaction in the brain, or a trick of the mind.

Whilst not refuting the importance of critical reflection on any experience, such alternative explanations can influence the spiritual space which children occupy, potentially moving it from a vivid space through to the invisible depending on the power of the alternative explanation and potential lack of endorsement which could counter the alternatives.

How then, do children inhabit and navigate these spaces of unseen worlds, and negotiate the implications of multidisciplinary which are presented to them in the form of different viewpoints? The immediate experiential space is usually lucid in terms of its authenticity; children's pragmatic descriptions to researchers demonstrate clarity in recall and articulate responses to questions (see accounts in Hart 2003; Pettersen 2015; Lovelock and Adams 2017).

Children are, by virtue of their cultural context, embedded in their experience in a way that is likely to resonate with other similar encounters. When a child's account is affirmed, and they remain confident in the experience, they can bask in the sunlight of the vivid space; a space underpinned by culture and tradition which can potentially support them for a lifetime. These are evident in adult recollections of childhood experiences such as Rankin's (2008) narratives drawn from the Alister Hardy archives of religious and spiritual experiences. One man told of two profound experiences from childhood which impacted on him through his life; in the first, he found himself 'surrounded, embraced by a white light, which seemed to both come from within [him] and from without... [feeling] an overwhelming sense of love, of warmth, peace and joy'. Sometime soon after, he felt compelled to take a walk, follow a specific route, and offer help to a woman who was trimming a hedge. This initiated a close and enduring friendship and he later came to call her his 'second mother'. He described the two encounters as 'really opening [him] to the significance of the spiritual dimension' and being receptive to a greater power which remained into adult life (pp. 96–98). (Also see Hoffman 1992 and Scott 2004 for further examples of adult recollections with lasting impact).

In addition, the actual fear of anticipated ridicule or dismissal is a fundamental driver in creating opaque and invisible spaces. The fear of dismissal, as well as the very act of it, can shift the child from the place of certainty about the experience to a space of doubt; doubt as to whether or not the encounter was real but also to a space in which no one appears to be validating it, where speaking about it seems to be unwelcome or unwise. Children thus find themselves in a strange hinterland, one which can move back to being vivid through the shimmering

space, when an open-minded adult appears (perhaps a trusted relative, family friend, religious leader, teacher or sometimes the researcher) and the child knows that their views will be respected.

The potential darkness of a space is also important to acknowledge. Whilst the majority of children's experiences are positive, some are not and they can create and leave feelings of fear and anxiety. As de Souza (2012) and Pettersen (2015) state, and I have argued elsewhere (Adams 2010; Lovelock and Adams 2017), fears embedded in dark spirituality need to be recognised by adults and addressed. Adults sometimes tend to, with the best intentions, dismiss the experiences as imagination in order to pacify their children. However, as Pettersen (2015) states, 'Telling a child that they did not really see an angel, a ghost or deceased loved one, or even a scary monster, is making too little of their concern, and it is not for adults to decide what a child sees or how a child feels about it' (214).

When a child has been frightened by an experience, this can conversely place them in any of the spaces, even a vivid one. The vividness might not always represent positivity. It might reflect an absolute certainty about the reality of an experience, but that experience might be a frightening one. The child may have no doubts that they were, for example, visited by God in a dream and admonished for bad behaviour (see Potgieter, van der Walt, and Wolhuter 2009) – and be scared by it. An adult's response might be to reassure them that it was 'just a dream'. In such a case, this could have a positive effect, moving them to a shimmering space, which would be a much more reassuring place to be on this occasion. Yet if adults ignore the darkness, a child could remain trapped and unsupported in an invisible space.

### **Reflections on spiritual spaces, non-linear journeys and tradition(s)**

The importance of the spiritual space(s) which a child inhabits is not to be underestimated, for it can affect their beliefs, confidence and openness for a lifetime. As noted above, whilst a child can inhabit different spiritual spaces in relation to the same spiritual experience, this movement does not necessarily have to be linear as the spaces crossed do not need to be side by side: a child who is secure in their vivid space may feel emotionally rejected by a dismissive statement from another, and find themselves withdrawing into the invisible space, no longer prepared to air it again. For example, in Scott's (2004) study of adult recollections of childhood experiences, he details the case of Rita who had experienced dreams of negative events about other people since childhood. Some of the dreams proved to be predictive and during childhood, Rita experienced 'fear or dread... of dreaming' (72). This situation would have placed her perhaps in an opaque space for she experienced confusion about them, never sure which might manifest and which might come to nothing. With a supportive adult, Rita might have been able to move into the shimmering space – with more

light being shed on the phenomenon to help her understand the nature of the dreams. Instead, when she was 10 years old, her grandmother closed down all conversations about a series of nightmares and sleepwalking episodes which accurately predicted that her friend would be injured if she continued playing fairy games in a nearby forest. Into adulthood, Rita has remained in an opaque space because of this, noting that her continued dread of dreaming may 'relate to not being heard as a child' (Scott 2004, 72).

The spaces are not intended to be hierarchical. Whilst a vivid space might initially appear to be the ideal, it is not intended to be automatically afforded the highest status. Certainly, if a child is confident in the veracity of their experience and it is valued and respected by peers and traditions, this is to be welcomed. It is an illustration of respect for the child. Yet this comment comes with the recognition that certainty can also be aligned with extremist religious/spiritual convictions which are potentially harmful. Furthermore, sometimes there is value in not being completely certain. Some doubt over an experience may be seen as a positive in that it initiates reflection and questioning of self and tradition(s). Irrespective of the outcome of such questioning, the process itself can be a valuable spiritual journey.

Conversely, the invisible space may initially appear to be the least ideal. Indeed, in most cases it is, rendering the child's experience inconsequential, airbrushing it out of any visible history even if it had conformed to religious and/or spiritual traditions. Such an impact on the child is potentially damaging, and something to be avoided at all costs; but it should be noted that some children may be content to have their experience go unnoticed. Spirituality can be intensely personal and whilst many children (and adults alike) do not express their views or experiences because they fear ridicule or dismissal, others elect not to share because they want to keep it private. A child can thus deliberately seek out invisibility for this reason, and reside happily in that space.

Finally, the influence of tradition(s) and wider cultural forces on the spaces can also be complex. On the surface, we might perceive adults' negative responses to children's experiences which are consistent with their own tradition as a personal disconnect from, or alternative interpretation to, their own tradition. Perhaps the adult considers, for example, a scriptural text on angelic experience as allegory rather than representative of lived experience; for some adults, their response may reflect a personal questioning of their tradition's validity; for others, the tradition in which they were raised may only resonate at a superficial level rather than as a deep, embedded belief.

## Conclusion

A child's spiritual encounter can be a deeply meaningful experience which can confirm, challenge or further impact their beliefs and worldviews and the nature of the space which they inhabit. Any response, from an adult or peer,

can further influence that positioning in a space. The three tools used here to navigate influences on the spaces – the nature of the children’s spiritual experience and the relationship with tradition(s), the influences of multidisciplinary and children’s perceptions of their experiences – are not intended to be exhaustive. However, they offer an insight into how traditions and wider cultural influences can interact to shape children’s spiritual spaces. With their different shades of light, from the vivid, shimmering, opaque to the invisible, these may be useful metaphors to help both adults and children understand the spaces within which children find themselves.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

Kate Adams is Professor of Education and Childhood and Director of Research and Knowledge Exchange at the University of Winchester, UK. With a background in teaching and a doctorate on children’s spiritual dreams from the University of Glasgow, Kate has been researching and disseminating her work on children’s spirituality internationally for two decades. Her particular interests lie in understanding children’s spiritual experiences from their perspectives and exploring how this knowledge can help adults support children.

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