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Prayer in Schools: In Search of a New Paradigm

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Abstract

Prayer and schools have an uncomfortable history together. Prayer is therefore a useful 'test' of various aspects of schooling. Empirical research on prayer in schools is used here to develop a new paradigm—a new way of understanding prayer in school, in terms of particular theories of spirituality, and a new way of understanding schooling, in terms of prayer and spirituality. The paradigm that we present reflects the views of young people studied in various recent research projects, and it also reflects well-established religious and philosophical positions. It proposes a model of 'mundane' spirituality inspired by the work of various Jewish and Christian scholars, notably Kook, Buber, Macmurray and Hay. This is exemplified by research on young people in Israel and the UK. Implications of this work for schools are described, noting the value of uncertainty and the as yet unknown, the plural, the open. The chapter does not reject education—or religion—as a search for 'truth': it recognises that truth is still emergent, and that there is room for the mysterious, the ineffable. **AQ1**

> Such certainty is beautiful, but uncertainty is more beautiful still.
>
> (Szymborska, 1998, p 244).

15.1 Introduction

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Prayer and schools have an uncomfortable history together. In the USA, prayer in school is seen as constitutionally problematic (Nord, 1995, p 114–116), notwithstanding the religiosity of the population and the perceived need for a better understanding of and engagement with spiritual and religious issues (Prothero, 2007; Purpel & McLaurin, 2004). In India and Sweden, boundaries between the religious and secular are drawn in quite different ways, with prayer and other religious practices treated in contrasting ways in two nominally 'secular' states (Niemi, 2018). In the UK, all community schools—not just those of a religious character—have been required since 1944 to start every day with an act of collective worship (Armstrong, 1948). And in Israel, prayer is central to the practice of religious schools, but the school system as a whole reflects a challenging relationship between religious practice and 'secularity' (Künkler & Lerner, 2016). Prayer is therefore a useful 'test' of various aspects of schooling.[1] Empirical research on prayer in schools has led us, as authors, towards developing a new paradigm—a new way of understanding prayer in school, in terms of particular theories of spirituality, and a new way of understanding schooling, in terms of prayer and spirituality. Following research in the UK, Hong Kong and Israel (Kohn, 2018, 2019; Stern, 2009; Stern & Kohn, 2019a; Stern & Shillitoe, 2018), we wish to commend the mundane in schooling, without giving up on spirituality, and we wish to commend the unknown, uncertainty and pluralism in schooling, without giving up on truth AQ2 (including religious truth).

The paradigm that we present not only reflects the views of some of the young people studied in various recent research projects, but also reflects well-established religious and philosophical positions. In this chapter, we will focus initially on the philosophical positions, whilst referring as appropriate to other publications with a more empirical bias. There are four sections to this chapter. Starting with an account of overlapping theories of what we wish to call 'mundane spirituality', we go on to explore how this is related to empirical research on prayer. In the third section, an account is given of the possible implications of such work for prayer in school—both the practice of prayer, and education about prayer. Finally, in the conclusion, the wider implications are explored—implications for religion and education, religious education and education as a whole.

15.2. Some Mundane Spirituality: Kook, Buber, Macmurray and Hay

Prayer suffers from a number of easy stereotypes, when it comes to children and young people (hereinafter 'young people'). One stereotype is of young people only concerning themselves with everyday matters (such as illnesses or broken friendships) and especially with requests for material possessions—such as a new bike. The second stereotype is of a more 'heavenly' or 'spiritual' approach to prayer, the religiously conventional prayer that is generally restricted to praise of God and requests for good or noble things (as represented by prayer books from many religious traditions, such as Groner et al., 1993, Ibrahim, 2010, Rock, 2003, St John, 2004, and Scindia, 2009). Typical attitudes to both the inappropriately 'non-spiritual' mundane prayers for new bikes and the religiously approved divinely spiritual prayer such as those praising God/gods,[2] both make the same distinction between the mundane and the spiritual. However, there is a risk that by rejecting the spiritual significance of the mundane, and associating it with selfish materialism, will miss out on an important—it seems to us, increasingly important—mundane aspect of spirituality.

Here, we explore the importance of the mundane in young people's prayer, bringing *together* the 'worldly' and the 'divine' rather than seeing them as in opposition. Young people's prayer should take account of what 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, p 76.)

Wong focuses on 'mundane' spirituality as he is concerned with addressing 'most people' and 'not just … a few spiritual geniuses' (Wong, 2006, p 76). We are going further, and exploring what young people's views of prayer tell us about the spiritual significance of the mundane itself, with 'mundane' implying both 'worldly' and 'everyday'. This exploration draws on spiritual traditions that find spirituality in or through, not beyond, the mundane and material world, making use of the writings of four twentieth-century philosophers from different religious and cultural traditions.

The first scholar we are presenting on the mundane is a somewhat counter-intuitive choice. Kook was a rabbinic scholar, philosopher, Kabbalist and the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, who had a distinct understanding of what spirituality means. His was a view that seems to stress transcendence and direct understanding (and fear) of God. In his view, 'the holy marks life's ultimate purpose' (Kook, 1981, p 13), and the spiritual is 'the Universal radiance that transcends nature' (Kook, 1981, p 13). In an airborne metaphor, he says this: '[w]hen we soar on high as on eagles' wings in the spiritual world, our soul stirs us to speak and to think about the most universal themes' (Kook, 1988, p 160). However, he continues, saying that in such flight, 'all things are joined in a more comprehensive whole, different worlds are united' and '[t]he holy and the mundane stand facing each other' so that '[t]he mundane is filled with joy and delight, and it rejoices to serve as an aid to the holy … [being] filled with its majesty, and … adorned with its splendor' (Kook, 1988, p 160–161). Kook also notes how spirituality should not involve a rejection of the physical world, in a political-religious move against those who would reject worldly involvement. 'Every philosophy which renounces the perfection of the physical world and the proper order of society, and floats in the spiritual realm alone, priding itself only in the

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Communion with God, the goal of much religious mysticism, is often expected to imply the negation of the finite as a precondition of man's union with the infinite. However, Kook emphasises that rather than confining oneself to the transcendental, man is called to worship God with all the natural forces granted to him. 'At times', he says, 'the holy spirit does its work quietly within the body and soul' as '[i]t links all the concerns hidden in them with all the higher realms beyond them' (Kook, 1988, p 155). In his view the holy and the mundane are indisseverable: 'The holy and the mundane jointly inspire and enrich the spirit of man, by the specific contribution of each: the holy illumines life's inner essence, while the mundane provides the instruments and outer dimension' (Kook, 1981, p 67). Spirituality is the act of bridging the chasm by elevating the totality of the mundane to the holy. Lamm (1995) uses the term 'harmonism' to describe Kook's thoughts regarding spirituality. Whilst Rosenzweig, he says, viewed the world as dissonant and fragmented (albeit contingently so), Kook saw it as a whole: '[t]he highest heavens and the bowels of the earth form one unit, one world, one existence' (Kook, 1981, p 144). 'It is not difficult', Lamm says, 'to hear the echoes of this teaching of Kook in Buber's famous statement that there is no holy and mundane, only the holy and not-yet-holy' (Lamm, 1995, p 168). Indeed, Kook is seen as being in the tradition of Hasidism in 'blurring … distinctions between the sacred and the profane' (Lamm, 1995, p 168).

Bergman (1991) describes how Kook's understanding of spirituality impacts the purpose of prayer. In Kook's writings, prayer has the important aim of consolidating nature by fusing the sanctified with the natural world. Most religious thinkers generally regard a person as a creature completely distinct from his creator. Kook's concept of prayer is quite different since, for him, there is no abyss between the creator and the created. He writes, echoing something of the philosophy of Spinoza (2000):

> The gulf between God and the world is solely a factor of man's knowledge, his perception and the way that he lives. As knowledge advances, mankind and the world come nearer to the divine. In man's most exalted condition and in his most perfect insight, he finds that everything is contained in God. (Kook, Orot hakodesh 8:1, quoted in Bergman, 1991, p 69.)

Since everything is within God, one can say that prayer is also within God. In a profound sense, prayer can be thought of as God's discourse with himself. Thus, Kook declares that everything prays: prayer is a universal phenomenon. The rose, opening its delicate petals to greet the dew or rays of the sun, prays.

> Prayer is the ideal of all worlds. All of existence longs for the source of its life. Each plant and bush, each grain of sand and clod of earth, everything in which life is revealed, everything in which life is hidden, all of the smaller works of creation and all of the larger ones, the skies above and the holy angels, all the minute detail in all of existence as well as its totality, *everything* yearns, strives, pines and longs for the perfection of the high source living, holy, pure and mighty. (Kook, Orot hakodesh 8:1, quoted in Bergman, 1991, p. 70.)

In such ways, Kook bridges the mundane and the spiritual, the profane and the sacred. His approach is also connected to that of the philosopher Buber, in the Jewish tradition, and to those such as Macmurray and Hay, in the Christian tradition. 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, p 229). The 'happening' of the spirit, in Buber as in Kook, 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, p 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, p 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, p 19–20), and to a horse (Buber, 2002, p 27), in a sense that suggests these are edging towards the dialogic. And he talks of people's relationship with 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, p vii.)

Smith, in his introduction, says that the main concern for Buber is 'how may I understand my experience of a relation with God?' (Smith, in Buber, 1958, p 4) and not with 'the now familiar categories of *I-Thou* and *I-It*', as the latter are 'pointers' to God (Smith, in Buber, 1958, p 5). So all the 'mundane' relationships in the world are also (or can also be) sacred, for Buber. Buber's approach is echoed in the philosophy of Macmurray, with Buber himself saying of them, 'I see no difference between us … [i]t is simply that

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bridged the mundane and the spiritual.

> My early religion had built a wall between the spiritual life and the material life; between this material world and another spiritual world. It is that wall that has been razed to the ground. Now I think there is only one world, and that religion is about this actual world we live in; and about the common experience that we all have in it. I have come to think that a purely spiritual experience is just an imaginary experience; and that a purely material world would be a dead mechanism in which there could be no human beings and no human experience. (Macmurray, 1945, p 31.)

He rejects materialists, who, he says, 'seem to me to have left the wall standing', whilst he describes the world as 'no longer a mere material world, or a mere world of Nature; it is a personal world' (Macmurray, 1945, p 31–32). The personal for Macmurray (as for Buber's dialogue) points towards God, as '[i]n its full development, the idea of a universal personal Other is the idea of God' (Macmurray, 1991, p 164). Interpersonal relationships between people point to, and in turn are therefore possible because of God. 'Man' [*sic*], he says, 'must return to God freely of his own will, because only in this way can a real community of men arise' (Macmurray, 1995, p 77).

> Through the love of men and women our individual selves reach out to fellowship with the whole infinite otherness of the world which is not us, yet in which we live and move and have our being. If this fellowship is to be possible—and its possibility is the condition of our own reality—then the infinity that stands over against us must needs be a personal God. For God is the postulate of our own being; and our self-realization is the realization of God. (Macmurray, 2004, p 162.)

Self, relationships (amongst people) and God are linked here—are linked, indeed, to all of the world. The sort of religious idealism rejected by Kook and Buber is likewise rejected by Macmurray, who says idealism refers to '*another* world, a spiritual world with which we can have occasional communion' which 'is excellent Platonism' but 'is not Christian at all' (Macmurray, 1995, p 59). He goes on to say that he has 'grave doubts, indeed, whether idealism, in any form, is compatible with religion' as '[r]eligion is concerned in its reality with two things—with action and with community' whilst '[i]dealism seeks to escape from action into meditation; and from the tensions of life in common into the solitariness of one's own spirit' (Macmurray, 1995, p 59). The 'purely spiritual' is the 'purely imaginary, a ghost world without substance or shadow' (Macmurray, 1995, p 59). The material and the mundane more generally are of one world with the sacred and divine—not merged in a vague pantheism, but in action, in active relationships amongst and between, bridging or linking the apparently separate.

Within education contexts, attempts to promote spirituality and spiritual development have taken many forms. Within the UK, in which 'spiritual development' has been established as required in all state-funded schools since the 1944 Education Act,[3] the influence of forms of relational spirituality has been significant, in particular due to the work of Hay. Hay himself has linked his views to those of Macmurray. 'What has been disclosed from a disciplined and prolonged immersion in children's conversation is the notion of "relational consciousness" as the most fundamental feature of their spirituality' (Hay, 1998, p 10), and his views 'were converging on an understanding of the nature of spirituality and hence religion that seemed remarkably close to [Macmurray's] vision' (Hay, 1998, p 11). Hay's view of spirituality is also explicitly linked to those of Buber and Levinas, so, for example, '[u]sing the language of Emmanuel Levinas, the privatising of spiritual awareness makes it easier to lose touch with the "face" of the other and hence of the sense of unconditional obligation' (Hay, 2006, p 231). He describes awareness of the hear-and-now, awareness of mystery and awareness of value, and he 'summarised the concept that linked all the units of meaning as *relational consciousness*' which involves 'the experience of being in relationship—with other people, with the environment and with God, and in an important sense, in touch with oneself' (Hay, 2007, p 13–14; see also Mason, 2015).

Linking Kook, Buber, Macmurray and Hay, this chapter does not attempt to describe them as agreeing on all matters spiritual. Far from it. Hay distinguishes spirituality and religion, in a way that would be rejected by Kook, certainly, and probably by Buber and Macmurray too. And two of the writers were writing out of Jewish traditions, and two out of Christian traditions—although all but Kook had somewhat troubled relationships with their respective traditions. We do, however, wish to note some similar features of all four accounts: we should not 'build walls' (in Macmurray's phrase) between spiritual and material worlds, but should recognise possibilities to bring them into relationship (in Hay's terms) through forms of dialogue (in Buber's terms) and in doing so we may be able to experience the holy through communion with God (in Kook's phrase). This is why we have suggested—in our introduction—the possibility that children and young people (and adults) are not choosing between the material and the spiritual but may—for example through prayer—experience a kind of 'mundane spirituality' (Wong, 2006, p 76).

15.3. How is Mundane Spirituality Expressed in Prayer in School?

During 2017–2019, we had the opportunity to research the prayer experience of young people in two different geographical, cultural and political contexts. One was in Jewish religious high schools for boys in Israel and the other in a prayer spaces project in English schools with heterogeneous populations of both religious and non-religious young people. Participants were interviewed in both contexts. Notwithstanding the contrasting school and national contexts, we believe that the young people

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themselves described in their own ways what we have described in the previous section as forms of mundane spirituality. We heard the desire of young people to find spiritual routes that bridge the divide between the sacred and the mundane. Or rather, express their understanding that there is, in fact, no such division. Our intention here is not to share the research findings in full (with these examples taken from fuller accounts in Stern & Shillitoe, 2018, 2019b, Kohn, 2018, 2019, and Stern & Kohn, 2019a), but to give some examples of how mundane spirituality, as discussed in the previous section, is expressed in the words of young people in these schools.

In Israel, Steinsaltz (1996) suggests that schools do a good job of teaching prayer literacy but do not do enough in developing the spiritual world of young people, leading to a dissonance between the formal act of prayer and the spiritual world of the young person. This idea was evident in the discussions with young people in Israeli research (Kohn, 2019; Stern & Kohn, 2019a), involving 20 young people between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. These young people describe prayers in school as the opportunity for a spiritual experience in which they strive to connect to God.

> 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.

Prayer may however seem to use the 'wrong words' and be directed at an 'unknown' being:

> I really have difficulty praying to God. To whom am I actually praying? Who is this invisible being I am talking to? … I am saying words I don't connect with to a Being I don't connect to.

And words may in any case not be enough.

> 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.

The mundane physicality of a mountain, with its awe-inspiring views and at special times, seemed to enable the young person to reach the 'high places' in his search for God in prayer. Another talked about the positive relationship with a religious studies teacher, in his search for a deeper connection to God through reflection and interpersonal engagement.

> 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 similar to those of this young person:

> 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

The mundane not only involves the world (a physical world) but human relationships—with sensitive others, and with oneself.

Such a conclusion links explicitly to the second piece of research exploring spiritual development experienced in 'prayer spaces' in the UK (Stern & Kohn, 2019a; Stern & Shillitoe, 2018, 2019b). These were projects set up in more than 30 countries with the support of the *Prayer Spaces in Schools* organisation. Prayer spaces were temporary events set up, typically, in a school classroom, with activities often led by young people, intended to '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' (Togwell, 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 (and therefore typically 'mundane' work, in our sense) in both religious education (as in Hammond et al., 1990) and spiritual development (as in West-Burnham & Huws Jones, 2007).

The research set out to evaluate the contribution of the activities to the spiritual development of young people, based the 'relational' spirituality of Hay on 'relational consciousness' (Hay, 2007, p 14, and Hay & Nye, 2006) and to the advice given by some 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, p 14) along with '[a]n awareness of oneself' and '[r]ecognising and valuing the worth of each individual' (SCAA 1995, p 3–4). The working definition of spiritual development was therefore that spiritual development helped 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, p 1–21). A questionnaire was responded to by 555 young people aged 7–16 in 24 schools, and there were interviews with 71 young people (Stern & Shillitoe, 2018). Similar numbers of young people

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described themselves as (variously) religious or non-religious, and they were distributed across similar numbers of community schools and schools of religious character.

Examples of self-reflective experiences include this young person who explains the very idea of relationships with the self, in a way echoing Arendt's description of solitude as 'that human situation in which I keep myself company' (Arendt, 1978, p 185):

> 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

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).

> I can't remember what it was called but [one activity] 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.

The second biggest category of responses referred to relationships with other people—35% of all responses. Young people described thinking about 'My Aunt who previously died', 'my grandad who has long gone in 2015' or 'missing my mum's uncle because he is dead'. 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.[4]

Animals and pets (alive as well as dead) also emerged as the most significant of the 'world' themes in the 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). Young people often reflected on the material dimensions of prayer spaces, such as food used in activities—mentioned by a number of young people ('I thought how delicious the bread was'). 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 beeds were a good stress reliver and the sand helped me think.

Interestingly, there was no mention of manufactured 'possessions'—phones, computers, money, clothes—it was all *personal* or *natural*. Hay and Nye (2006) also observed an appreciation for the 'natural' material world with their participants. A number of young people also reflected on 'the world' more broadly:

> 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. Only 1% mentioned the sacred or divine as 'the best thing' about the prayer spaces. Stringer, in his work on prayer in contemporary society, observed how his participants spoke to the 'non-empirical other'—at times God, and at other times, a deceased relative or other being. Stringer found that the communication style of such prayers was 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, p 79). That might be thought to be in contrast to the experience described above of the Israeli young person for whom (rather rare) connection with God was described as 'awesome'. Young people in the prayer spaces research seemed to describe prayer as both mundane (in either or both the material and everyday senses) *and* transcendent in character. Responses involving the sacred or

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divine typically reflected an 'everyday', informal, relationship with God. 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'. 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 of a 'sacrilising' or 'enchanting' of the mundane, something that conventional 'collective worship' activities in the UK seem to have failed to do (Pirrie, 2005, although Cheetham, 2000 is more positive about the spiritual potential of UK-based 'collective worship'). 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.

15.4. Implications for Prayer in School

What are the implications[5] of all this for those concerned with prayer in school? Notwithstanding the geographical, cultural and religious differences in contexts, we believe that our research findings can contribute to a new paradigm for meaningful consideration of prayer in school, and for the relationship between religion and schooling (and education as a whole) more broadly.

Whilst 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. They find praying using a fixed text, much of which was written thousands of years ago, spiritually unsatisfying and irrelevant to their own experiences. Teachers approaching young people with established 'certainties' has a great value, but, as Szymborska says, 'certainty is beautiful,/but uncertainty is more beautiful still' (quoted in the heading of this chapter), as 'the book of events/is always open halfway through' (Szymborska, 1998, p 244–245). A more dialogic approach to prayer would—in Buber's view—be characterised by surprise, as all true 'lessons' should be characterised by surprise. He says that 'a real lesson' is 'neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts', as it is 'one which develops in mutual surprises' (Buber, 2002, p 241; see also Stern, 2013). How can the act of prayer become a meaningful experience for these Israeli young people? We found that they try to provide meaning in 'mundane' ways, through dialogue and reflective relationships (with themselves, with peers and with teachers), and through physical mundane objects that would help them in their spiritual quest. Those participating in the UK prayer spaces shared similar experiences to those engaging in prayer in Israel. What was common to all was 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 exploring '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 young people, from a Jewish religious orthodox background, talked about prayer within the framework of a dialogue with God, but it is a dialogue of an 'everyday', mundane, kind. The UK young people participating in prayer spaces described a wider range of relationships, including with the world of animals and nature. But both groups emphasise relationships, and even the

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nature of prayer is reminiscent of Buber, for whom 'the spirit in its original reality is not something that is but something that happens' (Buber, 2002, p 229, quoted in full above).

There are several implications of this theorising and the evidence from the empirical research that could be helpful to educators. 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 reflective individuals may be a helpful exercise in transforming prayer 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 & Shillitoe, 2018, 2019a). Secondly, utilising the physical world around the young person is a powerful form of the spiritual. Kook, as we have discussed, declares that everything prays: prayer is a universal phenomenon. Convening prayer services in a venue in which the young people can marvel at the mysteries of nature and reflect, as Kook did, how each plant and bush, each grain of sand and clod of the earth has a Godly core, 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 was commented on positively by many.

Thirdly, 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 any school environment. 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, 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). The mundane may itself be the means by which spirituality is experienced.

And fourthly, allowing or encouraging young people to be able to talk to their God, to be in a state of dialogue and relationship with Him, 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 what is described as God but also in relation to other people. Encouraging and fostering the possibility of such relationships, amongst young people and between young people and their teachers, can be a catalyst for more meaningful prayer services 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.

15.5. Conclusion: Implications for Religion and Education

In summary, in this chapter we have tried to show how the spiritual philosophies of Macmurray and Hay (finding spirit through relationships), Buber (exploring the spiritual through dialogue) and Kook (raising the mundane to commune with God) can be the philosophic basis of a new paradigm for how prayer in schools could be made a more meaningful experience for their young people. This, we have demonstrated, is variously reflected in our research on the prayer experiences of Israeli and UK young people. It is no simple matter, and will be different for different young people and schools around the world. But our choice of empirical data—from the religious to the non-religious, from schools with and without a religious character—is intended to 'hammock' the argument. We are raising the importance of the mundane in school *because of*, not as a *contrast to*, our concern for spiritual development. It is hoped that this presentation of 'mundane spirituality' can offer a way forward for all those seeking a new paradigm in the planning and effective implementation of meaningful engagement with prayer in school.

Beyond prayer, there are implications for schools and religion, and education, more broadly. For all the value in certainty, in knowledge and pre-determined syllabuses and the passing on of religious and broader cultural and scientific heritage, there is an additional value in the uncertain and as yet unknown, the plural, the open. We are not rejecting education—or religion—as a vital and legitimate search for 'truth': we are recognising that truth is still emergent, that there is room for the as yet unknown, the mysterious, the ineffable. Through our work on prayer in school, we are affirming this importance. In plural societies (are there any non-plural societies?), even those people who are committed 'insiders' to a particular religious or philosophical tradition, by commending genuinely dialogic and open relationships amongst people and between people and 'the world' and the sacred and divine, we are leaving open the possibility of uncertainty and of the continuing search for the truth not yet discovered. If schooling were to be entirely dependent on the passing on of established knowledge, it would not—in Buber's terms—be filled with real lessons, but merely instruction. As the educational writer Durka says, amongst all the wonderful, vital, knowledge to be passed on, we must also encourage the 'learned uncertainty of teachers' (Durka, 2002, p 1). This is an important lesson for prayer in schools, for religious education, for religion and education, and for education as a whole.

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1 We do not attempt to define 'prayer' in this chapter, theologically or sociologically, and in the reports of empirical research we accept the contextual uses of the word 'prayer' used in the UK and Israeli schools, respectively.

2 'God/gods' might be best used throughout the chapter, but we use 'God' for convenience, recognising that the majority of participants in the research were Christian or Jewish. To make more general points, we also use 'sacred or divine', and this was used, in particular, in reports on the UK-based research.

3 http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/7-8/31/contents/enacted.

4 Written responses are transcribed as written, rather than corrected.

5 Some of these implications have already been reported in Stern and Kohn 2019.

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