

# Spirituality and children

by Heather Barton



*“My grandfather comes and sits on the end of my bed every night and talks to me,” says the eight year old girl in my counselling room. While I listen intently to my client, showing interest and empathy, my mind is searching – ‘What are we looking at here?’ ‘Do I need to look at safeguarding issues?’ ‘Is this really her grandfather or someone else?’ ‘What do I*

*know about the family?’ ‘Tell me about your grandfather,’ I gently prompt her. “Well, I really love him,” she replies. “I wish he hadn’t died because we used to have so much fun together.” “When did he die?” I ask her. “About a year ago.” “And what does he talk to you about?” “He tells me he loves me and talks about the good times we used to have together.”*

Spirituality appears in many different forms when working with children. A child talking to her deceased grandfather, for example, another seeing ghosts or angels in the corner of a room, or another being afraid of the devil or bad people who appear in dreams. A child might talk about her mother going for readings from a medium, or tarot cards, or a child from a family of a different faith talking about their god, who sounds surprisingly similar to the God of our own faith. There are also special moments when we sense something happening in the room that can’t be explained – a ‘magical’ or ‘holy’ feeling that God is there in the room between and around us. How do we recognise spirituality when working with children? How do we deal with it when it arises in a form that we are not prepared for? Are we open to talking about spiritual matters with children or do we close them down? Where or what is the line between spirituality, faith and religion?

## WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality can be defined as an innate human predisposition. It can be argued that every person is a spiritual being, whether they recognise it or not, and whether or not they believe in a divine power. Spirituality is part of an individual’s approach to life and is their way of thinking; being; doing; believing; behaving and engaging with life.<sup>1</sup> Spirituality represents a distinctive resource for living that needs to be understood from a much broader perspective than religious practices. It is the deepest dimension of all life and not just one small part of it. It is the ultimate ground of all our questions, hopes, fears and loves. It is at the heart of questions about our own struggles, loss and self-worth. It is essentially about connection and relationship with other people, ourselves and the world around us.<sup>2</sup>

We live in a multi-cultural society where ‘traditional’ religious faiths

are evident in our communities. Much of our world is also torn about by religious extremism and fanaticism. Spirituality is claimed by religious communities who seek to support their own faith community, which can give a sense of identity and purpose. There is, however, also a shadow side when it drives a young person to become, for example, a suicide bomber.<sup>3</sup>

## COUNSELLING AND SPIRITUALITY

It is recognised that an active interest in religion and/or spirituality contributes to positive wellbeing and health. There is, in fact, evidence and awareness of the importance of spirituality to wellness in almost every domain of life.<sup>4</sup> Often, however, spirituality is neglected with regard to counselling and mental health issues, which has resulted in clients' needs not being adequately met. Separating and regarding spirituality as though it were irrelevant means that this dimension of the client's life is discarded.<sup>5</sup> Many counsellors may be wary of approaching the subject of spirituality in therapy as few counselling training programmes recognise its importance, and do not integrate it into their core training. This means that often the issue is not addressed at all in counselling sessions. It is important to understand, however, that both client and counsellor do not leave their religion, faith or spirituality outside of the therapy room when they enter it.<sup>6</sup> Each person has spiritual values, whether they believe in a particular religion, follow a certain faith, or practice none of these.

Counsellors who venture into the realm of spirituality need to have a strong awareness of their own spiritual value systems and to be grounded enough in their own spiritual journey to be able to meet the client where they are, and not impose any unwanted change on them.<sup>7</sup> However, it may also be true that many counsellors are not

well enough equipped to deal with religious and spiritual issues and it should not be assumed that just because a counsellor is Christian, they have the expertise to counsel clients in the area of spirituality.

## SPIRITUALITY, FAITH AND RELIGION

Spirituality, faith and religion will be important issues to many clients who come to therapy. They may have no grounding in a particular tradition, but nevertheless find themselves looking for guidance, relief or meaning in life. Clients may bring many and varying issues relating to religion, faith and spirituality to the counselling room, which will involve a wide range of spiritual and religious orientations.<sup>8</sup> The terms 'religion', 'faith', and 'spirituality' are often used interchangeably to mean the same things, which can seem very confusing and challenging. Definitions have also changed over time and will mean different things to different people. However, they are important aspects of diversity that will be important to most clients. In fact, many clients come to therapy seeking answers to spiritual concerns but may find it difficult to talk about this in the therapy room.<sup>9</sup> Briefly, definitions of religion, faith and spirituality are as follows:

**Religion:** This refers to a formal system of beliefs that centre on some conception of God that expresses the views of a particular religious group or community.<sup>10</sup> Swinton believes that this can be a powerful force in a person's life that needs to be taken seriously. It has great importance for the process of mental health care, as well as the maintenance of good mental health.

**Faith:** This can be defined as a general religious attitude, or an accepted set of beliefs. This may be based on personal conviction, or trust and confidence in something or someone. Faith can be termed as something deeply personal, as

well as extremely private.<sup>11</sup>

**Spirituality:** This can sometimes be seen as an aspect of religion. However, in contemporary western cultures, spiritual beliefs have tended to move away from institutionalised religions, and towards other forms of spirituality.<sup>10</sup> There has, for example, been an increase, over the past forty or fifty years, in spiritual practices such as yoga, meditation and mindfulness.<sup>12</sup>

## CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

Even among those who profess a Christian faith, there is a great diversity of opinion, so assumptions should not be made about the beliefs held by an individual. If relevant, it is important that beliefs are explored and clarified in a session so that an understanding of the client's faith is gained by the therapist.<sup>13</sup> Many counsellors who are Christian believe that their faith is part of the therapeutic process, even if others do not recognise it.<sup>14</sup> They believe that therapy is a healing encounter, and in a unique way Christ is present when the sick or hurting are being ministered to. Christian therapists often believe, therefore, that healing will flow through the quality of the relationship they have with the client, whether or not the client is a Christian.<sup>15</sup>

Individual Christians who know a great deal about the Christian tradition as it relates to their own denominational perspective may know very little about other Christian traditions.<sup>16</sup> Some Christians, for example, believe it is necessary to go to church each week. Others may have given up going to church because of their disillusionment with Church in general, or perhaps because they have been hurt by Church. They still, however, consider themselves to be Christian. For other Christians, their experiences of formal religious practice may have led to hurt and discrimination, and so they may not wish to bring spirituality into the counselling

session, and may see it as an unwanted intrusion.<sup>17</sup>

There are many religious beliefs and theological traditions with which people may identify in the belief that they are Christian, but which in fact have been passed on in the form of tradition or customs. Some people, for example, may call themselves Christian because they were born into a 'Christian country'. Indeed, they may attend church on special occasions, such as Easter or Christmas, but have no real understanding of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity.

### **SPIRITUALITY AND CHILDREN**

Although some counsellors or mental health professionals may be uncomfortable with questions around spirituality and religion, there are often times in therapy that are experienced as 'special moments' where it seems that something 'different' is taking place, something beyond the 'normal'. This is described by Pargament<sup>5</sup> (p.11) as a 'meeting of souls taking place'. Swinton defines it as 'dimensions of human

experience that are essentially inexpressible'<sup>10</sup> (p.13). These special moments often happen when working with children. Jenny Lambourne<sup>3</sup> calls these moments 'Glimpses' – moments where something different can be glimpsed – something happens that can't be explained. Lambourne defines spirituality as a deep connection made with the inner self, the world around and the other or beyond. This can be seen 'in a time stopping moment of wonder-wow! or the shadow-ouch!' (p.46). These moments can be noticed in real time during a session or in reflecting back on sessions when writing up notes.

Nye<sup>18</sup> believes that spirituality is something we should expect to see in every child and that children are more open to spirituality than adults as they have a rich natural capacity for spirituality. However, Nye contends, adults often behave as if spiritual life can only begin once a child has been filled up with enough religious knowledge. Providing religious knowledge is not a pre-requisite

for a spiritual life. In fact, there are ways of acquiring and using religious knowledge that may even be detrimental to spiritual health. There is a huge difference between spirituality and religious knowledge. The genuine spiritual life that children already have can sometimes be trampled on by religious teaching. The idea may be promoted that faith is about learning Bible verses, doctrine or information about prayer or moral codes of behaviour. Often children who learn these things grow out of faith rather than into it as they tread water spiritually.<sup>18</sup>

Children's spirituality is recognised within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which refers to spiritual rights in four of its articles, with a further four also outlining specific religious rights. This indicates that all children have the right to spiritual wellbeing. In the UK, spirituality and religious education form part of the requirements of the education system, although this may be open to misinterpretation. Spirituality is increasingly



acknowledged to be an essential part of child development, but at the same time spiritual awareness is not embedded within current education systems.

## CHALLENGE

The challenge for therapists is whether they are able to see or hear spirituality when it is expressed by a child in a verbal or non-verbal form. Children have a capacity for depth which may take an adult by surprise. They do not separate out spirituality from other aspects of their lives as adults are prone to do, and can change quickly from talking about one subject to another. Children are capable of profound, meaningful beliefs from an early age despite cultural pressures and the decline in institutional religion.<sup>19</sup>

**A group of ACC counsellors who work with children and young people have been meeting together in a forum on Zoom, discussing the implications of working with children and spirituality. It has been enlightening and inspiring to hear of each other's experiences in this field. We would love to continue the discussion so if you are interested, please look out for further information regarding dates and times when this may happen again and please do join us as we continue the discussion.**

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