

The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes



Tracing the Threads Spirituality, Transformation, and Religious Doubt Within the Field of Adult Education

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Volume 34, Number 1, June 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091544ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v34i1.5613>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education / L'Association
canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

ISSN

0835-4944 (print)
1925-993X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

MacKenzie, M. (2022). Tracing the Threads: Spirituality, Transformation, and Religious Doubt Within the Field of Adult Education. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education / La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*, 34(1), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v34i1.5613>

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Volume 34 Issue 1

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editors-in-Chief: Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

34,1 June/juin 2022, 101–114
ISSN1925-993X (online)

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www.casae-aceea.ca

TRACING THE THREADS: SPIRITUALITY, TRANSFORMATION, AND RELIGIOUS DOUBT WITHIN THE FIELD OF ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract

While spirituality has emerged as a topic of interest in adult education, much of the current scholarship considers spirituality as distinct from religion. This literature review questions those conclusions, including the use of theistic terminology to describe a concept (spirituality) that many posit is non-theistic. Spirituality is also considered in terms of transformative learning theory and spiritually centred transformation, specifically as a type of non-cognitive transformation. In this way, spirituality is placed alongside other types of affective or emotionally based ways of knowing, learning, and transforming. Finally, experiences of religious doubt—defined as dissonance or uncertainty in one's religious and faith beliefs—are identified as potential catalysts that launch the transformative learning process. The review concludes by identifying the need for more research into the intersections of religious doubt and transformative learning in terms of what this research might tell us about the nature of both doubt and transformation.

Résumé

Cette étude se penche sur l'apprentissage et l'enseignement interprofessionnels en Bien que la spiritualité ait émergé comme sujet d'intérêt dans l'éducation des adultes, une grande partie des recherches actuelles aborde la spiritualité en faisant la distinction nette avec la religion. Cette revue de littérature remet en cause ces conclusions, dont l'utilisation de terminologie théiste pour décrire un concept (spiritualité) que plusieurs considèrent non théiste. La spiritualité est aussi abordée à partir des théories de l'apprentissage transformateur et de la transformation axée sur la spiritualité, notamment comme exemple de transformation non cognitive. Ainsi, la spiritualité est située au même rang que d'autres modes de savoirs, d'apprentissage et de transformation fondés sur l'affectif ou l'émotion. Finalement, les expériences de doute religieux — définies comme la dissonance ou l'incertitude quant à ses croyances religieuses et ses convictions de foi — sont identifiées comme catalyseurs potentiels pouvant lancer le processus d'apprentissage transformateur. La revue conclut en identifiant le besoin de plus de recherches sur les intersections entre le doute religieux

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
34,1 June/juin 2022, 101–114*

ISSN1925-993X (online)

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et l'apprentissage transformateur pour découvrir ce que ces recherches pourraient nous dire sur la nature à la fois du doute et de la transformation.

At first glance, the fields of spirituality, transformative learning theory, and religious doubt may not seem to have anything to do with each other. Indeed, when it comes to religious doubt in particular, some may argue that the subject is completely out of place in adult education discourse, given important scholarship that has questioned—if not outright rejected—the role of religious or theistic considerations in the field (English & Tisdell, 2010; Newman, 2012). However, as the following pages will describe, there are important linkages and overlaps between these three foci that warrant attention and further study. This literature review explores these linkages in detail, noting gaps across all three fields that should be addressed. In particular, it identifies how insights from the study of transformative learning theory and the spirituality of adult education can be employed to help us make better sense of doubt in general, with particular emphasis on religious and spiritual doubt.

Scope of Review and Limitations

My adult education practice is centred on the exploration of spirituality, faith, doubt, and religious belonging, particularly in a Westernized Christian context. In this way, my research is focused on a limited section of the wider discourse relating to spirituality and religion on a global scale, including the myriad ways of knowing, being, or connecting with a sense of the divine that exists within and between different cultural contexts. As it is related to my own practice and research interests, this review necessarily is limited in scope, focusing primarily on Western religious traditions (with a heavy emphasis on Christianity) and their intersections with spirituality and adult education. Accordingly, any conclusions drawn will not necessarily be applicable across the full spectrum of ways to understand spirituality and religion around the world. Still, even an application of adult education theory limited to Westernized Christianity may well yield valuable insight and suggest areas of potential inquiry for and within other spiritual and/or religious traditions.

Spirituality and Adult Education

As a topic in the field of adult education, spirituality is hard to define; yet this difficulty is not related to its prominence. Indeed, even 20 years ago, English and Gillen (2000) wrote that, "like dandelions in the spring, the term [spirituality] is cropping up everywhere" (p. 1). In the years that have passed, interest in what scholars conceptualize as spirituality has continued to grow and permeate the discourse of adult education. How, then, is the concept understood? English and Gillen defined spirituality as "awareness of something greater than ourselves, a sense that we are connected to all human beings and to all of creation" (p. 1)—a definition that was also accepted by Charaniya (2012). In a similar vein, Harris (as cited in English & Gillen, 2000, p. 1) defined the concept as "our way of being in the world in the light of the Mystery at the core of the universe; a mystery that some of us call God." Yet while Harris's reference to a divine power is certainly part of *some* approaches to spirituality, it is not necessarily characteristic of all. Indeed, Tisdell (2003) was explicit in stating that "spirituality is not about pushing a religious agenda," and that while for many people the areas of spirituality and religion are interrelated, they are not in fact the same (p. xi). Tisdell

did not propose a unifying definition of spirituality, but rather advanced a series of seven assumptions relating to spirituality and its intersections with the field of adult education:

1. Spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are interrelated.
2. Spirituality is about an awareness and honouring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of what many refer to as the Life-force, God, higher power, higher self, cosmic energy, Buddha nature, or Great Spirit.
3. Spirituality is fundamentally about meaning making.
4. Spirituality is always present (although often unacknowledged) in the learning environment.
5. Spiritual development constitutes moving towards greater authenticity or to a more authentic self.
6. Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in art forms such as music, art, image, symbol, and ritual, which are manifested culturally.
7. Spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise. (Tisdell, 2003, p. 28)

Similarly, English and Tisdell (2010) divided spirituality into four different areas, which they argued capture differing perspectives on spirituality: (1) it is different from religion; (2) it focuses on individuals' meaning-making processes; (3) it contributes to personal values and social action; and (4) it relates to symbolic and unconscious knowledge construction processes (p. 287).

Thus, we glimpse from the diversity of these assumptions and definitions the full breadth of what one might consider spirituality. In general, it is related to meaning making on an individual level, and to connecting with a higher power—whether that higher power is conceptualized within a specific religious framework or even understood in secular terms. It is at once also about recognizing one's connectedness with others while at the same time growing into a more authentic self. After seeing this myriad of understandings, and the apparent contradictions within each, perhaps one may affirm English and Gillen's (2000) observation that defining the term is like "trying to pin jelly to a wall" (p. 1).

Spirituality as a Non-Rational Process

Definitions aside, spirituality is one of a number of non-rational processes or "ways of understanding" that have emerged in adult education, largely as a counter to a field that many argued was becoming too rationally centric or cognitively based (Charaniya, 2012; Dirkx, 1997; Dirkx, 2001; English & Gillen, 2000; English & Tisdell, 2010; Tisdell, 2003). In his seminal text, Dirkx (1997) talked about the need to place emphasis in adult learning on what he called *soul*, which can be loosely understood as those parts of one's own self that are deeper than rationalization or cognition. These parts are key to who we are as people, yet are "grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experiences," with less emphasis on cognitive processing or thinking (p. 80). Further, Dirkx argued that soul "connects us to the immediacy of our present experience and, through this process, leads us into an experience that transcends more limited, ego-based views of the world" (p. 83), adding that "unlike the analytic, reflective, and rational processes...learning through soul fosters self-knowledge through symbolic, imagistic, and contemplative means" (Moore, as

cited in Dirkx, 1997, p. 83). In a similar vein, Dirkx (2001) noted the centrality of emotion in our decision-making processes, and thus argued for the need to attend to our emotions as holding the key to a deeper understanding of our selves (p. 65). This approach, he argued, is not typical of the way many theorists think of emotion. Dirkx stated that emotions are believed to either impede or motivate learning—a binary that reinforces a “rationalist doctrine” as opposed to recognizing the fundamental role that emotions play in their own right (p. 63).

In general terms, the literature does not precisely equate spirituality as being synonymous with *soul*, nor is spirituality understood as an emotion in itself. Still, spirituality is interconnected with these topics by virtue of their being non-rational processes that relate to identity and meaning making in ways that stretch beyond the limits of cognitive abilities alone. As Dirkx (1997) noted, examples of *soul* may include such emotionally rich experiences as “being awestruck by a brilliant sunset, captured by the majestic beauty of a rising full moon, or gripped by the immense pain and helplessness we feel for a child trapped deep inside an abandoned well” (p. 81). In other words, these examples may lead to the “awareness of something greater than ourselves” or the “sense we are connected to all human beings” characteristic of English and Gillen’s (2000) definition of spirituality (p. 1). It is in this context that the emergence of spirituality in adult education must be recognized and understood.

Spirituality vs. Religion

Despite scholarly attempts to separate *spirituality* and *religion*, their links are undeniable. While English and Tisdell (2010) referred to spirituality as “an *individual’s* [emphasis added] personal experience of making meaning to the sacred” (p. 287), they conceptualized religion as an “*organized community of faith* [emphasis added], with an official creed and codes of regulatory behavior” (p. 287). Thus, the former refers to an *individual* process of meaning making that is free of any external force, whereas the latter is the process of meaning making *within a communal setting* that expects members to affirm a common statement of belief. Regardless of the difference in communal vs. individual processes, in general terms the ultimate purpose of meaning making in both concepts is understood to be the same. Recognizing this linkage, Charaniya (2012) adopted an understanding of spirituality that “is not separated from religion or religiosity, yet is also not necessarily assumed to be inherently linked to formal religion” (p. 232).

Still, despite attempts to bracket these two concepts, the literature notes that such distinctions may, in some cases, be more imagined than real (English & Tisdell, 2010 p. 288). For instance, many spiritual or even secular people participate in practices like yoga, tai chi, or mindfulness without any recognition that these activities are rooted in specific religious traditions (p. 288). Further, English and Tisdell (2010) and Tisdell (2003) argued that because many people are “socialized in some sort of religious tradition, their earliest stage of spiritual development often develops in the context of religion. Thus, for many people it is impossible to completely separate spirituality and religion” (English & Tisdell, 2010, p. 287). English and Tisdell also noted that some spiritual experiences can take place in a religious context, and that our identities can be shaped by our membership in such religious communities. Therefore, even if one leaves a religious tradition later in life, it is impossible to completely bracket out the effect that being part of said tradition has on one’s ongoing

spiritual development (pp. 287–288). Charaniya (2012) took things one step further, arguing that not only can spiritual experiences happen in a religious context, but that such “organized communities of faith provide us with inroads to our own spirituality and opportunities for spiritual experiences” (p. 233). Thus, we see the tension of attempting to understand spirituality as something distinct from religion, yet also encompassing it.

Transformative Learning Theory and Spirituality

In the over 40 years since its initial introduction, transformative learning theory has evolved and been refined in response to a number of critiques and suggested improvements (some of which will be discussed later in the review). In this way, a theory that has proved seminal in the field of adult education is still considered a “theory-in-progress” (Baumgartner, 2012, p. 112). Transformative learning theory has typically been understood as a primarily rational or thought-based process, where a catalyst event forces a person to critically examine the ways in which they relate to the world (Baumgartner, 2012). Mezirow (1997) referred to the way in which someone relates to the world as a “frame of reference,” defined specifically as “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences” (p. 5). Expressed differently, frames of reference are the thought patterns we employ to organize our life experiences and then process them in ways that make sense to our own selves. Thus, “they selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our ‘line of action’” (p. 5). Therefore, through transformative learning theory, “we transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based” (p. 7).

As noted, critical to this process is a catalyst event that prompts someone to question their frame of reference in the first place. Mezirow (2012) described a 10-step process in which a person works through this catalyst event (which he calls a “disorienting dilemma”) by critically investigating their underlying assumptions and ultimately arriving at a new world view or frame of reference that differs from their starting point. Later, Mezirow (2012) articulated a broader definition of transformative learning that recalls “the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective” (p. 76). Central to Mezirow’s understanding of transformative learning is a particular action as a result of one’s own introspective, reflective process. In other words, while transformative learning begins with thoughts and thought processes, it must not end there. The end result must be some tangible insight or action taken by the person who transforms.

Transformation as Emotionally or Spiritually Centred

Mezirow’s (1997) conceptualization of transformation as an inherently rational, cognitively based occurrence in which one “assess[es] reasons, examine[s] evidence, and arrive[s] at a reflective judgment” (p. 10) has drawn many influential criticisms. Indeed, Dirkx’s “learning through soul” (as explored in a previous section) is often put forward as a critique of Mezirow’s rationally focused approach to learning in general. In essence, Dirkx (2001) and others like him argued that this dominant rational understanding of transformation theory overlooks fundamental components of human nature such as emotion and affect which are core to human experience and, therefore, how humans make sense of their world

(p. 70). In this same vein, Merriam and Bierema (2014) described Dirkx's framework as one that, while inclusive of the need for rational thought processes in transformative learning, also accesses "the unconscious world and incorporat[es] it into our conscious being, our ego" (p. 86).

Clark and Dirkx (2008) further articulated the importance of attending to one's emotional self as part of any transformative learning experience. In arguing for the inclusion of the role of emotion, they stated:

Emotion is not something that simply invades our experiences of teaching and learning...Rather, through the expression of affect and emotion in adult learning, we are offered a kind-of language for reinterpreting ourselves and the possibility to experience and recreate our sense of selves, our subjectivities, our being in the world. (pp. 89–90)

They also affirmed the value of a full range of emotional experiences, not just innately positive ones. In fact, they lamented that educators don't recognize "so-called negative emotions as something other than a barrier or challenge to effective learning experiences, something to get off one's chest before real learning can occur" (p. 91). Subsequently, a number of different lenses for investigating transformative learning have emerged that incorporate elements of self that exist beyond rational cognition. Kucukaydin and Cranton (2012) named four of these lenses as Merizow's rational approach (which most closely mirrors the original theory), Daloz's developmental approach, Freire's emancipatory approach, and Boyd's extrarational approach. As Taylor and Snyder (2012) noted, the emergence of these additional theoretical lenses stems directly from the perceived inadequacy of Merizow's initial approach in attending to non-rational ways of knowing and being.

Charaniya (2012) also proposed a lens for transformative learning that deals specifically with the spiritual and cultural elements of a person's self. She noted the parallel between understanding meaning making as a process that some argue is inherently linked to spirituality (see English & Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 2003), and that others view as core to all learning in general (Charaniya, 2012, p. 235). She argued that "when cultural and spiritual perspectives are invited into the mix, this process of making meaning, or learning, involves a range of experiences...It is a context in which spiritual development...can take place" (p. 235). In addition to advocating this non-rational approach to transformation, "in which knowledge is socially and collaboratively constructed," Charaniya also proposed another way to understand the actual process of transformation itself. While Mezirow (2012) advocated a 10-step, linear "transformation trajectory," Charaniya (2012) argued that transformation is in fact "a spiraling, creative...intertwining journey of discovery" (p. 236).

Similar to Charaniya, Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) noted that spirituality is often intrinsically tied to the essence of a person, largely shaping their self-understanding and how they relate to the world (p. 379). In this way, spirituality is not vestigial, nor can a spiritual person's transformation be examined in isolation from their spirituality. Spirituality is core, informing their sense of self, inter-weaving with their cultural identities, and, in many cases, providing a *why* that explains and informs their actions. Moyer and Sinclair (2016) presented a case study that largely aligns with this position. In interviews with employees and volunteers with faith-based organizations engaged in conservation work in Kenya, the (mostly Christian) participants reported that reflecting on their personal and shared theologies of creation influenced how they came to understand their work in the field (p. 45).

In other words, their faith-based context provided an opportunity to reflect on their work and connect it to a larger sense of meaning informed by their belonging to a particular faith tradition. Thus, through this process of reflection, participants were able to understand their work in a new dimension—not as something that existed separately from their faith, but as something that flowed as an extension of it (p. 46).

Transformation as an Unwelcome Event

A common factor across the various iterations of transformative learning theory (whether cognitive, spiritual, or emotional) is its framing as a largely intentional process. In other words, transformation can only take place if the learner allows it. To this point, Charaniya (2012) argued that to “invite transformative learning that is positively influenced by the cultural and spiritual aspects of the learner, [they] must be able to bring...the personal characteristics of intellectual curiosity and being comfortable with ambiguity” (p. 237). Similarly, MacKeracher (2012) argued that a learner can in fact block “an experience that leads to transformation” through any number of means, including (1) ignoring a critical incident; (2) choosing not to reflect on it; (3) insisting that the experience fits within their existing frame of reference; or (4) refusing to act in ways that align with new insights prompted by their experience (p. 349). She called for research and thinking on “the many different ways in which we can avoid transformative learning” (p. 353).

Most of the literature on transformative learning theory seems to assume that such transformation is inherently positive. Indeed, Mezirow’s (2012) own seminal theory suggested that the “end result” of transformation is “self confidence in new roles and relationships,” and “a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” (p. 86). However, Piercy’s (2013) observation about the “emotionally painful” process of “unlearning” previously held frames of reference, especially spiritually centred ones tied to a person’s deeply held beliefs and core sense of identity, suggested that transformation should not necessarily be understood as a universally positive event.

Doubt in a Religious Context

The phenomenon of doubt in religious and theistic contexts is an established field of study, particularly in the disciplines of psychology and sociology. At a general level, definitions of religious doubt focus on the experience of uncertainty or dissonance between one’s lived experience and learned beliefs, with the latter often being imparted in the context of one’s family, school, or religious spheres. For instance, Hunsberger et al. defined religious doubt as “a feeling of uncertainty toward, or questioning of, religious teachings and beliefs” (as cited in Krause & Ellison, 2009, p. 2), whereas Allport considered it a “collision of evidence with prior belief, or with one belief and another” (as cited in Baltazar & Coffen, 2011, p. 188). Puffer et al. (2008) acknowledged doubt as a “hesitant reaction” characterized by a “divided state of mind” (p. 271), while Krause (2015) noted that doubt “often arises when people are faced with two incompatible beliefs about their faith” (p. 746). Interestingly, other scholars have studied similar phenomena but use terminology and definitions that suggest a slightly expanded scope of focus. For instance, Paragment et al. named “efforts to conserve or transform a spirituality that has been threatened or harmed” as “spiritual struggles” (as cited in Ellison & Lee, 2010, p. 502). Ok (2004) perhaps offered the most comprehensive definition, using the umbrella term of “religious stress” in reference to “a state of mind

often characterized as being uncomfortable because of such feelings as uncertainty, distress, questioning, contradiction, confusion, doubt, anxiety, loss of faith, discord, and so on" (p. 201). Indeed, Ok not only articulated the range of experiences that give way to what he calls religious stress, but also identified some of its resulting emotions as "guilt, alienation, loneliness, disloyalty, and unwillingness in the context of religion" (p. 201).

But while scholars such as Ok are content to describe such experiences in relatively broad terms, others are more cautious about defining the phenomenon of doubt by way of what it is not. For instance, Puffer et al. (2008) were careful to distinguish doubt from unbelief. Whereas doubt is a "hesitant reaction," (p. 271), unbelief "is a rejecting response, a resolute state of mind involving a definite 'conviction of falsity regarding an issue'" (Beck, as cited in Puffer et al., 2008, p. 271). In other words, religious doubt is not a wholesale rejection of any belief or belief system, but rather is characterized by ambiguity in terms of the dissonance of either holding two beliefs that are contradictory, or having an experience that does not align with one's previously held beliefs. Indeed, the careful language used by the aforementioned scholars to define doubt would seem to support this nuance.

Conflicting Perspectives on Religious Doubt

While the study of religious doubt is not new, there is no consensus on whether religious doubt should be viewed in positive or negative terms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, perspectives differ depending on whether one approaches the subject from the angle of psychology and sociology, or theology and religious studies. A number of scholars (see Baltazar & Coffen, 2011; Fisherman, 2016; Krause, 2015; Puffer et al., 2008) took note of this dichotomy and of the strong language often employed by members of religious communities to chastise doubt and those who experience it. For instance, prolific Christian theologian Karl Barth argued that "no one should flirt with his unbelief or with his doubt," going so far as to say that "the theologian should only be ashamed of it" (as cited in Krause, 2015, p. 746). Similarly, Puffer et al. (2008) noted other characterizations of doubt in a Christian context that are even more inflammatory, including the idea that doubt entails "risky, dangerous, and destructive thinking," and should be understood as "a cancer burning and mutating healthy beliefs," or even as "a demonic weapon" (p. 270). Suffice to say that other fields of study are more sympathetic to the role and function of doubt, noting that doubt is typically embraced "as a universal natural process, particularly from a developmental psychology viewpoint" (Fisherman, 2016, p. 119).

Still, it would be an overgeneralization to argue that religion and religious scholars are united in opposition to doubt. Indeed, much of the current scholarship that approaches religion from a Westernized lens notes that thinking has begun to shift toward not only an acceptance of doubt, but a welcoming of it. Raman (2004) noted that many celebrated religious thinkers from a number of faith traditions have written about their own experiences with doubt, and argued that doubt may in fact be "a necessary precondition for faith" (p. 948). Puffer et al. (2008) also positioned doubt as "a universal experience germinated from human finitude and a necessity for faith maturation and its transitional experiences" (p. 270). They suggested that an era of postmodernism, characterized by "questioning everything, assuming nothing, and taking nothing for granted," might help explain why those with religious commitments and affiliations are more willing to speak openly about doubt in positive terms (p. 271).

Doubt as a Positive Factor in Faith Development

While much of the literature positions doubt as an unwelcome or unwanted phenomenon, several authors stated that, for some who consider themselves religious, this is not always the case. In their longitudinal study on religious doubt, Krause and Ellison (2009) noted that some participants did not seem bothered by doubt, and in fact used it as an opportunity (or even catalyst) to “seek spiritual growth” (p. 308). Similarly, in his study on religious stress among Muslim youth in Turkey, Ok (2004) noted that some participants “reported the feeling of pleasure and joy in undergoing this whole process [of grappling with religious stress]” (p. 207). Finally, Pope (2019) noted that participants in a multifaith discussion group with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim attendees appreciated the challenge of being confronted with beliefs and belief systems that made them question their own, including one participant who said:

I really do think it's when our beliefs and pre-set ideas are challenged that we actually learn something new. And it's hard, it's like muscles. You can't build muscle unless you stretch and strain and stress it and I think the same thing is true about ideas and beliefs. We don't change them easily and they don't expand easily. (p. 12)

This apparent dissonance in reactions and responses to doubt was referenced by Puffer et al. (2008), who noted that despite all the literature exploring the presence of doubt, there are surprisingly “few explanations for the conflicting results” on why some experience doubt positively and others negatively (p. 272). The authors suggested that Marcia's theory of identity development may help illustrate the reason behind these seemingly contradictory results.

Baltazar and Coffen (2011) provided an overview of Marcia's theory of identity development, which proposed four “categories of maturity in career choices, religious beliefs, personal value systems and sexual attitudes” (p. 183). Marcia posited that the concepts of *crisis* and *commitment* are integral to a mature identity, with *crisis* understood as the process of “trying out a variety of ideologies and roles,” and *commitment* defined as “the process of concentrating energy in a single role or ideology” (p. 183). The first of the four categories of maturity is *identity diffusion*, wherein “a person...may not have experienced a crisis, but has a very low degree of commitment” to their identity and sense of self (p. 183). In other words, diffusion paints a picture of someone who has not achieved what Marcia would consider a mature, developed identity. Individuals at a stage of *identity foreclosure* tend to be “close-minded and inflexible,” and “not only embrace values given by parents or other authority figures but also rely on those authorities for approval and affirmation” (p. 183). Those experiencing *identity moratorium* are “experiencing crisis, but [have] not yet finalized a commitment” to their identity, and may be undergoing life changes that cause them to question or reject some of the values and beliefs they've held to that point (p. 183). Finally, *identity achievement* “refers to the state of a person who has both experienced crisis and achieved commitment based on the individual's own choosing” (p. 184). Those at this stage of identity development typically “exhibit lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of self-esteem” and are “more introspective and able to achieve logical decisions and interpersonal relationships.” (p. 184). Of particular note in Marcia's theory is the role of crisis in helping a person achieve a mature identity. Crisis is not positioned as something to be

avoided, but as an inevitability that everyone will need to deal with and work through if they are to move beyond their childhood conceptions of self toward an identity that is capable of critical reflection and introspection. It is interesting to consider the implications of this theory when doubt lends itself to what Marcia called *crisis*.

With Marcia's theory of identity development in mind, Puffer et al. (2008) examined correlations between doubt and various stages of identity maturity. While the study was limited to a Christian context, their findings, particularly in two different categories of identity development, are worthy of note. The study found that *identify foreclosure* was a "consistent negative predictor of religious doubt," meaning that those at this stage of identity maturity were not likely to experience doubt. Conversely, they found that many participants at the *achievement* level—understood to be the most mature of all four identity categories—were in fact *more* likely to experience and live with doubt (p. 279). The authors appealed to the basic tenets of identity theory to explain these findings. As foreclosed individuals are considered "rigid and closeminded," they tend to avoid ambiguity and only seek sources of information that confirm existing beliefs (pp. 279–280). In contrast, those at achievement levels "can engage in the process of investing, attaching, and pledging an allegiance to a belief system and doubt at the same time" (p. 279). In other words, they are more comfortable with ambiguity and are confident enough in their own identity that they can evaluate sources of information or belief systems that differ from—or even challenge—their own. These findings have important implications for how we understand the presence or absence of religious doubt. For instance, the absence of such doubt in a *foreclosed* individual may not be cause for celebration, as it may suggest a person is not so much comfortable in their own faith as closed to other sources of belief. Similarly, the presence of doubt in *achieved* individuals may not be cause for concern, as these persons are likely to respond to doubt instead of suppressing it, and may even allow it to grow their faith. These same individuals may also simply be more comfortable living with dissonance. Thus, this study offers a possible explanation as to why some who have experienced religious doubt or stress react positively to it. It also suggests that doubt needs to be characterized more deeply than a simple binary of good or bad.

Implications for Religious Doubt and Transformative Learning

Exline noted that the specifics of "how people deal with spiritual struggles, such as doubt, is a vastly understudied area" (as cited in Krause, 2015, p. 756). In this regard, researchers like Krause (2015) have called for exploration of "a full slate of dissonance reduction strategies that people turn to when they experience doubts about their faith," as well as research "on the factors that influence the dissonance reduction strategies that a person who experiences doubt elects to pursue" (p. 757). In other words, more work is required to "dive deep" on doubt, moving beyond more general discussions on its positive and negative effects toward a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of those who doubt. Indeed, as an event or mindset that prompts religious adherents to question previously held values and beliefs, experiences of religious doubt may well serve as the "critical incident" that Mezirow described as launching the transformative learning process. As transformative learning theory helps to explain how people broaden their perspectives, and transform their identities in the process, an interesting question is raised: could insights from the theory help us understand the nature of doubt, and the experiences of those who live with it?

Summarizing the Literature

In many ways, the literature explored here on the fields of spirituality and adult education, transformative learning theory, and religious doubt barely begins to scratch the surface of these respective fields of study. Indeed, much has been written and many more ideas explored on each topic, and as noted at the outset of this review, the selected literature approaches these areas primarily through a Westernized Christian lens. In other words, the view presented should not necessarily be understood as universally encompassing all spiritual and/or religious traditions. Even within these limitations, the literature offers a reasonable overview of the main themes and highlights of these varied fields. The selected works on spirituality and adult education illustrate the novel and sometimes arbitrary ways that scholars have sought to separate spirituality from religion, while still holding on to more “palatable” elements of religious belief that come without negative connotations. Still, the complexity and nuance inherent in this scholarship demonstrates that such separation is easier said than done. Indeed, while some scholars appear eager to bracket out the theistic elements of spirituality, the selected literature demonstrates that language around spirituality is so tied up with concepts typically associated with religion that there is no straightforward way to do so.

The literature on transformative learning theory (with particular emphasis on its intersection with spirituality) also demonstrates the tension of a theory in progress. The theory continues to develop and germinate beyond Mezirow’s initial conception of a primarily cognitively based phenomenon to one that incorporates different ways of learning and processing, including experiences that are driven by emotion. In fact, much of the literature specific to spiritual transformation uses the word *spirituality* as synonymous with *emotion*, or indeed with any number of words that refer to knowing in ways that are considered non-cognitive.

The research on religious doubt helps to colour the sometimes heated and controversial perspectives on doubt and dissonance in religious contexts. Interestingly, more recent scholarship is demonstrating that such perspectives may be shifting, and that doubt may in fact be viewed as a positive in terms of its impact on faith development. At the most straightforward level, the research has demonstrated it is not always possible to make inferences in terms of one’s sense of faith identity based merely on either the presence or absence of religious doubt. Rather, it is the precise nature of the doubt itself, and the choices one makes to either work through it or suppress it, that illustrate how doubt may shape one’s sense of self. Unfortunately, it is here that the literature falls off, without giving much attention to how doubt can be understood in this context.

Discussion and Proposals for Future Direction

Previous sections have hinted at some potential critiques of the literature, specifically as they apply to the intersection of spirituality and adult education. Indeed, a review of the major scholarship seems to suggest that *spirituality* is largely used as a catch-all word for anything seen as non-cognitive. Further, it suggests that attempts to distinguish spirituality from religion are not as successful as some may assume or hope. Much of the scholarship maintains that while belief in a higher or divine power can be part of spirituality, it doesn’t necessarily need to be. At the same time, the language used to describe spirituality is substantially based in religious terminology. Dirkx’s (1997) use of the word *soul* is a prime

example. In essence, Dirkx used *soul* to describe "aspects of our world not visible through the language of logos," implying a realm of knowledge that lies deeper than cognition (p. 81). While there is nothing inherently theistic about this belief, use of the word *soul* inevitably conjures up images of an immaterial, immortal part of one's being—concepts that are typically associated with theism. In other words, Dirkx and others who attempt to draw similar distinctions between spirituality and religion borrow a word couched in religious, theistic terminology to describe a concept they posit is not inherently religious nor theistic. There is no doubt that one can derive meaning and a sense of purpose from their lives without any sort of religious affiliation or theistic belief. However, one could likely replace the word *soul* with *gut instinct* and find Dirkx's explanation of non-cognitive learning no less correct or meaningful. Therefore, appropriation of theistic terminology is unfortunate because it muddies the waters of what is actually meant by *spirituality*. Accordingly, it complicates and confuses scholarship that is actually centred on religious or theistic spirituality—for which there is no sufficient alternative terminology. Ideally, another word could be used to describe the processes of meaning making that are not tied to any religious or theistic belief. Barring this, a clear distinction of language to differentiate between instances of theistic and non-theistic spirituality would be useful.

At first glance, the connections between transformative learning theory and religious doubt are not immediately clear. However, when examining some of the conclusions drawn in the literature, similarities arise. For instance, it seems reasonable to conclude that occurrences of religious doubt serve as a type of critical incident that may eventually lead to transformative learning. Similarly, just as there are conflicting ideas on whether transformation is an inherently positive activity, so too there are questions about whether religious doubt should be understood in positive or negative terms. To this point, it is acknowledged that neither transformation nor the process of working through religious doubt is inevitable; indeed, both can be suppressed. There is also a shared recognition of the need to better understand the role of community and interpersonal relationships and their impact on how one responds to a critical incident or experience of religious doubt (see Krause & Ellison, 2009; MacKeracher, 2012). In other words, there is a general recognition that, as humans are inherently social creatures, human transformations don't happen in a self-isolated vacuum. These commonalities suggest exciting possibilities to apply transformative learning theory to better understand the nature of religious doubt.

Conclusion

The preceding pages have placed the phenomenon of religious doubt (long studied from psychological and sociological standpoints) in conversation with the field of adult education's conceptualization of spirituality and its seminal theory of transformative learning. While this literature review has approached this work through a limited lens, focusing primarily on Westernized (and predominantly Christian) approaches to spirituality and religious belief, it has regardless uncovered important commonalities and identified exciting directions for future cross-disciplinary research. The identification of these potential directions has itself been prompted by many important questions that remain unanswered in their respective fields. For instance, where does doubt come from, and what are the factors that influence how one responds to it? What are the experiences of people who work through religious doubt, and what role (if any) do religious affiliations and/or interpersonal relationships

play in how one chooses to respond to it? How does working through doubt lead to expanded paradigms and broadened frames of reference—the result of transformative learning? Further, beyond general descriptions about positive or negative interactions, what characterizes those relationships where a person feels supported and affirmed to work through doubt? What characterizes those relationships where a person ends up suppressing doubt? And ultimately, if one accepts doubt as an inevitability, how can communities and individuals alike respond in ways that support and affirm the experiences of those who doubt? These are all questions that warrant investigation.

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