

An Exploration into the Spiritual Dimension of Froebelian Philosophy and Pedagogy

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Abstract

There is little doubt that the ideas of Friedrich Froebel have transformed the way society views early childhood education (Bruce, 2019; Brehony, 2024). Although Froebel's perspective is not the only foundation of modern early childhood education, Montessori, for example, pursued a distinct pedagogical path, and traditions such as Reggio Emilia and Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) emerge from broader constellations of influence (Lilley, 1967; Hinitz & Lascaris, 2000; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2025), his "children's garden" metaphor remains particularly influential, positioning education as the careful cultivation of conditions in which children can flourish (Herrington, 1998; Tovey, 2018). Yet, beyond this well-recognised aspect of his work, there is a dimension that underpins and coheres his entire pedagogical vision, often less visible in current readings, namely the spiritual orientation through which Froebel understood education as relationally binding human beings, nature, and the divine (White, 1907; Lee & Evans, 1996). Aslanian (2023) describes spirituality as Froebel's "invisible" foundation, which knits together the more readily discussed elements of his approach (Wasmuth, 2024) and reflects Froebel's conviction that spirituality is intrinsically implicated in human life and meaning making (Eliade, 1959; Giesenber, 2000). This characteristic remains one of the least explored within Froebelian philosophy (Lee, 1993; Lee & Evans, 1996; Wasmuth, 2020; Best, 2016; Aslanian, 2023). This article explores the spiritual dimension of Friedrich Froebel's educational philosophy. Employing a narrative literature review, it examines Froebel's original writings alongside interpretations of key scholars, addressing the nature and role of spirituality in his thinking. Extensive research reveals that Froebel's spiritual philosophy, while non-dogmatic, was firmly grounded in his Christian faith and was central to his pedagogical approach. Nearly all aspects of Froebel's vision, including his concept of Unity, his elevation of play, his reverence for nature, and his high view of humanity, hold a spiritual characteristic, ultimately pointing to a relationship with the Divine.

Keywords

Froebel, Spirituality, Unity, Divine, God

Introduction

"Education should lead and guide man to clearness concerning himself and in himself, to peace with nature, and to unity with God; hence, it should lift him to a knowledge of himself, and of mankind, to a knowledge of God, and of nature, and to the pure

and holy life to which such knowledge leads" (Froebel, 1887, p.5).

There is little doubt that Friedrich Froebel is a key figure in early education (Franks, 1897; Liebschner, 1992; McNair & Powell, 2021; Wasmuth, 2022). His groundbreaking ideas have transformed the way society views early childhood education (Bruce, 2019; Brehony, 2024). Froebel's "children's garden" metaphor positions early education as a process of cultivating the conditions for growth

through care and attention (Herrington, 1998; Tovey, 2018), while also acknowledging children's dependence on adults in the early years (Wasmuth, 2024). Although his influence should not be overstated as the sole origin of contemporary early childhood approaches, the Kindergarten is widely regarded as a significant historical foundation for many child-centred currents in the field (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877; Lilley, 1967; Hinitz & Lascarides, 2000). Froebel's Kindergarten, established in the early 1800s, was revolutionary for its time (Wasmuth, 2020), as it emphasised self-directed activity, play as the foundation of learning, the importance of outdoor environments, holistic development, and the critical role of women as educators (Hinitz & Lascarides, 2000). Over time, these key principles have been constantly celebrated, becoming synonymous with Froebelian practice (Wollons & Wollons, 2000; Read, 2006).

Yet, there is another principle of Froebel's Kindergarten, an invisible one (Aslanian, 2023), that knits all other aspects together (Wasmuth, 2024), interconnecting humanity with nature and the Divine (White, 1907; Lee & Evans, 1996). This foundational principle (Wasmuth, 2022) refers to the spiritual dimension of his philosophy, an aspect intrinsically belonging to human beings (Eliade, 1959; Giesenbergs, 2000). This characteristic remains one of the least explored within Froebelian philosophy (Lee, 1993; Lee & Evans, 1996; Wasmuth, 2020; Best, 2016; Aslanian, 2023). Froebel believed that nurturing children's spiritual development was essential to the Kindergarten's approach (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877). Through this spiritual characteristic, he saw a path to unlocking the Divine essence within children, fostering in this way a sense of purpose, a deeper connection to nature, and ultimately, communion with the

Divine (Nishida, 2015; Aslanian, 2023; Wasmuth, 2024). In this sense, for the German pedagogue, education was not only a method to impart knowledge but a sacred process of nurturing the Divine spark within each child (White, 1907; Liebschner, 1992). He viewed humanity and nature as a reflection of Divine wisdom and saw children's spiritual engagement with nature as essential to their holistic development (Lee & Evans, 1996).

Froebel's writings consistently articulate a spiritual orientation (Froebel, 1891, 1906, 1912; von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877), yet this aspect is frequently backgrounded in modern accounts that privilege operationalised principles such as play, gifts, and self-activity (Lee, 1993; Wasmuth, 2020; Aslanian, 2023). This paper, therefore, attends to spirituality not as an additional theme but as a conceptual ground for Froebel's claims about unity and growth.

Conceptual Framework: Spirit and Spirituality

Given that spirituality is a central construct in this article, and one whose meaning is often assumed rather than defined, it is important to clarify how the term is used here.

Spirituality is widely recognised as an integral aspect of human experience and development (Hay & Nye, 1996; Giesenbergs, 2000) and is increasingly understood in both religious and non-religious contexts. The terms spirit and spirituality are commonly associated with an invisible, animating life force that shapes moral, cultural, and educational understandings across societies (Hay & Nye, 1996; Eliade, 1959; Giesenbergs, 2000; Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). Across ancient

traditions, including Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew thought, spirit was linked to breath, consciousness, and the sacred source of life (Lorenz, 2003; Bratcher, 1983; Karakaya, 2023). This understanding informed later Christian theology, where the Holy Spirit is viewed as a vital, empowering presence in human life (Del Colle, 2001). Likewise, many Indigenous cosmologies regard spirit as the connective essence that binds individuals to nature, ancestors, and the cosmos (Elkin, 1969; Grieves, 2008).

Although historically linked to religious traditions, spirituality today is commonly framed as a personal and relational search for meaning, connectedness, and purpose (Maxwell, 2003; Koenig, 2008). Younger's (2018) definition provides a helpful starting point for this article, describing spirituality as "that uniquely human capacity and need for a sense of identity and integrity, of place and purpose, which can only be fully satisfied in relationship with others and with a transcendent Other" (p. 44). This resonates with Hay and Nye's (1996) influential model, which understands children's spirituality as an awareness of self, others, the natural world, and a transcendent dimension.

Eliade's (1959) work is also instructive for this article. He argues that spirituality functions as a fundamental orientation through which humans interpret time, space, and reality (Allen, 1988). Giesenbergs (2000) extends this insight to early childhood, emphasising that children demonstrate spiritual awareness from a young age, expressed through their meaning-making, emotional depth, and existential curiosity (Hyde, 2005; Hart, 2006).

In the context of this article, spirituality is therefore understood as an intrinsic human capacity for seeking meaning, connection, and

transcendence, an orientation that Froebel regarded as central to human flourishing and foundational to his understanding of education.

Literature Search

To explore the spiritual dimension of Froebel's philosophy, a narrative literature review was employed (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). This approach enabled a comprehensive and interpretive engagement with existing scholarship and was therefore well suited to examining philosophical and conceptual themes such as spirituality in education (Green et al., 2006). The review process began with the identification of a broad range of sources, including Froebel's original writings available in English and secondary analyses of his work (Davies, 2000; Bell & Waters, 2018). Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to determine relevance and conceptual alignment (Bassot, 2022). The inclusion criteria required sources to be Froebel's writings available in English, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, or book chapters, and publications that explicitly addressed Froebel's spirituality, concept of unity, metaphysics, or related theological themes. The exclusion criteria ruled out non-academic material (such as blogs or unpublished theses), works that did not engage with Froebel's spiritual or metaphysical ideas, and sources that made claims without reference to primary texts or established scholarly analysis. This process ensured that the final body of literature was relevant, credible, and conceptually robust, while also making the review replicable for future researchers and transparent about its methodological limitations.

In line with good narrative review practice, attention was given not only to the

selection of sources but also to issues of authenticity, interpretive bias, and the limitations of the available literature. A notable challenge was the uneven accessibility of Froebel's original texts, many of which remain untranslated or exist only in partial form (Wasmuth, 2020). Moreover, secondary accounts, particularly historical commentaries, often reflect the theological, cultural, or pedagogical assumptions of their authors, underscoring the need for careful appraisal to avoid reproducing earlier interpretive biases (Bell & Waters, 2018; Bassot, 2022). Several authors (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003; Randolph, 2009; Snyder, 2019) highlight that narrative reviews must acknowledge such limitations to ensure transparency and guard against overgeneralisation. Accordingly, these considerations informed the review, ensuring that the arguments developed remained grounded, balanced, and attentive to the interpretive constraints inherent in working with a historically dispersed and variably accessible body of literature (Paul & Criado, 2020; Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020).

The analysis focused on identifying shared themes and divergent interpretations in order to construct a coherent understanding of the spiritual dimension within Froebel's philosophy (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003; Paul & Criado, 2020). A comprehensive search was undertaken across multiple academic databases, including DiscoverEd, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, ERIC, and Scopus. The exact search terms used were: The exact search terms used were: "Froebel spirituality," "Froebel spiritual," "Froebel religion," "Froebel unity," "Froebel concept of unity," "Froebel metaphysics," "Froebel Kindergarten religion," "children's spirituality Froebel," and "Froebel holistic development." (Jacso, 2005). Boolean operators were applied as follows: Froebel AND

(spirituality OR religion OR unity OR metaphysics), and children AND spirituality AND Froebel for child-focused searches. Quotation marks were used around exact phrases to refine results. No date restrictions were applied, enabling the inclusion of both historical and contemporary perspectives. The inclusion criteria prioritised Froebel's primary writings and peer-reviewed academic sources that critically examined the spiritual aspects of his thought. This strategy strengthened the review's credibility by ensuring that the selected materials were both relevant and conceptually robust, while also acknowledging the interpretive constraints inherent in working with a historically dispersed body of literature (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020).

Froebel as a Spiritually Inspired Educator

The fact that Froebel was regarded not as a simple educator of children but as a visionary figure whose ideas transcended conventional pedagogical thought is widely agreed upon by the majority of scholars investigated in this narrative literature review (Lilley, 1967; Liebschner, 1992; Wasmuth, 2022). For instance, Adolph Diesterweg, a highly influential German educator, remarked in a conversation with the Baroness von Marenholz-Bülow that: "The man [Froebel] is actually something of a seer" (von Marenholz-Bülow 1877, p. 23). Echoing this sentiment, Lawrence (1969) asserted: "If we consider Froebel himself, we find all the makings of a prophet" (p. 10), a description also supported by Hughes (1900) who viewed him as "the apostle of higher self-recognition" (p. 275). Moreover, Froebel's spiritual charisma is further confirmed by scholars such as Cole (1907), Liebschner (1992), Brehony (1987), Nishida (2019), and Wasmuth (2020), among others, who also emphasise the

spiritual dimension as a central element of his philosophy. Thus, these characterisations consistently elevate Froebel beyond the role of educational theorist, positioning him instead as a spiritually inspired educator.

To explore the spiritual dimension within Froebelian thought, the literature revealed that nearly every aspect of Froebel's philosophy implies a spiritual dimension (Wasmuth, 2024). For instance, Froebel viewed humankind not simply in biological or social terms, but through a spiritual lens, stating that his destiny is: "to become fully... conscious of the divine effluence in him, and, therefore, of God" (Froebel, 1887, p. 2). Additionally, his famous gifts and occupations, often perceived as developmental tools only (Bruce, 2019), were also seen by the German educator as "precious seeds" through which "man might raise himself to God by deeds" (Froebel, 1885, p. 183). Moreover, nature, too, held sacred significance for Froebel, functioning as a Divine text that revealed spiritual truths, as he points out: "From every point in nature a road leads to God" (Froebel, 1912, p. 110). Likewise, the concept of Unity makes sense to Froebel only in relation to "the source of all things—God" (Froebel, 1887, p. 126). These are just a few examples from many others found by this research that illustrate a clear and consistent pattern emerging from the literature, specifically that Froebel's philosophy is imbued with a spiritual dimension across all its aspects.

Notably, play, often regarded as Froebel's most revolutionary contribution to early childhood education (Bruce, 2021), is not exempt from this pattern. Beyond describing it as "the highest phase of child development" (Froebel, 1887, p. 54), Froebel frames it as a mode of wonder, meaning making, and connection that is explicitly spiritual, calling it "the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this

stage" (Froebel, 1887, p. 55). Crucially, however, this spiritual orientation is not confined to Froebel's statements about play; it is also built into the material and conceptual architecture of the Kindergarten. As Wasmuth (2020) argues, the gifts were designed to cultivate an experiential awareness, and later conceptual understanding, of the "law of the sphere", demonstrating how Froebel's pedagogy sought to lead children from sensuous engagement with form and movement towards recognition of underlying unity and order. Read this way, Froebel's originality lies not simply in elevating play, but in how he integrally connects everyday childhood activity (play, materials, movement, pattern) with a wider spiritual-cosmological account of connectedness and development (Lee, 1993; Wasmuth, 2020).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that it was Froebel's integrated spiritual vision that made him an outstanding and enduring figure in the history of education (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877; Wasmuth, 2022). Thus, whether Froebel's philosophy includes a spiritual component, this section has shown that spirituality was central to the educator's view, permeating all aspects of his thought, including his view of humanity, the role of play, nature, and the gifts and occupations (Froebel, 1885, 1891, 1906, 1909).

The Nature of the Spiritual in Froebel's Philosophy

As indicated, Froebel's philosophy included a spiritual dimension that shaped his thought and was implied in every aspect of his pedagogical framework (Lee, 1993; Wasmuth, 2024). However, despite general consensus on the presence of this dimension across his philosophy (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877; Wasmuth, 2022),

this research found that scholarly interpretations differ significantly when it comes to the question of what kind of spirit Froebel actually envisioned (Lee, 1993).

Given the foundational role that spirituality played in shaping Froebel's educational view, it is unsurprising that scholars have long debated the specific character of this spirituality. In this regard, four main interpretations have emerged concerning the nature of Froebel's spirituality, including whether it was atheistic, pantheistic, secular-humanistic, or Christian-theistic (Cole, 1907; Hughes, 1900; Kilpatrick, 1916; Lee, 1993; Best, 2016; Bruce, 2021).

Froebel's Spirituality as Atheistic

One of the most surprising and historically significant perspectives uncovered is the view, or more precisely, the accusation, that Froebel's philosophy carried an atheistic orientation, defined as the absence of any Divine presence or authority in relation to humanity (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877; Bowen, 1903). This interpretation reveals a tension between Froebel's rejection of formal church doctrine in his Kindergartens, and the perception that such rejection equated to a denial of God altogether (Liebschner, 1992). The accusation gained particular prominence in 1851, when the Prussian government, under pressure from dominant ecclesiastical authorities, banned Kindergartens on the grounds of alleged atheism (Wasmuth, 2020).

However, when examined in light of Froebel's own writings and the work of other scholars, this review found that the atheistic claim was not only unfounded but directly contradicted by the German educator's strong theological convictions. For instance, Froebel firmly rejected the concept of atheism, stating:

"In my [Froebel's] opinion there is no such thing as an atheist, for the deniers of God make out some kind of a God for themselves in their own fashion, even to making themselves one in their miserable self-confidence" (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877, p. 228). This categorical rejection reveals Froebel's deep commitment to a theistic worldview and his moral and spiritual disapproval of any worldview that denied a Divine presence (Hughes, 1900). This view is further validated in *The Letters to the Kindergarten*, where Froebel repeatedly expressed alarm over the idea of abandoning faith in God, saying: "Thank God that you have not been led to imitate the presumption of certain highly cultured circles who deny their Master..." (Froebel, 1891, p. 278). Here, Froebel frames the denial of God as a betrayal of fundamental values, fact which shows that faith was not peripheral, but central to his entire view (Bowen, 1903; Smith, 1983).

Importantly, a key finding emerging from the literature is the strong dissonance between how Froebel was perceived by the religious authorities of his time and how he personally understood his own relationship with the Divine. This disagreement is highlighted by Liebschner (1992), who discovered that the accusation of atheism was a punitive response to Froebel's refusal to incorporate formal religious dogma into Kindergarten's instruction. In this sense, his theistic standpoint is strongly supported by Bowen (1903) affirmation, that Froebel's philosophy cannot "in any meaningful sense" (p. 32) be labelled as atheistic, a view echoed also by Neumann (2023), who situates Froebel's spirituality within the Western theological tradition, grounded in the belief of a God-created cosmos, imbued with order and meaning.

Furthermore, the accusation of atheism becomes even more absurd when Froebel's own

pedagogical tools are considered. For example, his gifts and occupations, though often seen as primarily physical or developmental, were theistically charged. In this sense, Froebel wrote: “I mean that we shall be borne onward into the very heart of practical Christianity through these games and occupations of little children...” (Froebel, 1891, p. 55). This illustrates how even the most tactile educational materials were seen by Froebel as ways of cultivating a spiritual relation with the Divine, clarifying the debate presented across this section and reinforcing the idea that a theistic presence permeated the everyday activities of the Kindergarten (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877).

Overall, the findings suggest that the atheistic interpretation of Froebel’s philosophy was rooted more in the political and religious anxieties surrounding his educational reforms than in his actual beliefs. The theistic view is strongly supported by Froebel’s own writings and those of other scholars, mentioned earlier, which consistently highlight the presence of the Divine as the ultimate source of moral, educational, and cosmic order in the educator’s view (Bowen, 1903; White, 1907; Neumann, 2023). His rejection of formal church authority in education does not reflect a denial of God, but rather a more personal, relational, and integrated understanding of the Divine.

Froebel’s Spirituality as Pantheistic

A second major debate regarding the nature of Froebel’s spiritual philosophy concerns whether his view can be considered pantheistic. This debate emerges from the way Froebel framed the relationship between the Divine and the natural world. In this context, pantheism refers to the belief that God is identical with nature and the universe itself (Reese, 2025).

Throughout the review, it consistently emerged that nature held a central role in Froebel’s worldview, serving both as a developmental foundation and as a means of spiritual communion (Lilley, 1967; Aspin, 1983; Tovey, 2013; Flemig & McNair, 2022; Brehony, 2024). Froebel viewed nature as a living manifestation of the Divine, stating that: “All things are only through the divine effluence that lives in them” (Froebel, 1887, p. 2). Such statements have led scholars to interpret Froebel’s spirituality in different though related ways, with some characterising it as pantheistic (Bowen, 1903; Kilpatrick, 1916; Curtis & Boulwood, 1961; Winkler, 2023) and others arguing that panentheism is the more accurate description, insofar as Froebel depicts the Divine as both immanent in nature and yet exceeding it (Wasmuth, 2020).

Among these interpretations, Bowen (1903) presents a strong argument for viewing Froebel’s philosophy as pantheistic, claiming that his concept of the unity of all life, and the Divine presence throughout nature, reflects key features of pantheistic thought. This perspective is supported by Lilley (1967) and Birchenall (1970), who base their view on Froebel’s emphasis on interconnectedness, natural harmony, and the sacredness of physical reality. Encapsulating these views, Kilpatrick (1916) writes that, despite Froebel’s use of theistic language, “the general background of Froebel’s conscious theory is decidedly pantheistic, if not pantheism itself” (p. 22). For Kilpatrick, thus, Froebel’s view of God’s immanent presence in the universe serves as strong evidence of his pantheistic orientation.

The above line of reasoning is reinforced by Winkler (2023), who argues that Froebel envisioned a form of spiritual naturalism,

writing: "...for Froebel, God was nature and therefore, nature must be respected as divine" (p. 33). Curtis & Boultwood (1961) also emphasise this theme, referencing Froebel's claim that humans are "part of God" (p. 375), which they interpret as suggesting a non-dualistic view of the Divine and the world. Notably, this impression appears to be supported by Froebel's own language when he writes: "From every point in nature a road leads to God," and "nature in all its details has a spiritual ground, and not merely a material cause" (Froebel, 1912, p. 110). Taken together, these perspectives support Strauch-Nelson's (2012) argument that Froebel's spirituality is closely linked to the German philosophical movement Naturphilosophie (literally, "philosophy of nature"), a pantheistic tradition that viewed nature as a living spiritual force and humanity as integrally woven into the cosmos.

However, despite Froebel's deep reverence for nature, which has led to strong associations with pantheism, this review found that he was careful to distance himself from this view. As attested in von Marenholz-Bülow's (1877) memoirs of her conversations with Froebel, he responded to Diesterweg in a discussion concerning the nature of God and the natural world that: "But I do not say, like the Pantheists, that the world is God's body, that God dwells in it as in a house. But the spirit of God dwells and lives in nature... As the spirit of the artist is found again in his masterpieces, so must we find God's spirit (Geist) in his works" (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877, p. 29). This analogy reveals Froebel's commitment to a theistic worldview, one in which God is reflected in nature but not reducible to it (White, 1907; Liebschner, 1992).

Furthermore, this review found that multiple other scholars contradict the pantheistic claim. For instance, Cole (1903), one

of the early writers, claims that while Froebel's work reflects an awareness of Divine presence in all things, it does not collapse Creator and creation into one. Likewise, White (1907) warns against misreading Froebel's poetic spiritualism as doctrinal pantheism, stating that his views are "by no means...Pantheist" (p. 38). On the same line, Liebschner (1992) confirms Froebel's theistic view, arguing that the pantheistic interpretation derived from the educator's respect for the created nature. Clarifying further this debate, is Froebel's assertion that: "...the spirit of God, having gone forth from God, lives and works on in and through nature as an independent spirit, yet at one with God..." (Froebel, 1887, p. 155). This terminology suggests a vision of the Divine that is both immanent and transcendent from creation, being very similar to the Christian view of God (Franks, 1897; Lee, 1993; Wasmuth, 2020, 2024).

Overall, this highlighted that Froebel's language creates a tension that invites pantheistic interpretations, which he genuinely denies, clarifying his theistic position instead. While his reverence for nature and cosmic unity strongly resonates with pantheistic traditions, Froebel's spiritual thought ultimately rests on the idea of a distinct, personal, and creative God, who is active in, but not confined to, the natural world.

Froebel's Spirituality: Secular vs Christian

A final major debate regarding the nature of Froebel's spirituality concerns whether his thought should be interpreted as Christian or secular humanistic. While Froebel was accused of atheism during his lifetime, as previously discussed, a key modern trend sees scholars

increasingly interpreting the educator's view as secular-humanistic, a standpoint implying a lack of spirituality, religious belief, or acknowledgment of any Divine presence (Kallen, 1965).

For instance, several scholars (Lilley, 1967; Herrington, 1998; Tovey, 2018; Bruce, 2021) interpret Froebel's philosophy with minimal reference to its spiritual foundations, favouring a secular-humanistic interpretation instead. Two arguments recur in the literature in support of the claim that Froebel's spirituality does not map neatly into orthodox denominational Christianity. First, commentators note the relative absence of explicit religious instruction within Kindergartens. Second, they point to Froebel's omission of the Christian doctrine of original sin. These features are widely accepted as accurate; however, they should not be read as evidence that Froebel was a non-Christian. Rather, they are better understood as indicating a form of Christianity that is non-denominational (and not straightforwardly Protestant), in which spiritual orientation infuses pedagogy without being expressed through formal catechesis or confessional doctrine. These two arguments are examined in turn below.

The Absence of Religious Teaching in the Kindergarten

In support of the secular-humanistic interpretation of Froebelian thought, several scholars (Lilley, 1967; Herrington, 1998; Best, 2016) base their view on the absence of explicit religious instruction in early Kindergartens. Tina Bruce (2021), one of the most influential contemporary interpreters of Froebel, also notes that he did not offer doctrinal teaching or treat

religion as a formal subject in his settings. While Bruce (2021) acknowledges Froebel's personal theism, remarking that he "always believed in God as the creator..." (p. 23), her interpretation places limited emphasis on how this spiritual worldview informed his educational philosophy. Instead, Bruce (2021) foregrounds relational and cognitive dimensions, such as Froebel's desire "to help children make connections between things and people" (p. 28), and highlights his close friendships with liberal Jewish colleagues as evidence for portraying his approach as more "individual" and "secular in spirit" (p. 27), thereby obscuring the distinctly Christian spiritual dimension in Froebel's philosophy. In doing so, Bruce's (2021) interpretation leans toward a secular-humanistic framing that gives comparatively little attention to the centrality of the Christian spirituality within Froebel's own metaphysical and pedagogical convictions (Wasmuth, 2022).

However, multiple other findings of this research, drawn from Froebel's own writings (Froebel, 1885, 1906, 1912) and those of other scholars (White, 1907; Lee, 1993), contradict the secular interpretation. Religion, understood by Froebel as a spiritual connection between humanity and the Divine, was interwoven throughout the daily Kindergarten experience (White, 1907). Supporting this claim, Herr Pösche, the editor of *The Letters to the Kindergarten* observed: "In these free Kindergartens the main principles of religion are taught. By means of pretty coloured pictures, the children learn the Bible stories; and the first principles of Christian morality are taught them in a strictly unsectarian manner" (Froebel, 1891, p. 212). Other accounts (von Marenholz-Bülow, 1877; Franks, 1897; Cole, 1903) confirm that Froebel's institutions were saturated with moral, religious, and spiritual teaching, though not bound to any single denomination, but clearly

Christian in orientation (Smith, 1983; Lee, 1993). This is precisely where Froebel appears distinctive in relation to many contemporary educational institutions of his time: rather than positioning religious instruction as denominational teaching aligned with church authority, he reframed spirituality as an educational ethic and a way of living with the world, embedded in play, relationship, nature, and everyday practice. These findings suggest that the absence of doctrinal-religion teaching in Kindergartens, does not equate with a secular-humanistic interpretation of Froebelian philosophy. In this sense, Froebel's approach may only be described as secular in the narrow sense that it avoided church-bound instruction, not in the sense of excluding God or spiritual formation from education.

The Absence of Original Sin in Froebel's Theology

A second aspect emerging from the literature which is seen by multiple scholars (Best, 2016; Bruce, 2021) as supporting a secular interpretation of Froebelian philosophy, is the absence throughout his writings, of the Biblical concept of original sin, specifically, the belief that all humanity is condemned by the rebellion of the first man, Adam, and can only be redeemed through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Bible, 1996).

Notably in this regard is Best's (2016) investigation into Froebel's spirituality. Best (2016) argues that Froebel's spiritual dimension is primarily located within human experience, writing that "his [Froebel's] concept of the spirit is a very human one" (p. 281). Best bases his interpretation on Froebel's high estimation of humanity, especially of the child, and interprets Froebel's idea of spiritual education as centred

on human flourishing and moral development, without necessarily foregrounding or elaborating Froebel's references to a divine or transcendent source. Thus, Best's (2016) analysis places greater emphasis on the humanistic and ethical aspects of Froebel's thought than on its explicitly spiritual-theistic dimensions.

Froebel's high regard for humanity is widely acknowledged by scholars (Lilley, 1967; Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000; Bruce, 2019). Notably, Hughes (1900) describes Froebel as "the apostle of higher self-recognition" (p. 275), reflecting the educator's deep advocacy for human potential. However, while Froebel's omission of the Biblical concept of original sin and his optimistic view of humanity set him apart from many of his contemporaries, who framed the human relationship with God in punitive, doctrinal terms (Birchenall, 1970; Aspin, 1983; Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000), this research found that such distinctions do not imply a secular or spiritually-empty interpretation of Froebel's philosophy.

Rather, Froebel's admiration for humanity may stem from his belief that humanity originates from God, whom he describes as "the sole source of all things" (Froebel, 1887, p. 2). Froebel understands humankind as existing "in a state of continuous dependence on God" (Froebel, 1891, p. 144), and sees the destiny of humanity as a movement toward reconnection with the Divine, such that "man may also be led to God" (Froebel, 1887, p. 21). These quotations highlight a strong contrast to the secular interpretation, supporting instead Froebel's Christian standpoint that every human being is not only a valued member of society but also a child of God (Bible, 1996). This view is best captured by Wasmuth (2022), who claims that it is the belief in humanity's Divine origin and destiny that underpins Froebel's entire educational philosophy.

Additionally, other Biblical-Christian concepts emerged from the review, further contradicting the secular interpretation of Froebel's philosophy (Franks, 1897; Cole, 1907). One example is Lee's (1993) investigation into Froebel's work, which found that his view aligns with a relational form of Christianity, rather than an abstract or moralistic spirituality. Moreover, Lee (1993) asserts that Froebel's educational aims are directed toward achieving Unity with the Christian God (Wasmuth, 2022). To support this claim, Lee (1993) reads Froebel's spiritual and moral vision as explicitly Christian-inflected, drawing attention to Froebel's use of Biblical language and imagery and to his vocation of Christ-centred moral themes in discussions of education and human development.

A further expression of this interpretative thread, discussed by Lee (1993), is Froebel's recurring use of triadic/trine language. While this sometimes aligns explicitly with Christian theological claims, such as the doctrine of the Trinity (Bible, 1996), Froebel also deploys "trinity" more broadly as a symbolic organising form through which he sought unity-in-difference and meaning across the natural and human worlds. This is evident when he writes "...the manifestation and revelation of the one, eternal, living, self-existent Being—of God—must from its very nature be triune..." (Froebel, 1887, p. 149). Read in this way, Froebel's triune formulation can be understood both as theologically grounded and as indicative of a wider conceptual habit, a tendency to seek pattern, symbol, and relational structure in "everything," rather than limiting "trinity" to denominational doctrine alone. Liebschner (1992), similarly, suggests that Froebel's understanding of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in relational unity, may have informed his educational concept of Unity, even

as that concept also operates beyond explicitly Christian reference points.

Nonetheless, early authors such as von Marenholz-Bülow (1877) reinforce the idea that Froebel's spirituality was Christian in nature. Supporting this claim, the Baroness wrote: "Froebel's idea of education strives to bring to the full consciousness of men their relations to nature (the divine nature), and thereby... to God... as Christianity teaches" (p. 41). Similarly, Herr Pösche, the editor of *The Letters to Kindergartens*, argued that children's experiences in the Kindergarten supported them to "...learn to know the works of God" (Froebel, 1891, p. 4). This view is further affirmed by another early commentator, Franks (1897), who noted that those who knew Froebel regarded him as possessing a "truly Christian and religious spirit" (p. 229).

Even more importantly, the literature revealed that not only early writers, but also contemporary scholars argue for the Christian essence of Froebel's spirituality. A notable example is Helge Wasmuth, one of the most respected modern Froebelian scholars, who, despite identifying himself as an atheist (Wasmuth, 2022), acknowledges that Froebel's educational vision is deeply Christian in nature. He writes: "The ultimate goal of all Froebel's educational endeavours was to support children in achieving life unification, unification with nature and society, but especially God" (Wasmuth, 2022, p. 29). For Wasmuth, Froebel's Kindergarten philosophy cannot be fully understood without reference to its foundational relationship with the Christian God (Wasmuth, 2020, 2022, 2024).

Finally, the Christian essence of Froebel's philosophy is perhaps best encapsulated in the educator's own words, spoken at the Rudolstadt teachers' conference

four years before his death. As cited in Liebschner (1992), Froebel earnestly proclaimed: "I work so that Christianity may become a reality" (p. 35). This statement illustrates that, even in his later years, Froebel's educational aims remained consistent and firmly rooted in Christian principles.

Overall, with respect to the current debate over whether Froebel's philosophy is best interpreted as secular or Christian, the literature suggests that despite the absence of formal religious instruction in the Kindergarten, Froebel's pedagogy remained Christian-inflected in its moral and spiritual orientation. Rather than taking the form of Bible lessons typical of the period, Christian references and sensibilities were more often embedded in everyday routines, relationships, songs, and the framing of nature and unity, indicating a broadly Christian ethos without church-bound instruction. Furthermore, the argument for a secular interpretation based on Froebel's omission of the Biblical doctrine of original sin is strongly contradicted by other Christian elements identified in the literature, including references to Jesus Christ and the concept of the Trinity.

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings are not simply a historical clarification but a methodological and practical challenge. For scholarship treating Froebel's spirituality as incidental risks misleading the coherence of his concepts, unity, self-activity, freedom with guidance, play, and nature, because the logic that binds them together is explicitly theistic and relational. This does not require current researchers to adopt Froebel's metaphysics, but it does require interpretative honesty and acknowledging the basis of his thought before

selectively translating elements of his pedagogy into secular frameworks. For practice, the question is equally consequential. If Froebel's spirituality is quietly excised, what happens to the ethical orientation that sits beneath Froebelian practice, its insistence on reverence, connectedness, dignity, and responsibility within a living world? Perhaps the more provocative point is this: when we claim Froebel's approach while ignoring its spiritual ground, do we present his pedagogy, or do we domesticate it into a set of techniques compatible with accelerated, instrumental schooling? If Froebel's Kindergarten was, at heart, an education of relationship and wonder, then the challenge of today is not simply whether we can keep his language of God, but whether we can sustain the depth of attentiveness and moral purpose that his worldview demanded.

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