**Title: How the Play and Musical *Spring Awakening* Transcend to a Religion for Depressed Teenagers**

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**Abstract:** I propose that the musical *Spring Awakening* can transcend the realms of entertainment to collaborate with Hans Mol’s religious theory of the sacralisation of identity to intervene in teenage depression and suicidality. This is done through an appreciation of depression as an attack on positional normalcy and as an identity crisis, and a presentation of Spring Awakening as a religion and alternative spiritual treatment. I focus particularly on the character of Moritz and how the contribution of academic pressures and a need for validation in attachment-insecure teenagers can lead to an increased risk of suicide. The alternative to this is representation and espoused understanding, displayed in the way we internalise aspects of our surroundings and ‘attach’ to them, placing them on a pedestal; this is how I link the musical *Spring Awakening* to Hans Mol’s religious theory of the sacralisation of identity.

**Keywords:** Theatre, religion, depression, teenagers, identity.

**Main Article:**

What does spiritual identity mean for Generation Z and how can a fictionalised cohort of the Lost Generation begin to explain it?[[1]](#footnote-1) Tackling the taboo issues of 19th-century Christian Germany through rock music, *Spring Awakening* explores teenage sexuality, abuse, academic pressures, and, most importantly for my work, mental health. I saw myself in these kids who transcended space and time to speak to the experience of young adults facing an attack on their positional normalcy: depression. By avoiding the trivialisation and diminishing of youth mental illness and crises, *Spring Awakening* provides a beneficial, and most importantly, *safe* outlet for ‘shameful’ emotions and experiences because, in the words of Journey, the writing '[seriously addresses] the concerns, anxieties, and preoccupations of children [... to the degree that] they might even constitute tragedy’ (Journey, 2015).

Like all revolutionary action, *Spring Awakening* was deeply opposed in its early days, and I understand why; it is a musical that, to use a colloquialism, takes no prisoners. What we watch is a crisis slowly unfold, and what is so terrifying is that we are powerless to stop it. But this is also why this piece is unparalleled in its work on teenage mental illness. It shows us the darkest of what depression can be and, in doing so, gives us the tools, in more ways than one, to begin to tackle it and attest to the fact that no one is alone in their experiences (Shlufman, 2021).

Mol’s work on the sacralisation of identity helped me realise just how much of a lifeline *Spring Awakening* had provided me and *why* this could be the case. This enabled me to lay the foundation for *Spring Awakening* to work with Mol to respond as an intervention to mental health as a crisis of identity. For Mol, religion is ‘the stable niche that man occupies in a potentially chaotic environment which he is therefore prepared vigorously to defend’ (Mol, 1976, p. 65). In other words, religion, regardless of how it presents itself, is the key to unlocking our identity in a society of bedlam and is capable of infusing that instability with security and asylum. This coping mechanism can only be understood as such because of an attachment that has become ‘ritually symbolic’ and sacralised and, when we perceive others as treating it with less dignity than we afford it, we begin to experience ‘defence.’ This can take many forms but, in this work, culminates in ‘symptoms’ of depression, ranging from self-harm to suicide. This shapes my thesis that the musical *Spring Awakening* is a ‘religion’ for depressed and suicidal teenagers; *Spring* *Awakening* *is* the attachment. This allows academic conceptualisation of one ‘case study’ of depression whilst also studying a possible intervention.

Just as sacred texts offer dogmatic direction and narrative, *Spring Awakening* canbegin toact as a secular ‘doctrine’ (Davies, 2022, pp. 28-30). Sacralising identity is a two-way process (Davies, pp. 28-30). While most apprehensible in the relationship between a religious leader and adherent, it is not exclusive to this, quite the opposite. Spring Awakening poses a prime example where the teenager is transformed by innate representation visible in an influential text; that text is profoundly altered in its presentation and reception by its audience, the teenager. If only one of the two parties can exhibit awareness of the dynamic, it becomes a *perceived* relationship (Davies, p. 29), however, the *concept* becomes anthropomorphised in its capacity to conduct religious confession. Finally, *Spring Awakening* is, abstractly, not far removed from religious conversion (Powell, 2017, p. 33) in its mediating of the transition from ‘traditional’ religion or unhealthy coping mechanisms.

There is a proven positive correlation between a lack of representation and the risk of teenage suicide. Alternatively, Gill and colleagues show that an 'increasing belongingness and [reduced perception] of being a burden on others may be an important intervention strategy for weakening the link between distress and suicide ideation’ (Gill et al, 2023). This is now the context in which *Spring Awakening* can step in as a coping mechanism and I will provide one textual example of this in the character of Moritz, with whom I most closely identify.

Riddled with crippling anxiety, Moritz is convinced of his supposed insanity for his desires and attempts to grapple with human sexuality. He craves academic validation and acceptance and when these are not provided, he becomes trapped and, in terror, commits suicide. From 2014-2015, forty-three per cent of suicides in school-aged individuals (<20) are evidenced as having an academic trigger (Campbell, 2017). As both a personal and primary stressor of adolescents, academic trauma has a pull of connection that rises above fictional writing. This opens a communication line with the ‘participant’ in the ‘Eucharist’ of *Spring Awakening* that their struggles are not hopeless or irredeemable.

*Spring Awakening* began as a murmur of rebellion. It ‘at first made people want to cross themselves’ but, with time, we began to see the Church doors being flung open and the ‘sinners’ accepting it as a priestly calling to listen ‘to the shameful and disturbing confessions of humanity’ (Ziolkowski, & Moore, 1967, p. 15). These are the words of Ziolkowski & Moore and a parallel between confession and *Spring Awakening* - an *intentional* parallel. Depression is not a purely psychosomatic illness, it is, of course, characterised by mental turmoil, but it goes far beyond this into embodied action, and this concept of ‘salvation’ exemplifies one aspect of this. At its core, religion is designed to soothe, and what does every teenager crave? Acceptance and belonging: comforting (Gill et al, 2023). So, what happens when *conventional* religion feels idealistic? The individual throws themselves at any means of short or long-term, safe or unsafe, self-soothing. Thus, I argue that Spring Awakening provides this safe outlet and transcends beyond ‘*just* a musical’ when ‘saviour and saved’ enter the realm of supernatural experience and existence. *Spring Awakening* *is a religion*.

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1. This article began as a formative essay for Douglas Davies’ first-year module, Worldview, Faith, and Identity (Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)