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# **Building Bridges, Negotiating Boundaries:**

Young Christians', Jews' and Muslims' experiences  
of interfaith work in the UK

**Lenita Törning**

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy,  
Birkbeck College, University of London

I confirm that this thesis is my own work and that I have correctly acknowledged the work of others. I have not submitted this work previously as part of any other assessment or published it in another forum.

# Abstract

This thesis focuses on young Christians', Jews' and Muslims' experiences of interfaith work in the UK and what impact(s) being involved in interfaith might have on their religious, social, ethical and political identities. It is situated in a growing academic and policy interest in interfaith work as a means to build cohesive communities, mitigate tension and conflicts, and encourage active citizenship. It also engages with still under-explored questions around how young people active in interfaith work are affected by this activism. The aim is not only to understand *how* and *why* young people from different religions are involved in interfaith work, but also the *impact* being involved in interfaith work might have on young people's identities and sense of belonging.

Focusing on the biographical accounts of young Christians, Jews and Muslims involved in three different interfaith organisations in UK, the thesis explores how the young people have become interested in interfaith work; the relationships, messages and contexts that have been important in forging this interest and activism; what interfaith work means to them socially, theologically, ethically and politically; and the challenges they have experienced with this form of faith-based engagement. Drawing on Kate Tilleczek's 'complex cultural nesting approach', this thesis attends to the young people's complex personal experiences of interfaith work and the different social actors, contexts and frameworks that have been important in forming this interest.

The thesis shows that, to understand young people's interfaith work, we need a multidimensional approach that considers social and theological dimensions

in young people's lives; look at how interfaith work is a means to fulfil social and political goals, but also forms of theological commitment; and explore how challenges facing interfaith work inform young people's experiences in different ways, particularly theological, social and political tension in relation to interfaith space, religious congregations and British society at large.

*For mum and uncle Leif*

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# Preface

One of the most common questions I have got during the course of this thesis is ‘what made you decide to focus on this particular topic?’. This question has come from different directions. Interfaith practitioners were fascinated that someone who is not already involved in interfaith work would spend so many years studying interfaith relations (most interfaith scholars are also themselves participating in interfaith work). This fascination grew even more when they heard of my academic background and how my interest in interfaith work had emerged. Fellow research colleagues have been intrigued by my choice of research topic and found it important and timely, but some have also raised the valid question why we should focus on such a small minority of young religious people. For others, interfaith work remains an unknown phenomenon and I have forgot how many times I have spent answering the second most common question I have got during this research process: ‘interfaith work sounds interesting, but what does it actually *mean*?’. While the rest of the thesis will answer the questions why we should focus on young people’s interfaith work and what interfaith work means, this preface attends to how I ended up writing a thesis on young people’s experiences of interfaith work in the UK.

This thesis is the result of a somewhat unconventional academic background and an interest in religion and current affairs that goes back to my childhood. For reasons that are still not entirely clear to me, I was early on interested in religion. Having grown up in a secular Swedish family that never attended church, did not practice Christianity and only celebrated Christmas and Easter for

cultural reasons (being what the Swedish scholar of religion David Thurfjell (2019) has described as ‘post-Christians’), my interest in religion was a bit surprising. While my family, especially my mother, was intellectually interested in the notion of religion and spirituality, religion was not a frequent topic of conversation in my household. I am baptised into the Church of Sweden (as many other Swedes), but not confirmed and I would not say that I have any faith in God. The only time in my life I have regularly prayed to God was when I was 10 years old. My maternal grandfather was dying from cancer and I was daily asking God to save his life. When my grandfather died anyway, I was furious with God for letting him die and I swore never to attend a church again (I eventually did, but I had mixed feelings for years). However, despite these conflicting feelings (or perhaps because of them), I still had an intellectual interest in religion. Being a precocious reader, I read the Bible from cover to cover when I was nine years old and found the ethical and political stories from the Old and New Testaments fascinating. Later, in my childhood diary, I describe the Bible as ‘one of the best books I have ever read.’ Through movies such as ‘Aladdin’, I also developed an early interest in Islam and Arabian culture and literature.

But the events that had most impact on me and have shaped my career are the September 11 attacks in 2001. As many others, I remember exactly where I was and I what I did the moment I heard the news. I was 14 years old and was watching my younger sister’s riding lesson. My mother was standing next to me and we were both a bit annoyed that all of the other parents were watching the TV instead of focusing on their children’s riding lesson. Before we had the time to investigate what was going on, my mother got a phone call from my father and she asked him if anything had happened. I don’t know what he told her, but I remember

how her eyes widened a bit and she froze before joining the small group of parents in front of the TV. I followed her to find out what this was going on and arrived just in time to see the second plane hit the south tower of the World Trade Center on live television. Youth scholars have argued that significant historical and political events that take place during the childhood and teenage years can shape people's world-views and political consciousness for the rest of their lives, and this was what happened to me (Johansson & Hertz, 2019). I still don't know exactly why the September 11 attacks affected me the way they did, but they invoke something in me that remains alive today. During the weeks and months following the attacks, I read everything I could get my hands on. I cried when I listened to the recorded farewell phone calls from people on the hijacked planes to their loved ones on the ground. I started to follow the news daily and watched every single documentary on the topic broadcast on Swedish television. I was filled with a wide range of intense emotions: despair, fear and rage, but also fascination. With time, I developed a deep interest in the factors behind the attacks. Why have they occurred? Who were behind them? And what could be done to prevent them from happening again?

These questions have shaped the direction I have taken my education, both in upper-secondary school ('gymnasiet' in Swedish) and at university. I specialised early on the intersection between religion and politics, with a particular interest in religiously inspired terrorism and security studies. As an undergraduate student in International Relations at the University of Gothenburg, I wrote most of my essays on topics in relation to terrorism and counterterrorism. I explored the September 11 attacks and the events leading up to them from so many different angles that I became (in)famous in my university department as 'the terror expert.'



I was also one of the first university students in Sweden to focus on radicalisation and, being an Anglophile with a deep interest for all things British and with my eyes set on eventually moving to the UK, I wrote my BA thesis on the criticism of the Prevent Strategy in the UK. I had also applied and was accepted to do an MA in terrorism and security at King's College London. My academic journey to become a leading expert on terrorism and counterterrorism had begun – or so I thought. However, things did not go as planned. Because of unpredictable events in my private life, I had to defer the offer from King's College London for a year and to find something to do I started to look for other master's programmes. By chance I found a master's programme in Religion in Peace and Conflict at Uppsala University, that was predominantly based on distance learning. Intrigued by the focus on religion and faith-based engagement – thinking it would help me understand grassroot efforts to prevent radicalisation – I applied and was accepted. This decision was a wild card: I had no academic training in Religious Studies and, having spent almost four years studying terrorism, I had a very limited understanding of peace movements. I spent my first term seriously wondering what earth I had got myself into. My identity as a political scientist was strong and I struggled with my lack of understanding of complex academic concepts such as 'religion' and 'secularisation.' In order to catch up, I did a lot of extra reading and specialised myself in the sociology of religion. It took a lot of time and effort, but with time my academic mindset started to change and I found my new academic pathway exciting. I declined the offer from King's College London and remained in the Department of Theology at Uppsala University.

When people ask me about this decision, I often describe it as the best decision I have ever made – despite the extra workload. During my time at Uppsala

University, I discovered how limited the understanding of ‘religion’ often is in Political Science and through my empirical research with young Swedish Muslims active in a Muslim peace movement I explored how theological and ethical frameworks can inform political action. My previous focus on security was challenged and expanded, and I started to question the motives and rationale behind the construction of security policies and preventative work in new ways. It was also through my studies in Uppsala and my research on young Muslims that I first encountered interfaith work. Initially, it was through faith-based diplomacy, where interfaith work is often a pivotal method. But my biographical interviews with young Muslims for my master’s thesis also introduced me to what would later be the topic of this thesis: interfaith youth activism. Several of the young Muslims were active in an interfaith youth project and they described passionately how the experiences from this interfaith project have shaped their understanding of religion, politics and social justice.

These accounts fascinated me for several reasons. First, they introduced me to a form of faith-based engagement that stood in a stark contrast to the religiously inspired terrorism that had been my focus previously in my academic career. Second, I realised quickly how little research has been made on interfaith youth work and how valuable these perspectives are to understand the role religion might play in political and civic activism. It made me ask questions why some young people are drawn to interfaith work, when others join radical movements. When the opportunity emerged with a PhD position in the Ethical Monotheism project in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, to study (inter)faith relations in new and exciting ways, I took it and the result of this decision is the thesis you are about to read. The title of this thesis is

*Building Bridges, Negotiating Boundaries* and while this title aims to capture the meaning of interfaith work for the young people in this thesis, the same title can be used to describe my academic journey leading to this thesis. While some people decide to stick with their subject throughout their academic career (from the undergraduate degree to their doctorate), I have switched academic disciplines to be able to explore what I am interested in greater depth (and breadth). Throughout my academic career – from being a political scientist with a deep interest in the study of terrorism to becoming a sociologist of religion and later transforming into some form of psychosocial scholar – I have been interested in what is possible to study and this thesis is a result of this transdisciplinary academic conversation. Although I have not completely left the study of radicalisation and terrorism – when I am writing this preface I am working as an analyst in the Swedish Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism in Stockholm, where I am (amongst other things) responsible for developing a strategy to work with faith communities – I have deepened my understanding of what it means to work for a more cohesive society (as well as the challenges facing such an endeavour). The questions that emerged following the September 11 attacks and have shaped my academic and personal interests – Why have they occurred? Who were behind them? And what could be done to prevent them from happening again? – have broadened to not only include my fascination (and fear) of violent actors and security discourses, but also a wide range of other voices that are important in shaping the world we are living in.

Little more than 19 years have passed since the fateful Tuesday in September that changed my life and many others. When I am looking back, it is interesting to see how a series of events can have such impact on a life (as well as on societies and the world at large). But it also shows how intersected our personal

experiences can be with the career path we choose for ourselves. I can still feel those intense emotions and intellectual curiosity I felt during the early weeks after the September 11 attacks, but I am also filled with a greater sense of hope than I was back then. The young people in this thesis have introduced me to new bridges and boundaries and opened my eyes to new possibilities. As I will discuss more in-depth in Chapter 7, they have also put me on a new and exciting academic pathway forward. We may live in an uncertain world, filled with challenges and unanswered questions. We still read daily about atrocities, terrorist attacks and challenges facing societies. But there are also so many of us who want to make a difference and who dedicate our lives to make it happen. It is time to focus on some of them.

# 1.

## Setting the (interfaith) scene

I am an American Muslim from India. My adolescence was a series of rejections, one after another, of the various dimensions of my heritage, in the belief that America, India and Islam could not coexist within the same being. If I wanted to be one, I could not be the others. My struggle to understand the traditions I belong to as mutually enriching rather than mutually exclusive is the story of a generation of young people standing at the crossroads of inheritance and discovery, trying to look both ways at once. There is a strong connection between finding a sense of inner coherence and developing a commitment to pluralism. And that has everything to do with who meets you at the crossroads (Patel, 2011, p. x).

This quote is from the leading interfaith youth practitioner Eboo Patel's (2011) acclaimed memoir *Acts of Faith - The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, in which he reflects on his own story to understand the factors and processes that shaped his journey from being – in his own words – an ‘ordinary’ young Muslim to founding the leading interfaith youth organisation in the United States, the *Interfaith Youth Core*, at the age of 27. By focusing on experiences of community service with the Catholic Workers’ movement in the 1990s, his inability to talk about religion with his peers as a child, his intellectual and political struggles with questions around race, racism and inequality during his time at university, and later his deepening faith and religious engagement, Patel

reflects on the relationships, messages and contexts that have been key in shaping his religious, ethical and political worldviews and providing him with spaces of belonging where he could make sense of his multiple identities. Interfaith work and encounters are at the centre of these reflections. Not only does Patel describe how interfaith encounters – formal as well as informal – made him reflect on his own religious identity and what it means to be part of a community, but also how these experiences led him to become involved in organised interfaith work and later set up the Interfaith Youth Core. I have chosen to begin with this quote from Patel because this thesis deals with similar factors that Patel reflects on, but in a different time, national context and with a more diverse focus. By focusing on the biographical accounts of young Christians, Jews and Muslims<sup>1</sup> involved in three different interfaith organisations in UK,<sup>2</sup> the present study explores how the young people have become interested in interfaith work; the relationships, messages and contexts that have been important in forging this interest and activism; what interfaith work means to them socially, politically, theologically and ethically; and the challenges they have experienced with this form of faith-based engagement. The

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I am putting the religions in alphabetic order and all three religions will have equal focus. While this decision (particularly my decision to put Christianity first) can be criticised for ignoring theological and political factors in interfaith work, it is made to create a coherent terminology throughout the thesis. However, it is important to note that the ordering of religions in research on interfaith relations is not unproblematic and can provide insights into the focus of the studies. Some scholars order religions based on continuity which, in this case, would mean Jews, Christians and Muslims. Others decide to order religions based on what religion is their primary focus; for example, Jewish-Muslim relations can mean (but not exclusively) that these encounters are studied from Jewish perspectives. There can also be other reasons – theological, historical, political and social – why religions are ordered in a certain way. See Meri (2016) and Thomas (2017) for discussions about the need to attend to terms and ordering of religions in interfaith research.

<sup>2</sup> An important reason why this thesis is focusing on Christians, Jews and Muslims in the UK is that it is written and funded as part of the research project ‘Psychosocial approaches to Ethical Monotheism,’ where the focus is on Christian, Jewish and Muslim relations in the UK. In this project, we explore how seemingly coherent monotheistic identities, communities and traditions are shaped and transformed through encounter with the ‘other.’ The selection of religious traditions and national context is therefore shaped by the parameters of this research project. However, as will become clear throughout this and the following chapters, there are also theological, historical and social factors that make this focus relevant. I will describe the selection and recruitment process more in-depth in Chapter 3. The three interfaith organisations will be introduced in section 1.3.3. in this chapter.

aim is not only to understand *how* and *why* young people from different religions are involved in interfaith work, but also the *impact* being involved in interfaith work might have on young people's identities and sense of belonging. As the title of this thesis – *Building Bridges, Negotiating Boundaries* – indicates, the central focus is on the investments, identifications and negotiation processes the young people's experiences of interfaith work have entailed, internally (in terms of their identities and subjectivities) as well as externally (in relation to their senses of belonging to different social, religious and political contexts and communities). At the heart of this analysis is the central research question of this thesis: *what impact(s) might young people's interfaith work have on their religious, political, ethical and social identities?*

The rest of this chapter sets the scene for the thesis. Section 1.1. focuses on why we should study interfaith work and how this thesis is embedded in ongoing theological, historical and political debates and the emergence of 'interfaith/interreligious studies' as a field of study. Section 1.2. situates the thesis within the limited literature on young people's interfaith work, as well as discuss how the present study will contribute to this field of study. Section 1.3 describes the UK context and why this is a significant national context to focus on. In the final two sections of the chapter, I clarify the research aim and research questions and provide an outline for the rest of the thesis.

## **1.1. Why study interfaith work?**

Recent decades have witnessed growing religious, academic and policy interests in interfaith work. What for a long time was a predominantly theological and philosophical concern for religious institutions and departments of theology can

now be found in a wide range of academic disciplines and social settings, ranging from education (e.g. schools, colleges and universities), third sector actors (e.g. charities) to local governance and counter-terrorism policies (Ipgrave et al, 2018; Grier & Nagel, 2018; Dinham, 2012). Interfaith work is now part of the public and political discourse as a possible means to bring different faith communities together and build cohesive societies, tackle social exclusion, racism and intolerance, and lately also to prevent violent extremism and terrorism (Bretherton, 2011; Cheetham et al, 2013; Halafoff, 2013; Grier & Nagel, 2018). The sociologist Patrice Brodeur (2005) argues that interfaith work “has moved from the margins of Western society in 1893 to multiple centers of power worldwide within slightly more than one hundred years” (Brodeur, 2005, p. 42), referring to the first Parliament of the World’s Religions that took place in Chicago in 1893,<sup>3</sup> considered by many interfaith practitioners and scholars to be the start of ‘the interfaith movement.’<sup>4</sup> Following the terror attacks in the United States in 2001 and London in 2005, many governments started to include interfaith work in their community cohesion strategies to deal with growing religious diversity in their communities, and interfaith forums are commonly used to communicate with representatives from faith communities as well as reaching marginalised and minority faith groups

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<sup>3</sup> The Parliament of the World’s Religions (PWR) was part of the world’s fair World Columbus Exposition in Chicago to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus’ arrival to the United States. The PWR brought together people (predominantly men) from a wide range of religious background, including – for the first time – representatives from Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh backgrounds. This was the first interfaith event of its kind and has therefore both symbolic and practical value to many interfaith practitioners. This event was followed by another PWR in 1993 and has since been repeated several times (the next one will be a virtual event in October 2021) (Halafoff, 2013; Brodeur, 2005; Eck, 2003). The PWR has also played an important role in the development of a global ethic framework (originally drafted by the Christian theologian Hans Küng) and I will come back to this in section 1.1.1.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘interfaith movement’ is often used by interfaith practitioners and some scholars to describe the wide range of different individuals, organisations and institutions involved in interfaith work at local, national and international levels. It is sometimes described as a ‘decentralised social movement’ with links to the social movements of the 1960s (e.g. the environment movement, anti-war movement, women’s movement) and involves a wide range of methods. See Halafoff (2013) and Fahy et al (2019) for sociological analyses of the emergence of this movement.



(Brodeur, 2005; Dinham, 2012; Weller, 2013; Giera & Nagel, 2018; Nordin, 2017; Axelson & Stier, 2020).

### **1.1.1. What does interfaith work mean?**

This diversity of what interfaith work is and can be is also visible in the very concept itself. As noted by the interfaith scholar Paul Weller (2009), ‘interfaith’ is a nebulous concept and lacks a shared definition. There also exists a wide range of name variations – for example, interfaith/inter-faith, inter faith, interreligious/inter-religious and multifaith/multi-faith – and while these are often used synonymously, there are also theological, political and social reasons why some concepts are preferred (Halafoff, 2013; Moyaert, 2013; Weller, 2013b; see also Kahn-Harris, 2009). It is important to pay attention to this conceptual diversity as it might shape how religiously diverse encounters and cooperation are understood and justified (Moyaert, 2013). Weller (2009) distinguishes between them by pointing to the function of the concept: *multi-faith* is often used to capture the religious diversity in a project or event (e.g. a multifaith prayer room), *inter-faith* describes “the relationships *between* faiths and the people who belong to them” (p. 63, italics in original) and *inter-religious* the encounter between different religions in religiously diverse contexts. He also notes that the unhyphenated concept of *interfaith* is commonly used but that “some prefer to avoid this for fear of giving the impression of a movement that blurs the distinctiveness of the religions involved” (p. 64). There are also many different forms of ways of *doing* interfaith work: dialogue, forums, organisations, projects, events, informal encounters, social action projects and scriptural reasoning to mention a few. The theologian Marianne Moyaert (2013) stresses the need to avoid being too strict in how one conceptualises different ways

of doing interfaith work since this could simplify what often are complex encounters. However, she does identify five general categories of interfaith work (or interfaith dialogue, which is the term she uses) that capture how multifaceted interfaith encounters can be (these categories often overlap): (1) dialogue of life, (2) the practical dialogue of action; (3) theological dialogue; (4) spiritual dialogue, and (5) diplomatic dialogue. I will go through each briefly.

The *dialogue of life* captures everyday informal encounters that happen between people of different faiths as they go about living their (religious) lives in their neighbourhoods and local communities. These encounters rarely deal with complex theological differences but can still be significant in how people understand their and other people's religions. They can also form friendships and later lead to more formal forms of interfaith work. The second, the *practical dialogue of action*, "takes shape in context of collaboration in humanitarian, social, economic or political fields" and "is constituted by the external challenges with which all people are confronted, regardless of their religious tradition" (Moyaert, 2013, p. 202). This is when interfaith work becomes social action and can bring people of different faiths together to work for a better world. As with the dialogue of life, this form of interfaith work is rarely dealing with theological differences, although it might bring about a better understanding of theological similarities between different religious traditions in terms of what kind of society they want to see. Some theologians, such as the feminist theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher (2013), have described this form of interfaith work as 'the activist model of dialogue' and noted the links to other social movements (for example, the women's movement). Hill Fletcher also emphasised that, in contrast to more theological forms of interfaith work, "the lines between 'sacred' and 'secular' are not always

clear [in the activist model]; religion is always necessarily intertwined with the social and political” (Hill Fletcher, 2013, p. 174). The practical dialogue of action or the action model of dialogue are today widely used by both men and women but emerged initially as a result of women’s participation in interfaith work (Hill-Fletcher, 2013; Cornille, 2013). As we will see in section 1.2. and in the following chapters, this is a popular form of interfaith work for young people and what the majority of the young people in this thesis are very passionate about.

Moyaert’s third category – *theological dialogue* – is probably the most well-known form of interfaith work. According to Moyaert, it is sometimes known as *dialogue of discourse* since it is dealing with theological discourse in scripture(s) and doctrines. This form of interfaith work is theological in focus and explores theological differences (and similarities) between religious traditions. If other forms of interfaith work focus on how religion and theology are lived and understood, the purpose of this form of interfaith encounter is to deal with “*what* is believed and on doctrinal issues” (Moyaert, 2013, p. 203) and “the question of truth itself is at stake as well; in that sense theological interreligious dialogue is also truly a matter of *truth seeking dialogue*” (ibid.). Although this form of interfaith work can be carried out by everyone, it requires theological knowledge and is therefore most common amongst religious leaders or other people with a standing in religious communities. The participants also tend to be seen and acting as representatives of their religious communities. Some of the young people in this thesis expressed a wish to dig deeper into theological questions in relation to truth and doctrine, but most of them did not consider this form of interfaith work as important for them. As we will see in section 1.2. in relation to the literature on young people and interfaith work, this is one of the least common forms of interfaith work amongst young people and many young

people (in this as well as in other studies) are highly critical of the notion that one can be a representative of one's religion or religious community. The fourth category of interfaith work is *spiritual dialogue*, or *dialogue of experience*, in which people of faith "learn from one another through prayer and meditation, and is often seen as a greater symbol for interreligious friendships" (p. 203). This can be multifaith prayer sessions, praying in each other's houses of worship, celebrate each other's religious festivals or other forms of shared ritual or spiritual experiences. Moyaert argues that "some people experience a deeper unity with the ultimate dimension of life in spiritual dialogue – an experience that places the belief system of rites and doctrines in an entirely new perspective" (ibid.). This is a form of interfaith work that is appreciated by several of the young people in this thesis and has made it possible for them to enjoy their faiths in new ways.

Moyaert's final category – and the second least common form of interfaith work amongst young people – is *diplomatic interreligious dialogue*. This form of interfaith work is often used by the heads of religious communities to tackle and mitigate religious tension and violence. It might involve formal theological debates and developing shared strategies in relation to certain issues, but it has also been criticised for being too much of a photo-op with religious leaders standing side by side with little (if anything) to show as a result. However, Moyaert argues that while this form of interfaith work might not result in something concrete to use on the ground, religious leaders shaking hands and being friendly with each other can send a powerful message to adherents in their communities that interfaith work is important and encourage adherents to build bridges with other religious communities. I will not focus on this form of interfaith work in this thesis, but a few of the young people mentioned how they have been inspired by religious leaders'

involvement in high-level interfaith work. To summarise Moyaert's five categories above, they provide a good overview of different ways to do and conceptualise interfaith work – from very informal encounters in the everyday life to formal meetings at the global level. As we have seen above and will see in the following chapters, they also capture the multiple ways young people do interfaith work. But there is another form of doing interfaith work that Moyaert does not cover but is still important for young people's interfaith work and that is what Hill Fletcher (2013) calls a *Storytelling Model*. Here the focus is not on being a representative of one's faith and wrestling with theological discourse – seen in the theological dialogue above – but about sharing one's lived experiences of practising and identifying with a particular faith. By telling stories from one's own perspectives – speaking for oneself and not for an entire religion or a religious community – religious and theological particularities and universalities are visible in more personal ways, and participants are able to explore how religious identities and practice are formed in social contexts and in the everyday.

This form of interfaith work differs from what Moyaert describes above as *dialogue of life* because it does not have to be informal; storytelling dialogue can take place in formal spaces with the intention to talk about theological, social, political or other forms of issues impacting interfaith relations. However, the participants are only representing themselves and not their religions or religious communities. As with the activist model of dialogue described above, this form of interfaith work has emerged through women's participation in interfaith work (Hill Fletcher, 2013; Egnell, 2006). It is also the most common form of interfaith youth work and what most of the young people in this thesis had experiences of doing (alongside interfaith work as social action). But it is also important, as emphasised

by the interfaith scholar and theologian Edward Kessler (2013a), that interfaith work – regardless of form and focus – should be about a respectful encounter between two or more individuals. Kessler criticises the term ‘interfaith dialogue’ or interfaith work for being “both misconstrued and ill-defined” (p. 74), where even the most casual or spontaneous conversation could be seen as a form of interfaith dialogue. Instead, he argues that “(f)or dialogue to take place, there must be a genuine listening to and hearing of ‘the other’” and “involves a respect that takes the other as seriously as one would wish to be taken oneself” (Kessler, 2013a, p. 75-76). It is far more than merely learning about each other’s religious traditions, but an active engagement with “a dialogue partner on a quest, for example, about the nature and meaning of God’s purpose for humanity” (p. 76). This, Kessler points out, is a difficult exercise and can result in a much more profound change – socially, theologically and ethically – than one might expect. As we will see in the following chapters, this resonates well with how many of the young people experience interfaith work – both its emphasis on ethical and respectful encounters, but also how interfaith encounters can transform theological, social and political frameworks in ways that are not always easy to deal with.

Weller’s (2009) distinction, Moyaert’s (2013) and Hill Fletcher’s (2013) categories and Kessler’s (2013a) emphasis on difficult and genuine interfaith work provide a good foundation for what interfaith work means in this thesis. As for the concept itself, I will be using the unhyphenated concept of *interfaith work* throughout. There are a few reasons for this (which will also be developed further throughout this chapter). The first is drawing on Weller’s understanding of *interfaith* as being about *relationships* between people of faiths. While he is using the hyphenated version and I am not, relationships between *people* of different faiths and *personal*

*experiences* of religiously diverse encounters are at the forefront of this thesis. The focus is not on the encounters of different religions or religious traditions, but on people and their different understandings, engagements and negotiations of what it means to identify with a particular religion. It also attends to the young people's relationship with their faith communities (sometimes called intrafaith relations) and how participating in interfaith work might impact on these relationships. As we will see in the following chapters, interfaith work for the young people is not only being about meeting, befriending and working with people from different faiths, but also about exploring the boundaries of their personal theologies and negotiating what this means for them as people of faith. It intersects with other identities in their lives and is embedded in social, political and ethical worldviews. This also draws on Kessler's (2013a) understanding of interfaith work as being about genuine, respectful encounters. Although the young people do interfaith work in different ways and for different reasons, genuine and respectful encounters that respect and engage with similarities and differences are at the centre of how they understand and define their interfaith work. The impact(s) of these encounters are also the focus of this thesis.

But, secondly, 'interfaith' is the preferred concept as used by the young people and the interfaith organisations in this thesis (including, as I will come back to more in depth in section 1.3., by policy makers in the UK). I did not encounter any of the concerns mentioned above by Weller that using *interfaith* risks blurring the distinctions between religions. Although – as we will see in Chapter 6 – several of the young people in this thesis did mention this in relation to politics of interfaith work, the tension was not visible in what concept they decided to use. Only one of the research participants preferred using 'interreligious' to describe his interfaith

work for theological reasons (although he sometimes slipped back into using ‘interfaith’ because he thought it was easier to say) and there were also a couple of young people who challenged the notion of ‘faith’ in interfaith. I will come back to this more in depth in Chapters 4 and 5, but to be coherent in the terminology throughout the thesis I will be using the concept of ‘interfaith.’ Lastly, I will be using interfaith *work* to sum up a wide range of ways of ‘doing’ interfaith. While there are similarities between the young people in what kind of interfaith work they have experienced, there are also several differences. Most prefer social action projects (what Moyaert calls ‘dialogue of action’ and Hill Fletcher ‘the activist model’), storytelling (both informal and formal) and learning more about other religions through spiritual dialogue, but there are also a few who appreciate theological debates about truth and doctrine (theological dialogue). Although ‘work’ is a vague description, it makes it possible to capture these different ways of doing interfaith and explore what it means to the young people.

The rest of this section will focus on the theological and social scientific study of interfaith work. I begin by exploring significant theological ideas and approaches to other religions. While this thesis deals with personal theologies of young people and not theologians, it is important to provide a theological context of different dominating approaches to interfaith work since some of these ideas shape how the young people think about their interfaith work in theological terms. It is also an important academic foundation for the thesis. I will then go on to attend to the emergence of interfaith/interreligious studies to which this thesis contributes and how this field is not only a result of the development in theology of religion but also is tied to historical event and the growing social and political need for interfaith work.



### **1.1.2. Theologies of (other) religions**

Although religious diversity is nothing new and religious leaders and theologians have been aware of the existence of other religions for a very long time, theologies around how to deal with the existence of other religions and what this means for one's own religion are a much more recent phenomenon. While some scholars trace these as far back as the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment period and the radical transformation this period had on theological orthodoxy (Kärkkäinen, 2009), many describe the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries as particularly significant when it comes to the emergence of the field of theology of religions in general and interfaith work in particular (Cheetham et al, 2013; Kessler, 2010; Brodeur, 2005). Not only was a significant theological scholarship produced in this period, but historical and political events took place that resulted in groundbreaking official theological shifts in how religious institutions (particularly the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches) thought about and dealt with other religions. As we will see below, these shifts not only made interfaith work possible by challenging and sometimes even reversing previously held theological stereotypes and biases of other religions, but they also made interfaith work important to be involved in from the top to the grassroots (Cheetham et al, 2013; Kessler, 2010; Halafoff, 2013). To give a comprehensive overview of the rich and fascinating field of theology of (other) religions<sup>5</sup> with its many theologians and

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<sup>5</sup> 'Theology of religions' is often used to describe the Christian theological field of thinking about other religions, whereas 'theology of other religions' tends to be used by Jewish and Muslim theologians (e.g. Brill, 2010). However, the concept of theology of religion is also used by non-Christian theologians and I will therefore predominantly be using 'theology of religion' when describing the field of study in this section. I am using 'theologies of religions' when describing different theological approaches to other religions.

diverse way of thinking would be an impossible task.<sup>6</sup> Instead, I will focus on a few significant theological approaches that still shape how interfaith relations are understood, including for the participants in this thesis. Since this thesis focuses on young Christians, Jews and Muslims, I will only consider these in this section and not cover any other religions.<sup>7</sup>

If theology is “at its broadest thinking about questions raised by and about the religions” (Ford, 2013, p. 3), theology of religions is the thinking about other religions. The theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2009) defines theology of religions as “that discipline of theological studies which attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions” (p. 20). This meaning and value is always in relation to and in the light of one’s own religion. For Christian theologians – who have been most prolific in developing different theological approaches to other religions – theology of religions involves “think[ing] theologically about what it means for Christians to live with people of other faiths and about the relationship of Christianity to other religions” (Kärkkäinen, 2009, p. 20). This Christian theological scholarship has – in different ways – focused predominantly on salvation and truth in relation to other religions. Although Jewish and Muslim theologies of other religions have been produced – particularly in the last few decades (e.g. Brill, 2010, 2012; Cohn-Sherbok, 1994;

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<sup>6</sup> See Cohn-Sherbok (2001), Cheetham et al (2013) and Cornille (2013) for edited, comprehensive overviews of interfaith theology and relations; Pratt (2021), Thomas (2017), Siddique (1997) and Akay-Dag (2017) for volumes on Christian-Muslim encounters; Meri (2016) and Aslan & Rausch (2019) for edited volumes on Jewish-Muslim relations; and Kessler (2010, 2013b) for focus on Jewish-Christian relations. See also Kärkkäinen (2003) for a Christian theology of religions, Brill (2010, 2012) for a Jewish theology of religions, and Siddique (1997), Tanner Lamptey (2014) and Aslan et al (2016) for Islamic theologies of religion. Siddique’s book covers Muslim-Christian relations, but the majority of the book focuses on Muslim thinkers.

<sup>7</sup> Both Cheetham et al (2013) and Cornille’s (2013) edited volumes include other religions than Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Cheetham et al (2013), authors explore a wide range of religions’ understanding of ‘the religious other’, whereas Cornille’s (2013) volume includes chapters on different forms of bilateral dialogues – including between Eastern and polytheistic religions.

Siddique, 1997; Tanner Lamptey, 2014) – some Jewish and Muslim theologians and scholars are self-critical of the lack of scholarship compared to Christian theologians. The Jewish theologian Alan Brill (2010) criticises fellow Jewish thinkers of focusing too much on the virtue of dialogue and “neglecting their own internal theological classification” (p. xii), leading to the neglect of developing a Jewish theology of religion. Edward Kessler (2013b) makes a similar point and, by referencing the Jewish thinker Claude Montefiore, asks for a Jewish theology of Christianity. The feminist Muslim theologian Jerusha Tanner Lamptey (2014) argues for the need for Muslim theologians to pay attention to how other religions are depicted in the Quran and other Islamic scriptures, because “it defines the theological nexus between God and humankind” (p. 1). This nexus deals with questions around what God requires of humankind, what kind of relationships are being sought and what requirements humankind needs to live up to. She also points out that “in defining this nexus between God and humankind, the Quran depiction of the religious Other is also and always a depiction of the religious self” (ibid.). While she acknowledges that there is an emerging Muslim scholarship to the field of theology of religion – particularly on the origin of religious diversity and the soteriological status of other religions – “not all of these articulations explicitly or consciously attempt to grapple with the theoretical underpinnings of the larger field of theology of religions” (p. 6).

Both Brill (2010) and Tanner Lamptey (2014) have tried to develop Jewish and Muslim theologies of religions; Brill by going through Jewish scripture and various Jewish theologians using Alan Race’s typology (which I describe below) and theologically engaging with non-Jewish theologians, and Tanner Lamptey by introducing an Islamic theology of religion based on feminist and pluralist ideas.

Overall, the main tension in theology of religions and interfaith work at large is that between *universalism* and *particularism*: how is it possible to be open to other religions and see the commonalities between them (universalism) without losing the uniqueness and particularity of one's own religion (particularism)? (Moyaert, 2005, 2012) Over the years there have been several attempts to distinguish and categorise different theologies of religions. The still most commonly used is the Christian theologian Alan Race's (1982) classic typology of *exclusivism*, *inclusivism* and *pluralism*.<sup>8</sup> In short, it categorises different theological understandings of the value and meaning of other religions, with a particular focus on salvation and the notion of truth. While this typology has emerged in Christian theology and therefore uses a terminology that might not be relevant to other religions – see Moyaert (2012) for a critical analysis of salvation in non-Christian religions – it has been used to develop Jewish and Muslim theologies of religions (e.g. Brill, 2010, 2012; Cohl-Sherbok, 1994; Aslan, 2016; Tanner Lamptey, 2014).

*Exclusivism* or exclusivists are theologians and people of faith who consider their own religion to be the only true religion and path to salvation. Other religions (and sometimes even other denominations within their own religions) are seen as unnecessary and false. This was the most common theological approach in most religious institutions until mid-twentieth century and it remains common in conservative and orthodox religious communities (Schmidt-Leukel, 2013).

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<sup>8</sup> There are also other classifications of theologies of religion. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2009) mentioned three others, all by Christian theologians. The first is by Paul Knitter who distinguishes between four options (the conservative model, the mainline Protestant model, the Catholic model and the theocentric model). The second is by Hans Küng, who also identified four different categories: (1) no religion is true, (2) only one religion is true, (3) every religion is true, and (4) one religion is the true one in whose truth all religions participate. The third typology is by Jacques Dupuis who also identified four categories: (1) Ecclesiocentrism, (2) Christocentrism, (3) Theocentrism, and (4) Realitycentrism. However, Alan Race's typology remains the most common in theology of religions as it has most room for non-Christian faiths and I will therefore focus on it in this section.

Extreme forms of exclusivist theologies can be found in fundamentalist and extremist religious groups and might even legitimate the use of violence (Pratt, 2013). Exclusivists are highly unlikely to participate in interfaith (or intrafaith) work, although some might consider it as long as they are not compromising their theological frameworks (Moyaert, 2012). Exclusivist theologies can be found in Christianity, Judaism and Islam (as well as in other religions). There are a wide range of exclusivist approaches, but what they have in common is that they are downplaying any commonalities between religions and instead are focusing on the differences. In Christianity, the most commonly shared exclusivist theology is that the only path to salvation is through Jesus Christ. One of the most influential Christian theologians was Karl Barth who made a distinction between Christianity and ‘religion’ (which he considered a human phenomenon), where “all commonalities between Christianity and other faiths are regulated to the level of ‘religion’ while at the same time these commonalities are declared as irrelevant because the only thing to decide the ‘truth and falsehood between the religions’ is the name of Jesus Christ” (Schmidt-Leuken, 2013, p. 140). While there are some Christian exclusivists who might accept that some individual non-Christians might be saved, “all forms of exclusivism have in common that they deny any positive salvific role of the non-Christian religions (or, as with intra-Christian exclusivism, even of other forms of Christianity)” (Ibid, p. 141).

These sentiments can also be found in Judaism and Islam. Alan Brill (2010) describes Jewish exclusivists as having a Judeo-centric universe where “other religions are not relevant; at best, the exclusivists can speak of individual gentiles as righteous and admit the possibility that there is knowledge among the nations” (p. 20). The most restrictive form of Jewish exclusivism can be found in “some of

the halakhic approaches that require the gentile to formally and publicly submit to Judaism and enter into a semi-conversion of a separate religion of the seven Noahite laws as defined by the rabbis” (ibid). The Islamic scholar Marcia Hermansen (2016) describes Muslim exclusivism to be the majority position for most of pre-modern Islamic theology and is still dominant in Islamic theology today (especially in very conservative and radical Muslim communities and groups). The most central idea for Muslim exclusivists lies in the idea of supersessionism and total replacement: “there is no value in any other tradition once Islam had been revealed through the mission of Mohammed” (Hermansen, 2016, p. 48). In other words, Islam replaces Judaism and Christianity as religions and the Quran is the final, perfected word of God. Other scriptures are considered at best incomplete and at worst corrupted. One of the most well-known Muslim exclusivist theologian is the Medieval Sunni Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya , who later have influenced the emergence of ultra-conservative Islamic movements – including Salafi and Salafi-jihadi movements (Hermansen, 2016, p. 48; see also Maher, 2016).

*Pluralism* is the other end of the spectrum. If exclusivists consider their own religion to be the one true religion and only path to salvation, pluralists think there is some truth in all religions and other religions are also legitimate means of salvation. Kärkkäinen (2009) argues that “pluralism involves both a positive and a negative element: negatively, pluralism categorically reject exclusivism (and often inclusivism); positively, it affirms that people can find salvation in various religions and in many ways” (p. 25). Although pluralists do not necessarily reject the particularity of their own religions (though some extreme pluralists might), they consider it to be one of many different means to build a relationship with God and they are focusing to a much higher extent on what different religions have in

common (that is, universalism). As Kärkkäinen noted above, pluralists tend to be highly critical of exclusivists (and vice versa) and it is not uncommon that those developing pluralist theological frameworks previously have been exclusivists themselves. Often these reversed theological frameworks are the result of interfaith encounters (Kärkkäinen, 2009; see also Schmidt-Leuken, 2013 and Hermansen, 2016). Pluralists are often involved in interfaith work and consider it as essential, for social as well as theological reasons. As with exclusivism, there are pluralist theologians and people of faith in Christianity, Judaism and Islam (as well as in other religions). While there are different pluralist frameworks, they share the assumption that all religions are “related to the same Ultimate (known as ‘God’ in theistic religions), despite their different and even apparently opposed doctrinal statements about this reality” (Schmidt-Leuel, 2013, p. 144) and that these religions are “justifiable if one takes into account the religions’ widespread affirmation that the Ultimate, because of its transcendent nature, is necessarily beyond any human words and concepts” (Schmidt-Leuel, 2013, p. 144). This means that no religion is more superior than the other and that there is a love for God in all religions (Brill, 2012).

One of the most well-known pluralists and thinkers behind these ideas is the Christian philosopher of religion John Hick, but there are also significant Jewish and Muslim pluralists as well. The Jewish theologian Dan Cohn-Sherbok (1994) argues that “the Jewish community needs to adopt an even more open stance towards the world – what is required today is a Copernican shift from Inclusivism to Pluralism in which the Divine – rather than Judaism – is placed at the centre of the universe of faiths” (p. 5). Such a standpoint, he emphasises, “would enable Jews to affirm the uniqueness of Judaism while urging them to acknowledge the religious

validity of other faiths” (ibid). Muslim pluralist theologians – such as Farad Rahman and Ednan Aslan (2016) – argue that religious diversity is part of God’s plans and put emphasis on parts of the Quran where other religions are not only tolerated but cherished and respected (Hermansen, 2016).

*Inclusivism* falls in between exclusivism and pluralism. It is similar to exclusivism in the sense that inclusivists still consider their own religion to be the one true religion and means of salvation, but they also see some value in other religions and there might be paths to salvation for people of other faiths. Brill (2012) describes how inclusivists “acknowledge that many communities possess their own traditions and truths, but maintains the importance of one’s comprehension as culminating, subsuming or perfecting all other truths” (p. 7). Since the 1960s, this has been the most commonly held theological standpoint in most religious institutions and has shaped – in different ways – how they approach interfaith work (Schmidt-Leukel, 2013). I will come back to this shortly. Just as with exclusivists and pluralists, there exist a wide range of inclusivist approaches to other religions. A common Christian inclusivist approach is that of eschatological connectedness: “for inclusivists, salvation is still Christological, but in an ontological rather than epistemological sense: one can be saved even without knowledge of Christ at all” (Moyaert, 2012, p. 30). This idea is developed most famously by the Christian theologian Karl Rahner who argued that people of other faiths could be seen as ‘anonymous Christians’: “God’s universal salvific will encompasses every human being, so that God is in fact gracefully present to all. To the extent that non-Christians respond positively to God’s grace by acts of faith, hope and love, they are anonymous Christians” (Schmidt-Leukel, 2013, p. 141). Central to Rahner’s thinking is that God’s grace is most clearly expressed in the Christian church and



Christianity is the absolute religion. However, “non-Christian religions may function as path of salvation for their adherents as long as these have not yet come to a clear and full recognition of Christ as the absolute saviour” (Ibid.). This idea has been criticised by exclusivist theologians for undermining the need for mission and evangelisation, as well as diminishing differences between religions.

There are also Muslim and Jewish inclusivist theologies. Muslim inclusivist theologians follow a similar pattern as Christian inclusivists: emphasising the uniqueness of Islam and Islamic supersessionism but without denying theological value in other religions. This can take different forms. Some classical Muslim theologians, such as the Medieval theologian al-Ghazzali, argue that salvation is possible for non-Muslims if they have never been able to encounter or learn about Islam because of the historical or geographic location in which they live. There are also those Muslim theologians and scholars – and these exist in Judaism and Christianity as well – who avoid the question of salvation in other religions altogether by stressing that they do not know God’s final judgement and can therefore not judge. However, they still stress that the possibility that more than one religion is true is theologically and logically impossible and that Islam still remains the one true religion. They also tend to be highly critical of Muslim pluralists who they accuse of interpreting Islamic scripture too liberally. The Muslim scholar Timothy Winter (1999) has criticised Muslim pluralists for ignoring Islamic supersessionism in their reading of the standing of other religions in the Quran. While the Prophet Mohammed did let other people of other religions – particularly Judaism and Christianity (known as People of the Book) – practise their religions in Muslim societies, they were not allowed to proselytise and they were also heavily taxed (Winter, 1999; see also Hermansen, 2016). Brill (2010) argues that

“inclusivism affirms a uniqueness in Judaism, like the exclusivist, but rejects the idea that there is no value in other religions” (Brill, 2010, p. 17). The Medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides is often thought of as a Jewish inclusivist theologian in his understanding that non-Jews who keep the Noahide Laws – the seven commandments made between God and the covenant with Noah – and serve God have a place in the world hereafter. In other words, it is possible to serve God without being a Jew (Brill, 2010). The Jewish theologian and the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2006) also sees this as a form of *universalism*; an acceptance of what different religions have in common (God) but also “balanced with a new respect for the local, the particular, the unique” (p. 20). This is a more God-centred approach than inclusivism is in Race’s typology (which tends to focus on the religion) – Brill (2010, 2012), for example, describes universalism as a category of its own – but it has similarities with some less extreme forms of inclusivism in the emphasis on the need to attend to particularity without ignoring the value of other religions. Sacks understands the balance between universalism and particularism – the acceptance of diversity and difference – as the dignity of difference. In order to tackle the challenges of modernity and globalisation, Sacks argues, we need to be able to attend and talk about difference, and “that each of us within our own traditions, religious or secular, must learn to listen and be prepared to be surprised by others” (p. 23). However, he was criticised for this notion by more right-wing Orthodox Jews and changed his book accordingly.

This is a way of thinking that also some Christian theologians share. For example, Kajsa Ahlstrand (2001) argues that Christians should not downplay Christianity’s particularity in interfaith work to show respect to other religions. Instead, what makes a religion unique should be the foundation for dialogue and

engagement, at the same time as other religions' particularities should be respected too. Lesslie Newbigin (1989) also put emphasis on the need for Christians to acknowledge their commitment to ultimate authority of Christ and he rejects the notion that it is possible to start any form of interfaith work on objective grounds (which is sometimes the argument of pluralists). However, he also stresses that "Christians should recognise the presence of God in the lives of non-Christians and expect to be changed by the experience of dialogue" (Womack, 2007, p. 5). True interfaith work and dialogue, according to Newbigin, mean that "our versions of Christianity may be put at risk, challenged and transformed through an encounter with a member of another faith" (Womack, 2007, p. 5).

While Alan Race's typology remains the most common form to understand different theologies of religions and is used frequently by interfaith practitioners, it has been criticised for being too limited and restrictive.<sup>9</sup> Scholars and theologians have pointed out that it is impossible to categorise theologians (and people of faith generally) into clearly defined categories. For example, Lesslie Newbigin (1989) stressed that his own theological positioning can be seen as exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist depending on what argument one is focusing on – but he also emphasises that it might be none of them because his ideas do not fit into clearly defined categories. Instead, they transcend and intersect with each other.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Alan Brill (2010) argues that most theologians and people of faith do not belong to a single category, nor should they be constrained by these categories.

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<sup>9</sup> See Moyaert (2012), Kärkkäinen (2009), D'Costa (1996); Brill (2010, 2012), and Thomas (2013a) for critical reflections on Race's typology. There are also those theologians who are critical of the field of theology of religions altogether and prefer other, more hermeneutically oriented approaches. One example of this is the emerging field of *comparative theology*, which differs from theology of religion by providing a deeper, more hermeneutical study of other religions. See Moyaert (2012), Clooney (2011), Clooney & Stosch (2018) and Cornille (2019) for comprehensive overviews of comparative theology.

<sup>10</sup> See Womack (2007) for a critical analysis of Lesslie Newbigin's theology of religion.

Instead, he points out, it is both possible and sometimes even preferable to move across and between different theological approaches depending on context and situation. However, this does not mean that he thinks theological classifications are without any value. What they can do is to “illuminate how we do have different theologies in different situations” and how this can “help formulate middle positions when people seem to accept contradictory positions in the same situation” (Brill, 2010, p. 22).

In this thesis, I will not be using Race’s typology or categories to explore the young people’s theological frameworks. However, it will be clear – as Brill points out – that the young people’s personal theologies are shaped by these different theological approaches and how this makes interfaith work theologically essential for some and more difficult for others. It will also be clear that the research participants’ personal theologies are not set in stone but changeable and transformable, and how they sometimes struggle to make sense of contradictory theological understandings of other religions as well as their own. Some of the ideas and questions presented above are also visible in the young people’s accounts: is it possible to embrace the particularity of one’s own religion and still be open to other religions? How can theological differences be tackled and addressed, without losing sight of similarities – and vice versa? And what happens when theological frameworks change and transform? As we will see in Chapters 4 to 6, these theological questions are often at the forefront – explicitly or implicitly – in the young people’s biographical accounts about their interfaith work and shape their experiences.

### **1.1.3. The emergence of interfaith/interreligious studies**

But before shifting focus to young people's interfaith work and why we should pay attention to it, I will first touch upon the emerging academic discipline to which this thesis is contributing: interfaith or interreligious studies. This transdisciplinary field of research did not emerge until the last decade, but it is closely tied to the developments in theology of religion and the growing political and social need of interfaith work. As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, interfaith work is no longer a priority only for theologians but also used in a wide range of social setting, including politics, local governance and education. This has attracted academics from different academic backgrounds to explore what interfaith work is, how we can understand the theological, historical and political shifts in the need for interfaith work, and the impact(s) this might have on those involved (Leirvik, 2014; see also Cheetham et al, 2013; Gustafson, 2020; and Patel et al, 2017). While there is an ongoing debate about whether the field should be named 'interfaith' or 'interreligious studies',<sup>11</sup> there are some shared ideas about what interfaith/interreligious studies is (or should be) about. The theologian Oddbjørn Leirvik (2014) has described interfaith studies as a relational field that explores the theological, philosophical, social and political realities of interfaith relations. It is also about "an awareness of how religions relate not only to each other, but also to internal plurality and (...) to other social systems and society at large" (p. 1). Marianne Moyaert (2019) shares this view. She describes the field's centre of gravity as "what happens in the space 'in-between' the faiths" and "part of the

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<sup>11</sup> Those who argue for the use of 'interfaith studies' (e.g. Patel, 2018) do this because it makes it possible to attend to the relationship between people of different faiths, whereas those who prefer the use of 'interreligious studies' (e.g. McCarthy, 2018) argue that it separates the emerging discipline from the interfaith movement and also makes it possible to situate interreligious studies within the secular discipline of Religious Studies. See Patel et al (2018) and Gustafson (2020) for discussions about interfaith/interreligious studies as an emerging discipline.

agenda of interreligious studies is to broaden scholarly attention from interreligious theological dialogue to other non-discursive expressions of interreligiosity” (Moyaert, 2019, p. 4). It also includes paying attention to new voices, spaces and ways of doing interfaith work, as well as using different methodologies to study interfaith relations. The origin of these academic interests can be found in at least two intersected areas. The first are a set of historical factors, processes and events that have led religious communities – particularly Christian churches – to become involved in interfaith work. Theological shifts and changes do not emerge in a vacuum, nor does our need to study it. As noted by Edward Kessler (2013b), theologies (as well as theologians and people of faith) are shaped by surrounding historical, social, cultural and political contexts. These factors are not only about shifts in theological frameworks but also the structural and practical implications of these shifts.

For example, the emergence of the Christian ecumenical movement in the beginning of the twentieth century is described by several scholars as important in later providing a structure and rationale for interfaith work (Moyaert, 2013; Kärkkäinen, 2009; Schmidt-Leukel, 2013; see also Kessler, 2013b). While this is an intrafaith movement – aimed at creating unity amongst those believing in Jesus Christ and put an end to the long and sometimes bloody divisions between different Christian denominations – its mindset, structures and methods are seen as significant in later making churches becoming involved in interfaith work. Moyaert (2013) argues that “ecumenical dialogue showed that it is possible to maintain positive and constructive relations with people who think and believe differently” (p. 196) and this later led to an openness of using similar approaches to other religions. This is why interfaith work sometimes is known as ‘wider ecumenism’

amongst Christians: “one that reaches beyond the community of Christian churches to include the world’s great religions” (Moyaert, 2013, p. 196; see also Phan, 1998).

The intersection between theology, politics and power in the history of Western colonialism and the process of decolonisation, and the Holocaust or the Shoah have also been significant. Not only have these resulted in ground-breaking theological shifts in official doctrines which have been crucial in the emergence of organised interfaith work, but also in attracting academic attention outside of theology. The history of colonialism and the decolonisation process that followed had profound impact on Christian theology. Christianity was deeply linked to European colonial powers and Western imperialism, and Christian exclusivist theologies were used to replace local traditions and religions. Following the decolonisation after the Second World War, many churches did not only lose political power and prestige, but a painful theological, political and social reckoning started around the role of Christianity in European colonialism (Moyaert, 2013). The history of colonialism still shapes practical interfaith work – particularly Muslim-Christian relations (Siddique, 1997) – but also the academic study of interfaith work. It can be found in theological studies, such as liberation theology and postcolonial theology of religion (e.g. Daggers, 2013; Calles Barger, 2018), and postcolonial and feminist scholars have paid attention to marginalisation, oppression and power in interfaith work. Moyaert (2019) notes that these theoretical and methodological frameworks “draw attention to the intersectionality of identities, power imbalances and the fact that interreligiosity is always political” (Moyaert, 2019, p. 4). These studies also focus on who does and who does not participate in interfaith work, and the political, theological, social and ethical frameworks that are in play in these encounters (Cornille, 2013; Hill Fletcher, 2013;

Egnell, 2006). Another very significant historic tragedy that still shapes interfaith work and the study of interfaith work – particularly between Jews and Christians – is the Holocaust or the Shoah. Many churches (with a few exceptions) kept quiet about it and some even participated in the Nazi regime. While scholars – including some Jewish theologians – do not equate Christian anti-Judaism with Nazi antisemitism, it did play a role in it and this later led to a historic and groundbreaking reversal of official Christian exclusivist teachings of contempt and replacement in relation to Judaism in both the Roman Catholic Church and the mainstream Protestant churches in the 1960s and 1970s (Moyaert, 2013; Kessler, 2013b).<sup>12</sup> These also led to more inclusivist approaches to other religions in many mainstream Christian institutions.<sup>13</sup> The first significant document to be published was *Nostra Aetate* after the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) in 1965, which changed the Roman Catholic Church's approach to other religions - including condemning antisemitism and insisting that Judaism is a living faith – and also opened up ecumenical work with other churches. The second came in 1970 when the (Protestant) World Council of Churches published a similar document (Kessler, 2013b; Moyaert, 2013; Kärkäillen, 2009). While these are official documents and do not automatically reach the local pews and pulpits in churches at the grassroots, they provided new institutional frameworks and significant theological shifts in official doctrines about the need for interfaith work and promoting positive

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<sup>12</sup> In short, the Christian replacement theology is the doctrine that Christianity has replaced Judaism as a religion (that is, Christian supersessionism) and formed a new covenant with God through Jesus Christ. The old covenant between God and the Jewish people is broken and Judaism is no longer relevant as a religion. Following the Holocaust, these ideas changed and in most mainstream official theological doctrines Judaism is today seen as a living faith and the covenant between God and the Jewish people remains (Kessler, 2010, 2013b).

<sup>13</sup> This does not include the Orthodox churches and many evangelical churches, which still have not revised this theological doctrine. These churches tend to a higher extent adhere to more exclusivist theological frameworks and are less likely to participate in interfaith work (even though there are some exceptions, see Azumah, 2012).



encounters with other faiths (Kessler, 2010). The Holocaust also led to Christian reckonings about the theological and historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and the role Judaism plays in Christian identities. In Chapters 4 to 5, some of the young Christians reflect on this. But, as noted by Kessler (2010), “the Shoah did not only cause Christianity to reassess its relationship with Judaism, but also stirred greater Jewish interest in Christianity” (p. 4), including how Christianity has influenced Judaism (particularly Rabbinic Judaism) and the Jewishness of Jesus. Since the Jewish religious polity differs from the Christian in terms of structure and hierarchy, there have been no similar official documents like the *Nostra Aetate*. However, in 2000, 220 rabbis and Jewish intellectuals signed the *Dabru Emet* (‘Speak Truth’) document which stressed the significance of good Jewish-Christian relations and expressed appreciation for the theological shifts in how official Christian institutions regarded Judaism. It even went so far as asserting that Jews and Christians worship the same God, and that Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon (Kessler, 2010, 2013; Brill, 2012; see also ICJS, 2000). There have also been similar Muslim responses. In 2007, the *A Common Word* document was published in which Muslim leaders and scholars expressed the need for improved relations between Muslims and Christians. One year later saw the publication of *An Open Letter* where Muslim scholars expressed the wish to improve Muslim-Jewish relations (Ahmed & Kessler, 2016).

These historical events and theological shifts in religious institutions have been critical in providing institutional frameworks to interfaith work and encourage adherents – from the top to the bottom – to engage with people of other faiths. But there is also a second area which has been significant in the emergence of interfaith/interreligious studies: interfaith work as a response to the political,

economic, cultural and technological possibilities and challenges brought about by globalisation. Moyaert (2013) considers globalisation – or the sociological phenomenon of globalisation, which is the term she uses – to be the most critical factor behind the need for interfaith work, globally as well as locally. Not only has global migration resulted in increased religious diversity in many places (which we will see in the UK in section 1.3.), but the challenges of globalisation have also given rise to a wide range of interfaith initiative and calls for action. One of the most well-known is the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* (1993), which was drafted by the Christian theologian Hans Küng and approved by the Parliament of World's Religions in 1993 (it was later updated in 2018, see PWR, 2018). This document provides a vision of a better, more just and sustainable world and economic order, and encourages people of faith (and none) to come together to work for a better, more just and sustainable world and economic order. Its core messages can be summarised in four statements: (1) non-violence and respect for life; (2) solidarity and a just economic order; (3) tolerance and a life of truthfulness; and (4) equal rights and partnership between men and women (PWR, 1993; see also Hedges, 2008). While the document stated that it did not try to ignore or remove differences between religious communities, the idea of a 'global ethic' was framed around shared ethical values that all religions have in common, such as caring for the neighbour, social justice and solidarity. It also directly criticised religious leaders, communities and groups that participated in spreading hatred, xenophobia and inciting violence (PWR, 1993; see also Küng, 1997, 2004; and Halafoff, 2013).

Although this document has been criticised for its structure, focus and for preaching to the converted (e.g. Cheetham, 2007; Hedges, 2008), it has been significant in providing a global interfaith framework around social and political

action and inspired many in the interfaith movement – as well as studies on the intersection between interfaith movement and other social and political movements (Halafoff, 2013). But interfaith work – as a discourse and an idea as well as a set of methods – has also become a counter-response to the discourse of the clash of civilisations by promoting dialogue, collaboration and friendships in hope “to stop the spiralling effect of misunderstandings, misapprehension, annoyances and violence” (Moyaert, 2013, p. 199). As we saw in the beginning of this chapter and will see further in section 1.3., interfaith work has become a way to create platforms and spaces in which differences can be handled in respectful and constructive ways – whether this takes place at the very local level or as part of policymaking (Cheetham et al, 2013). However, this has also been significant in the emergence of interfaith/interreligious studies to understand what this means in practice. Scholars from theology as well as from the social sciences have started to analyse not only the theological implications of these interfaith encounters, but also study interfaith from a broader and empirical perspective by paying attention to the *social actors* and *individuals* involved in interfaith work (who does and who does not participate in interfaith work?), *geographical* and *spatial contexts* (where does interfaith work take place?), the *political* and *theological structures* that frame the interfaith space, and what *impact* interfaith work might have on (local) communities, relationships, identities and theologies (Ipgrave, 2018; Nordin, 2017; Prideaux & Dawson, 2018; Dinham, 2012; Bretherton, 2011; Halafoff, 2013; Gidley & Everett, 2019; Egorova & Ahmed, 2017).

This thesis’ focus on young people’s experiences of interfaith work in the UK contributes to the emerging field of interfaith/interreligious studies. It explores a group of interfaith participants we still have very limited knowledge of and attends

to the impact(s) participating in interfaith work might have on to their religious, political, social and ethical identities and sense of belonging – to their religious communities as well as to the British society at large. I will explore ‘identity’ and the theoretical framework around this in more depth in the next chapter but will briefly discuss here what I mean with ‘community’ since this is an important concept in this thesis (as well as in interfaith/interreligious studies more generally). As with ‘interfaith work’, ‘community’ is a contested concept and the academic understanding of what ‘community’ is has also changed over time “to reflect moves from place-bound studies of social relationships to considerations of symbolic and multiple identities” (Day & Rogaly, 2014, p. 76; see also Blackshaw, 2009). The concept has a long transdisciplinary history going as far back as the fourteenth century and has later emerged in social research as societies started to change with industrialisation and the modern age in the eighteenth century onwards (Giddens & Sutton, 2017; see also Blackshaw, 2009, and Crow, 2018, for extensive explorations about ‘community studies’). The sociologist Graham Crow (2018) notes that ‘community’ can mean different things and it is difficult to ‘pin point.’ It might be associated with particular geographical places and localities, but might not. A ‘community’ can be made up of people who share some form of identity or set of values, but this might not necessarily be the case. A ‘community’ might also be organised around shared interests, but “it is evident here as well that such communities built around a common interest can still be quite heterogenous and have some members who are more active and influential than others” (Crow, 2018, p. 2).

As a concept, ‘community’ is criticised for being unstable, vague and normative. The sociologist Tony Blackshaw (2009) described it as “one of the most

vague and imprecisely drawn concept in the social sciences; it seems to mean everything and nothing” (p. 2) and noted how this vagueness invites misunderstanding. The sociologist of religion James Beckford (2015) shares this view and argues that ‘community’ has become a “weasel word that occurs frequently in discourses at the levels of everyday life, public policy-making, welfare services and social scientific studies” and that “it has no stable content but is most often used to elicit positive responses, especially in connection to religion or faith” (p. 227). He encourages fellow scholars to be more precise and critical in how they are using ‘community’, particularly in studies on ‘faith’ or ‘religious’ communities. These communities are not homogenous and unified but diverse and made up of a wide range of traditions, practices and belief systems – internally as well as between different faith communities (see also Dinham, 2010). Abby Day and Ben Rogaly (2014) found in their study that the terminology of (faith) communities can “be seen as a cohesive and a fragmentary tool, reflecting symbolic and multiple ideas of community and sometimes obscuring deeper structural issues” (p. 86f). They also stress that “communities are brought into being by people who imagine them and create them, who believe in them, who feel they belong to them (and that others may or may not do so)” (p. 86). These points show the need to attend not only to how communities are imagined in policy and by people, but also the social, political and sometimes also theological structures that make up what is considered to be a ‘community’.

In this thesis, ‘community’ is used in different ways. It is found in the policies around ‘community cohesion’ in the UK (described in more depth in section 1.3.) where community is embedded in communitarian ideals of shared values, history and identity (Dinham, 2012; Cantle, 2008). It is also present in

discussions around ‘faith’ and ‘religious’ communities – both in a more descriptive sense (as seen in section 1.3. on the religious landscape in the UK) but also in how the young people imagine and understand these communities. As we will see, not all of these experiences are positive and some of the young people’s accounts give insights into the complexity that Day and Rogaly explored in their study: how faith communities can be both cohesive and fragmentary and give rise to questions of who belongs and who does not. Lastly, several of the young people discuss ‘community’ in relation to their interfaith work. Here, ‘community’ is often used to describe positive feelings of belonging, companionship and working with like-minded people. However, as with faith communities, this form of community is not only positive but can also raise questions of ‘preaching to the converted’ and about the very core of what interfaith work is and can be. These negotiations between building bridges and engaging with diversity are critical to this thesis and will be dealt with in more depth in the following chapters.

## **1.2. Why study young people’s interfaith work?**

Young people belong to a group that, together with women, has historically been absent in interfaith work and it is not until the last two decades that interfaith organisations, projects and methods for young people have been developed (Halafoff, 2013; Orton, 2014). There are both political and religious reasons behind this development. The growing political interest in interfaith work as a means to build cohesive communities has framed interfaith youth work around the notions of active citizenship and religious literacy.<sup>14</sup> Involvement in interfaith organisations,

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<sup>14</sup> Although the concept ‘religious literacy’ has been around for several decades, it is not until fairly recently that it has grown in popularity and become part of the political and academic discussions

projects and activities aim, in different ways, to provide young people with learning spaces and opportunities to develop skills and knowledge needed to lead successful lives in multicultural and religiously diverse societies and boost their civic and political participation (Cornelio & Salera, 2012; Halafoff, 2013). This involves using a wide range of methods – from storytelling and dialogues about religion to social action projects and working with community leaders and politicians to bring about social change. For example, Graham Bright with colleagues (2018) found in their interviews with interfaith youth workers in the UK that they used dialogical pedagogies that linked young people’s everyday experiences of their faith to wider ethical and moral issues, such as shopping, caring for others, the environment and being a good neighbour. By providing young people with safe spaces to reflect and broaden their perceptions of their religions, the interfaith youth workers wanted the young people to not only build bridges between different faith communities but also to the wider society (Bright et al, 2018). Others have explored how interfaith youth work can provide platforms for civic engagement (Cornelio & Salera, 2012), spaces for democratic education (Liljestrand, 2018) and opportunities to learn more about one’s own and other’s religions (Krebs, 2014). I will come back to this more in-depth in section 1.2.1. Interfaith youth work is also a response to growing political and religious concerns about religious extremism and violent radicalisation (particularly of young Muslims) (Patel, 2007; Halafoff, 2013). Eboo Patel, the

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about the need to develop nuanced and complex knowledge and conversations about religion. Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw (2017) define ‘religious literacy’ as “an understanding of the grammars, rules, vocabularies and narratives underpinning religions and beliefs” (p. 1). In short, this means having a basic understanding of different religions and their histories, traditions and contexts, as well as how these are shaped and are shaping the social, cultural and political contexts in which they are manifested. But it also involves having “the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” (Moore, 2006, p. 1). Formal educational institutions – such as schools (the RE subject) and universities – are identified as key spaces to develop young people’s religious literacy (Dinham & Francis, 2015), but as we will see throughout this thesis, interfaith youth projects and organisations can also be seen as important spaces to do that. I will come back to this more in-depth later in this chapter and in Chapter 5 and 7.

interfaith youth practitioner we met above, has identified religious identities as one of the main ‘battle fields’ facing communities today. Drawing on the African American thinker W.E.B. Du Bois, who famously wrote that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (Du Bois, 1903, cited in Patel, 2007, p. xv), Patel argues that there now also exists a “problem of the faith line” between “*religious pluralists*, who actively seek to build bridges of respect and cooperation across differing belief groups, and *religious totalitarians*, who actively seek to destroy those who believe differently” (Patel, 2010, p. 233, italics in original). But where religious extremist groups have been successful at attracting young people with their black-and-white ideologies and clear in-group/out-group dichotomy, interfaith organisations have struggled to reach out to young people and tend to stick to activities and structures that either do not interest young people or exclude them. Patel considers this a great challenge and argues for the need to create and expand “spaces where religiously diverse people gather to work on matters of religious diversity” and develop a ‘public language of faith’ that “articulates what makes you a faithful Jew, Christian or Muslim also makes you a better citizen” (2007b, p. 25). This was one of his key aims when he founded the Interfaith Youth Core. Interfaith youth work, he concludes, “can help young people develop a language of faith that is relevant to the world of diversity, where they spend most of their time, thus encouraging them to affirm their faith identity” (ibid, p. 26).

The sociologist and interfaith practitioner Anna Halafoff (2013) shares this view and argues that interfaith youth work can provide young people with alternatives to extremist movements and “by countering alienation through social inclusion and encouraging young people from diverse faith traditions to play a non-violent critical role in deliberative forms of governance, multifaith youth initiatives



contribute to building genuinely peaceful societies” (p. 104). In addition to this, there are also beliefs that young people are more open to interfaith work than older generations because of the historical time and social circumstances under which they have grown up. The scholar of religion Diana Eck (2006) has described the younger generation as “the first interfaith generation” that “does not need to be convinced of the challenge of religious identity in a multireligious world” (p. x). With this she means that, in contrast to older generations, young people today have grown up with religious diversity and the opportunities and challenges of a religiously diverse society are part of their everyday lives (Eck, 2006). Others describe young people as ‘change makers’ who bring energy and enthusiasm to interfaith projects, and that their experiences of growing up in religiously diverse societies put them in “an ideal position to play an important role in normalising pluralism and in spreading an awareness of interdependence and global responsibility in ultramodern societies” (Halafoff, 2013, p. 104).

### **1.2.1. Young people and interfaith work: a growing field of study**

However, despite these positive words and hopes for interfaith youth work, we still have limited knowledge about young people’s participation in interfaith work and the impact it might have on their lives. Most publications to date have focused on adult practitioners (e.g. Patel & Brodeur, 2006; Bright et al, 2018) and while this work provides interesting and valuable insights into the practical, philosophical and theoretical development of interfaith youth work, young people’s voices are often absent or restricted to particular topics due to space and focus. This thesis’ focus on young people’s experiences of interfaith work and the impact it might have on their identities and sense of belonging contributes therefore to closing a significant

knowledge gap. At the time of writing this thesis, only a handful of other empirical studies have explored how young people themselves experience interfaith work<sup>15</sup> and in this section I will review this literature closely to identify themes that are important to the present study. To the best of my knowledge, these studies are amongst the few studies – perhaps even *the only* – that have been published on young people’s interfaith work so far and they provide therefore an important foundation for the thesis. In the next section I will summarise these themes and identify gaps to which this thesis will contribute.

Overall, the studies on young people’s interfaith work are small-scale, based on qualitative interviews and/or ethnographic fieldwork with young people, and focus on different angles of young people’s interfaith work. Jayeed Cornelio and Timothy Salera (2012) and Stephanie Krebs (2014) have in their studies focused on why young people are involved in interfaith work and what interfaith means to them. Cornelio and Salera interviewed 22 young Christians and Muslims involved in the interfaith youth organisation ‘Muslim-Christian Youth for Peace and Development’ (MCYPD) in Barangay Tala in the Philippines, a post-war context with a long history of tension and conflicts between Christians and Muslims. In the interviews, Cornelio and Salera identified three interlinked themes that sum up the young people’s interfaith work and why they have decided to

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<sup>15</sup> However, it is important to note that while there has been very little research on young people’s interfaith work in interfaith (youth) organisations and projects, there have been studies looking at school pupils’ experiences of interreligious education in the Religious Education (RE) subject in schools. As noted by Johan Liljestrand (2018), studies have explored “the classroom as a space for encounters between students with different religious backgrounds...and on students’ attitudes toward those with different religious affiliation in western Europe” (p. 39) and recent years have seen a growing number of publications focusing on this and the challenges facing the RE subject (e.g. Arweck & Jackson, 2014; Vikdahl, 2019; Engebretson et al, 2010; Davis & Miroshnikova, 2013). Since this thesis is focusing on young people’s voluntary interfaith work outside of formal education and not on the RE subject, I will not include this research here – but I will come back to the impact the school system might have on young people’s religious and political identities in the next chapter.

become involved in the MCYPD: (1) ‘person, not religion’, (2) ‘friendships’, and (3) ‘community engagement.’ The first theme – ‘person, not religion’ – summarises the young people’s interest in “the character of the follower rather than the contents and doctrines of the religion” (p. 50). Rather than being interested in the theological components of religion, the young people in Cornelio and Salera’s study were more interested in how religion is lived and practiced in everyday life. While this does not mean that the young people were not interested in learning more about content and doctrines of religious traditions, it was not considered a priority and Cornelio and Salera noted that this makes interfaith youth work different from more traditional forms of interfaith work (e.g. theological dialogue between religious leaders).

The second theme – ‘friendships’ – focuses on the social importance of interfaith youth work. Many of the young people described that one important factor in why they became involved in the MCYPD was the opportunity to meet other young people and make new friends. These friendships were important in their own right – particularly for those young people who have recently arrived as immigrants and did not have many friends – but Cornelio and Salera also argued that friendships motivate the young people to understand each other better and are therefore directly linked to their interest in ‘person, not religion’ above. For many of the young people, having a Christian or Muslim friend and knowing more about their everyday religious practice have helped them challenge previously held stereotypes about each other. These two themes show, according to Cornelio and Salera, how the MCYPD can have important social and educational impacts on the young people, particularly in a post-war context like the Barangay Tala. But learning about lived religion and making friends were not the only important factors in the young

people's interfaith work. Cornelio and Salera identified a third theme in the interview material that they consider important also from a democratic perspective: the young people described how participating in the MCYPD has given them opportunities for community engagement and becoming involved in local politics. Through the MCYPD the young people had set up panels, elected youth representatives to the local council and built a platform from which they have got a public voice. Although the MCYPD was the only youth organisation in the local area and it is therefore not possible to estimate if the situation would have been different had there been other youth organisations present, Cornelio and Salera still concluded that this makes interfaith youth work valuable also in fostering young people's democratic participation. However, they ask for more empirical research on young people's interfaith work, particularly whether participating in interfaith youth work might lead to youth empowerment.

Stephanie Krebs' (2014) doctoral thesis is the only study I have found that explicitly explores young people's lived experiences of interfaith work. She interviewed 11 young Americans from a number of faith and non-faith backgrounds who have participated in a leadership programme organised by the Interfaith Youth Yore. Using a phenomenological approach, she was interested in how the young people identified and experienced interfaith work and what they have learned from being involved in interfaith work. When analysing the interview material, she identified four broad themes as responses to these questions: (1) the role of the environment, (2) the value of individual relationships through sharing and storytelling, (3) holding an ecumenical worldview, and (4) strengthening of the individual's faith or non-faith tradition. Some of these themes are similar to what Cornelio and Salera found in their study above but Krebs also identified other

factors that Cornelio and Salera did not focus on. Most notable is the first theme – the role of the environment – where many of the young people identified the importance of the physical space where interfaith work takes place. For many of the young people, a distinct characteristic of the interfaith spaces they have experienced was that they were ‘safe spaces’ – that is, structured by guidelines and ground rules – and this made conversations and encounters more comfortable and less confrontational. It also made the young people feel ‘welcome’ and able to ‘speak their minds’ without being afraid of hurting someone else or being judged themselves.

But Krebs’ study also showed other important aspects of young people’s interfaith work. As with Cornelio and Salera’s participants, Krebs’ research participants expressed the importance of friendships and learning about the lived realities of their new friends’ religions in personalised ways (particularly through storytelling) and participating in interfaith work was a way to maintain these relationships. The young people also described a close link between their interfaith work and social action, and for many of them being involved in interfaith work meant also being active in their local communities and in different social justice projects. This was also connected to the third theme identified by Krebs: that the young people expressed ‘ecumenical worldviews’ – that is, an interest in other religious traditions and cultures, high levels of tolerance and acceptance for diversity, and a belief “that all life is interconnected and that love is at the root of all great religions” (Krebs, 2014, p. 104). While none of the young people used the term ‘ecumenical worldview’ – this is a concept from critical and cosmopolitan pedagogy used by Krebs – their accounts gave voice to a desire to understand and ‘do good’, a ‘yearning for learning’ and acceptance of ‘multiple truths’. Many of

the young people participating in Krebs' study had not grown up with interfaith work (only a few had, most of them because their parents were religious leaders or active in their congregations) and it was not until they came to university that they became aware of multiple readings and interpretations of religious traditions – including their own. Although some of them described interfaith work as difficult at first, all of them felt it was important by the time of their interview with Krebs. Being involved in interfaith also strengthened their faith or non-faith – which is the fourth theme identified by Krebs – and many of them described how learning about other people's faith and non-faith had helped them reflect about their own tradition. For some of them, this has also developed their 'ecumenical world-views' and provided an important basis for future interfaith work and social action. In her conclusion, Krebs summarised young people's interfaith work as "characterised by participants' description of the environment, the importance of building relationships through sharing and storytelling, the connection to an ecumenical worldview, and the strengthening of participants' own personal faith or non-faith tradition through engagement in interfaith dialogue" (p. 133). In order to understand young people's experiences of interfaith work, we need to take these different aspects into account and explore what they mean to young people. As will become apparent later in this chapter, many of these factors are also important in this thesis and I will come back to them in section 1.2.2.

Other studies have explored the link between the interfaith space and relationships, and how this shape young people's experiences of interfaith work. Johan Liljestr nd (2018) has in his study on young people's participation in the Swedish interfaith youth project 'Together for Sweden' (TFS) looked at the "relationship between interreligious learning and physical place" (p. 41). He

interviewed 23 young people from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu backgrounds in Stockholm and identified four educational spaces in the young people's accounts: 'invited places', 'common meeting points', 'nomadic spaces' and 'secular public spaces.' These spaces were linked to different activities provided by the TFS and brought about a range of emotions and tensions. 'Invited places' involved visiting different houses of worship or religious buildings ('homes' of different religious communities) and is a key feature of the TFS's leadership programme. The aim of these fieldtrips was to "highlight the difference(s) between the host and the guests and community building based on face-to-face encounters" (p. 42) and the young people were often expected to wear the religious clothing required in these spaces (e.g. wearing the kippah, covering their hair with a headscarf). Liljestrand noted that many of the young people described visiting these spaces as 'being a guest' and while most of them had positive experiences of these trips, some also emphasised tension of 'not being at home' and felt a need to 'adapt' that made them feel 'less free'.

These feelings were very different from how they described the TFS headquarters in Stockholm – what Liljestrand defines as 'common meeting points.' The TFS is located at 'Fryshuset', a national youth organisation with a wide range of activities and programmes for young people, and many of the young people's experiences of the TFS headquarters were also linked to 'Fryshuset.' Liljestrand found that "many describe 'Fryshuset' as a place that provides space for individual participation and common deliberation, where one's experience is important" (p. 43) and how this emphasis on individuality made it possible to have more open discussions about sensitive and personal topics. The neutrality of the TFS space – that is, not directly linked to a particular religious community, as in 'invited spaces'

– also created the sense of an ‘interreligious we’ amongst the TFS participants. But participating in the TFS activities also involved visiting other spaces and different forms of learning opportunities. Some of the young people had travelled abroad for fieldtrips with the TFS to visit other interfaith organisations and they described these ‘nomadic spaces’ as possibilities to “understand and experience the everyday lives of others in a very tangible way” (p. 44). For example, they involved shared accommodation, mealtimes and schedules, which provided a different kind of spatial and social closeness than other TFS activities. Liljestrand argued that “when there is little time to be alone and reflect, religious and cultural differences can become accentuated and need to be handled socially if the intended sense of community is to be maintained and developed” (p. 45). While many of the participants found these experiences rewarding, they were also described as daunting and required considering other people’s religious habits before acting in certain ways (e.g. refraining from ordering a beer at a restaurant when there are young people who do not drink alcohol in the group).

The fourth space identified by Liljestrand – ‘secular public spaces’ – bring about another set of learning experiences. These take place in schools, where a team of four TFS participants were invited to tell their stories about what it means to belong and identify with a particular faith to students in classrooms. What is particular about this space is that, in contrast to the other spaces, “the intended subjects for learning are mainly students in the classroom, where any tensions and negotiations within the [interfaith] group have to be controlled and managed” (ibid.). Some of the young people described a need to have a ‘united front’ when interacting with school students and perform a collective ‘public we’, which at times could create confusion about the purpose of the school visits. But Liljestrand



also observed that these public spaces provided the young people with a public voice and that “environments like schools, classrooms or public cultural centres are used to create and shape educational experiences of acting as a public ‘we’ in the civil sphere” (p. 46). He concluded that focusing on spatial experiences and conditions “offer a framework for how educational experiences can be contextually shaped in civil interreligious work” but also the need to acknowledge the different power dimensions framing these spaces and encounters and how this might impact on young people’s experiences of interfaith.

Phil Henry (2015) found similar themes in his interview study on young people’s interfaith work in the Derby Interfaith Youth Forum (DIYF) in the UK. Drawing on Symbolic Interactionism as theoretical framework, Henry was interested in “uncovering what symbolic meaning people develop and rely on in their interaction with each other” (p. 120) and the impact face-to-face interactions between young people of different faiths might have on ‘self-other’ relationships. Like Krebs and Liljestrand, he noted a close link between the interfaith space and social relationships. The space and social order the young people had created in the DIYF with ground rules made it possible for them to discuss difficult and sensitive topics – like gender rights, violent extremism and abortion – but also touch upon more mundane subjects, such as religious clothing and practice. The young people also felt they could respectfully challenge each other if they did not agree or had a different point of view on a certain topic, which helped them develop and strengthen a sense of self. The friendships formed in these spaces are critical and Henry argued that “the genuine resolve to see each other, to share food (however basic) and explore with each other is significant to motivate participation” (p. 119). In the conclusion, he emphasised that in order to understand young people’s interfaith

work, we need to “understand how young people from diverse faith-backgrounds understand themselves and others in a group” (p. 126). This involves paying attention to how young people make sense of themselves, their experiences of rejections and recognitions, as well as the different social contexts they are associated or associate with. But it also requires focusing on the interfaith space itself and how “the setting, ethos, ground rules, training opportunities and facilities made available in the context of the group, and the relationship building that flows from interaction, individually and in group settings” (p. 126) affect young people.

A couple of studies also focus on the limitations of interfaith youth work. One of them is Kjersti Siem’s (2018) study of young people’s interfaith work in Norway. She interviewed eight young people in their late 20s and early 30s from Christian, Muslim, Jewish and secular backgrounds who were active in two different interfaith youth projects and while these – like the participants in the other studies above – had positive experiences and believed interfaith work had the ability to build a cohesive and peaceful society and counter existing stereotypes about faith traditions, they also focused on challenges facing interfaith youth work. The most common critique was that interfaith youth projects only attracted those who are already interested in interfaith work – they were only ‘preaching to the converted’ – and that groups and individuals who might need interfaith work would not join.<sup>16</sup> Some young people also mentioned that many young people stopped coming to interfaith events after a while and this had a negative impact on what they could talk about. In some cases, this has led interfaith youth leaders to avoid bringing up difficult topics for discussions – particularly the Israel-Palestine conflict – to

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<sup>16</sup> This critique is also common in studies made on adults who are active in interfaith work, see Nordin (2017), Dinham (2012) and McCarthy (2007) for more extensive discussions on this.

prevent the dialogue from collapsing. Some of the young people felt that this made them less able to handle tension around such issues in other venues (e.g. social media), which could have a negative impact on interfaith friendships. These challenges – particularly ‘preaching to the converted’ – make Siem question whether interfaith youth work can be effective in preventing violent extremism since it attracts young people who already share the objectives of interfaith work. She also points out that this creates the assumption that you need to share the theological and political views of the interfaith organisation to be able to join, which could exclude people with different theological and/or political worldviews.

The anthropologist Sunaina Marr Maira (2016) provides another critical approach by focusing on the impact political frameworks and state policies might have on young Muslims’ experiences of interfaith work. While her study only briefly touches on interfaith youth work – it explores the impact the ‘War on Terror’ has on how young Muslim Americans’ define and do ‘politics’ – she looks at how interfaith work has emerged as an ‘acceptable’ and “sanctioned site of public engagement for young Muslim American youth” (p. 96). Although many of the young Muslims Maira interviewed had positive experiences of interfaith work – both as a form of public engagement and as an opportunity to educate non-Muslims about what ‘Islam is really about’ – some of them expressed frustration with what they considered to be ‘interfaith politics’ and restrictions on what they could do and say. This is particularly notable in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict, where many young Muslims felt that interfaith work in relation to this conflict was only framed around religion and the relationship between Muslims and Jews, and they were not allowed to discuss the political situation or make any political statement. There were also concerns that support for Palestine could be seen as support for

Hamas or that any criticism of Israel would be interpreted as antisemitic and as a challenge to the United States foreign policy. Maira found this problematic and argues that “tensions related to Middle East politics and censorship of the Palestine question often ruptured interfaith coalition on college campuses” (p. 100). She also points out the need to acknowledge how religious and political identities can be intersected in interfaith youth work, and that downplaying or ignoring some political identities (in this case in relation to Palestine) could have consequences not only for how interfaith youth work is carried out but also for young Muslims’ political selfhood and what kind of citizens they are allowed to become in these settings. While interfaith youth work can be a good site for young Muslims’ public engagement and provide opportunities to challenge existing public and political discourses about Islam, Maira concludes that it also raises questions around what is “acceptable Muslim American politics and alliances by South Asian, Arab and Arab American youth and what forms of mobilisation are permissible and promoted” (p. 118).

### **1.2.2. Mind the research gap: identities and belonging**

If we look at the studies above, they provide several important insights into young people’s interfaith work. The first is that young people’s interfaith work is *relational*. Many of the studies identify friendships, interest in ‘person, not religion’ and lived religion, and working together as important factors why young people are involved in interfaith work. These friendships and learning outcomes also impact on their own religious identities and some – particularly Krebs’ (2014) participants – described how being involved in interfaith work has deepened their understanding of their faith tradition. The second insight is that young people’s interfaith work is

*spatial*. As we could see in Krebs, Liljestrand (2018) and Henry's (2018) studies, the interfaith space is important for how the young people experience interfaith work and what they learn. For example, it can be a 'safe space' with ground rules that structure conversations and provide the young people with a sense of security in their interaction with young people from other faiths. It can also involve moving across various interfaith spaces with different objectives and learning outcomes. Paying attention to the spatiality of interfaith work does not only mean exploring the physical space in which it takes place but also the social structures that make up this space. Phil Henry, for example, emphasised the importance of looking at how "the setting, ethos, ground rules, training opportunities and facilities" (p. 126) shape the relationships young people form in interfaith spaces. Through such a perspective, relational and spatial factors are intersected and need to be understood as interdependent.

The third insight is that young people's interfaith work is *political*. This is visible in two ways. The first is that several of the studies show that interfaith youth work lead to increased public engagement and many of the young people describe how being involved in interfaith work has made them more active in their local communities. But some of the studies also emphasise the need to study interfaith youth work in relation to political and policy frameworks. As Maira (2016) observed, how interfaith work is perceived in public and political discourse might shape the development of interfaith spaces and this can have direct impact on who participates in interfaith work, what is possible to express in these spaces and what interfaith work can achieve. This makes it important to explore young people's experiences of interfaith work in relation to the political contexts in which it takes place and attend to how both religious and political identities might be activated in

these settings. Although the studies above provide a comprehensive foundation to an underexplored field of study, it is also possible to identify some significant empirical gaps. The first is that the studies paid little to no attention to how young people's interest in interfaith work has emerged or the contexts, actors and frameworks that have been important in forging this interest. Although some – Krebs in particular – are interested in young people's interfaith journeys, they do not explore it in any greater depth. A consequence of this – which is a second empirical gap – is that possible differences between and within religious traditions in how interfaith work is experienced are ignored. The fact that young people might use similar terms to describe their interfaith work does not mean that these carry the same meaning for all young people, even if they belong to the same religion. As we saw in section 1.1.3., 'faith communities' are not homogenous and there exists great internal diversity within faith communities that need to be acknowledged (Dinham, 2012; Beckford, 2015; Day & Rogaly, 2014). Social factors such as religious tradition, race/ethnicity and gender might all affect how young people experience interfaith work, as could the theological, political and historical frameworks of their religious communities and congregations.

Furthermore, many of the positive impacts of interfaith work identified above could also bring about challenges that young people need to tackle – something none of the studies explore. For example, a 'deepened faith' and 'interfaith friendships' might not necessarily fit within the theological and political structures of the young people's religious congregations and this could lead to tension, isolation and even withdrawal. Paying attention to these issues and how young people negotiate and interact with them are important not only to understand how interfaith youth work might impact on individuals but also broader social,

religious and political contexts and relationships. This thesis aims to contribute to filling these gaps. By drawing on biographical interviews with young Christians, Jews and Muslims in the UK – a process I describe in more depth in Chapter 3 – I will explore the young people’s experiences of interfaith work in relation to their biographical accounts and identify the contexts, relationships, narratives and frameworks that have been important in forging and sustaining their interest in interfaith work. Their understanding of and identification with religious communities and traditions are particularly important here. As we will see in the following chapters, there are differences between young people belonging to the same religion in how and why interfaith work is important, and theological understandings also inform their political identities in different ways. I will also, as mentioned in the introduction, focus on what impact(s) being involved in interfaith work might have on their identities and particularly how different sets of identities – religious, political, social and ethical – are shaped, (re)negotiated and activated as a result of this. Through such a broad gaze, this study hopes to provide a more complex understanding of young people’s interfaith work and attend to show how different identities and senses of belonging shape and are shaped by young people’s experiences of interfaith work.

### **1.3. Why study young people’s interfaith work in the UK?**

But before going further into how I did this, I will focus on why the UK is a good context to carry out such research in. In the first two sections I will provide a brief background to interfaith work in the UK and the religious, structural and policy contexts that have been important in this development. I will then go on to focus on the development of the ‘interfaith youth sector’ that has emerged in the last two

decades. The aim of this section is not to provide a complete overview of the interfaith, religious or policy spheres in the UK – for more extensive discussions see Weller (2009, 2013), Davie (2015), Dinham et al (2009) and Woodhead & Catto (2012) – but to identify shifts, structures and contexts that have been important in the development of interfaith (youth) work, and to situate this thesis in a national context. Many of the themes that emerge in this section will be dealt with in more depth in the following chapters.

### **1.3.1. The ‘interfaith sector’ in the UK: a short historical overview**

The UK has a long history of interfaith work. Paul Weller (2009) has traced the earliest interfaith initiatives in the UK back to the first half of the twentieth century and while most of these initiatives at the time were carried out in the periphery by ‘interfaith enthusiasts’ and lacking wider support of government agencies and mainstream religious communities, some of the interfaith organisations from this period are still active. For example, the World Congress of Faith founded in 1936 by Sir Francis Younghusband remains a leading interfaith organisation in the UK, as do the London Society of Jews and Christians (founded in 1927) and the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ). The CCJ was founded in 1942 as a response to the Holocaust by the then Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple and the Chief Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz (Weller, 2013), and has in the last decade also become an important actor in interfaith youth work. I will come back to this in section 1.3.3. But despite these early interfaith structures, it was not until the 1980s onwards that the interfaith scene in the UK started to “move from a socially and religiously peripheral position to a more ‘mainstream’ one” (Weller, 2009, p. 65). Weller has identified several reasons for this. The first is a changing religious landscape. As in



many other European countries, the religious landscape of the UK has changed since the end of the Second World War from predominantly Christian<sup>17</sup> to becoming “increasingly ‘three dimensional’ and now exhibiting contours that are Christian, secular and religiously plural” (Weller, 2009, p. 63). In relation to interfaith work, the growing religious diversity is particularly important. Whereas the earliest interfaith initiative took place in a much more religiously homogenous environment – one important reason, according to Weller, why they attracted little wider attention and interest – interfaith work in contemporary Britain is a direct response to a religious landscape in transformation. Although some religious minority groups – particularly the Jewish community<sup>18</sup> – have been present in the UK for centuries, it was first during the 1960s with the increased need for foreign labour from former British colonies (predominantly Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the West Caribbean) that the UK became more visibly religiously diverse (Weller, 2009; see also Woodhead & Catto, 2012; Davie, 2015; Modood, 2019; Meer et al, 2016;

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<sup>17</sup> Christianity is the longest established religious tradition in the UK. Although the Christian landscape is diverse – involving Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and ‘free churches’ (Methodist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Baptism and Pentecostal) denominations – the Anglican denomination is the dominant denomination through the Church of England that has been the established church since 1534. This is visible not only in that the British monarch is also the head of the Church of England and that Church of England bishops sit in the House of Lords (Dinham & Lowndes, 2009), but also that the UK is divided into parishes – “a territorial model with civic as well as religious implications [that for centuries] determined the parameters of life for the great majority of British people from the cradle to the grave” (Davie, 2015, p. 4). While the role and function of the Church of England has changed with increased secularity and political and economic reforms (particularly the welfare state, see Woodhead, 2012), it still has a dominant role in the religious landscape in the UK. See Davie (2015) for a more extensive discussion.

<sup>18</sup> The Jewish community is the oldest minority religion in the UK and while the presence of Jews in Britain goes as far back as the Middle Ages, “the contemporary period of Jewish settlement arguably dates from 1656” (Bluck et al, 2012, p. 89). A majority came to the UK as refugees from Russia and Poland in the nineteenth century (predominantly Ashkenazi Jews) and Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and the Jewish community reached its peak of around 400,000 people in the middle of the twentieth century. The community has since declined “for a variety of reasons (among them migration to Israel, marriage outside the community and reduced family size” and is today around 300,000 where the majority lives in London, Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow (Davie, 2015, p. 59). The Jewish community is also divided into different branches, from ultra-orthodox (Haredi), Orthodox to Liberal and Reform Judaism, where the majority belongs to the Orthodox community and this is also visible in the Anglo-Jewish communal leadership (for example, the Chief Rabbi belongs to the Orthodox community). See Kahn-Harris & Gidley (2010), Gidley & Kahn-Harris (2012) and Bluck et al (2012) for more extensive discussions on Jews in the UK.

Triandafyllidou & Modood, 2017). Most of the new arrivals belonged to Muslim,<sup>19</sup> Sikh and Hindu communities<sup>20</sup> and as these people settled with their families in the UK, a new religious representation emerged with mosques, gurdwaras, temples and other houses of worship. For many Christian leaders – particularly in larger cities, where a majority of migrants settled – this new presence brought about a need for methods and approaches to handle these changes, and interfaith work became one way to do this (Dawson, 2016; see also CoE, 2005, 2017). According to Weller (2009), these structural changes – particularly at local and national levels – have been critical in the development of the interfaith sector in the UK. He describes “the emergence of multilateral local inter-faith initiatives and groups in towns and cities throughout the UK” (p. 69) in the final quarter of the twentieth century as a significant example of this development. These local initiatives not only made it possible to develop spaces for interaction between different faith communities at grassroot levels, but also provided opportunities for joint social action in relation to issues facing local neighbourhoods (see also Pearce, 2012). While a majority of local interfaith initiatives take place in diverse locations – such as London, Birmingham, Leicester and Bradford (Weller, 2009) – Weller noted that some also emerged in less visibly diverse areas. The aims of these interfaith initiatives are primarily to build bridges between diverse and less diverse areas, and to organise

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<sup>19</sup> The Muslim community is both the largest and ethnically most diverse of the religious minority communities in the UK. While its presence precedes the post-war labour migration, it was during the 1950s and 1960s that the Muslim community grew significantly. The majority of Muslims originate from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, but recent decades have seen the arrival of Muslims from countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Somalia and Bosnia (Weller, 2009). The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has the largest Muslim population in the UK, but Birmingham, Bradford, Newham and Luton have also many Muslim residents. See Lewis (2007), Gillat-Ray (2010) and Modood (2019) for more extensive explorations of Muslims in the UK.

<sup>20</sup> The UK has also a range of other minority faith groups, such as Buddhism, Bahá’is, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Paganism and also a number of ‘new religious movements’ (Weller, 2009). While I will not focus on those or the Sikh and Hindu communities in this thesis due to the focus on Christians, Jews and Muslims, they are still significant actors in the changing religious landscape of Britain.

activities and exchanges to improve religious literacy and intercultural competence (see IFN, 2006). As we will see below, local interfaith initiatives have also an important role to play in policymaking.

Another significant moment in the development of the interfaith scene in the UK and directly linked to the emergence of local interfaith initiatives was the founding of the Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFN) in 1987.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the local initiatives described above, the IFN is a national player and showed how interfaith work is not only relevant for particular local settings but also on the national level. The aim was not to replace already existing interfaith initiatives but “to link them in order to encourage wider sharing of the experience and expertise already held within these organisations” (Weller, 2013, p. 372) and make these accessible to affiliated members and the wider public. The IFN’s founding aim can be summarised into two points: (1) “to advance public knowledge and public understanding of the teachings, traditions and practices of different communities in Britain” and (2) “to spread awareness of [faith communities] distinctive features, common ground and to promote good relations between persons of different faiths” (Weller, 2013, p. 371). To do this, the IFN organises conferences for its members and the general public, publishes resources and reports to promote good interfaith relations, provide support for different interfaith initiatives and link a wide range of different interfaith initiatives, organisations and projects across the UK. It has also “acts as a means of communication between its affiliated bodies and their diverse interest, resources, and contributions to one another, to government, to public bodies and to the wider society” (Weller, 2013, p. 374). Weller (2009) describes the

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<sup>21</sup> This is a short discussion of the Inter Faith Network for the UK. For more comprehensive overviews, see Weller (2009, 2013) and Pearce (2012).

IFN as “a major catalyst in the transformation of inter-faith initiatives from relatively marginal initiatives into what is now a much more central feature of the UK’s religious landscape” (p. 68) by providing structures, purpose and direction for interfaith work, locally as well as nationally. Structurally, the IFN is not a membership organisation in the traditional sense; Weller (2013) describes it more as a ‘network of networks’ or ‘organisation of organisations’ with no “existence of its own apart from the existence of its affiliated organisations and groups” (p. 371). This structure brings a wide range of different voices to the table: the IFN is made up by four different groups of members – national faith community representative bodies, local interfaith member bodies, national and regional interfaith member bodies and educational/academic bodies. These different bodies represent different actors with different perspectives and reasons to participate in interfaith work. While this diversity makes it possible to get beyond the ‘interfaith enthusiasts’ and include people who might not have been involved in interfaith work otherwise, it can also bring about tension between and within different bodies – in relation to different expectations, but also in how the IFN should respond to wider social and political issues. However, while this brings about challenges for the IFN, Weller also considers it to be a strength: “the tensions which are inherent in the structures of the Network have on the whole, so far provided to be creative and mutually stimulating” (Weller, 2013, p. 371). The IFN has provided structures and resources for interfaith youth work in the UK and I will come back to this in section 1.3.3.

In addition to structures, the IFN has also played an important role in developing shared ethical frameworks of what interfaith work should be about. In the latest update of *Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs* – also known as the IFN ‘code’ – interfaith work is about respect, trust and

sensitivity towards the religious other. It is framed around the notion of freedom to live in accordance with one's traditions and beliefs, but also accepting the right of other people to do the same and respecting the right to disagree. Matters in relation to faith should be dealt with through respectful and genuine listening and proselytising or pressuring others into changing their beliefs are not acceptable in interfaith practice (IFN, 2017; see also IFN, 1991). Weller (2013) describes the process of developing this code and other statements of interfaith work as particularly difficult because of the many religious actors involved, but also that it shows the strength of the IFN as an interfaith body that it has been able to develop such shared frameworks. As we will see in the following chapters, this understanding of what interfaith work is and should be about is close to how the young people in this thesis (and their interfaith organisations) understand it.

### **1.3.2. Interfaith work and policy in the UK**

Policy has also been critical in the development of interfaith work in the UK. As we could see earlier in this chapter, many governments have in the past two decades come to include interfaith work and practice in their policy attempts to build cohesive societies, and this is visible in the UK as well. While there have been connections between religion and policy in the past (Woodhead & Catto, 2012), this intensified in the late 1990s and early 2000s onwards with the emergence of policies around 'community cohesion'. Much has been written about 'community cohesion' and faith communities in the UK and here is not the place to review this literature in any detail – see Furley et al (2006) and Dinham (2009) for more extensive coverage of this. I will instead focus on a few important policy responses and policy

shift scholars have identified as important for the interfaith sector.<sup>22</sup> The first is the election of Tony Blair and the ‘New Labour’ government in 1997, and the implementation of the left-centrist communitarian policies of the ‘Third Way’. These policies directly opposed the neoliberal policies and individualism of the Thatcher era of the 1980s and early 1990s and “emphasized the need to strengthen civic participation and the formation of mediating structures between the state and the individual” (Bretherton, 2011, p. 349). Faith communities had important roles to play in this communitarian vision. As observed by Adam Dinham (2012), faith communities were seen as “repositories of resources – staff, buildings, volunteer networks and money – which could be deployed to the social good” (p. 577) and they also provided welfare and community services, as well as other initiatives for community cohesion. The sociologists of religion Melanie Prideaux and Andrew Dawson (2018) have described these policy changes as the opening of the ‘UK religion policy window’, where “religion undoubtedly experienced a newfound political prominence” (p. 365) and where both faith communities and faith organisations became important actors for policy makers to work with.

This was further articulated in the policy responses to two critical events in the UK in the early parts of the 2000s. The first critical event is the violent riots that took place in the northern English cities of Bradford, Oldham and Bradley in the

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<sup>22</sup> There are two commission reports that are relevant to mention here. The first is the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain report – the *Parekh Report* – published in 2000, which made 135 recommendations on how to counter racial discrimination and disadvantage in the UK, and rethink national identity and the national story to make these more inclusive (CMEB, 2000). Although this report’s recommendations were criticised, it is one of the most significant reports published on race-relations and multiculturalism in Britain. The second and more recent is the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB) report *Living with Difference* in 2015, which explored the (historical as well as contemporary) role, place and significance of religion and belief in the UK and made 37 recommendations for policy and public life on how improve religious literacy and representation, create a shared understanding of fundamental values and inclusion (CORAB, 2015). Because of space and focus the reports will not be reviewed in this section, but they have contributed to the national discussion on race, national identity and religion in the UK. For a more extensive discussion of these two reports, see Modood (2019).

summer of 2001, where predominantly young people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin clashed with the police and resulted in the development of policies around ‘community cohesion’. The main goal of these ‘community cohesion’ policies was to counter what was considered the main trigger behind the riots – ethnic and cultural segregation that has led to ‘parallel lives’ – and develop practical approaches that put emphasis on a shared (national) identity with shared values and a shared sense of belonging (Cantle, 2008).<sup>23</sup> In order to do this, these approaches draw on the social scientific concept of ‘social capital’, that can broadly be defined as “a collective asset made up of social networks based on shared norms and trust and mutuality” (Gilrich, 2004, p. 4, cited in Furley et al, 2006, p. 5; see also Putnam, 2000). As noted by Alison Gilchrist, there are three types of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking – where ‘bonding’ is the close relationships within a group with shared commitments, ‘bridging’ is the connection between people with less in common but with overlapping interests, and ‘linking’ describe links “beyond peer boundaries, cutting across status and similarity and enabling people to exert influence and reach resources outside their normal circles” (Furley et al, 2006, p. 7). In ‘community cohesion’ policies, the focus was predominantly on developing ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ social capital, and interfaith work became an important means to build this.

This was most visibly expressed in the policy document *Face to Face, Side by Side: A Framework for Partnership in Our Multi Faith Society* (DCLG, 2008) that was published in 2008. According to Dinham (2012), this was the document

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<sup>23</sup> Policies around ‘community cohesion’ have criticised previous multicultural policies for leading to segregation and parallel lives, and instead argue that ‘interculturalism’ – with emphasis on shared identity and belonging – is the right policy path forward (Cantle, 2012). However, there are scholars who argue that interculturalism should be seen as new forms of multicultural policies. See Meer & Modood (2012) and Meer et al (2016) for more extensive discussions, as well as Antonsich (2016) for a critical debate between Cantle and Meer & Modood.

that most clearly developed the contours of the ‘multifaith paradigm’ under the Labour era and the government funding it resulted in led to the development of interfaith councils and forums as a form of regional and local governance, where government officials meet and interact with religious leaders on issues relevant for local communities (Prideaux & Dawson, 2018). In 2009, a national ‘Interfaith Week’ was established together with the IFN (see section 1.2.1) to celebrate interfaith work across the UK. While the ‘multifaith paradigm’ has changed with policy shifts, as we will see below, the Interfaith Week still remains and gathers interfaith practitioners of all ages across the country. I will come to this in section 1.2.3.

The second policy response that affected interfaith work in the UK in the early 2000s, and still has a profound impact on the relationship between government and faith communities, is the Prevent Strategy that emerged after the terror attacks in London in 2005. As the London attacks were carried out by young Muslim men who were born and/or raised in the UK, the Prevent strategy was developed as a response to this (Heath-Kelly, 2013; Thomas, 2016). Being one of four strands of the comprehensive British counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST (the others being Pursue, Protect and Prepare), ‘Prevent’ aims to develop different practical approaches, partnerships and programmes to prevent (young) people from being radicalised and joining violent extremist and terrorist groups. Before the London attacks, ‘Prevent’ was the smallest and least known of the four strands with very little funding but later developed into one of the most well-funded and controversial strands of the CONTEST strategy (Baker-Beall et al, 2014). Before the review of the strategy in 2011 – when the funding of projects became more restricted to those only working with ‘vulnerable’ people – hundreds of millions of pounds were



provided in funding to a wide variety of projects, including interfaith (youth) projects, to foster critical thinking, community cohesion and active citizenship (Heath-Kelly, 2013).

While the strategy aims to tackle different forms of violent extremism – something that was further articulated after the 2011 review – the main focus was on preventing violent Islamic extremism and this led to a wide range of projects aimed at Muslim communities in the UK. This has brought about fierce criticism of the Prevent Strategy from scholars and practitioners for securitising integration and alienating and stigmatising Muslim communities (Kundnani, 2014). Adam Dinham (2012) has noted that ‘Prevent’ has brought about a distinction in policy making around religion, where faith communities are both seen as heroes (as in community cohesion) and villains (by providing breeding ground for religious extremism), and this has also affected interfaith work. In his interviews with interfaith practitioners, Dinham found that many considered the Prevent agenda to undermine interfaith work by singling out a single faith community in the UK – the Muslim community – which has led to increased levels of mistrust and suspicion. This has resulted in many interfaith projects rejecting funding from ‘Prevent’ to show solidarity and to not be seen as affiliated with the ‘Prevent’ strategy. As I will come back to below, this is a position that one of the interfaith organisations included in this thesis has taken. Many of the participants in Dinham’s study also expressed the view that the ‘Prevent’ agenda “was seen as exacerbating existing tensions” and “created competition between faith groups on the ground” (Dinham, 2012, p. 581) based on the need for funding. While the funding has changed since Dinham conducted his interviews, as I will come back to below, the Prevent Strategy still affects interfaith

relations and, as we will see in Chapter 6 in this thesis, also informs many young Muslims' experiences of interfaith work.

If the Labour era defined policy approaches to faith communities and interfaith work in the late 1990s and the 2000s, the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010 and the election of the Conservative government in 2015 onwards have dominated the policy arena in the 2010s. During this time, the 'communitarian' policy agenda of the Labour era was replaced with social and political visions of "the removal of state programmes and intervention in favour of a market of self-help, social enterprise, and mutuality" (Dinham, 2012, p. 585). For interfaith work, this meant that much of the funding for the interfaith sector – particularly interfaith forums and councils at local and regional levels – was terminated and the funding structure changed with the introduction of the funding scheme *Near Neighbours* in 2011. The aim of this scheme is to fund projects that intend to "bring people together in communities that are religiously and ethnically diverse, so that they can get to know each other better, build relationships of trust, and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in" (Prideaux, 2019, p. 500). While this programme has received a significant amount of money from the government to build good interfaith relations in diverse communities, it has also been criticised for its structure: grants through the *Near Neighbour* programme are managed by the Church Urban Fund, a charitable organisation set up by the Church of England which operates through the parish system (Dinham, 2012). Although people of all faiths can bid for funding through the programme, they need to go through the local parish church and this, according to Dinham (2012), represent a shift "from a broadly owned and distributed multi-faith paradigm in which many traditions, and

none, have a stake, to one in which the Church of England gate-keeps a primary funding stream and is revalorised as ‘national church’” (p. 586). Dinham also notes that “support for the remainder of the faith-based contribution is also moved from a central and active position in policy-making (...) to the general hurly-burly of the contested civil society arena” (p. 586). While interfaith work is still considered important from a policy perspective and there is still government support for this form of faith-based engagement (Home Office, 2016), it lacks the link to local governance it once had and is considered to be part of the civil society (Prideaux & Dawson, 2019). The Casey review on integration, published in 2016, also raised critical questions around the limitation of interfaith work and the need to not overestimate what it can achieve. Whereas interfaith work is considered as a source for good, it might not reach those who most need it and the review noted a lack of women and young people involved in interfaith work (Home Office, 2016).

### **1.3.3. Interfaith youth work in the UK**

These changes in the religious landscape, the development of the interfaith sector and policy changes are important to understand how organised interfaith youth work has emerged in the UK. While there certainly have been interfaith initiatives for young people in the past, it was not until the early 2000s onwards that interfaith youth work started to become more common and the UK has today a wide range of interfaith youth organisations, interfaith youth sections and interfaith projects aimed at young people. An important reason for this can be found in the development of ‘community cohesion’ policies mentioned in the previous section, where young people’s involvement in civil society and active citizenship were considered critical to build a cohesive society (Thomas, 2011). Interfaith work is

described in policy as important to provide young people with knowledge about other religions and cultures, and the social skills to interact with people from diverse backgrounds. For example, the multifaith policy document *Face to Face, Side by Side*, described above, stressed that young people are often absent in organised interfaith work and encouraged more young people to become involved in interfaith work (DCLG, 2008). This led to the development of a wide range of interfaith activities for and with young people, including interfaith youth councils, dialogue groups and social action projects (IFN, 2009, 2014). There is a lack of studies on how the policy shift following the 2010 election has affected interfaith youth work, but interfaith youth work is still described in policy as an important means to provide opportunities for young people to be active in their communities, and the *Near Neighbour* scheme is funding a wide range of interfaith youth projects and organisations (Home Office, 2016; IFN, 2018a).

Interfaith networks and organisations have also been important for interfaith youth work in the UK. As we could see in section 1.3.1., the Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFN) has been an important actor in the development of a national discourse around interfaith youth work in the UK – structurally as well as in stressing the need for young people to be involved in interfaith work. Structurally, the IFN has organised conferences, events and published documents and handbooks that have been significant in providing platforms, structures and rationale to organise and do interfaith youth work. In 2002, as part of the Queen’s Golden Jubilee, the IFN organised the first national interfaith youth forum in the UK that gathered 50 young people from nine different religions with the aim to share experiences of what it means to be young and religious, and develop shared practices to work together (IFN, 2002). This was followed by several other

conferences and annual meetings focusing on young people's interfaith work (IFN, 2009, 2014; 2018a), as well as the publication of the interfaith youth handbook *Connect* in 2004. This handbook – which was updated in 2018 in consultation with young people and interfaith practitioners – provides recommendations, advice and food for thought to help young people set up interfaith projects at their campuses and in their local communities (IFN, 2004, 2018b). The IFN has also a youth section on their website with documents, videos and information about interfaith youth work in the UK, including linking a wide range of interfaith youth organisations and projects across the country.<sup>24</sup> The three interfaith organisations in this thesis are affiliated members of the IFN.

But the IFN has also contributed to the national discourse around the need for young people to be involved in interfaith work. Interfaith work, as we have seen above and also will encounter in the young people's biographical accounts later, tend to attract older people and young people remain a minority. The need to counter this is visible in the IFN's decision to have several of its annual conferences – which generally attract more older than young people – focusing on young people's interfaith work. There is a firm belief that young people need to be included as valid members in their own right, be given platforms to have their voices heard and also the right to set up and do interfaith work that interests them – not what older interfaith practitioners find important (IFN, 2009, 2014). Whether this is actually working is difficult to say – none of the young people in this thesis mentioned the IFN – but the IFN does send a strong signal of how interfaith youth work is seen at the national level. As many interfaith projects for adults, most

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<sup>24</sup> For more information about this, see <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/activity/youth> [URL accessed on 2020-04-16].

interfaith youth projects are temporary and short-term. However, there have been some long-lasting and permanent structures for interfaith youth work. In some cases, older interfaith organisations in the UK have developed youth sections to attract young people to become active in their organisations. But there are also several interfaith youth organisations across the UK that are run for and by young people, and offer a wide range of interfaith activities, leadership programmes and social action projects. The three interfaith organisations from which I have recruited young people for this thesis – the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ), the Faith & Belief Forum (formerly Three Faiths Forum/3FF) and the Feast – are examples of this. I will describe the selection process in more detail in Chapter 3 and only briefly introduce each organisation here as they represent important trends in the interfaith youth scene.

As we could see in section 1.2.1., the CCJ is one of the oldest interfaith organisations in the UK and has become a leading national actor on Christian-Jewish relations. However, as many other established interfaith organisations, the CCJ is made up by predominantly older people and has struggled to attract young people to the organisation (Weller, 2013). In order to attract more young people to interfaith work, they developed a student leadership programme in 2016 for young Christian and Jewish university students. The leadership programme aims to give the students the knowledge and practical skills to organise their own interfaith initiatives at their university campuses.<sup>25</sup> The CCJ has also employed a few young people in their headquarters in London, some of whom we will meet in the following chapters. If the CCJ is an older interfaith organisation that has developed

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<sup>25</sup> For more information about the student leadership programme, see <http://www.ccj.org.uk/campus-leadership-scheme/> [URL accessed on 2020-04-17]

interfaith youth work as part of their organisation, the Faith & Belief Forum represents an interfaith organisation that initially was for adults and later transformed into a leading interfaith and intercultural youth organisation. Founded in London in 1997 by Sir Sigmund Sternberg, Sheikh Dr Zaki Badawi and Revd Dr Marcus Braybrooke, the aim was to provide a forum that could “encourage friendship, goodwill and understanding between people of different faiths, especially between Muslims, Christians and Jews.”<sup>26</sup> The Three Faiths Forum, as it was known as then, started with interfaith youth initiatives in 2004 when they launched their still ongoing school programme that enables school pupils to learn more about different faiths and belief systems. This has followed by a wide range of programmes and projects for young people, including internship opportunities, leadership programmes, and art and storytelling projects. In contrast to the CCJ, which focuses on Christian and Jews, the Faith & Belief Forum includes on many different faiths and belief-system – which was further acknowledged in their name change from Three Faiths Forum to the Faith & Belief Forum in 2018. The Faith & Belief Forum is today one of the leading interfaith and intercultural youth organisations in the UK and they also have many young people employed in the organisation. We will meet a few of them later in the thesis.

The final interfaith organisation included in this thesis – the Feast – represents another trend in interfaith youth work in the UK. While the CCJ and the Faith & Belief Forum are interfaith organisations with national outreach (although both have their headquarters in London), the Feast is a predominantly locally based interfaith youth organisation.<sup>27</sup> It also differs from the other two interfaith

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<sup>26</sup> <https://faithbeliefforum.org/about/history/> [URL accessed on 2020-04-17]

<sup>27</sup> The Feast has smaller offices in Luton, London (Tower Hamlet) and Bradford, but its base is in Birmingham.

organisations in that it is a Christian charity and is grounded in the biblical ethical teachings of ‘loving our neighbour.’ Although the Christian foundation of the Feast is visible in the governance structure – only Christians can become trustees or the CEO (who should be a committed Christian)<sup>28</sup> – it is not as visible in the young people who participate in the organisation. I will come back to this more in depth in Chapters 3 and 7.

The Feast also firmly emphasises its ethos of bringing young people from different faiths together and showing the possibility of doing so, and this commitment is visible in the religious diversity among the staff members (who, at the time of writing this thesis, are both Christians and Muslim). With its headquarters based in Birmingham, it is the result of a series of ‘Youth Encounter’ events that Dr Andrew Smith (who at the time of writing this thesis also is the director of interfaith relations for the Bishop of Birmingham) held for young Christians and Muslims between 2000 and 2008.<sup>29</sup> During this time, Smith developed a set of ‘Guidelines for Dialogue’ which emphasise the importance of safe space, respecting others and being able to listen, and these still form the foundation of the Feast (which I will come back to in Chapter 5).<sup>30</sup> The Feast was founded in 2009 and offers a wide range of activities, ranging from after school clubs for school children, movie nights, social justice projects and other activities that encourage young Christians and Muslims to become active in their local community. When I met up in February of 2017 with the leadership of the organisation – which is made up by predominantly Christian, but also Muslim staff

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<sup>28</sup> See <https://thefeast.org.uk/about/what-we-do#faq> for more information about the governance structure and ethos of the Feast.

<sup>29</sup> See <https://www.thefeast.org.uk/about/history/>.

<sup>30</sup> For more information about the Guidelines of Dialogue, see <https://www.thefeast.org.uk/resources/guidelines-for-dialogue/> [URL accessed on 2020-04-17].



members – they expressed a wish to become a movement and that their Guidelines for Dialogue should inspire and be used in other settings and projects. The ambition to form movements is something the Feast shares with the Faith & Belief Forum. The Feast is also the organisation that explicitly expressed in my meetings with them that they do not accept any money from Prevent funds. In the following chapters, we will meet a few young people who are working as staff members or are volunteering for the Feast in Birmingham.

But it is not only the interfaith sector, policy interest in interfaith work and the many different interfaith youth organisations that make the UK a significant context to study young people's experiences of interfaith work. Why young people decide to become involved in interfaith organisations is also interesting. Although there is a growing interest in interfaith youth work from both policy makers and interfaith organisations in the UK, the motivation for young people to be involved in interfaith work is less known (IFN, 2014). What makes young people become and remain active in interfaith work is therefore not only an interesting academic question, but also relevant for practitioners and policymakers. In the next section, I return to the aim of the study and describe how this thesis will contribute with insights into this.

#### **1.4. Research aim and research questions**

As I have mentioned throughout this chapter, what I am interested in exploring in this thesis is young Christians', Jews' and Muslims' experiences of interfaith work in the UK and particularly the impact it might have on their identities and sense of belonging. As seen in the sections above, there are several reasons why this is important to explore. First, there only exists a few studies on young people's

interfaith work and we still have very limited knowledge about how the young people have become interested in interfaith work; the actors, contexts and structures that have been important in forging this interest; the role religious traditions play in how they experience interfaith work; and what consequences being involved in interfaith work might have on young people's sense of belonging to their religious communities. Second, the previous section on the UK context shows how interfaith youth work has become popular with a growing number of interfaith youth initiatives and organisations and is described in policy as an important means for young people to develop active citizenship and religious literacy. Still, young people involved in interfaith work in the UK remain a minority and understanding why young people are active in interfaith work is therefore not only interesting from an academic perspective but also for practitioners and policymakers.

By focusing on the biographical accounts of young Christians, Jews and Muslims active in three different interfaith organisations in the UK, the main research question this thesis aims to answer is: *what impact(s) might young people's interfaith work have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities?* This question will be answered through the following research sub-questions:

- How did the young people become interested in interfaith work?
- What actors and contexts have been important in forging and sustaining their interest in interfaith work?
- What does interfaith work mean to them socially, politically, theologically and ethically?
- What challenges have the young people experienced with interfaith work?

## **1.5. Chapter outline**

This chapter has set the scene for the thesis, situated the thesis in an academic and national setting, and identified the research aim and research questions.

Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework of the thesis. It is divided into two parts. The first part is a literature review and it is divided into two sections: religious identities and political identities. The two sections define what ‘religious’ and ‘political’ identities mean, social and political contexts and transformations that have been dominant in the development of these theoretical concepts; and how they will be used to understand young people’s experiences of interfaith work. The second part introduces the theoretical lens that will be used in this study. It is based on the Canadian youth scholar Kate Tilleczek’s (2011, 2014) ‘complex cultural nesting approach’ and the three social processes of ‘being’, ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’, where young people’s identities and sense of belonging is seen as the result of complex negotiation processes across multiple spatial and social contexts. The chapter concludes with a discussion on how this theoretical framework will be applied to the present study.

After establishing the theoretical framework of the thesis, Chapter 3 focuses on the methodological approach. The chapter is divided into three parts. I begin by describing what I mean by ‘biographical accounts’ and why I have chosen biographical interviews. I then go on to introduce how the study has been conducted: the selection process of organisations and participants, the development of the interview guide and how the interviews were carried out. In the third and final part I focus on how the interviews were transcribed and analysed with help of

Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The chapter ends with ethical considerations and an outline of the three empirical chapters.

Chapters 4 to 6 are the empirical chapters and answer the four research sub-questions. Chapter 4 focuses on how the young people became active in interfaith work and explores the contexts, actors and structures that have been important in forging this interest. Chapter 5 looks at how the young people 'do' interfaith and pays attention to interfaith work as a means to achieve social and political goals, and interfaith work as theological commitments. Chapter 6 examines the 'politics of interfaith' and the challenges the young people think interfaith work faces. The three chapters end with a summary of the main findings of each chapter.

Chapter 7 examines the results that were reported in the previous chapters and discusses them in relation to the research questions, research literature and the theoretical framework in Chapters 1 and 2. The chapter ends a summary of the conclusions of the study, as well as implications for future research, social policy and some final reflections of what this research has meant to me.

## 2.

# Being, Becoming and Belonging: Theorising religion, politics and young lives

The previous chapter set the scene for the thesis and situated it in the literature on young people's interfaith work and the UK context. This chapter introduces the theoretical framework I use to understand young people's experiences of interfaith work and the impact it might have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities. It is divided into two parts. The first part is a literature review that looks at the formation of young people's religious identities and belonging, and how religion has been used by young people in their political and civic engagement. In order to understand what impact young people's experiences of interfaith work might have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities, we need to understand how these identities are formed, the actors, contexts and structures present in these processes, and how young people are interacting with these. The aim of this literature review – which is predominantly from the sociology of religion and the sociology of youth participation – is not to give a complete overview of these vast and complex academic fields. Instead, it will identify and unpack dominant contexts, actors, frames and ideas that have shaped how young people's religious identities and civic and political engagement are understood in previous research and situate the thesis within this scholarship. Important to note is that the

great majority of these studies are carried out in Europe and, in a few cases, the United States. There is an emerging literature on young people and religion in other parts of the world (e.g. Bayat & Harrera, 2010; Cornelio, 2015, 2016), the political and religious contexts are different from the UK and I have therefore decided not to include them in the literature review.

However, it is important to point out the differences between the UK and the US in terms of religious context. Whereas the UK (and most other European countries) is shaped by powerful historic churches (although many of these are now experiencing a membership decline), the US is less regulated and is made up by what is commonly known as a ‘religious smorgasbord’ (Berger et al, 2008; Davie, 2006). The sociologist of religion Grace Davie (2006) has described Europe’s religious landscape (or the UK, which was her focus) as ‘exceptional’ in contrast to many other parts of the world (including the US) – both in its history and religious development (being simultaneously increasingly secular and religiously diverse). These differences might create different conditions for the formation of young people’s religious identities and sense of belonging, as well as studies on them. The American studies in this and the previous chapter are included because they are important in studies on young people’s religious identities and religious belonging: either by providing theoretical frameworks that British and European scholars draw on in their studies on young people’s religious socialisation (e.g. Sherkat, 2012) and religious identities (particularly individualisation of religion) or by providing significant empirical data (especially on young Jews’ religious identities later in this chapter and young people’s interfaith work in the previous chapter). Although there are differences between the US and the UK – some of which are pointed out in this chapter – the literature review shows that there are also interesting overlaps,

engagement and critiques that are useful for this thesis. Another important thing to note in relation to the literature review and the first part of the chapter is that these sections rely on a functional understanding of religion. Recent decades have seen a growing discussion within the sociology of religion of what ‘religion’ means – often distinguishing between ‘substantive’ and ‘functional’ definitions of religion, where the former deals with the theological and philosophical essence of religion (what is religion?) and the latter how religion is used (what does religion do?). Although sociological studies on (young) people’s religious identities and belonging also can be interested in the theological essence of religion (for example, in dogma and scripture), most take their starting point from how religion is used and understood by research participants (McGuire, 2008; Beckford, 2003; see also de Vries, 2008 and Asad, 1993 for extensive and critical discussions). From such a perspective, religion needs to be understood as a social construct, where religious meanings and importance are formed in relation to social contexts and relationships (Beckford, 2003). This is also the understanding of religion I am using in this thesis and, as we will see in the following chapters, this brings about both opportunities and challenges in the study of young people’s interfaith work.

In the second part of the chapter, I turn to theoretical approaches in youth studies to develop an analytical framework that makes it possible to explore young people’s experiences of interfaith work from a ‘psychosocial’ perspective. I will also touch upon how this thesis understands the concept of ‘young people.’ As with ‘interfaith work’, ‘community’ and ‘religion’, ‘young people’ is a multifaceted concept and needs to be defined properly. I end the chapter by summarising the main arguments and describe how this theoretical framework will be used in the following chapters.

## **2.1. Young people and religion: religious identity and belonging**

The academic study of young people and religion is a fairly new field. Although, as stated by the sociologist of religion James Beckford (2010), “questions about youth and religion have been central to discussions about continuity and change in every religious tradition” (p. x), it is not until the past two decades that serious scholarly attention has been paid to young people’s religiosity and religious engagement (Klingenberg & Sjö, 2019). This section introduces a few theoretical approaches and studies that help us understand how young people’s religious identities and belongings are formed.<sup>31</sup> In the first subsection, I will focus on religious socialisation – that is, the social and cognitive processes through which young people become religious and learn about the norms, values and narratives of religious traditions – and the social contexts and actors that are influential in these processes. In the second subsection, I will go on to look at studies that explore how young people engage with these traditions, structures and actors. To reconnect with the title of the chapter: while the first subsection attends predominantly to young people’s religious ‘becoming’, the second subsection explores more in-depth their religious ‘being’ and ‘belonging.’ These two subsections overlap. As noted by Elisabeth Arweck and Gemma Penny (2015), studies on young people’s religiosity “relate[s] to theories of identity and identity formation as well as religious socialisation (transmission) and nurture; this includes the question of socialisation agents and factors” (p. 257). However, separating them makes it possible to first

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<sup>31</sup> Since this thesis deals with young people who identify as religious, I will not focus on studies on young people who do not identify as religious – so-called ‘religious nones’ – in this chapter. Although this is a significant and growing field of research that provides important new perspectives on young people’s relationship with religion – particularly in Britain where the 2011 Census showed that a majority of young British people identify as ‘nones’ or ‘secular’ – it is outside the scope of this thesis. See Lee (2015, 2017) and Madge & Hemming (2016) for more extensive discussions of ‘religious nones.’



look at actors and contexts that previous research identified as important in religious socialisation, and then go on to focus more closely on how young people engage with these actors and contexts in the construction of their religious identities and sense of belonging. I end the section by summing up the main theoretical arguments.

### **2.1.1. Becoming religious: young people and religious socialisation**

Studies on religious socialisation have been critical in the sociology of religion to understand how young people become religious, their religious learning processes and the survival of religious communities. Drawing on socialisation theory and looking at ‘primary’ (e.g. family and religious institutions) and ‘secondary’ (e.g. school, peers and media) socialisation agents, scholars have tried to understand when and under what circumstances young people come in contact with religion, develop religious identities and become members of religious communities (Kühle, 2012). Historically, the main focus of these studies has been on the role of family and religious institutions – often regarding young people as ‘passive’ recipients of religious narratives and content provided by these social agents – but recent decades have seen changes in both focus and role given to young people (Lövhelm, 2012; Klingenberg & Sjö, 2019). As a result of the ‘new sociology of childhood’ that emerged in the 1990s, where children are perceived as “social actors in their own right, capable of actively constructing and determining their own social lives” (Hemming & Madge, 2012, p. 43; see also James & Prout, 1998 and Corsaro, 2017), studies have started to focus on young people as highly active in the religious socialisation process (Hemmings & Madge, 2011; Klingenberg & Sjö, 2019). One of the most cited scholars in the study of young people’s religious socialisation is

the sociologist Darren Sherkat (2003). He defines religious socialisation as “an interactive process through which social agents influence individuals’ religious beliefs and understandings” (p. 151) and “the process through which people come to hold religious preferences” (p. 152). What Sherkat is most interested in is how religious preferences are formed and how they change. Religious preferences, he argues, “are the favoured supernatural explanations about the meaning, purpose and origins of life” and “these preferences will help drive choices in the realm of religion – motivating religious devotion, public religious participation and affiliation with religious organisations” (ibid.). Although Sherkat stresses that individuals interact with many different agents of socialisation throughout their lives, he focuses specifically on the role of traditional ‘primary’ agents – particularly family (including spouses) and denominations/congregations – and how these shape religious journeys. Religious denominations, according to Sherkat, “influence individuals through their particular orientations toward beliefs and offerings of opportunities for religious action” (p. 158) and “provide distinctive contexts for collective activities, thereby channelling peer influence on religion” (Sherkat, 2012, p. 159). However, he does not consider individuals to be passive recipients in this process and argues that “individuals have considerable agency to reject socialization pressure, and to choose which connections guide religious preferences” (ibid.).

He also considers the individual level to be pivotal to understand religious dynamics and that “religious change will only occur if large proportions of individuals change their preferences for religious goods and alter their religious choices” (p. 162). In order to study this, Sherkat notes, we need to pay attention to multiple social actors – such as family, religious congregations and educational

institutions – but also attend to individuals’ agency and how they interact with these social actors. Sherkat’s definition of religious socialisation as an interactive process involving multiple actors has been used by a number of sociologists of religion who study young people and religion (e.g. Arweck & Penny, 2015; Hemming & Madge, 2011; Lövheim, 2012). He has also inspired scholars who want to broaden how religious socialisation is conceptualised in the study of young people’s religious socialisation. In a recent article, Maria Klingenberg and Sofia Sjö (2019) build on Sherkat’s definition of religious socialisation to develop a broader definition of young people’s religious socialisation. They are very critical of how studies of religious socialisation have tended to focus on “young people’s perceptions of the influence their parents had had on their attitudes, or as the way in which children’s and care-takers’ attitudes to religion and religious behaviours correlate” (p. 163). Instead, they suggest “a bottom-up perspective that departs from the beliefs and behaviours or religious preferences that young people hold, and then attempt to understand the social sources for these preferences” (p. 168) and draw on Sherkat’s emphasis on religious socialisation as an interactive process to do this. They also argue for the need to “highlight the contextual understanding of religion and the need to be aware of contextual aspects” (Klingenberg & Sjö, 2019, p. 174) in young people’s religious socialisation.

The sociologist of religion Mia Lövheim (2012) also shares Sherkat’s definition of religious socialisation as an interactive and dynamic process and points to the need to consider the many different socialisation agents and contexts that shape young people’s understanding of religion. She argues that “a working understanding of religious socialization in contemporary society must be able to incorporate changes in the forms in which values and ideas are transferred between

generations, as well as of the content of these values and ideas” (p. 152). Although Lövheim’s analysis is mainly theoretical, she draws upon results from a large mixed-method research project on young Swedes’ relationship with religion directed by her and Jonas Bromander (2012), which showed that only a small minority of the young people participating in the study mentioned the family and religious institutions as important in their religious socialisation. Instead, a majority identified news media, television, the school and the Internet as important spaces where they encounter religion. This is particularly evident amongst young people who have not grown up in families where at least one of the parents are attending religious services regularly (Lövheim & Bromander, 2012). Lövheim criticises fellow sociologists of religion for spending too much time researching traditional socialisation agents (such as the family and religious organisations) and not paying enough attention to other spaces and sites which affect young people’s religious socialisation. Although she considers the family and religious organisations to still play important roles in the religious socialisation of young people, she also argues that if we want to understand the many different sources young people draw on in forming their religious identities, we need to pay attention to multiple socialisation agents (Lövheim, 2012).

These are patterns that are also visible in studies on young people’s religious socialisation in the UK. Nicola Madge, Peter Hemming and Kevin Stenson (2014) have explored young people’s religious identities and belonging in three research sites in the UK (the London Boroughs of Newham and Hillingdon, and Bradford in West Yorkshire). Their study – *Youth on Religion* (YOR), the same title as the book – is based on survey data from over 10 000 young people, as well as individual and focus groups interviews with 160 young people between 12 and 18

years old. These came from a range of faith and non-faith backgrounds. What they found in their study was that multiple socialisation agents were present and influential in the development of the young people's religious identities. For most of the participants their religious journeys began in the family with religiously practising parents (particularly their mothers) or grandparents, but other social agents were also important – such as peers, media, school, the Internet, science and the local area in which they lived.

Madge et al (2014) also found that a majority of those who identified as religious had grown up in religious homes and regularly attended religious services and rituals. Those young people who described themselves as very devout – called 'strict adherents' – tended also to be very reluctant to challenge their families' belief systems, whereas others who were more 'flexible' adherents or 'pragmatists' tended to stress the importance of agency and choice. Strict adherents also emphasised agency, but often in the choice of becoming very devout and less about challenging the content of their belief systems. They tended to link their religiosity to family life and while they might practise their religion differently than their family members (particularly if the family members were not living in the UK), they still took pride in sharing a 'religious history' and journey with relatives. This is less clear amongst young people who have not grown up in a religiously practising family or are not identifying as religious. Peer relationships, the Religious Education (RE) subject and media are described as key by those young people who are identifying as religious but did not grow up in a religious family. Having religious friends and accompanying them to religious services or activities can also initiate a religious socialisation process, which was also shown in Maria Zackariasson's (2016) study on young Swedish Christians who are active in the

youth section in the Eumenia Church. Other social identities, such as age, gender and ethnicity, might also influence young people's religious socialisation. In her article *What can we say about today's British religious young person?* Rebecca Catto (2014) argues that:

One certainly can no longer assume that a British young person is a practising Christian. He or she is likely to engage with a range of offline and online resources in order to learn more about their faith and feel some tensions between their commitment and engagement with wider society. Social class and other factors will affect his or her capacity to engage with religion and civil society (p. 1).

Catto notes that more attention needs to be directed towards these issues, as well as to “the interplay of structure and agency; the categories of class, gender, ethnicity, migration and sexual orientation; lived experiences beyond the categories of the world religions; and the influence of peer relationship and education” (p. 9). This emphasis on the interplay of structure and agency and the need to take different social identities – such as gender and ethnicity– into account to understand young people's religious socialisation are particularly relevant for this thesis and I will come back to this more in-depth later in this chapter.

What this literature review shows is a complex social pattern when it comes to religious socialisation. Rather than only involving traditional socialisation agents – such as family and religious institutions – young people today are interacting with a broad range of social contexts and actors that might influence what young people learn about religion and how they form their religious identities. In the next subsection I will focus on what consequences this might have on how young people construct their religious identities.

### **2.1.2. Being religious: constructing religious identities and belonging**

Although studies on young people's religious identities have taken different forms – some have been qualitative studies (e.g. Thompson, 2018; DeHanas, 2016; Lewis, 2007; Hopkins et al, 2011), others have been large mixed-method research programmes (e.g. Madge et al, 2014; Lövheim & Bromander, 2012; see also Catto, 2014) – what they have in common is an interest in how young people define what being religious means, their identifications with and investments in religious congregations and communities, and what sources, contexts and relationships are important in forming young people's religious identities. The sociologist of religion Sylvia Collins-Mayo (2010) argues that “[young people's] engagement with religion, religious ideas and institutions tell us how resilient beliefs and practices are, and how religions might adapt, transform and innovate in relation to wider social and cultural trends” (p. 1).

Studies on young people's religious identities have been influenced by late modern scholars, most notably Giddens' (1991) emphasis on the self as a 'reflexive project' and Ulrich Beck's (1992) 'individualisation thesis.' In short, these theoretical frameworks attempt to explain how societal changes have changed identity formation and transition processes, from being determined by the social contexts individuals find themselves in to becoming the responsibility of the individual (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). For the study of young people's religious identities, this means that religious identities are no longer considered purely in relation to religious institutions but as a result of individuals' complex negotiations with multiple social structures. Young people's agency is also taken into consideration and their ability to make their own choices in relation to their religious practice (Hemming & Madge, 2011; Klingenberg & Sjö, 2019; see also

Ammerman, 2003). Madge et al (2014) found in their YOR study, described above, that “religious identity is formed through a complex interaction between young people’s biological, physical and cognitive development, the cultural values and prevailing discourses they are exposed to, and the material and spatial settings in which they live and are growing up” (p. 208). They also stressed that “religious identity embodies elements of labelling and affiliation, belief, belonging, and public and private practice, and there is enormous individuality in how these elements are reflected” (ibid.). In order to understand young people’s religious identities, we need to look at the intersection between the social structures that provide religious narratives and young people’s agency and interaction with these structures (Hemmings & Madge, 2011).

Studies have explored this in different ways. Some have focused on young people’s religious identities and belief systems as ‘individualised’ – that is, more personalised and fluid forms of religious identities and belief systems, often (but not always) formed outside religious institutions (cf. Wilke, 2015). This discussion is not unique for youth religiosities and can be found in studies of (predominantly Christian) adult populations as well. A common way to describe more individualised belief systems has been through what Grace Davie (2015) calls ‘believing without belonging.’ In short, this concept tries to explain why a majority of people in the UK (as this was her research site) identify as Christians and/or maintain a private belief system but do not attend church services or express belonging to religious congregations. Although this concept has been criticised by some sociologists of religion (e.g. Bruce & Voas, 2010; Day, 2011) for having a too limited approach to ‘belief’ and ‘belonging’ (as I will come back to in more depth below) and Davie herself has suggested more inclusive ways to understand



the formation of religious identities and belonging in contemporary Britain,<sup>32</sup> ‘believing without belonging’ has been influential in the study of the construction of young people’s religious identities and particularly the consequences societal changes, decline in religious practice nationally and secular youth culture might have on young people’s engagement with religion (cf. Madge & Hemmings, 2011).

A majority of these studies focus on young Christians. Sylvia Collins-Mayo (2012) has defined this emphasis on individualisation as a ‘subjectivization of belief’, that is, a religiosity and spirituality formed through “an authentic and personal relationship with God that is not curtailed by a religious institution” (p. 85). Although many religiously active young people still search for a community of like-minded individuals, these might not necessarily come from religious congregations and their belief systems are often formed in relation to their personal worldviews. The focus is on individual authenticity, agency and religion as a ‘personal choice’ (Collins-Mayo, 2012). A study that inspired Collins-Mayo’s argument about subjectivised beliefs was the sociologists of religion Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (2005) study of young American teenagers’ religiosity. In their interviews with young people across the United States, Smith and Denton identified five general themes that summarised the young people’s belief systems:

- (1) a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth;
- (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions;
- (3) the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself;
- (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life

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<sup>32</sup> Most notably through what she defines as *vicarious religion*, where (in short) a minority is providing services for an (unchurched) majority. See Davie, 2007 and 2015 for more extensive discussion of this concept.

except when God is needed to resolve a problem; and (5) good people go to heaven when they die” (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 162-163).

These themes represent what Smith and Denton described as the ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’, which is a belief system where the emphasis is more on personal wellbeing and ethical behaviour than on living in accordance with theological interpretations provided by religious institutions. Although Smith and Denton emphasised that this was not true for all the young people they interviewed, they still argued for the importance of exploring these more individualised forms of religious identities and the consequence this might have for religious congregations and communities (Smith & Denton, 2005). Apart from Collins-Mayo’s (2012) study on subjectivized beliefs above, there are some other UK studies that have followed this path (e.g. Collins-Mayo, 2010).

However, this emphasis on individualised beliefs has been criticised. The sociologist of religion Abby Day (2009, 2010, 2011) has in her research on three generations in North Yorkshire in north England discovered that while the concept of personal authenticity is important in understanding young people’s religious identities, these identities are also embedded and formed in social relationships – most notably the family and close relatives, but also peers and sometimes deceased relatives. Day describes this form as ‘believing in belonging’, where the social plays a critical role in shaping what belief systems are considered meaningful. A tendency in the sociology of religion, according to Day, is that the preferred approach to belief has been its propositional form, “typified by statements like ‘I believe in God’ that seem to assert a position without indicating what kind of God or the degree of belief that is felt” (Day, 2010, p. 10). This emphasis on propositional beliefs is problematic, she argues, because it tends to see belief systems as universal and this

makes it difficult to capture the rich diversity and complexity in how people believe (Day, 2010). Instead, Day suggests an approach that defines religious identities as performed and shaped by the social and cultural contexts from which they emerge. This is particularly important in the study of young people's religious identities and belief systems:

I found that young people's beliefs tend to be co-produced, through participation with family and friends in creating and maintaining beliefs. This problematised ideas about private, individualised beliefs, or the 'believing without belonging' thesis, as my work suggests that belief and belonging are interdependent, with beliefs being explicitly located, produced and practised in the public and the social realm (Day, 2009, p. 276).

The human geographers Giselle Vincett, Elisabeth Olson, Peter Hopkins and Rachel Pain (2012) found similar results in their study on young Christians in Scotland. By focusing on what they define as 'performance Christianity' – "which highlights religious action in the everyday or secular, combined with a discourse of authenticity and a pluralistic approach to institutions and religious spaces" (Vincett et al, 2012, p. 275) – they explored how young Christians practise their religion in a religious context that has changed significantly in the past decades. They found that the young Christians were more mobile than previous generations – they often attended multiple churches and "used spatial tactics in order to reframe church spaces and affiliation" (p. 280) – and searched for spaces where their worldviews could be challenged. There was also a greater tendency amongst the young Christians to identify themselves as 'Christians' and reject denominations. Vincett et al suggest that this could be a consequence of increased secularity in Britain and that the young people have been brought up in social contexts where Christian identities are marginalised. However, the authors rejected the notion that this was a sign that young Christians' religious identities are 'individualised.' Instead, they

argue that it is “the *nature* of belief [that] appears to have changed” (p. 286, italics in original) and how this is relationally and spatially shaped. The young Christians in Vincett et al’s (2012) study advocated for an ‘authentic Christianity’ that is “less based on membership of a particular church community or specific doctrinal beliefs than on the kinds of performance through which religiosity is expressed, shared and challenged or deconstructed” (p. 282). This involved building bridges between sacred and secular spaces, engaging with the ‘other’ (who can belong to a different religion or be secular), re-construct the messages in the Bible through action and “re-vision sacred or ‘church’ space” (p. 286). For many of the young Christians, this meant challenging what they consider to be ‘Sunday Christians’ (whom they tended to regard as limited by propositional beliefs, doctrines and religious tradition) and find ways to live their beliefs in the everyday – including in spaces which are not considered as ‘sacred’ (e.g. youth work). These findings show the need not only to pay attention to *how* young people practise their religion but also *where* and *with whom*.

This is also something the sociologist of religion Anna Strhan (2013) found in her study on Evangelical Anglican students in London. She argues that to understand the religious formation of these young Christians, attention should be directed to the intersection between spatiality, embodiment and reflexivity and how beliefs are formed through relationships and action. In order to do this, we need to look at how religion is *lived* and explore “the ‘messiness’ of how religious life-worlds flow beyond the orderliness of categories of doctrine and spaces of religious institutions” (p. 225). While propositional beliefs are significant so far as they can provide ethical frameworks for the young people to consider and engage with, it is in the active engagement, embodiment and negotiation of the meaning of these

beliefs that form the young people's Christianity. It is therefore neither fully institutional nor fully 'individualised' but formed in the interplay between these two and this needs to be considered in studies on young people's religiosity.

This critique of 'individualisation of religion' has been developed further in studies on young people from other religions than Christianity, particularly on young Muslims.<sup>33</sup> In her research on young Muslim women in Sweden, the ethnologist Pia Karlsson-Minganti (2014) has found how the young women used their Muslim identity to produce what she calls a 'third space' (using Homi Bhabha's terminology, see Bhabha, 2004). In this 'third space', young Muslim women can make sense of contradictory identity positions, particularly traditional social identities in the family and secular society demands (including youth culture) (Karlsson-Minganti, 2014). Karlsson-Minganti's research partly confirms Day's work on the importance of social belonging and authentic relationships, but also problematises the notion that propositional beliefs play a limited role in forming young people's religious identities. What Karlsson-Minganti found in her research – similar results have also been found in studies on young Muslims in the UK (e.g. Jacobson, 1998; DeHanas, 2013; Haw, 2010 – was a different way of engaging with religious narratives. Rather than distancing themselves from traditional religious values, the young women embraced them and tried – through negotiations and learning – to find the 'essence' of Islam. This 'essence' or 'core' was firmly separated from what these young women felt were parental traditional customs and practices, often identified as 'cultural' interpretations of Islam from the parents' home-countries. Through this practice and by embracing what the young women

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<sup>33</sup> Since this thesis is interested in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, this section will look at studies made on these religions and exclude studies on other religions.

identified as ‘Islamic’ values and norms, they created a space in which they could resist gender roles expected by the family and feelings of exclusion and alienation they felt in Swedish society (Karlsson-Minganti, 2014).

This process is often described as ‘deculturalisation of Islam’ and has become a way to understand young Muslims’ agency in contexts of multiple identity positions and expectations (Roy, 2004; Sedgewick, 2014; see also Modood, 2019, Meer et al, 2016 and Triandafyllidou & Modood, 2017). The anthropologist Nadia Fadil (2005), who has studied young Muslim women in Belgium, has defined this process of deculturalisation of Islam as ‘individualisation through religion.’ This is different from ‘individualisation of religion’ above and looks instead at how young people express empowerment and agency through their religious identities. By ‘going back to the sources’ of Islam, young Muslims create spaces for themselves in which other restrictive identities can be negotiated and resisted. The sociologist Daniel Nilsson DeHanas (2013) found similar patterns in his research on young Muslims in East London. Many of his research participants described their Muslim identity as the most important identity in their lives, with Islamic values and ethical teachings framing how they live their everyday lives. Although far from all the young Muslims were content with how they lived their lives – many expressed desires to live more in accordance with Islamic requirements (particularly praying five times a day, which many of the young people struggled with) – they tried as much as possible to live as they believed. Their religious identities also informed their political identities, which I will come back to in section 2.2. ‘Individualisation through religion’ can also involve embracing very conservative religious values, which Anabel Inge (2016) found in her research on young Salafi women in London. Many of these young women had found Salafism

– a very conservative and pious branch of Islam – after navigating through different religious contexts; most had grown up in families where religious practice was not a priority or where they felt that cultural customs and values shaped religious practice. Here we can see a different approach to what came up in Madge et al's (2014) study above where young devout people ('strict adherents', among them many young Muslims) did not challenge their family's belief systems and religious practice. This shows how the family and parents can play different roles in young people's religious socialisation. Becoming Salafi was also a response to feeling excluded from British society and many also struggled with following strict Islamic norms (including wearing a niqab) in a secular society without becoming completely isolated. Many of the young women were separated from their families because of their beliefs – sometimes because the families disapproved of the young women's religious identities and called them 'fundamentalists', in other cases the young women distanced themselves from family and friends because they were not Salafi – and had only small social groups of people to spend time with. For these women, the social milieu and context of Salafi groups in London – often small and isolated – were crucial for their continual investment in their Salafi identities. Believing and belonging are here directly intersected.

The majority of studies on young Jews tend to focus on either young Jews' religious socialisation or young Jews' attitudes to Israel. In the UK, there have been some policy studies focusing on the role of Jewish schools and parents in young Jews religious socialisation (e.g. Miller et al, 2016) and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and Jewish Leadership Council/United Jewish Israel Appeal (UJIA) have published reports that attend to the relationship between Jewish education and young people's Jewish identities, attitudes to Israel and community

engagement (Graham, 2014; Miller, 2014; see also Boyd, 2016 and Graham & Boyd, 2011). These studies provide interesting insights into young Jews' religious socialisation – for example, having a Jewish upbringing (e.g. having a bat/bar mitzvah, keeping kosher, celebrating Shabbat and Jewish holidays), attending Jewish schools, participating in Israel tours and/or being involved in Jewish youth movements are important elements in forming and maintaining Jewish identities. But they are either based solely on interviews with parents (Miller et al, 2016) or large statistical data material with no qualitative questions for the young Jews to develop what each answer means to them personally (Graham, 2014; Miller, 2014).

Studies from the United States show similar results. For example, Michelle Shain with colleagues (2013) have explored to what extent 'Do It Yourself' (DIY) Judaism is prevalent amongst young American Jews. In short, DIY Judaism "characterize[s] alternative forms of Jewish engagement that bypass the established infrastructure of American Jewish life" (Shain et al, 2013, p. 3) and a "common thread linking DIY projects is that they empower participants, allowing them to define their own Jewish identities and create their own forms of Jewish expression" (ibid, p. 4). Since young American Jews tend to be less likely to participate in religious services than older generations and to a higher extent be disconnected from their Jewish communities, the authors were interested to explore if young American Jews engage with Judaism in other ways. In order to do this, they draw on survey data from 2870 young Jews. They found similar results as Graham (2014) and Miller (2014) did above: religious engagement was more frequent and important if the young people had grown up in families where Judaism was practiced, they belonged to a Jewish congregation and were married with children. They also discovered that DIY Judaism was not particularly common



amongst the sampled young Jews. Those who were practising and engaging with Judaism did this through established Jewish institutions or in the family. Another quantitative study that has explored how young Jewish identities are formed is Reeshma Haji with colleagues' (2011) study on young Jewish Canadians. Drawing on survey data from 258 young Jewish Canadians, they explored three forms of Jewish identity – religious identity, cultural identity and identity salience – and they were interested in what impact religious and cultural identification with Judaism might have on how young Jews think about interfaith relationships and their political attitudes to Israel. In contrast to the other studies, they also included an open-ended question about what being Jewish means to the young people. The study showed that the more religious the young people identified themselves to be (that is, they described themselves as either 'religious' or 'religious *and* cultural' in the survey), the less positive were they about interfaith relationships and the more right-wing they tended to be in relation to politics in Israel. In contrast, those young people who identified as 'culturally Jewish' were less practising, more positive to interfaith relationships (many of them had grown up in interfaith families) and more critical of politics in Israel.

This is a similar result to Dov Waxman's (2017) study on young American Jews' attitudes to Israel. He drew on data from the 2013 Pew Research Center's "Portrait of Jewish Americans" to explore whether young American Jews are less attached to Israel than older American Jews. What Waxman found was that while young American Jews tend to be more critical of policies in Israel (particularly in relation to Palestine), they are not less attached. He explained this by making references to four points:

(1) They are more liberal than their older counterparts; (2) they are more oriented toward universalism and more concerned with social justice as central to their Jewish identities and Judaism (partly because they are more likely to be the offspring of intermarriage); (3) the Holocaust and anti-Semitism has had less of an impact on them; and (4) they have significantly different “generational memories” of Israel than older generations (Waxman, 2017, p. 178f)

These ‘generational memories’ of Israel have to do with the time the young American Jews have grown up in. Waxman argues that, in contrast to older generations who might have memories from the Six Day War, young Jews today have grown up with the Second Intifada and the Gaza wars. They have also been introduced to Palestinian narratives of the conflict to a much higher extent than older generations. But the lack of qualitative data makes it difficult to understand what this means to young Jews and their understanding of what it means to be Jewish, and Waxman asks for more studies exploring this. This focus on quantitative studies in relation to the study of Jewish identities have been criticised by scholars in the UK. Maxim Samson, Robert Vanderbeck and Nichola Wood (2018) have argued for the need to put individual identities at the centre of the analysis of the formation of young Jewish identities and how multiple sources are present in this formation. They are critical of how previous literature to a large extent focused on collective Jewish identities and belonging and how young people adhere to these – particularly through quantitative survey data – rather than looking at how individual and collective Jewish identities are formed in dynamic interaction with each other. Doing this makes it possible to look at how young Jews engage with collective Jewish structures, such as Jewish schools and synagogues, and how these multiple sources are used in the formation of personalised, hybrid Jewish identities (Samson et al, 2018). Maxim Samson (2018) explored this further in his

qualitative study of the impact attending a pluralist Jewish school in London might have on the formation of young Jewish identities. In contrast to the studies mentioned above, which tended to interview parents and educators, Samson also carried out interviews with young Jewish students. What he found was that the school provided the young Jews with a space to negotiate and explore different understandings of Judaism and Jewishness. Rather than adhering to a particular nominal understanding of what Judaism means, the young people were able to “openly express a symbolic Jewishness based on self-identification and cultural practice rather than religious observance” (p. 748). The presence of other Jewish young people from a wide range of Jewish backgrounds was also important in this process. Several of the young people enjoyed the opportunity to debate their faith and described how disagreements made it possible for them to develop personalised Jewish identities. Samson concluded that it is important to move away from looking at Jewish schools as “vehicles for the construction (or, more accurately delivery) of a collective, reified sense of presumptive Jewishness” (p. 753) and instead exploring how young people use these educational spaces in the construction of their personalised, hybrid Jewish identities. He also asks for more research focusing on less traditional Jewish spaces (such as schools and synagogues) to understand the varied ways young Jewish identities are lived and formed (Samson, 2018).

Another qualitative study that has explored questions around what being a Jew means for young Jews is Sarah Abramson’s (2011) study of Anglo-Jewish youth movements (Orthodox, Reform and Liberal). She explored the role of the Jewish community and youth movements in shaping what ‘Jewishness’ means for young people. Jewish youth movements play important roles in the formation of young Jewish identities and sense of belonging to their Jewish communities. They

are peer-led, offer a wide range of activities (including Holocaust education and Israel tours) and through informal education “use stimulating activities (...) to teach young people to identify *seemingly of their own accord* with certain values” (p. 65, italics in original). The different branches within Judaism have their own youth movements and the primary aim of these is to “promote a certain understanding of what it means to be Jewish that will appeal to as many young people as possible, while also striving to differentiate their movement from all others” (p. 64). What Abramson was interested in exploring was how the informal education provided by Jewish youth movements deal with questions around ‘authentic Judaism’ and particularly the notion of Jewish pluralism – i.e. intra-Jewish diversity – that is a contentious issue within the British Jewish community (see also Gidley & Kahn-Harris, 2012). The main factor deals with the question of Jewish continuity and practice, where the Orthodox Jewish community considers Judaism to be

the embodiment of a singular truth that cannot be negotiated (...), [whereas] non-Orthodox Jewish denominations stress that Jewish continuity depends on the cultivation of a sense of commonality which can be preserved and transported across physical distance and metaphoric chasms and thus has room for the accommodation of different Judaisms (Abramson, 2011, p. 58, italics in original).

In her interviews with youth leaders in Jewish youth movements, Abramson asked them how they work with questions around continuity and the negotiation of Jewish difference. Her study resulted in two significant findings. The first is that even though the young leaders were keen to provide their young participants with the tools and knowledge needed to strengthen their Jewish identity and belonging, very few of them embraced the notion of pluralism. This took different forms – while some of the young leaders considered Orthodox Jewish practice and interpretation of Jewish law (halacha) to be the authentic way of doing Judaism, others said that

they “wrestled” with pluralism and preferred terms like “cross-communal, which means asking people to negotiate their differences and arrive at a compromise that is comfortable for all participants” (p. 69). The second finding was that while the question of pluralism is challenging also for young people belonging to non-Orthodox denominations, Abramson concludes that “the younger generation are beginning to grapple with pluralism in (often) more complex and nuanced manners” (p. 76). This provides insights into how young Jews are negotiating the theological and political boundaries of their Jewish communities, and the impacts this might have on their religious identities. It is also another example of how young people engage with the ethical teachings and religious narratives of their religion in a different way than the emphasis on individualisation of religion we saw above in relation to (predominantly) Christian youth. However, as we saw above and will see in the following chapters, young Christians can also show a similar pattern in how they engage with their religious traditions. Questions around what an ‘individualised faith’ means in practice, as with young people’s political engagement that I will turn to next, are often structured by other social identities, such as class, ethnicity and gender (cf. Marsh et al, 2007). Exploring young people’s religious identities requires taking a number of social positions into account, including the local context in which they live their everyday lives. I will come back to this in section 2.3.

### **2.1.3. Summary**

In this section I have looked at dominant theoretical orientations and related research in understanding how young people’s religious identities and belongings are formed. The first subsection focused on religious socialisation, and the social

actors and contexts that are important in young people's religious socialisation. We could see how the theoretical interest has shifted and widened, from primarily focusing on traditional socialisation agents like the family and religious institutions to also including other social contexts that young people spend their lives in – such as school, the Internet and social media, and peer groups. Young people are becoming religious and learning about religion in multiple social contexts and these need to be considered if we want to understand young people's religiosity today, as well as possible tensions within and across these social contexts. The second subsection looked at how young people construct their religious identities and belonging. Two theoretical themes were introduced: 'individualisation of religion' and 'individualisation through religion.' Although neither of these themes are absolute – most young people can be found in both – they provide different theoretical insights into how young people use propositional beliefs and what they mean to them. Whereas 'individualisation of religion' puts emphasis on authenticity, choice and resistance against propositional beliefs as dominating factors in how young people are religious today, the 'individualisation through religion' explores how returning to 'religious sources' and scripture can empower young people and help them resist restricted identity positions.

However, one thing these themes have in common is that they show how young people are highly active in defining and constructing their religious identities, and the different strategies they use to make this happen. For many young people today, being religious is not only about belonging to a specific religious congregation and/or community but also about identifying and defining what this means at a personal level. What these subsections show is that in order to understand young people's religious identities and belonging, we need to pay

attention to the social contexts and actors that influence young people but also the ways young people interpret, engage, negotiate and resist these contexts and structures. As we will see in the following chapters, this is critical to understand how experiences of interfaith work might impact on young people's identities. In section 2.3 I will introduce the analytical approach I will use to study this but before doing this I will look closer at another body of literature that is important for this thesis: that on how religion is used in young people's political and civic engagement.

## **2.2. Religious mobilisation, participation and politics**

As we saw in the previous chapter, interfaith work is not only about affirming young people's identities and providing them with social contexts to improve their religious literacy; interfaith work is also a kind of faith-based social engagement with emphasis on active citizenship and building cohesive communities. The aim of this section is not to provide a complete overview, but to introduce some theoretical orientations and related literature on how young people's religious identities are activated in political and civic engagement and the role theological and ethical worldviews and teachings might have in the formation of political imaginaries. Academic interest in the relationship between religion and civic participation is not new. Faith communities are often described in community cohesion policies as 'repositories of social and cultural capital' (Dinham, 2009) and important actors in building cohesive communities. Studies have also shown a positive relationship between religious practice and being active in the civil society (e.g. Gibson, 2008; Youniss et al, 1999; Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Ebstyne-King & Furrow, 2008; Lam, 2006). Johan von Essen, Lesley Hustinx, Jacques Haers and

Sara Mels (2014) have identified two possible explanations for this relationship. The first can be found in religious beliefs. Belief systems can provide moral and ethical frameworks that form a need to become active in civil society and teach “the values of altruism and caring for others, [which] may easily find expression in acts of volunteering” (p. 1). The second is religious institutions, through which “people receive information about volunteering opportunities, [and] have a higher likelihood to be invited and experience normative expectations and social pressure to volunteer” (p. 1-2). However, Essen et al also problematise the positive relationship between religious participation and civic engagement – a relationship they argue that has become so established within academic literature that it almost has become a ‘default relationship’ – and ask for studies that also take social contexts, historical and political changes, the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘volunteering’, and individual differences into account (Essen et al, 2014). The sociologist Rhys Williams (2003) has a similar position. Like Essen et al, he argues that religious belief systems and institutions can provide people with ethical frameworks and social networks to become active in the public sphere. However, rather than assuming that religion makes people more likely to become socially active, he argues that studies should focus on under what circumstances this kind of activism emerges, who decides to participate (and who does not), and also how theoretical understandings of what the ‘public sphere’ entails might affect the analysis of the relationship between religion and politics (William, 2003).

### **2.2.1. Young people, religion and politics: an overview**

Research on how young people use religion in their civic and political engagement is still a limited field of study, but recent years have seen a growing number of



publications. It is important to note that a great majority of these focus on young Muslims, which can also be seen in this section (where only a few studies focus on young Christians and Jews). One explanation for this can be found in the increased academic and policy interest in young Muslims' political engagement following the London bombings in 2005, which have resulted in a wide range of transdisciplinary studies. This dominance of studies on young Muslims makes this section somewhat imbalanced and shows the need for more studies on what role religion plays in young Christians' and Jews' political and civic engagement (a gap this thesis is contributing to filling). But, despite these limitations, this section also provides important insights into how religion and politics intersect in young people's activism. I will come back to this more in-depth in the summary in section 2.2.3.

Looking at studies on how young people use religion in their political and civic engagement, it is possible to identify two areas. The first area contains studies that explores how young people use religion in radical and violent activism, where the most notable is the rise of radical Islamism and Jihadism amongst young Muslims in Europe (Abbas, 2007). Multiple studies have explored the role Islam plays in violent radicalisation of young Muslims and have found a close relationship between religious and political identities (e.g. Neumann, 2016; Abbas, 2009; Brachman, 2008; Coeelsat, 2008; Gest, 2010). This is a contested field of study and the concept of radicalisation in particular has been criticised for being too limited and deterministic and some have argued that the emphasis on religion as a precondition for 'Islamic' radicalisation ignores other important factors – such as individual motivations, circumstances and interactions (PisoIU, 2012; Kundnani, 2014; Baker-Beall et al, 2014). Still, empirical studies on young people's involvement in radical Islamist groups in the UK have shown two tendencies in

how religion and radical political engagement intersect. The first tendency is that Islam provides an ethical framework through which political and societal issues and challenges are interpreted. This ethical framework is often structured by particular interpretations of Islamic scriptures and selected Islamist theologians, and often involves embracing a strict and conservative interpretation of Islam (e.g. Gest, 2010; Neumann, 2016; Wiktorowicz, 2005). The formation of this ethical framework is a radical form of the deculturalisation of Islam we could see in section 2.1.2 and the process has some similarities to what Anabel Inge (2016) observed in her study on young Salafi women but differs when it comes to political engagement. Where Inge's participants are predominantly apolitical, the conservative Islamic practice of young Muslims in radical groups is often directly linked to political action and, in some cases, the use of violence (Neumann, 2016).

The second tendency is that Islam and experiences of being a Muslim are often important political trigger points. Common factors were feelings that Islam was under attack (both at home and abroad), resistance against foreign policies (e.g. the Iraq War) and the 'war on terror', socio-economic inequalities, racism and Islamophobia (Thomas, 2013; Wiktorowicz, 2005; Neumann, 2016). Although these factors are not unique for radical Islamist groups – as we will see below, they are shared by young Muslims involved in non-violent and non-radical groups – what is distinctive are the methods used to counter them. Not all embrace violence, but many withdraw from the democratic system and become what Justin Gest (2010) defines as 'apartists'; "characterised by nihilism or hopeless disenchantment with the democratic system, leading to marginalisation from it and the other civic entities" (p. 94). The risk of this behaviour, according to Gest, is that these anti-democratic sentiments might lead to increased isolation and possibly the use of

violence. But not all studies on the intersection between religious and political identities focus on radical forms of engagement.

The second area of study on how young people mobilise their religions in social engagement has emerged through the study of young people's democratic engagement. Policy survey studies and quantitative studies have shown that young people are less likely to participate in conventional political participation, such as voting, writing letters to Members of Parliament (MPs) and joining mainstream political parties, than their elders (Collin, 2015). Young people are often described as politically disillusioned, "fuelling concerns about the emergence of an apolitical, socially disengaged generation" (Fahmy, 2006, p. 178). However, qualitative studies have found that this negative picture is too limited. Rather than being disillusioned or apolitical, the young people participating in these studies showed high levels of political literacy and interest in political issues but preferred alternative spaces and formats to express these views (Collin, 2015; Marsh et al, 2007; Kehily, 2007; Fahmy, 2006). Most common were boycotting products, social activism and joining social movements, participating in various activist causes (e.g. climate change, gender inequality, racism, social inequality) and using social media (Collin, 2015). Their political activism was also to a much higher extent formed through their everyday experiences. David Marsh, Therese O'Toole and Stephen Jones (2007) argued in their study on young people's political engagement in the UK that "in order to understand young people's political engagement, it is necessary to understand politics as 'lived experience'" (p. 178). They found a close link between 'the personal' and 'the political' in how young people perceive and 'do' politics: young people invest in issues that have direct relevance for their everyday lives and interest in politics often emerges as a result of particular experiences.

Young people's political identities and understandings of the 'political' are often described as a result of negotiation processes in relation to multiple social contexts and drawing on personal, ethical and political frameworks. Marsh et al (2007) describe political identities as "structured lived experiences", informed by "factors that shape or constrain the ways in which such politics is expressed and experience," and state that social identities such as class, gender, ethnicity and age are "part of the way in which individuals negotiate their political identity" (p. 212). It is in relation to this that religion has emerged as an important factor – both how religious identities and lifestyles inform political identities and participation but also how theological and ethical worldviews shape political opinions and views on citizenship. This is similar to what we could see above in relation to the role of religion in radical and extremist groups, but here the focus is on how religion is used in democratic and civic engagement.

Richard Gale and Therese O'Toole (2009) have in their study of young Muslim men's activism in a Muslim justice movement in Birmingham found a close link between these men's religious identities and their political activism. By taking their starting point in the young Muslims' political biographies, Gale and O'Toole explored both how young Muslims used their religion to motivate their political activism and how global and local political realities played important roles in shaping the need of this activism. Many of their participants argued that Islamic ethical teachings and moral frameworks were important in the formation of their political imaginaries. They felt that Islam required them to contribute to the society in which they live and being a Muslim meant being an active citizen. However, experiences of Islamophobia and racism, UK foreign policy (e.g. the Iraq war) and the so called 'war on terror' were also important trigger points in their decision to

become politically active. The Islamic concept of the ‘ummah’ – the global Muslim community – played a notable role in the young Muslims’ faith-based engagement, linking lived and local experiences to global events (Gale & O’Toole, 2009; see also O’Toole & Gale, 2013).

Daniel Nilsson DeHanas’ (2016) study of young Muslims and Christians in London shows a similar pattern. As we could see in section 2.1.2, many of the young Muslims in his study described how their religious identities have informed their political engagement. This took different forms – joining protest groups, attending political rallies, fundraising and boycotting products. Boycotting was the most popular one and these were both ethically and politically motivated. While some of the young Muslims boycotted products because they were associated with unethical conduct (e.g. by using child labour), the most common reason for boycotting products was alleged connections to Israel and Denmark.<sup>34</sup> Most found the information about what products to boycott through text messages and the Internet, or from friends in Muslim youth organisations. Like the young Muslims in Gale and O’Toole’s study above, the Muslim ‘ummah’ was also critical in the formation of the young Muslims’ political imaginaries and provided both ethical and political structures to these imaginaries. Theological worldviews informed not only what political and social issues they considered as important, but also how they choose to act and what forms of participation they choose. In these cases, religious and political identities were intersected and hard to separate. The young Christians (all Jamaicans) in DeHanas’ study showed a different pattern. They were not as politically active as the young Muslims and the link between religious and

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<sup>34</sup> This is a political response to the Mohammed cartoon crisis in 2005, which still affects young Muslims’ political subjectivities. See Cesari (2013) for a critical analysis of this event.

political identities were not as explicit. However, while DeHanas could not see a general trend and “no overall basis for a positive or a negative effect of religiosity on the civic engagement of young Jamaicans” (p. 41), those young Christians who did identify as highly religious were more likely to give money to charities and organisations than those who did not. Part of the explanation for the discrepancies between the young Muslims and Christians can also be found in the role of religious institutions and I will come back to this in section 2.2.2.

Ethical understandings of what it means to be religious can also play important roles in how and why young people choose to become politically active. In Anita Harris and Kim Lam’s (2018) study on young Muslims’ and Buddhists’ political participation in Australia, their participants motivated their political or civic engagement based on their theological understanding of what it means to be Muslim or Buddhist. Many of them stressed the importance of ‘giving back’ to their local communities and described community service as intrinsic to being Muslim or Buddhist. They also made a close connection between their participation and self-development; being politically and civically active were also part of their attempts to ‘become better persons’ and “working to reduce the centrality of autonomous ego to be instead in service to the larger social good” (p. 13). Harris and Lam found that “this politics of ‘working on the self’ was often radically other-oriented, reflecting an attempt to go beyond the needs of not only the individual, but also local concerns focusing on the rights of individuals within a bounded nation-state” (Harris & Lam, 2018, p. 14). They defined these processes as “constructing religio-ethical selves with global responsibilities and outlooks” (ibid), but also noted that:

the young people invoked an understanding of ‘shared human values’ and ‘human duty’ to help others, acknowledging the influence of religious ethical teachings on their participatory actions, yet also displaying a recognition of ‘universal’ values of care and compassion which were shared by individuals across a range of cultural and religious backgrounds (Harris & Lam, 2018, p. 15).

In order to understand the intersection between religiosity and participation for young people, Harris and Lam argue, “we need to begin at their religious narratives, trajectories and work on the self to understand how they might frame and perform participation in religious terms” (p. 16). The emphasis on the need to attend to how the personal and the political intersect is also visible in Ruth Sheldon’s (2016) study on young Jews’ and Muslims’ student activism in relation to the Palestine-Israel conflict on British campuses. Sheldon did fieldwork and conducted interviews with young Jews and Muslims involved in pro-Palestine and pro-Israel student societies in three different British universities (which she calls Old University, New University and Redbrick University). By focusing on the students’ lived experiences of the Palestine-Israel conflict, Sheldon explores how embodied histories, narratives and diasporic identities are at play in the students’ activism, as well as memories of the Holocaust, political discourses around the ‘War on Terror’ and the legacies of decolonialisation. What she found was a need to look beyond collective categories, such as ‘religion’ and ‘politics’, and attend to “how political conflicts are not only constituted through competing discourses in the abstract, but are also the locus of intense feelings, contradictory desires and visceral interpersonal encounters” (Sheldon, 2016, p. 3). For both the young Muslims and the young Jews, the Palestine-Israel conflict activated memories, ethics, emotions and feelings of victimhood that went beyond religious and ethnic identifications. For some of the young Muslims, the conflict represented a fight for transnational

justice and the need to take a stand against oppression. For some of the young Jews, the Palestine-Israel conflict brought up historical memories of the Holocaust and complex relationships between Zionism and Judaism. Sheldon also pays attention to how the setting – in her study the university – impacts on the students’ activism. Political framings around what is allowed to be expressed and what constitutes ‘good relations’ shape the students’ experiences. Sheldon’s study shows the need to explore young people’s activism from a psychosocial perspective that attends to the complex interplay between the structural and the personal. This is an important perspective for this thesis and I will come back to this more in-depth in section 2.3.

### **2.2.2. Religious institutions and citizenship**

However, religious institutions can also play important roles in how young people’s religious identities are mobilised into social action. In his study of young Muslims and Christians introduced above, Daniel Nilsson DeHanas (2016) also explored the role of religious institutions in shaping young people’s citizenship. By asking “what kind of citizens are [the young people] becoming?” (p. 3), he focused on different religious institutions’ approaches to citizenship, and how theological structures shape the kind of political participation that is encouraged. Although DeHanas looked at several religious institutions, he paid most attention to the two that were most popular amongst young people: Ruach Ministries in Brixton and the East London Mosque in Tower Hamlet. Ruach Ministries is a multicultural Pentecostal church founded by a second-generation Jamaican, attracting several hundred young Christians for their youth service every Sunday. In these services, the pastor preached about the importance of overcoming personal struggles and “that one’s faith in God should be tangibly manifested through personal victories” (p. 147).



This was embedded within what the pastor defines as ‘citizenship in heaven,’ where secular citizenship and national identities are downplayed, and the emphasis is instead on being an ambassador for Christ. However, this does not mean that being a good citizen is not considered as important; on the contrary, the Ruach Ministries encouraged their young people to be “the best citizens of which ever country you are” (p. 143) and to follow the law. But they did not put any emphasis on the importance of *British* citizenship and argued instead that “more important are one’s actions while residing in one country or another” (ibid., italics in original). The East London Mosque (ELM) in Tower Hamlets has a similar approach to citizenship as the Ruach Ministries has. They put emphasis on the importance that young Muslims become “Islamised citizens”, a process that involves “the adoption of an all-encompassing Muslim identity,...the continual practice and development of *deen*, the Islamic micro-practices of everyday life,...[and] an Islamised imagination of citizenship embedded in a global community, the *ummah*” (p. 157f, italics in original). DeHanas argues that “an Islamised citizenship is a comprehensive one – it reaches deeply into one’s self-identification, daily practices and community of belonging as it becomes the main frame of reference for civic engagement” (p. 158).

However, while there are similarities between the congregations in how theology influences how citizenship is regarded, DeHanas found differences in the kind of citizens they produce. Whereas the Ruach Ministries promotes what DeHanas calls a ‘subjectified’ Christianity – where authoritative truth claims are “made relevant to the individual subject in order to show that they are true” (p. 159) – the ELM promotes an ‘objectified’ Islam, where the focus is on “transfiguring the various historic and context-dependent streams of Muslim belief into a timeless, changeless and singular entity of ‘Islam’” (p. 160). Although there is a fine line

between subjectification and objectification – Ruach preaches messages of objective truth and young Muslims describe subjective experiences “which feels so ‘right’ that they confirm the objective truth of Islam” (p. 161) – these approaches impact on how the young people regard citizenship and community. While the strong emphasis on the Muslim ummah and the social networks provided by the ELM can partly explain the high frequency of political participation by young Muslims, DeHanas argues that the Ruach focus on “citizenship in heaven” promotes a more ‘otherworldly’ and individualistic approach to participation and therefore might not provide the same social contexts for social change as the ELM does. In the concluding chapter of the book, DeHanas answers the question “what kind of citizens are young people becoming?” by describing them as ‘believing citizens’ and this has a dual meaning: “it refers not only to the religious inclinations of youth I encountered, but also to the need for listening to and ‘believing in’ these young citizens. Most young people in the second generation do not think that their voices are adequately heard by media or by the government” (p. 189).

This emphasis on being listened to and believed in is visible also in Justin Gest’s (2010) study of young Muslims’ political participation in London. He focused on young Muslims in Tower Hamlets – the same area that DeHanas focused on – and found a close relationship between democratic participation and feeling ‘valued.’ Those young Muslims who felt that their voices were considered important by others and who had access to spaces – often, but not exclusively, provided by religious institutions – where they could make their voices heard were much more likely to participate in the democratic system than those who had not the same access. Gest argued that the role of religious institutions is important in this process but notes that other organisations and spaces are also significant –

particularly those that provide ‘bridges’ between the Muslim communities and the wider British society and help young Muslims to feel they are valued by society. Those young Muslims who do not have access to these institutions, organisations and/or spaces might become ‘alienated’ (that is, passive citizens that are not active in the democratic system) or ‘apartists’ (joining radical groups, as we could see above).

### **2.2.3. Summary**

This section has focused on how young people in different ways have mobilised religion in civic and political participation, and the ways religious and political identities might intersect. The first subsection provided an overview of this still limited field of study and focused on two areas of study. The first looked at how young Muslims use religion in radical and violent activism, and the role religion can play in violent radicalisation. The second explored how the emerging literature on young people’s political participation and political identities has made religion an important factor in the formation of young people’s political imaginaries. While there is a dominance of studies focusing on Muslims and very little on young Christians and Jews, these two areas show how religion can provide important ethical frameworks and social contexts that shape both what political issues young people consider important and the preferred methods to challenge these. Although there were some differences between young people from different religions – for example, DeHanas’ study showed that young Muslims were generally more politically active than young Christians – there was often a close relationship between their religious and political identities. The decision to boycott certain products, participate in activist causes or join a group was often informed by the

ethical and political frameworks of their religious traditions. The second subsection also showed the importance of religious institutions in forming these frameworks and young people's understanding of citizenship. Although religious institutions might have different approaches to these issues – as we could see in DeHanas' study above – they can still be important in shaping young people's ethical frameworks and provide them with social settings that encourage them to become active citizens.

These perspectives are important in the study of young people's interfaith work. First of all, they show the importance of looking at the role of ethical frameworks in shaping the need to become active in society. Although not all of the young people in this thesis define their interfaith work as 'political' in the sense we could see above, the ethical language they use to motivate their interfaith work and how they understand their participation still pose questions about the intersection between religious, ethical and political identities. They also raise questions in relation to the theological and political borders of religious institutions and communities. While religious institutions can be important in shaping young people's theological understanding of citizenship and participation, we still know very little about how young people might influence their religious institutions and communities as a result of their participation. This is particularly significant when it comes to interfaith work since this form of faith-based social engagement can result in participants becoming marginalised and even excluded from their religious institutions (cf. McCarthy, 2007). The relationship between their religious institutions (if they have any) and their interfaith work thus becomes interesting not only for theological but also for political reasons. Lastly, it is important to pay attention to the 'structured experience' of political, religious and ethical

engagement. As we saw in section 2.1.1, social identities, such as gender, age, sexuality and ethnicity, are often important in young people's religious socialisation and how they experience political participation, as well as what issues they consider to be important (Marsh et al, 2007). In relation to young people's experiences of interfaith work, it is therefore important to pay attention to how different identities can intersect and the implications this might have on how young people understand their interfaith work. In the next section, I will focus on how I will study this in the following chapters.

### **2.3. Theorising young lives: Being, Becoming and Belonging**

If we look back at this chapter, some points can be made. The first is that young people's religious identities and belonging are a result of a complex interplay between the social contexts they find themselves in, the people they spend time with and how they themselves understand, interpret and negotiate the meaning(s) of these processes, encounters and belongings. Being religious is not only about belonging to a religious congregation or growing up in a religiously practising family but also about finding out what this means at a personal level. As we could see in section 2.1, this process can take different forms depending on the religion the young people identify with and is also often informed by other social identities, such as ethnicity, gender and age. In order to explore this analytically, we need to attend to how religious identities and senses of belonging are formed and become meaningful through the intersection between different identities and social contexts. An intersectional approach is also important for understanding the way(s) young people use and mobilise their religion in political and civic engagement. As we could see in the previous section, not only do religious, political, ethical and social

identities often inform each other in this process but young people's everyday lives and experiences also shape the theological, ethical and political frameworks they draw on. For this thesis, which explores how young people from different religious backgrounds experience interfaith work and the impact(s) it might have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities, it is therefore important to develop an analytical framework that not only attends to these complex interplays and intersections but also provides a flexible approach that makes it possible to focus on a wide range of backgrounds and experiences.

This is the aim of this section. In the next two subsections, I will develop an analytical framework that puts young people's individual accounts in focus and makes it possible to explore their experiences from a 'psychosocial' perspective – that is, as formed in the intersection between the 'social' (with discourses, frameworks, boundaries and ideologies) and the 'individual' (involved in interpretations, negotiations and resistance). Here I am inspired by Stephen Frosh's (2015) definition of the 'psychosocial' as "an understanding that what is taken to be the realm of the personal...is produced and sustained by various manifestations of sociality, and vice versa" (p. 3). As argued by Kath Woodward (2015), this does not mean "adding on the social to a psychological approach or one that explores the social with an added psychological perspective" but to study the interplay between these two by "bring[ing] together the micro and the macro, the personal and the social, inner worlds and outer worlds" (p. 5) in innovative theoretical and methodological ways. In order to do this, I will turn to theoretical approaches in youth studies and particularly the youth scholar Kate Tilleczek's (2011, 2014) 'complex cultural nesting approach' with three intersected social processes: 'being', 'becoming' and 'belonging'. As we have seen throughout this chapter,

‘being’, ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’ are key concepts in studies on young people’s religious and political identities and, as we will see in the following chapters, they also help us to explore their interfaith work. The section will be divided into two parts. In the first subsection I will introduce Tillecze’s approach and how she conceptualises ‘being’, ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging.’ In the second subsection I will go on to theorise this approach further and discuss how I will use it to understand the young people’s experiences of interfaith work.

But before doing this, I want to say a few words about how I understand ‘young people’ and how I will be using it throughout this thesis. As noted by the sociologist Gill Jones (2009) and the youth scholar Andy Furlong (2012), the concept of youth is a social construction and what (and who) is considered to be a ‘young person’ might differ across time, societies and academic disciplines (see also Johansson & Herz, 2019; Johansson, 2017). For a long time, scholars (particularly psychologists) focused on adolescence (often the teenage years) to understand the physical and psychological developments young people experience as they transition from childhood to adulthood. While adolescence and the teenage years remain important for understanding young people’s identity formation, youth scholars have also started to pay attention to older young people (Furlong, 2012). As more and more young people (particularly in the UK and other Western countries) have started to put off what are considered to be traditional markers of adulthood – such as picking a career, settling down with a partner and having children – until their 30s, the twenties have become a more important period for identity formation (Johansson, 2017; Furlong, 2012). The psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000, 2014) has argued for the need to pay more attention to a period he calls ‘emerging adulthood’ – a stage in their late teens and twenties in which young

people are neither adolescents nor young adults “but is theoretically and empirically distinct from them both” (Arnett, 2000, p. 470). Arnett argues that “a key feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the period of life that offers the most opportunity for identity explorations in the areas of love, work and worldviews” (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). Young people try different careers and attend university (or even different universities), they might have different partners before finding somebody to settle down with and they often explore and encounter a wide range of different worldviews – including religious worldviews that mean they re-examine the religious worldviews they grew up with. While Arnett considers emerging adulthood to start around the age of 18 when many young people leave home for university or work for the first time, he stresses that there is no definite endpoint to this period. Some might become young adults in their late teens and others might not identify as adult until their late twenties. Any attempts to generalise should therefore be avoided and it is important to pay attention to social, cultural and political differences when studying this age group.

Arnett’s theory of ‘emerging adulthood’ has been criticised for being too American and middle-class-focused, but his underlying ideas about the late teens and twenties as an important period in young people’s identity formation have been stressed by other scholars as well, including in Kate Tilleczek’s (2011; 2014) complex cultural nesting approach (see also Furlong, 2012; Johansson & Herz, 2019; Hendersen et al, 2006). These ideas are also important in how I understand ‘young people’ in this thesis. Although I am not using the term ‘emerging adults’, my research participants belong to the same age group as Arnett considers to be ‘emerging adults’ (they are between 18 and 28, with the majority being between 19 and 24 at the time of the interviews). I am also interested in what impact interfaith



work might have on some of the choices that are very distinct for this period in the young people's lives, such as career choices, (religious) worldviews and social relationships. I will come back to this more in detail in the next chapter and now turn attention to the analytical framework.

### **2.3.1. Being, Becoming and Belonging: a conceptual approach**

Kate Tilleczek (2011) describes her 'complex cultural nesting approach' as "an interpretive framework that offers a means of studying the ways in which youth experiences are nonlinear and occur in social contexts that are nested inside one another" (p. 4). This approach has been developed as a critical response to what Tilleczek considers to be a dichotomy between two dominant theoretical perspectives within youth studies: that is, large-scale quantitative 'transition' studies that focus on young people's transition from childhood to adulthood through educational institutions and the labour market, and qualitative 'youth culture' studies that explore the formation of young people's identities and subjectivities in relation to different economic, political and cultural contexts and structures (Tilleczek, 2014). She argues that:

Young people live in the world as experiential beings of the present and the past. They also live in possible futures as they move towards becoming adults. In both cases, they seek to belong in and to social institutions. To capture the complexity of young lives requires theoretically sophisticated modes of interpretation" (Tilleczek, 2014, p. 15).

Tilleczek is not alone in this endeavour – several leading youth scholars have criticised the theoretical dichotomy within youth studies and suggested more inclusive theoretical approaches that study young people's transition and youth cultures in tandem (e.g. Furlong et al, 2011; Johansson, 2017; Johansson & Herz,

2019; Hopkins, 2010) – but what makes the ‘complex cultural nesting approach’ interesting is that it provides both a theoretical and a methodological framework to study this empirically. In order to capture the complexity of young people’s lives, Tilleczek argues for the need to use narrative and biographical methods that put young people’s life-stories in focus and explore their experiences in comprehensive and holistic ways. In this chapter I will focus on the theoretical framework of the ‘complex cultural nesting approach’ and come back to the methodology in the next chapter.

The theoretical framework explores young people’s lives in two intersected ways. The first is that it identifies the social processes of ‘being’, ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’ as critical in understanding young people’s experiences. ‘Being’ is defined as a fundamental social process in young people’s lives that “relates to living in the moment of time and experience” (Tilleczek, 2011, p. 155). It explores young people’s identity formation and the strategies they use to “forge identities through daily negotiations at school, home, community, work and with friends” in order to be “valued for who they are *now*” (p. 11, italics in original) and create stability in their everyday lives. This social process is directly linked to young people’s biographies: to understand young people’s experiences of ‘being’, we need to look at the stories and narratives they tell about themselves and their lives (Tilleczek, 2014). The second concept – ‘becoming’ – is about time and change. Tilleczek defines ‘becoming’ as a fundamental social process that “relates to the nonlinear and complex processes of similarity and change over time” and includes the “physical, emotional, social, cultural and intellectual” (Tilleczek, 2011, p. 155) transformations and transitions young people experience in their journeys towards becoming adults. This involves both the transition processes young people make

through educational institutions into the labour market – which is the focus of many transition studies within youth studies (cf. Johansson & Herz, 2019) – but Tilleczek also uses ‘becoming’ more broadly to capture emotional, cultural and social developments young people experience as they grow up and come in contact with more diverse frameworks and worldviews. This can bring about tensions between ‘being’ (which is more focused on stability ‘here and now’) and ‘becoming’ (with its focus on time and change). Tilleczek argues that:

Young people live their lives just *being* who they are now. But they are always in the process of (and constantly reminded about) becoming the people they will be. They feel, experience, react and negotiate their place and intersecting identities within families, schools, political systems, friendships, and communities, all the while becoming their more biologically mature selves (Tilleczek, 2011, p. 10, italics in original).

In order to explore this tension and to understand the strategies young people use to handle this, Tilleczek introduces the concept of ‘belonging.’ ‘Belonging’ is defined as a fundamental social process “having to do with fitting in, finding one’s sense of place and feeling some sense of integration into the social worlds that are important to young people” (p. 144). This includes the importance of close relationships, such as family and friendship, but community activities and political and civic engagement are also important in forming senses of belonging. ‘Belonging’ is therefore not only about intimate relationships and feelings of ‘home’ (albeit these are very important) but also about society and the institutions young people are part of. How young people create belonging and where they feel they belong – as well as where they do *not* belong – make it possible to explore how macro-level issues (such as social class and social inequalities) inform young

people's experiences and the impact this might have on their identity formation and how they live their lives at the micro level. To understand these social processes in young people's lives, Tilleczeck argues that we also need to pay attention to how they are embedded in the social contexts and settings in which young people live. The 'complex cultural nesting approach' does this in two ways. The first is that it focuses on the different levels of social contexts and settings in young people's lives, and how young people's experiences are informed by a wide range of social contexts and structures. In order to do this, Tilleczeck draws on the psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, which is divided into *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *macrosystem* and *chronosystem*. The *microsystem* is understood in this model as "a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by young people in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics, for example, homes, the family, the classroom, etc" (Tilleczeck, 2014, p. 156). Religious congregations and interfaith organisations can also be seen as forms of microsystem according to this understanding.

The *mesosystem* is 'a system of microsystem' and makes it possible to explore how different microsystems inform each other (young people always belong to several at once) and the impact this can have on their identity formation and senses of belonging. Tilleczeck argues that it is by looking at the interplay of microsystems that "experiences and embodiment of social class, poverty, ethnicity, identity and age are played out" (p. 6) and it becomes possible to analyse how young people's identities are intersected. The *macrosystem* represents the political and social structures that might not be visible in young people's lives but still influence them. These can be national structures, such as law, educational policy and 'national values', but also regional and global structures seen in processes of globalisation

and large-scale economic frameworks. Lastly, Tilleczeek (2011) uses the *chronosystem* – “the timing and patterning of lives” – to “remind us that individuals and/or groups of young people live in position to historical time” (p. 8) and the importance of situating young people’s lives in a historical context. Not all generations face the same challenges and opportunities, and the historical time in which young people grow up needs to be considered to get a holistic understanding of young lives and the forces that shape their experiences. But the ‘complex cultural nesting approach is not only interested in identifying these different social contexts and levels of contexts in young people’s lives, but also how these contexts and levels are ‘nested’– that is, intersected and “stacked up within one another, each offering different but simultaneous experiences” (Tilleczeek, 2011, p. 4). The different social contexts and levels of contexts in young people’s lives – such as family, school, work, friendships, and religious congregations – are not standing on their own but are informed by and embedded in historical, social and political contexts. She argues that “the young person is always a social young person, and youth studies must further examine what it means to understand complex nested social relations for young lives over time in shifting global and/or local contexts” (Tilleczeek, 2014, p. 18).

‘Culture’ is an important concept in this analysis. Tilleczeek (2011) understands culture to “represent both material and nonmaterial aspects of the lives of young people as found across the four systems outlined above (micro, meso, macro and chrono)” (p. 8f). Material aspects of culture include, for example, technological media (such as mobile phones and the Internet), fashion, government and school policies, and state laws. Non-material aspects of culture, on the other hand, focus on more abstract but significant forms of influences on young people’s

lives, such as “societal representations, values, attitudes, and ideas about such things as youth, education, families, punishment, or the importance of technology” (p. 9). While non-material aspects of culture might not have the same direct impact on young people as material aspects of culture can have, they still “shape the logic of practice in prevention, policy, programs, and treatment of young people” (Tilleczek, 2011, p. 9) and can therefore have a profound impact on young people’s identity formation and senses of belonging. In order to understand the meaning of ‘being’, ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’ in the lives of young people, it is therefore important to not only attend to the different levels of social contexts in which young people live their lives and how these are nested but also the material and non-material aspects of culture that make up these social contexts.

### **2.3.2. Being, Becoming and Belonging: A conceptual discussion**

Tilleczek’s ‘complex cultural nesting approach’ is useful for this thesis in several ways. First, it provides a holistic and flexible framework to study young people’s lives that pays attention to both individual experiences and how these are shaped by multiple social contexts and relationships. By identifying different levels of contexts – micro, meso, macro and chrono levels – and the need to explore how these intersect in young people’s biographies, Tilleczek’s approach makes it possible to develop an analytical framework that looks at young people’s experiences from a psychosocial perspective. While Tilleczek herself does not describe her approach as psychosocial, the ‘complex cultural nesting approach’ puts emphasis on the need to explore the interplay between the social (with relationships, structures and institutions) and the personal (with emotions, identifications and negotiations) in the formation of young people’s identities and subjectivities. For

this thesis, which is interested in the impact(s) young people's interfaith work might have on their religious, political, ethical and social identities, this approach makes it possible to identify different social contexts that are important to understand young people's interfaith work. It also provides opportunities to explore how these social contexts might be nested and intersected, and how this might shape young people's experiences of interfaith work. Secondly, Tillecze's emphasis on the need to explore the social processes of 'being', 'becoming' and 'belonging' to understand young people's lives provide a comprehensive understanding of identity formation. While she is not alone in pointing to the connection between 'being' (stability in the 'here and now') and 'becoming' (time and change in the future) in relation to identity formation – this is something she shares with leading identity scholars (e.g. Jenkins, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; see Hall, 1996 for a critical discussion of the concept of identity) – her inclusion of the concept of 'belonging' in the equation is more novel. It also taps into a growing transdisciplinary interest in 'belonging', including youth studies (e.g. Habid & Ward, 2019). Here is not the place to discuss this rich body of literature (see, for example, May, 2011; Antonish, 2010 and Lähdensmäki et al, 2016, for extensive discussions), but for this thesis there are two theoretical points worth mentioning.

The first is the emphasis on 'belonging' as something that is both personal and structural. This understanding of belonging is predominantly developed by the sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis (2006). She makes a division between 'belonging' and 'politics of belonging'. The former focuses on social locations (e.g. social identities such as gender, class, age and religion), identifications and emotional attachments (stories about who one is/not), and ethical and political values about these attachments. Politics of belonging, on the other hand, describes the

construction, discourses and values of political collectivities (such as nation-states). Here the attention is on the boundaries of political belonging; that is, who is included (e.g. through citizenship) and who is excluded. By focusing on both these forms of belonging, Yuval-Davis points to the need to understand belonging not only as a form of emotional attachment but also as a political project that determines who is considered to be a member and the discourses and values that make up these structures. Yuval-Davis' understanding of belonging – particularly her emphasis on 'politics of belonging' – has been important in studies of young people's sense of belonging (Habid & Ward, 2019). While Tilleczek (2011, 2014) does not make any references to Yuval-Davis in her approach, their understanding of belonging is very similar. As we could see in section 2.3.1, Tilleczek defines belonging not only as an intimate feeling of 'being at home', but also as a process that takes place in relation to society and social institutions. To be able to explore belonging in the young people's accounts in this thesis, I will be drawing on Yuval-Davis understanding of 'belonging' as emotional and political. This is particularly helpful when trying to understand the impact young people's interfaith work might have on their sense of belonging in relation to multiple contexts (including their religious communities and as citizens in the UK).

But there is also another important aspect of the concept of belonging that Tilleczek mentioned in her approach that is particularly relevant for this thesis and which other scholars have also noted. It is the question of *not* belonging. Elspeth Probyn (1996) understands belonging as "a mode of thinking about how people get along, how various forms of belonging are articulated, how individuals conjugate difference into manners of being, and how desires to become are played out in everyday circumstances" (p. 5). She also argues that there is an affective aspect of



belonging that can be found in the word itself: it is not only about *be*-ing but also about *longing* - a desire to belong to something and become something in relation to this (Probyn, 1996; see also Bell, 1999). This affective aspect further emphasises the need to see belonging as a process and linked to questions around 'being' and 'becoming.' But it also raises question around what happens if somebody does not belong. The sociologist Vanessa May (2013) argues that what makes the concept of 'belonging' valuable is that it captures the structural and emotional struggles around inclusion and exclusion, and the impact this might have on people's identities and sense of self. However, she also notes that a feeling of not belonging might not necessarily only be a bad thing. While it can bring about difficult feelings of exclusion and being 'out of place', it can also be the starting point for activism for social change (May, 2013; see also May, 2011). As we will see in the following chapters, this understanding of 'belonging' is helpful to understand the emotional importance of interfaith work for some of the young people in this thesis and makes it possible to attend to how not belonging to one space can bring about a sense of belonging to another.

## **2.4. Chapter summary**

This chapter has introduced the theoretical framework that I will use to understand the young people's experiences of interfaith work and the impact it might have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities. It was divided into two parts. The first part was a literature review that looked closer at young people's religious identities and belonging, and how religion has been used in young people's political and civic engagement. Two overall conclusions were drawn from this literature review. The first is that in order to understand young people's religious identities

and belonging, we cannot focus solely on the social actors and contexts in young people's lives – such as family and religious congregations – but we also need to pay attention to how young people engage with these contexts and actors, and make sense of what they mean at a personal level. The second is that young people's religious and political identities often intersect, and religious traditions can provide important ethical frameworks through which young people's political and civic engagement are understood and interpreted.

The second part of the chapter focused on developing an analytical framework to study young people's experiences of interfaith work. The literature reviewed showed that an analytical approach is needed that explores not only the interplay between different sets of identities but also attends to a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. In order to do this, I introduced the Canadian youth scholar Kate Tilleczek's 'complex cultural nesting approach'. This approach provides both a theoretical and methodological framework to study young people's experiences. The theoretical framework is divided into two intersected parts. The first explores young people's identity formation through three social processes: *being*, *becoming* and *belonging*. The second identifies four different levels of social contexts – *micro* (where young people spend their daily lives), *meso* (the interplay between different micro systems), *macro* (political and social structures) and *chrono* (historical time) – which are needed to understand the meaning of being, becoming and belonging. Together, these provide a holistic analytical approach to understand young people's lives and also makes it possible to explore young people's experiences of interfaith work from a psychosocial perspective. Tilleczek's approach also provides a methodological approach to study young people's experiences. In the next chapter I will discuss this in more detail.

# 3.

## Constructing Biographical Accounts: Methodology and methods

So far, I have focused on setting the scene for the thesis (Chapter 1) and laying out the theoretical framework to understand young people's experiences of interfaith work (Chapter 2). In order to answer the main research question of this thesis – *what impacts might young people's interfaith work have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities?* – we need to pay attention to the complex interplay between individual experiences and social contexts, and how young people understand and interact with these settings. In this chapter, I describe and discuss how I researched this with the young people in this thesis, and the methodology, research methods and analytical framework I use to understand their experiences of interfaith work. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first focuses on the methodological framework and here I discuss what I mean by 'biographical accounts' and why biographical interviews are a suitable method for this thesis. The second section describes the research process in detail: the selection process and how the interviews were carried out. The third section attends to the thematic analytical framework I used to identify themes and structure the empirical chapters (Chapters 4-6). The chapter ends with ethical considerations, as

well as a chapter summary of the main arguments in the chapter. The chapter summary also introduces the empirical chapters.

### **3.1. Understanding biographical accounts**

As mentioned above, this section introduces the methodological framework I use to understand the young people's biographical accounts and the research method I have used to gather them. I begin by attending to why we should focus on young people's biographical accounts and to do this I will re-connect with Kate Tilleczek's theoretical approach discussed in the previous chapter. I then go on to describe how biographical interviews are understood in this thesis and why I have chosen this particular research method.

#### **3.1.1. Why focus on young people's biographical accounts?**

How I understand 'biographical accounts' in this thesis is informed by Tilleczek's 'Complex Cultural Nesting Approach'. As we saw in the previous chapter, this approach is divided into two parts. The first is the theoretical framework with the focus on 'being', 'becoming' and 'belonging', that was the concern of the previous chapter. The second is a methodological framework, where Tilleczek puts emphasis on the importance of focusing on young people's biographies and stories to understand their experiences. She argues that, by attending to biographical accounts, "we form a window of understanding young lives as stories that portray complex, fluid and flexible characters over time and place" and "opens the field [of youth studies] to deeper description of the abundance of experience and identity processes" (Tilleczek, 2014, p. 20). This way of understanding the importance of

biographical accounts is directly tied to Tilleczek's theoretical approach. If we want to understand the social processes of 'being', 'becoming' and 'belonging' in the lives of young people, Tilleczek argues, we need to look at the stories young people tell about their experiences and explore how these stories are shaped by the multiple social contexts, relationships and structures present in young people's lives. Tilleczek does not suggest a specific analytical framework to do this but puts emphasis on the importance of using methods that are flexible and open enough for young people to be able to construct their biographical accounts as freely as possible.

Tilleczek is not alone in this endeavour. Other youth scholars have also argued for the need to focus on young people's biographies to understand their lives. The British youth scholar Rachel Thomson (2007) has traced this interest in young people's biographical accounts to the wider 'biographical turn' that has emerged in the social sciences in the past two decades. At the heart of this 'biographical turn' lies an understanding that the stories people tell about themselves provide us with good insights into their identity formation and the impact social, historical, and political structures and contexts have on how people make sense of their lives. Thomson identifies two drivers behind the 'biographical turn' within youth studies. The first is an interest in young people's identity formation and how the stories young people tell about themselves provide insights into "who and what is possible to be" (Thompson, 2007, p. 78). The second is that studying young people's biographical accounts makes it possible to understand social change. This is particularly informed by late modern scholars, such as Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992), who, as we could see in the previous chapter, argue that identity formation today takes place in relation to multiple social contexts and structures.

Giddens (1991) has described this as the reflective sense of self, where identity formation is a constant project of trying to make sense of who one is and can become. The stories we tell – both to ourselves and to others – are central in this process. Beck (1992) uses the distinction between ‘normal biographies’ and ‘choice biographies’ to describe this process. Whereas ‘normal biographies’ describe “life pattern defined by convention and shared expectation” (Thomson, 2007, p. 86) (for example, in relation to education, career and family life), ‘choice biographies’ are formed as the result of the ‘individualisation of the self’ where young people are responsible to form the lives they lead. However, the ‘individualisation of self’ does not mean that young people are not shaped by social, political and economic structures and discourses; it only means that young people are responsible for making decisions in relation to their lives to a higher extent than previous generations (Ibid; see also Johansson, 2017).

By focusing on young people’s biographical accounts, it is possible to explore how they make sense of and negotiate these demands, the resources they draw on and who they become in the process. It also provides a holistic framework to understand young people’s experiences (Thomson, 2007; Tilleczek, 2014). At the core of both Tilleczek’s and Thomson’s understandings of biographical accounts – as well as this thesis – is that they are socially constructed: that is, they are not seen as a piece of reality told by young people to be studied, but as something constructed in the process of telling. This means that the young people’s biographical accounts are also the result of the research process itself: the theoretical and methodological stances, the research questions, and the relationship between the researcher and the researched. How I will handle these questions is the focus of the next section.

### **3.1.2. Biographical interviews: flexible and structured**

In order to gather the young people's biographical accounts, I used biographical interviews. Some forms of biographical interviews, such as life story interviews, can be very unstructured in focus and sometimes only centre around one single question ('tell me about yourself') (Arnold & Blackburn, 2004; Thomson, 2007; see also Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013). However, since my interest was to learn more about my participants experiences of interfaith work and the impact it might have on their identities and sense of belonging, I used a more structured form of biographical interviewing that is interested in learning more about young people's lives in relation to a certain topic (interfaith work). It can be described as a more flexible form of semi-structured interviewing, where I have developed an interview guide with a few broad themes I wished to cover (I will describe the interview guide in more depth in the next section) but that still allowed the young people to tell me their stories as freely as they want. I have borrowed some techniques from life story interviewing – for example, by starting out with the question 'please tell me about yourself' – and ask questions in relation to their biographical accounts. This form of interviewing was chosen because it provides the opportunity to develop rich biographical accounts but without losing the focus of the thesis.

But as with all qualitative interviews, it is also dependent on the relationship between the researcher and the research participant. Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale (2013) have emphasised the need to see the two words in interviews: "it is an *inter-view*, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee (p. 4, italics my own). As we could see above in relation to biographical accounts, interviews – including the most flexible ones – are always a result (at least in part) of the research context. They are (at least in

part) informed by the theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis, but also of my own background: as a Swedish, white, middle-class woman who identifies herself as a secular and cultural (post)Christian. Sometimes my background was brought up in the interviews – for example, my own complex relationship with religion – but mostly it was never covered or acknowledged. As noted by Brinkmann & Kvale (2013), “the research interview is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and controls the situation” (p. 6). This is important not only to understand the construction of young people’s biographical accounts in the interview situation but also in the analytical process. I will come back to this later in this thesis.

## **3.2. Collecting biographical accounts**

This section turns its attention to how I carried out the research with the young people. It begins by focusing on how I selected the interfaith youth organisations and recruited the young people. I then go on to focus on how the interview guide was constructed and how the interviews were conducted.

### **3.2.1. Entering the field: selecting organisations and participants**

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I recruited young people from three interfaith organisations: the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ), the Faith & Belief Forum (formerly 3FF) and the Feast.<sup>35</sup> These organisations were chosen for several reasons. First, I wanted to include different types of interfaith organisations to get as many perspectives as possible. The CCJ is one of the oldest and most established

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<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the young people, who are called by pseudonyms, I am not anonymising the interfaith organisations in this thesis. I will come back to this more in-depth in section 3.4.



interfaith organisations in the UK, the Faith & Belief Forum is a leading interfaith youth organisation with a national outreach (but began as a dialogue forum for Christian, Jewish and Muslim adult leaders), and the Feast is a predominantly local interfaith organisation with its headquarters in Birmingham and is (in contrast to the two others) a Christian charity. I did look at other interfaith organisations and interfaith projects aimed at young people – such as interfaith women’s groups, local interfaith youth councils and intercultural organisations with interfaith components – but did not find anything that represented the same combination of structure and focus as the CCJ, the Faith & Belief Forum and the Feast. Most of the interfaith projects I found when looking had also terminated or they did not get back in touch with me. Although selecting only established interfaith organisations and not looser, more temporary interfaith projects (that make up most of the interfaith work in the UK) might have an impact on what kind of interfaith experiences this thesis can explore, it provides the thesis with a greater stability, organisational history and (most importantly) active members to recruit participants from.

Second, I wanted interfaith organisations that included young Christians, Jews and Muslims but with different emphases. The CCJ focuses on the theological histories and relationships between Christians and Jews, the Faith & Belief Forum on a wide range of faith and belief systems (although I only concentrated on young Christians, Jews and Muslims) and the Feast was at the time working with young people from predominantly Christian and Muslim backgrounds. The Feast’s Christian constitution and what impact this might have on the young people’s experiences was also interesting to explore further. I tried to contact an established interfaith organisation that focused on young Jews and Muslims but sadly did not hear back from them and had to let that focus go. Third, I wanted the organisations

to offer a wide range of activities to increase the possibilities of recruiting young people from different backgrounds and experiences of interfaith work. The CCJ has in the last decade started to offer both leadership programmes and paid positions to attract more young people into the organisation. The Faith & Belief Forum offers a wide range of paid positions and internships for young people in the organisations, and they also have different leadership and story-telling programmes for young people. The Feast is predominantly made up of volunteers, but they have also employed young people as youth workers. Together, these organisations provide both a good mix of organisations, but they also represent – as we could see in Chapter 1 – different developments in the interfaith landscape in the UK.

How I first approached the organisations differed slightly. The first organisation I contacted was the Faith & Belief Forum. This was partly because I already had met the director of the Faith & Belief Forum at an unrelated meeting at Birkbeck and he was very positive about my research project. But the Faith & Belief Forum also organised an interfaith youth event that took place around the time (November 2016) when I started to enter the field. The event in question was the Interfaith Summit during the Interfaith Week and I thought it was a good opportunity to get to know the work of the organisation better and possibly meet some young people who might be interested in participating in the thesis. To get more information about the event and to introduce myself, I sent an email to one of the young organisers. While I was not able to recruit any young people at the Interfaith Summit, the young person I contacted before the event – Sam<sup>36</sup>, whom I will introduce more fully in the next chapter – became one of my first recruits and

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<sup>36</sup> The young people's names are pseudonyms. I will come back to this in my discussion of the ethical considerations in section 3.4.

later also helped me recruit Baile, Lalon and Laura from the Faith & Belief Forum. Although the CCJ did not have any interfaith youth activities for me to attend, I approached the organisation in a similar way as the Faith & Belief Forum: I emailed the person who was responsible for the student leadership programme at the CCJ. At that time, I wanted to include young people who participated in the student leadership programme and felt it was a good idea to contact the gatekeeper. This person turned out to be another young person – Elizabeth – who not only became a participant in the thesis but also helped me recruit Isaac and Frank Temple. Elizabeth tried to get some of the young people involved in the student leadership programme to participate, but they all felt were too busy with university to participate. I was also recommended to contact the local branches of the CCJ to hear if they knew any young person who was active in their local work. Most of these emails were responded in a similar fashion – ‘sorry, but we don’t have any young people who are active’ – but I got a positive email from one of the local branches and this was how I was able to recruit Jacob.

The process to get access to the Feast took longer than the CCJ and the Faith & Belief Forum. I approached the Feast in a similar way to how I approached the other organisations: by emailing the then CEO about my project and saying that I was interested in including the Feast in my thesis. He responded with a very positive email and we met over a coffee when he was in London in early December of 2016. We got along very well, and he helped me to get in contact with one of the adult employees responsible for the work the Feast does in Birmingham. She was equally positive about my project and invited me up to Birmingham in early February of 2017 to meet the team and introduce myself and my research further. Later she informed me that they have turned down researchers in the past because

they thought that these research projects were not interested in what the Feast wanted to do. However, they were very interested in my thesis and trusted me as a researcher. Through her, I was able to recruit Mayah, Billy, Minerva, Sana and Nadine. Although this recruitment process took longer than the CCJ and the Faith & Belief Forum (where I was mostly depending on snow-balling) and almost completely dependent on gatekeepers, I found the process to be very helpful in getting a good understanding of the organisation and build trustful relationships. Through my meetings with the leadership of the Feast before meeting the young people, I learned a lot about the Feast, its system and purpose. This also helped me understand some of the young people's experiences of the Feast and develop questions to ask them.

In order to help Sam, Elizabeth and the leadership at the Feast to help me find young people to include in the thesis, I sent them an information sheet (see Appendix 1) describing who I was looking for. First, I wanted to find young people who identified themselves as Christians, Jews or Muslims. The focus on 'identify' is important here. As we could see in the previous chapter, identifying with a particular religion can take different forms – some are very practising, others might not be practising at all but still consider religion to be important in their lives – and I wanted to include young people with different relationships with their religion in the thesis. This turned out to be very helpful for some of the young people who have more complex relationships with practising their faith but still are strongly identifying with their religion. I also managed to find young people from different branches within their religions. Amongst the young Christians, I have a Catholic, a Pentecostal Christian, an Anglican Christian and two Methodists. There is also diversity amongst the young Jews, with one identifying as Orthodox (but who grew

up in a Liberal Jewish synagogue), another having practised as an Orthodox Jew but left Orthodoxy and a third identifying as a Reform Jew. All the young Muslims identify with the Sunni branch of Islam, but their religious practices vary, having been shaped by the diverse origins of their parents. As we will see in the following chapters, this brought about an interesting mix of theological and political approaches to interfaith work.

The second criterion was based on age. Initially, I thought I would include young people between 16 and 23 years old. The reason behind this is that most of the interfaith projects I encountered in the early stages of this thesis involved this age group (most of these focused on young people in schools and at universities). I also thought, from a theoretical perspective at that time, that this age group would be appropriate since I was interested in what impact interfaith work might have on young people's identities and this is a time in young people's lives when their identities are in flux. Although there are differences between young people who are 16 to those who are 23, I thought this would bring about opportunities to explore how young people at different stages in their lives experience interfaith work. However, some significant experiences early on in the recruitment process made me realise that I had to extend the age group. The first, and most important one, was that I had difficulties recruiting young people in this age group. Although there were interfaith youth projects for younger people, these were difficult to find and, when I managed to find them, they were often already terminated (most of them were short-term). The two interfaith organisations I first established contact with and that wanted to participate in the thesis were also unable to help me recruit young people in this age category. It was Sam at the Faith & Belief Forum who first made me realise that I should extend the age group. When he heard that I was looking for

young people to interview, he said that he would have loved to participate but that he, with his 24 years, was older than what I was looking for in the information sheet. This encouraged me to change the age group to young people between 16 and 30 years old. Although this is a significant age difference and young people who are 16 years old are often in a very different place in life compared to someone who have turned 30, I wanted a broader age group to avoid excluding young people who might be interested in participating in the thesis. I also thought, similar to my initial plan, that including younger and older young people might make it possible to explore different experiences of interfaith work and also attend to Jeffrey Arnett's (2000, 2014) emphasis on the twenties as an important period for identity formation (see Chapter 2). In the end, however, most participants were in their mid-twenties. The youngest participant (Billy) was 18 at the time of the interview and the oldest (Jacob) was 28, but most of the others were around 23 to 25 years old. It also became obvious during the recruitment process and afterwards that young people in their late teens and mid-twenties are the most common participants in interfaith youth work. This means that extending the age group slightly provides good insights into an important group of interfaith participants.

However, the age difference between the participants still raises some critical questions in relation to what effect this might have on how formative interfaith work is on identity formation and what kind of biographical accounts are produced. Although identity formation is never finished and, as we saw in Chapter 2, the twenties are an important formative period in young people's lives, there are still differences between teenagers and young people in their twenties. Whereas teenagers to a much greater extent are still living with their parents and many are still in school, older young people in their mid-twenties are often living on their

own and might have finished their education and started a job (Furlong, 2012; Arnett, 2000, 2014; Jones, 2009; Johansson & Herz, 2019). Older young people also bring with them more life experiences and often a clearer understanding of who they are than teenagers do. But, as we will see in the following chapters, these different life experiences also brought reflexivity and a different kind of awareness to the thesis that might have been otherwise lost. The chapters will also show that, while there are some differences between the younger and older participants in terms of work and education, there are also many similarities between them and the older participants were asking very similar questions as the younger ones. I will come back to this in Chapter 7.

I also tried as far as possible to get a good mix in terms of gender and ethnicity. Although this was not possible to have as guiding criteria in the same way as age and religion, I strived for as much diversity as possible to be able to include a wide range of experiences. In terms of gender, seven of the young people identified as women and six as men. None of the young people expressed other ways of identifying their gender. This gender balance was a good surprise since studies have shown that a majority of those participating in faith-based social activism tend to be women (Davie, 2015; Ipgrave, 2018) and I had therefore expected to find more young women than young men to interview. I also managed to get some diversity in terms of ethnicity. Most of the young Christians (except for Nadine, who has West Indian origin) and all of the Jews identified as white, and the young Muslims had predominantly Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin. All in all, I recruited and interviewed 13 young people for this thesis. Five of these identified as Christian, three as Jewish and five as Muslims. Four young people had in different ways been active in the Faith & Belief Forum (two Jews, a Christian and

a Muslim), four in the CCJ (three Christians and a Jew) and five in the Feast (a Christian and four Muslims). For a full overview of the young people, see Appendix 2. This narrow sample of participants can be criticised for being too small and limited. However, keeping the number of participants low makes it possible to attend more to their lived experiences and therefore provide a more detailed analysis than would have been possible with a larger sample of young people. A smaller sample is preferable in biographical research as this is a time-consuming method and produces an abundance of in-depth data (Arnold & Blackburn, 2004). By conducting two interviews with each participant (26 interviews in total) I wanted instead to dig deeper into the young people's experiences and follow up on themes in a way that might be more difficult had I interviewed a larger sample. But it was also a matter of practicality: young people remain a minority in interfaith work and it was at times challenging to find young people who both fit the criteria and wanted to participate. Some early contacts fell off because the young people were too busy and did not have the time to participate. However, as the interview process proceeded, it was clear that the 13 participants produced biographical accounts that showed both depth and breadth. It is time to describe this process.

### **3.2.2. (Re)constructing the interview guide(s)**

Before I carried out the interviews, I constructed an interview guide (see Appendix 3) that functioned as a foundation for the first cycle of interviews. This interview guide was developed to be both flexible enough to be able to capture a wide range of experiences and encourage the young people to tell their stories as freely as possible, but also structured enough to answer the research questions and engage with the theoretical framework. The interview guide was divided into three broader



themes: (1) the young people's backgrounds and how they became interested in interfaith work; (2) the young people's interfaith work in the present and why they are being active; and (3) how the young people felt about the future and the impact their interfaith work might have on future religious and political engagement. Each theme was made up by key questions and topical probes that focused on specific moments in their lives: their religious upbringing, family life, education, why they chose to become active in that particular interfaith organisation, the opportunities and challenges they experienced being involved in interfaith work, what it means to them to belong to and identify with a religion, if there are any particular scriptural texts they are inspired by, etc. Although I very rarely asked the questions in the exact way as they were written in the interview guide, they structured the content of each broad theme.

The interview guide was developed in different cycles. First, it was constructed in relation to the research questions (particularly the subsidiary research questions) and the theoretical framework of the thesis. Hennink et al (2011) describes this as the 'design cycle' of the interview guide, where the aim is to develop an interview guide that makes it possible to answer the research questions of the study. During this 'design cycle', I developed the thematic structure of the interview guide and some of the key questions and topical probes. However, I did not know whether the structure, themes and questions would work smoothly in an interview. In contrast to more structured interviews where the interview guide is made up by specific questions to ask the participants, biographical and in-depth interviews are reliant on more flexible interview guides that make it possible to follow the story the participant is telling (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013). In order to try if the interview guide worked, I carried out a few pilot interviews with young

people in the UK and in Sweden. The pilot interview I carried out in the UK was with Sam and is included in this thesis since it turned out well. It also showed that the structure of the interview guide worked in practice and I only made some small changes in relation to some of the topical probes and questions that I felt were either too abstract or too similar to my research questions. I also got the opportunity to try the interview guide on four young people who are involved in an interfaith youth project in Sweden that I had been following for a time. Most of these interviews were carried out in English since several of these young people did not speak Swedish and these interviews helped me become much more confident working with the interview guide and familiar with its structure.

This familiarity was helpful when I carried out the rest of the interviews for this thesis. Hennink et al (2011) describe this part of the development of the interview guide as the ‘ethnographic cycle’, where the structure and content of the interview guide might change during the interview process. The interview guide I developed during the ‘design cycle’ only changed slightly during the ‘ethnographic cycle’. However, since I carried out two interviews with each participant (a process I will describe more in just a moment), I developed a second interview guide for each participant (see Appendix 4 for an example of a second interview guide). These interview guides were personally tailored and followed up on themes, discoveries and questions that emerged in the first interview, and were therefore different from the first interview guide.

### **3.2.3. Conducting the interviews**

As mentioned above, I conducted two interviews with each participant and each interview lasted between one and two hours (see Appendix 5 for an overview of all

interviews). The interviews were carried out between January and June 2017, in places the young people chose. In some cases, interviews took place in one of the rooms at the interfaith organisation; in others, they occurred in a quiet spot in different coffee shops. Two interviews took place at Birkbeck. When the young people left it to me to decide where the interview should take place, I was careful to ask them what kind of environment they preferred. As noted by Brinkmann & Kvale (2013), the setting in which the interview takes place is important for several reasons. First, the participant needs to feel comfortable to speak freely and the chosen place for the interview should therefore be somewhere they feel they are not distracted or overheard. This is particularly important when the interview covers sensitive topics. Second, the place should not be too noisy since this could make it difficult to hear what the interviewee is saying and affect the recording. Although not all the places chosen for the interviews were completely quiet and some interviews were interrupted by colleagues entering the room or the coffee shop was about to close, none of the young people complained about where the interview took place and it was mostly I who was affected by the disturbance.

I began all the interviews with some small talk with the young people about how they were and about things that had occurred lately (particularly with the terror attacks in Manchester in May and the general election in June of 2017). It was important to me that they felt relaxed before I turned on the Dictaphone and the interview began. In the first interview I told them about the procedure of the interview and let them sign the letter of consent (see Appendix 5). They also chose a pseudonym to replace their real names. Only two of the participants – Sam and Isaac – preferred me to choose the pseudonyms for them. I will come back to this later in relation to ethical considerations in section 3.4. The first interview followed

the themes in the interview guide in a very flexible way: it focused on their background and upbringing, religious engagement, how they became interested in interfaith work and why they became active in the interfaith organisation they were involved in. I began the interview by asking them to ‘tell me something about themselves’ and followed where the answers to that question took us. The young people reacted in different ways to that question. Most of them were taken aback by the vastness of the question. Baile, for example, said that she did not know how to respond to a question like that. In those cases, I provided the young people with examples and probes of what I was looking for – such as their age, where they lived and their religious background – and their biographical accounts took on from there. But some young people used the question to provide me with a lengthy answer. Jacob, for example, spoke for more than 30 minutes before I asked another question.

I tried as far as possible not to disturb the young people while they were talking and instead took notes in a notebook to identify questions and themes. When they were finished, I asked follow-up questions or asked them to elaborate on what I found interesting. In this way, I managed to ask questions directly to their biographical accounts and I only used the interview guide as a memory sheet to keep the interview focused. The more interviews I carried out, the more confident I became in letting go of the interview guide and following the young people’s stories. Several of the young people were pleasantly surprised by how flexible and ‘conversational-like’ the interviews were. Mayah, for example, had expected me to come with a list of already defined questions to ask her. But as the first interview progressed, she felt much more comfortable with the flexible way of asking questions and by the end of the interview she teased me and said, “don’t think I didn’t know what you were trying to do.” Some of the young people also describe

the interviews as ‘almost therapeutic’ and gave them the opportunity to reflect on why they are still active in interfaith work. Isaac, for example, said that while he knew how his interfaith journey began, he had never really thought of why he was still active. This helped him understand his interfaith work in a broader light and think deeply about what interfaith meant to him. Another thing that struck me during the interviews was how open the young people were about their lives. Many gave lengthy, personal, and sometimes painful accounts and this left me feeling both very grateful for their generosity and concerned from an ethical standpoint how I should use these accounts in the thesis. On the one hand, I wanted to stay true to their stories; on the other hand, I did not want to risk including accounts that could be used against the young people after publication. In those cases where the story turned very personal and/or included difficult situations involving other people, I informed the young people that they should read the transcripts of their interviews and tell me if there was anything they did not want me to use. Although several read their transcripts, none of them asked me to exclude anything. However, to avoid putting them at risk I made some ethical decisions in relation to this and I will come back to these more in-depth in section 3.4.

The second interview focused on the themes and questions that emerged or were not covered in the first interview. I identified these by transcribing the first interview almost immediately afterwards (I will describe the transcription process in more detail in section 3.3.1), but the notes I took during the first interview and what came up in the interviews with other young people were also very helpful. I constructed a second interview guide for each participant. For some young people, the second interview guide was short and only covered a few themes with questions and topical probes. For others, the second interview guide was much longer than

the first interview guide and focused on a wide range of themes. The reason for this difference can be found in how broad the first interview was. If the first interview covered a wide range of themes, I used the second interview to go deeper into some of these themes to explore them further. But if the first interview focused more deeply on some issues, I used the second interview to get a broader view and this often led to more themes. Most of the second interviews were shorter than the first one, but in some cases they were longer. Laura's second interview, for example, lasted for almost two hours and was able to go deeply into some of the themes that emerged in the first interview. Some of the young people described the second interview as much more relaxed than the first one: they knew me as a researcher and the format of the interview was familiar. Although several brought up painful and very personal accounts in the first interview, I felt that the second interview gave more space to share personal experiences and show emotions. It was also a good way for me to follow up on themes that I discovered were specific for certain religions. For example, I discovered in the first interviews with the young Christians that the question of evangelisation in interfaith work was very complex and was able to follow up on that.

### **3.3. Analysing biographical accounts**

This section focuses on the analytical process and the steps I took to analyse the young people's biographical accounts, how I transcribed the material and the analytical framework I have used to code and identify the themes that make up the empirical chapters. I will begin by focusing on the transcription process that have been a very important part of the analytical process and then go on to introduce the analytical framework.

### 3.3.1. Transcribing the interviews

The transcription process had different purposes. As I mentioned in the previous section, I transcribed the interviews very quickly after conducting the interviews. This was an important part of the interview process and the preparation for the second interview, but it was also critical in the analytical process. As noted by Hennink et al (2011), to begin to transcribe interviews shortly after they have been conducted is a good way to early get an overview of the data material. I did not use any transcribing tools or programmes to transcribe the interviews but did it all manually: by listening to the recordings and transcribing what was being said. This process took a very long time – from around 8 hours for an hour’s interview to up to three days (for the longest and most complex interviews) – but it was worth the time. Not only did I get a very good understanding of the data I was working with (individual interviews as well as the material as a whole) but the informal analysis I did during this process was also helpful in structuring the empirical chapters. I will come back to this below.

All interviews were transcribed in full and verbatim, and I tried as far as possible to stay true to word articulations (by using *italics* in the text), emotional expression (such as laughs), and tone of voice (e.g. happy, ironic, sarcastic) in the text when this was important to understand the meaning of the text. However, I wanted to make the text as readable as possible and therefore included only when necessary expressions such as ‘eh’ and ‘um’. The process of transcribing an interview from verbal speech to written text is not a neutral process. Cindy Bird (2005) argues that the transcription process should be seen as an interpretative act, where the researcher’s social, cultural, linguistic, theoretical and methodological stances need to be considered. The transcription process should therefore be seen

as a meaning-making process “rather than simply a mechanical act of putting spoken sounds on paper” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). My decision to transcribe the interview material is therefore dependent on the theoretical and methodological choices I have made. Had I had another methodological and theoretical framework, I might have transcribed the interviews differently. All transcribed, the interview material made up 1100 pages. To make sure that I got the words, expressions and sentences right, I re-listened to the interviews several times while reading through the interview transcripts. This was both a good way to ensure that the transcripts covered the interviews accurately, but it was also an important part of the initial analytical process. During this time, I identified themes and patterns that later came to be important in the thematic analysis (which I will describe below). To facilitate this reading process (as well as the analytical process) I printed all interviews and put them into a folder. To ensure that the young people’s anonymity was respected, I only used their pseudonyms in the transcripts. When the transcription process was over, I deleted the recorded interviews from my computer and stored them on an external hard drive that only I have access to.

### **3.3.2. Thematic analysis**

To do the thematic analysis of the young people’s biographical accounts, I have used Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke’s (2006) step-by-step guide. This guide, which is made up of six phases, provide clear steps that makes it possible to follow how the interview material has been coded and how themes have been identified, as well as *why* these themes have been chosen. Braun and Clarke argue that even though thematic analysis is one of the most common analytical frameworks used to analyse qualitative data, it is often defined in very vague terms and it is unclear



what steps have been taken, how the material has been coded and how themes have been identified. They define thematic analysis as “the searching *across* a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86, italics in original). The six phases that makes up Braun and Clarke’s step-to-step guide helps the researcher identifying those patterns. These six phases are: “(1) familiarizing yourself with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report” (ibid, p. 87).

In the rest of this section, I will focus on how I used Braun and Clarke’s guide to code the interview transcripts and identify the themes that make up the empirical chapters. As we could see above, the analytical process began during the transcription period and this was a very important part in familiarising myself with the data material. I actively read and re-read the whole data material (all 1100 pages) several times to get a good sense of each participant and how the different biographical accounts could be understood as a whole. This process also provided an important foundation for starting to code the material, which is the second phase in Braun and Clarke’s guide. As with the transcription process, I did not use any programme to code the material and did it all manually. Although this process took a very long time and I initially considered using NVivo to help me code the material, coding it manually provided me with a flexible and thorough way to get to know my material even better. It also made it easier for me to re-code the material when needed. The coding process had different phases. Initially, I read through each interview and highlighted in the margin codes that I found important and significant in the account. These codes were also relevant for the research questions. Examples of codes are ‘interfaith’, ‘meaning of religion’, ‘civic engagement’, ‘politics’,

‘family’ and ‘religious congregations’ (see Appendix 7 for an excerpt showing how I coded the interview material). I wrote all codes down in a code diary. When I had coded the material and re-read them several times, I started to look at the codes for possible themes. As noted by Braun and Clarke, this third phase “involves sorting the different codes into potential themes and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes” (p. 89). I went through all the codes I had written down in the code diary and started to look for themes. Initially, these were smaller themes that could be made into a section in a chapter. For example, it could be about ‘growing up’, ‘choosing interfaith organisations’, and ‘challenges of interfaith work’. The more of these smaller themes I found, the better understanding of the relationship between them did I get. I also identified different levels of themes and sub-themes in the material, which was also the starting point of structuring the empirical chapters. During this time, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggestion to work with mind-maps to illustrate how more overarching themes and smaller themes were linked to each other. This process took several weeks, and I did several different mind-maps with a wide range of themes. Although this process, as with the transcription and coding processes, took a long time, it was also very creative and during this time I tried different themes by writing smaller chunks of text to see if the themes were possible to work with.

This process continued into the fourth phase of Braun and Clarke’s guide: reviewing the themes. According to the authors, this phase involves two levels. The first level involves “read[ing] all the collated [data] extracts for each theme, and consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). If they do, one can move on to the second level, where the researcher considers “the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set, but also

whether...[the] thematic map ‘accurately’ reflects the meanings evident in the data set as a whole” (ibid.). In order to check this, I did two things. The first was I re-read each interview again to see if the codes and themes I had identified were accurate. I then looked at the data material as a whole (what Braun & Clarke describe as ‘data set’) to see if the themes also were appropriate across the interviews. During this process, I found some new codes but no new themes.

After I had checked that the codes and themes I had identified accurately reflected my material, I went on to the fifth phase: naming the themes and sub-themes. Braun and Clarke argue that “by ‘define and refine’, we mean identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspects of the data each theme captures” (p. 92). This process was critical in my attempt to start structuring the analytical process. During the process of coding, finding themes and reviewing the themes, I started to get a sense of what I wanted the chapters to look like, what they should focus on and how they should inform the argument of the thesis. I had written all this down in my code diary and during the fifth phase I re-read these notes and tried different ideas in different drafts. A critical part of this work was to get the sub-themes – that is, smaller themes – to fit within the larger themes and to develop a red thread throughout the empirical chapters without unnecessary repetition. This process took several months to do. In the end, I identified three broader themes that structured the empirical chapters: (1) Becoming Active, (2) Doing Interfaith; and (3) The Politics of Interfaith. Together, these three chapters capture the richness of the data material and answer the research questions of the thesis. The sixth phase in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guide is producing the report, where the researcher “tell[s] the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis”

(p. 93). Here, the researcher needs to convince the reader that the thematic analysis is sound by including data excerpts to illustrate the argument and provide analysis of these data excerpts. This will be the focus of Chapters 4 to 6. But before I introduce these chapters further, I will focus on the ethical considerations I have made in relation to the data material.

### **3.4. Ethical considerations**

I took several steps to ensure that this thesis was conducted to the highest ethical standard. Before the interview process began, I applied for and was granted ethical approval from the School of Social Science, History and Philosophy at Birkbeck, University of London. In this form, I described the project, the methodology, the recruitment process, how the interviews will be carried out, how I planned to handle possible emotional distress brought up in interviews, and how I would ensure informed consent (see Appendix 8 to see the ethics approval form). I also did a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check to show that I have no previous record of criminal convictions. Since I wanted to carry out interviews with young people, I wanted to be able to offer any of the interfaith organisations a DBS certificate in case they requested it. This is commonly used in youth work contexts and recommended by the Economic and Social Research Council in research on young people.<sup>37</sup> None of the organisations did and the only interfaith organisation I explicitly told about the DBS check was during my meeting with the leadership in the Feast. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, before the first interviews with the young people began, I asked them to sign a letter of consent (see Appendix

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<sup>37</sup> For more information about the ESRC ethical recommendations when researching children and young people, see <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/frequently-raised-topics/research-with-children-and-young-people/>

6). In this letter, I described that participating in the interviews is voluntary, that they had the right to withdraw at any time during the interview process and that only I would have access to the recorded interviews. I also described how these recorded interviews would be stored and the precautions I would take to avoid recordings falling into the wrong hands (storing them in an encrypted external hard drive that only I have access to). I read through the letter of consent with the young people to ensure that they understood the terms and then asked them to sign the letter. All the young people did this without any questions.

To protect their anonymity and to avoid as far as possible other people outside the organisations recognising them, I asked the young people to choose a pseudonym. Some of the young people objected to this and said that they wanted to be called their real names, but I told them that I could not foresee who might read the thesis after publication and for research ethical reasons I would not use their real names. All the young people accepted this rationale. Most of them picked their own pseudonyms – some took names they wanted to call their future children, others took relatives' names or the names of people they admire. The only one who chose both a first and a last name was Frank Temple, who picked his name based on the two religious leaders he admired the most: Frank Littell and William Temple. In several cases, the young people's choice of pseudonyms came up in their biographical accounts and this showed that a pseudonym might provide deeper insights into people's lives. Three of the young people asked me to pick names for them – Sam, Isaac and Sana – and in those cases I tried as much as possible to pick names that were both suitable and linked to their religions. After picking the pseudonyms I asked the young people if they liked the names and they all accepted them. As I mentioned above, I have not anonymised the interfaith organisations in

this thesis. There are several reasons behind this decision. First, I got permission to use the real names of the organisations by the leadership and the young people were also enthusiastic about naming the organisations. Second, since all organisations are leading names in interfaith work, they would have been recognisable despite anonymisation. While this decision raises important ethical questions, it also provides the study with data that would otherwise have been ignored. During the interviews I was also careful to make sure that the young people did not feel uncomfortable or unnecessarily exposed. As I mentioned above, one way to make sure they felt more at ease was to offer them to read their transcripts before I used them in the thesis. I made this offer before the interviews so the young people could feel a sense of control over what they were about to tell me. Although none of the young people who read their transcripts asked me to remove anything from them, many of them were grateful that they had the chance to read it. Minerva, for example, even shared the transcript with her family after receiving them and asked them ‘did this sound like me?’ (they agreed that it did).

However, in some cases I decided not to use parts of the transcripts for ethical reasons even though they would have contributed to the thesis. These were situations involving conflicts with other people and including this in the thesis could put the young person at risk. Before making this decision, I informed the young people about my decision and they agreed with me. I also made sure to end all interviews with a little conversation about how the young people experienced the interview and if there was anything they wanted to add. This was a good way to create a smooth transition after the Dictaphone was switched off and avoid an abrupt ending to the interview. It was also useful to hear the young people’s reflections about the interview and what they enjoyed and thought about it. In some

cases, many very intriguing and significant insights were given during these smaller conversations and I took many notes during these conversations (sometimes even wishing that I had not switched the Dictaphone off). These notes were kept in my field diary and later transcribed on computer. As with all other notes I took during and after the interview process, I always used the young people's pseudonyms and never included any personal information or details that would make it easy to recognise them.

### **3.5. Chapter summary**

This chapter has focused on the methodological framework and the method of the thesis. The first section focused on what I mean by 'biographical accounts' and why biographical interviews are a suitable research method for this thesis. The second section went on to describe the practical steps I took to recruit the interfaith organisations and the participants in this thesis, how I developed the interview guide and conducted the interviews. The third section described the analytical process: how I transcribed the interviews and analysed them with help of Braun and Clark's thematic analysis. The fourth focused on the ethical considerations I have made to ensure that the thesis is conducted at the highest ethical level. To re-connect with the title of this chapter – Constructing Biographical Accounts – this chapter has shown that the young people's biographical accounts are constructed in several ways. They are the result of young people's understanding of their lives and the social, political and historical contexts they find themselves in. But they are also formed by the research process: the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the thesis, the interview process and later the transcribing and analytical processes. These need all to be taken account when approaching the young people's

biographical accounts in the coming chapters. The next three chapters are the empirical chapters of the thesis. The next chapter – ‘Becoming Active’ – focuses on how and why the young people became involved in interfaith work. It explores the young people’s childhood and family life, religious background, education and how their interest in interfaith work emerged. Chapter 5 is called ‘Doing Interfaith’ and this chapter deals with this topic in two overall ways: by exploring interfaith work as a means to achieve social and political goals, but also as theological commitments. The final analytical chapter – ‘The Politics of Interfaith’ – looks at challenges and boundaries of interfaith work. Here the focus is on the challenges the research participants have experienced in relation to their interfaith work and the impact this has had on their sense of belonging to their religious communities and to the UK. Together, these three chapters are the result of the sixth step of Braun and Clark’s (2006) model: producing the report.



# 4.

## Becoming Active: Start of interfaith journeys

This chapter focuses on how the research participants' interfaith journeys began. It answers the first two of the research sub-questions: (1) how did the young people become interested in interfaith work? and (2) what actors and contexts have been important in forging and sustaining the young people's interest in interfaith work? The chapter is divided into two major themes: 'growing up' and 'choosing interfaith work.' Whereas 'growing up' focuses more generally on the young people's backgrounds and particularly on religious and political socialisation, 'choosing interfaith work' focuses directly on how the participants became interested in interfaith work and got involved in the interfaith organisations they are active in at the time of the interviews. I end the chapter with a chapter summary of the main arguments.

### **4.1. Growing up**

This section focuses on the young people's reflections about their upbringing and particularly the formation of their religious and political identities. In contrast to the next section, it focuses very little directly on their interfaith work. However, it provides important insights into the young people's religious and political

socialisation and some actors and contexts that have been important in later forging young people's interest in interfaith work. It also explores the young people's understanding of their religious identities and lays ground to later focus on how it informs their interfaith work. The first subsection attends to the role of the young people's parents in their religious and political socialisation, and the second looks closer at the young people's own religious identities – or 'their Christianity/Judaism/Islam', which was a common way to describe their religious identities – and belonging. These reflections are often a response to the first main question I asked in the beginning of the first interview: 'could you tell me something about yourself?' but also to direct questions in relation to their family life, education, and religious background.

#### **4.1.1. Parental influence: religious and political socialisation**

When the young people talked about their upbringing, religious and political socialisation were at the forefront of their stories. All the young people have grown up in families where religion was visibly present in their everyday lives – all attended religious services regularly, they observed religious holidays and performed religious rituals at home (such as praying, keeping kosher, and following Ramadan) – although some families were more religiously practising than others. What is particularly evident in several of the young people's stories is the impact their parents' religious practice and political frameworks had on the formation of the young people's religious and political identities. Frank Temple (FT), a 24 years old Methodist who is working for the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ), grew up in a family where his father was a Methodist minister (making FT a 'son of a manse', which he was very proud to be) and his mother organised youth events in

the church. This experience of growing up with a parent who is a religious leader had a great impact on his understanding of what it means to be a Christian and a leader:

I think having a parent who's visible in a community and who are themselves active in community relationships and politics...I think that gives you *a sense* of how you also relate to the rest of your community. So that's one thing. I think also the experience of having people coming to your house, for help and for support and for meetings...It has given me a sense of a person's duty to other people.

FT described his family as 'progressive Christians' who believe in the need to be active in their communities and help others. Interfaith work is an important part of this theological framework and FT's father was very active in interfaith relations, particularly in relation to Holocaust education and helping refugees. As we will see in section 4.2 and in the next chapter, this has had impact on how FT's interest in interfaith work emerged and why he became active in the CCJ. This emphasis on doing good was also visible in Baile and Mayah's accounts. Baile, a 24-year-old Jew working for the Faith & Belief Forum, referred to her late mother as important in providing Baile and her brother with a moral compass to treat other people with respect:

My mum had very, very strong sets of values that were around, sort of...*whatever* your beliefs might be, you are still a person that deserves respect and value. She may have really, really disagreed with someone very strongly, but that wouldn't stop her appreciating them as a person. She always had this very strong principle of 'you are a person first and your opinions come next'. Having that around, I think, just installed something.

Although Baile self-critically admits that she is much more judgemental than her mother was and struggles with separating people from their views, this moral

compass has still had an impact on how Baile tries to live her life. She also mentioned her mother as important in forging her interest in interfaith, both from a moral point of view but also from a practical. As with FT's father, Baile's mother was active in local interfaith work in one of the CCJ's local branches and it was through this work that Baile had her first interfaith encounters. Mayah, a 21-year-old Muslim volunteering for the Feast, had a slightly different experience. Her parents, particularly her father, were very careful to teach her to know her religion and be aware of how some Muslims' theological interpretations might distort what they considered to be the correct understanding of Islam:

My mum and dad have always encouraged us that 'your faith is more important, you should follow your faith' and like 'you should follow it the right way, with the right intention, you shouldn't do anything wrong'. You know, your faith...my dad always says that there are people out there practising our faith in the wrong way, but if you understand your faith and look at it properly you will be able to do better with it. He's always said that you have to know your faith properly, so I think for him it has always been important that we knew our faith.

When I asked her what she meant with 'follow the faith in the right way', she put emphasis on the distinction between peaceful and radical interpretations of Islam:

There are some people who would read or interpret it wrong and might take it to its extreme. But whereas...if you look at Islam properly, Islam means peace. So, the right way is to do it in a peaceful way, do you know what I mean? But obviously there are people who have interpreted it wrong, have a lack of understanding so for my mum and dad, for my family, it's important that we understand it properly.

This distinction between 'peaceful' and 'radical' is common amongst the young Muslims in this thesis. Although Mayah expressed it most explicitly in relation to her family, many of the other participants also told stories about how they have

grown up with parents and family members who emphasised the need to challenge radical and very conservative interpretations of Islam. This does not only have to do with the current political environment in the UK but can also be a result of issues and events in the parents' countries of origin. Lalon, a 26-year-old Muslim who had volunteered for the Faith & Belief Forum, described how both his parents had been involved in the struggle for Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan and how his late father's frustration with the politics in Bangladesh informed his approach to religion:

I grew up with [my father] screaming at the TV, scream at political parties, scream and shout and get really angry at what was going on in Bangladesh, at imams and mullahs. At the people that were...religious and conservative people who were ruining what he fought for, what he wanted. So, growing up with that, I think, put a distrust in...overly zealous *religiosity* that didn't include cohesion.

This mistrust of zealous religiosity has also informed Lalon's religiosity. He described those who follow scripture uncritically (particularly Wahhabism) as treating scripture as "IKEA instructions" and not going deeper than scratching the surface level of Islam. But Lalon's late father had also shaped the formation of Lalon's political identity. Lalon identifies as a socialist and he argued that this is a direct result of growing up in a family of 'freedom fighters' (a non-violent term he uses to describe his parents' fight for a free Bangladesh):

[My father] instilled upon us ideas of independence and freedom or what that meant. Not liberalisation and not liberalism, but...liberty. So that played a big part in my politics...that whole issue of egalitarianism and making sure that everyone had the right opportunities and the equal opportunities. And not just equal and not just equality, but *equity*...equity of opportunities as well.

As we will see in the next chapter, this political worldview is critical to Lalon's interfaith work. It also is a good example of how political identities inform faith-based social engagement and this is something Lalon shares with some of the other young people – particularly FT and Baile.

This section has shown how important parents can be in the formation of young people's religious and political worldviews. Not only do the several of the young people describe how their parents have been important in providing them with theological understandings of their religions, but also how they have been positive role models in their interfaith work. This indicates that parents might be very important in forging interest in interfaith work. It also overlaps with what we saw in Chapter 2, where the family is often critical in forming young people's understanding of the world and taps into Kate Tilleczek's (2014) emphasis on important relationships on the micro level. I will come back to this in the chapter summary.

#### **4.1.2. Finding religious belonging**

The young people did not only talk about the importance of their parents in forming their religious and political identities, but also about their own reckoning with their faith and other actors and contexts that have been important in this (to this day still ongoing) process. There was a diversity in terms of how religiously observant the young people were: some had gone from being less religiously observant to becoming much more serious in their religious practice; others had gone from being very observant to becoming less observant, and in some were still searching for a sense of religious belonging. But something that united all the young people was attempts to make sense of what being Christian, Jewish and Muslim meant to them

personally. A common theme that came up in several of the interviews was the distinction between ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ or radical theological interpretations, where many of the young people described themselves as the former. As we will see below and in the following two chapters, this theological positioning both informs and is impacted by the interfaith work for several of the young people. It was most commonly expressed by the young Muslims (as we could see above in relation to Mayah’s and Lalon’s accounts) but several of the young Christians and young Jews also made similar points. Laura, a 23-year-old Anglican Christian active in the Faith & Belief Forum, described how attending a charismatic Anglican church (part of the Church of England) as a child made her become very wary of what she felt were too zealous theological frameworks. Although she had fond memories from the church and described it as very family friendly, she experienced the church as “too charismatic and a bit too much” and the focus on evangelicalism was also against her theological understanding of what it means to be a Christian. She left her church after her parents divorced when she was 16 and was at the time of the interviews was still searching for another church to belong to. Her experience is similar to Lalon’s reflections in the previous section:

What turned me away from the Christianity as I see it in that church was just that people were so aligned to their Christian faith that it was part of every single part of their lives and it was kind of to a point when it was unreasonable and they didn’t really reflect on it. It was just very much like ‘this is what the Bible tells us, so this is what we’re going to do.’ I try to be quite rational and think about the theology and the theory behind stuff rather than this is just a belief that I have been told.

Laura’s emphasis on the need for critical reflection about the tenets of Christianity and not following the faith blindly was informed by her university studies in theology at the time of the interview. When I asked her what ‘being rational’ about

one's faith means, she explained that it involves the need to think critically about one's faith and consider the historical, political and social contexts that shape theological understandings. For her, as for most of the other young people in this thesis, following a faith too strictly and letting it become "your whole life" makes it difficult to engage in society and show respect for people of other religions. Laura also mentioned that this prevents people from understanding "that Christianity itself as a concept isn't a unified single concept, but it's a human interpretation of a relationship with God and how God expresses himself." This critical understanding of religion and religious belonging is also visible in many of the young Muslims' accounts. As we could see above, both Mayah and Lalou expressed criticism toward radical and very conservative Islamic interpretations, but there was also a distinction made between religion and culture. Mayah was the one who most firmly expressed that culture had nothing to do with religion:

Culture is made from people, religion is from God. And not everybody agrees with people, but in order to look good to others people follow that. Everybody forgets God. And to God it's like you're not following your religion, you are just doing it to impress other people. You are doing things to satisfy the culture, not your religion. For me, I just look in the Quran. If I need to find the answers from my religion I go and look in the Quran. I wouldn't go to the culture. The culture is what people tell you.

Mayah's account is significant in several ways. First, it is connected to her account above in relation to the importance of knowing your religion and to practice it peacefully. When I asked her what it was about culture that she disliked, she described the radicalisation process of Muslims into becoming extremists. Culture, according to her, can be one reason why people turn to radical and 'wrong' interpretations of Islam. It is what people 'make up' and get other people to believe in, but that have no real bearings in the Quran. Second, her way of describing that



she goes to the Quran to find answers about her religion appears slightly different from the very critical approach encouraged by Laura and Lalou. She accepts the view that the answers to her religiosity can be found in the Quran and in order to find these answers, one needs to 'know one's faith properly'. This is a different answer from many of the other young Muslims who do not put as much emphasis on the Quran as Mayah did. Billy, an 18-year-old Muslim who is also volunteering for the Feast, described how he has gone from being the 'religious guy' in school with an almost fundamentalist understanding of scripture to becoming more spiritual and developing a personal relationship with God:

I was this religious guy and my idea of religion back then was that you have to *show* your religion, you have to learn the x, y, z. But I didn't realise that I was saying x, y, z, but I wasn't practising myself. And fair enough, I was a kid and you are easily vulnerable, but I realise that growing up now I am more spiritual in the sense that...You see, with people these days, you think 'this person is religious' or 'that person is religious' because of the way they dress, but I don't believe that. I believe that the person who we least expect can be the closest to God than any man or imam with a beard. Because for me now, it's not your physical appearance that brings you closer to God, it's your character.

For Billy, this meant cutting his long hair, shaving, stopping wearing religious clothes and starting to think deeply about theological questions. He also started to pray in Sunni, Shia and Sufi mosques and described how these movements provided him with a deeper sense of religious belonging to the Muslim *ummah* (religious community) than he felt when he was attending the same mosque all the time. Moving in with his father and reading about the Prophet Mohammed's life and deeds played important roles in changing Billy's perception of what it means to him to be a Muslim. But, as we will see in the next chapter, being involved in the Feast

has also had an impact on Billy's religious identity by providing him with a space to reflect on big spiritual issues. However, not all the young Muslims expressed a disdain for cultural influences on religious practice. Minerva, who was 19 years old at the time of the interview and volunteered for the Feast, described that the ways she practiced her religion was a fusion of religious and cultural practices and she was very proud of her Pakistani heritage:

My mum is from Pakistan and that's an Islamic country, so culture and religion are kind of intertwined for me. So, Eid, for example, is obviously a Muslim festival first, but for me it's about dressing up in our traditional clothes, having certain sweets and stuff like that. Eating certain food. It's not Islamic food, it's cultural food. So, they are quite intertwined for me, the both. I just think it's really fun, to be honest. It's a big part of who I am.

These different understandings of culture and its impact on religion are interesting. Mayah and Billy were more critical of cultural influence on theological understandings, whereas Minerva describes favourably how cultural and religious practices can unite and how this informs her religiosity. However, Minerva is also very aware that other young Muslims can feel differently, especially if they are detached from their parents' countries of origin and/or feel restricted by cultural interpretations that might cause tension between younger and older generations. Although Minerva does not give any direct examples of this, we could in Chapter 2 see examples of how some young Muslims turn to Islam to challenge what they feel are unreligious cultural practices (for example, in relation to gender roles). Islam, particularly more conservative interpretations of Islam (such as Salafism), can under those circumstances become a form of emancipation and act of rebellion (Dehanas, 2016; Karlsson-Minganti, 2014; Inge, 2016). It is interesting to note that this was not the case for the young people in this thesis. Not even Mayah, who most

firmly argued that culture has nothing to do with religion, described any direct conflicts with her parents around cultural interpretations. Instead, the young Muslims described how they understood the challenges their parents faced and the need to respect different points of views in terms of cultural practices. This does not mean that there were no tensions – they might have chosen not to share this with me – but this was not something that came up in their interviews and not something they described as important in relation to the formation of their religious identities.

The young Jews in the study focused on changes in practice and their relationship with their Jewish community. This was most evident in Baile's account. She was a very practising Orthodox Jew when she grew up and was active in several Jewish youth movements. Similarly to Billy, she identified as the 'religious one' and tried to be the one who spoke good Hebrew, dressed very modestly (she did not wear trousers for a very long time) and followed Jewish scripture. But two experiences during a trip to Israel with her then boyfriend and a male friend made her become aware of gender boundaries that made her question her place within Orthodox Judaism. The first was when she went to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, where men and women are separated by a barrier during the prayer. After the prayer, Baile's boyfriend and friend described how magical the experience had been for them, but Baile described how she had not heard anything of the male service on the other side of barrier. Instead it had felt like praying on her own at home. The second experience was during a visit to the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem (during the same trip to Israel as the first experience), when she had sat down with her boyfriend and their friend to eat a shared meal with others in the congregation. She had not noticed that all the other women had left the room and she did not notice this until a man came up to her and asked her to leave. When

she refused, they set up a table only for her in the corner and asked her to sit there. This made both Baile and her boyfriend very upset and they decided to leave. Baile described this experience as something that “really threw” her:

I’d never experienced something that made me question anything about the roles of men and women in Judaism. It was only at that point when I started to really think ‘actually no, this isn’t a Judaism that I’m okay with’ and it sent me a spiral of trying to work out what I wanted from Judaism and I stopped praying for a long time and...I started kind of exploring what I through the point of prayer was and reconsidering what connection I had with the community.

But she did not decide to leave Orthodox Judaism behind her until she had a direct confrontation with someone in her synagogue who had meant a lot to her theologically and a person she had considered to be theologically progressive. Baile had at that point discovered that she was bisexual and a public fight with this person about LGBTQ rights made her start to question whether there was a place for her in Orthodox Judaism. It made her stop practising Judaism and withdraw from the Orthodox community. But at the time of the interview she very strongly emphasised that she still identified as a Jew, for both ancestral and ethical reasons:

I would never be able to disconnect myself from Judaism because even though I found so many things that I disagree strongly with within Judaism and I’ve found so many things that mean nothing to me in Judaism...Judaism is bigger than that. To me, Judaism isn’t a dogmatic position or a series of practices or a collection of cultural attributes or ethnic features or anything like that. Judaism is all of those things and none of those things and more than those things. I am part of it and I couldn’t never not be part of it.

She is still also very inspired by Jewish ethical teachings around social justice and giving to charity, and in the next chapter we will see how Baile's Jewish identity is embodied in her interfaith work.

The section provides insights into how the young people understand what it means to be Christian, Jewish and Muslim. As we could see, many of them identified as progressive and critical religious thinkers and challenged conservative or radical theological interpretations of their religions. What is notable is that they did this *before* they become interested and involved in interfaith work. Although this was not necessarily the main reason why and how they became active in interfaith work, as we will look closer at in the next section, it shows that the young people were highly active in making sense of what their religions mean to them – not only in terms of everyday practice but also at theological and political levels. However, as we will see in the next section, being involved in interfaith work can also become a way for the young people to rediscover their religions and start practising again.

## **4.2. Choosing interfaith work**

How the young people became interested in interfaith work and the actors and contexts that have been important in forging this interest differ between them. As we could see above, two of the young people – Frank Temple and Baile – had parents who were active in interfaith work and their interest emerged partly as a result of this. But the rest of the research participants did not have any family ties to interfaith work growing up and they became interested in other ways. This section focuses on these journeys into interfaith work and is the result of questions

in relation to how their interfaith work emerged and why they chose the interfaith organisations they were active in.

#### **4.2.1. Through interfaith organisations**

For Mayah, Billy and Minerva in the Feast, they came in contact with the Feast through their schools in Birmingham (they did not attend the same schools) and are today working as youth volunteers. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Feast is working with segregated schools in Birmingham and organises after-school clubs where young people can interact, talk and make friends across religious and cultural lines. Mayah, Billy and Minerva had similar stories of how they first encountered the Feast: one of the youth workers from the Feast came to their schools in Year 7 and introduced themselves, what the Feast was about and invited them to come after school to learn more. None of the young people were at that time particularly interested in interfaith work or knowledgeable about what it entailed. Instead, it was the social environment and the events organised by the Feast that attracted them. Mayah was slightly embarrassed when she said that she initially thought it was about ‘enter faith’ and wondered how one enters and comes out of a faith, but realised soon that it was something different from that:

I was like, ‘okay, that sounds quite interesting, I might give it a go’. I needed extracurricular activities anyway for college anyway. So, you know, it would look good on my CV, whatever, whatever (laughing). But...I worked with it and I thought ‘okay, it was nice’ and then I went to a few more events and met new friends. And it was nice, almost like a social thing. It was nice to hear other people’s stories as well.

Billy had a very similar experience. He was 12 years old when he first met one of the Feast’s youth workers and while he at that time had no idea what interfaith was

all about, he liked the youth worker and with time found the idea of interfaith very intriguing:

I remembered meeting her in the playground and she had this thought about Muslims and non-Muslims working together. And growing up in a primary school where most were Asians I'd never...that thought [of doing interfaith work] had never crossed my mind and I thought it seemed interesting and I thought that was something that I'd like to be involved in. So I got involved and it was just 'wow'. Just talking to non-Muslims about their faiths and stuff like that was something I had never done before.

Minerva had a slightly different experience than Billy and Mayah. She did not express the same fascination with the notion of interfaith work as they did (although, as we will see in the next chapter, she found it important). In her case, it was the social community that attracted her to the Feast. At that time in Minerva's life (in Year 7), she was bullied for being studious and for the way she spoke English, where some of her classmates accused her of 'talking like a white girl' because she spoke with no Asian or Brummie accent. Minerva had almost no friends at that time and besides volunteering for an elderly charity, she was not allowed by her mother to participate in any other after-school activities. The Feast became a good option for her:

I think that is what clicked with me, if you like. I think it provided events that I *could* go to, you know, at a reasonable time, they looked fun. I think it was something that was family friendly. For me I think that is what worked. Had it been something that my mum had no idea about and it was at 8 or 9 pm, it wouldn't have been feasible for me. I think [the Feast youth workers] understood that. And the events of talking about yourself and hearing about other people. Yeah, I think it was good and it allowed me to kind of bring in my own opinions without it being that I am the spokesperson of my faith.

What the experiences from the Feast show is that it is not necessarily for religious reasons young people are attracted to the interfaith organisations. Instead, it can be for social reasons and later become significant also for religious reasons. But what Mayah, Billy and Minerva's experiences also show is the importance of interfaith organisations in attracting young people to interfaith work. If it had not been for the Feast, it is not certain that any of them would have become involved in interfaith work. By coming to the young people's schools and providing them with activities the young people found appealing, an interest in interfaith work emerged which made Mayah, Billy and Minerva remain in the organisations as volunteers when they started sixth-form college. As we will see in Chapter 5, they are amongst those young people in this thesis who express the most loyalty to and passion for their interfaith organisation. For Billy and Mayah in particular, the Feast is a second family and they consider several of the adult youth workers as their friends. As we will see in the next subsection, this is also the same for Sana (who is also volunteering with the Feast, but found her way to the organisation in a different way).

#### **4.2.2. Through universities and internships**

For a majority of the young people, university played an important role in starting their interfaith journeys. It was during their time as university students they discovered interfaith work and found ways to be active. For FT and Baile, who had grown up with parents who were active in interfaith work, university helped making sense of what interfaith work meant to them personally and how they wanted to be active. FT joined a student leadership programme that the CCJ organised at his university and became one of their first student presidents. This was also an



important time in forming his interest for the CCJ, which later led to his employment in the organisation. Baile described her entire undergraduate experience as being about interfaith work. She chose a Religious Studies undergraduate degree that she described as “basically interfaith” with modules on interfaith relations between the Abrahamic religions. She also set up a Jewish Student Organisation (JSoc) at her university, served as Vice President in the Islamic Society and took on the role of interfaith officer at another university. But although interfaith campus activities were critical for Baile to get the skills and experience of interfaith work, it was her internship at the Faith & Belief Forum that she spoke most intensely about. She joined the Speaker programme in her second year of her undergraduate degree after having been recommended by a friend and this experience played an important role in her reckoning with her Jewish identity and sense of belonging:

Being a speaker, I think, was one of the things that helped me to process my own beliefs and thoughts, because for the first year or so, while I was still kind of getting myself accustomed as a speaker and getting used to the skills that involved, I would re-write my story each time. I had like a written track record in which you could kind of track my attitude to God because...like right at the beginning I passionately believed and lalala and then, like, the last one that I ever wrote down said something along the lines of ‘I’m not sure if I believe in God and it’s a bit of a taboo to talk about God in Judaism’. So, I could really track it and being a speaker massively had its own benefits for me as a person, wondering out what my journey was.

Baile also expressed strong passion for the work the Faith & Belief Forum did and said that she early on wanted to work for them. She described how she applied for several jobs until she got the job she had at the time of the interview. As we will see more clearly in the next chapter, the Faith & Belief Forum is a space that

represents not only the theological, ethical and political worldviews of Baile but also provides a sense of belonging. Together with the young people from the Feast, Baile was one of the research participants to express the most love for her interfaith organisation. Laura was another of the young people to find interfaith work during her time as a university student. She was finishing off her master's degree in theology and attended a Catholic university while interning at the Faith & Belief Forum. She decided to apply for the internship to get a more diverse theological experience and to work with questions in relation to faith and politics. One of the reasons why she chose an interfaith organisation and not a Christian charity was because she was concerned that a Christian charity might be too evangelical and that a predominant theological worldview would influence every part of its work and outreach:

I think that is why I wanted to come into an interfaith place with people from different views can come together and do the same work. I think I am kind of nervous of really highly organised religions doing things...The Faith & Belief Forum is sort of the space where it's not like a church has set up an interfaith space. It's very much a space that is just for all different people to come together, there's no affiliation and any kind of underlying sort of influence.

Here we can see a link between Laura's previous experiences from her childhood church and her decision to join an interfaith organisation. The Faith & Belief Forum represented an opportunity for her to work on questions in relation to political theology and faith and society without feeling the fear of being in an environment with restricted theological boundaries. By choosing to become involved in interfaith work, she is not only provided with a space to explore questions she is interested in but also in an environment with a wide range of theological frameworks. Of all the research participants, Laura was the one with the greatest academic interest in the

theological side of interfaith work and the Faith & Belief Forum filled a need for her to have a space to explore theological questions in a diverse context. Sam, a 25-year-old Jew working for the Faith & Belief Forum, shares Laura's wish to be in a diverse context. He grew up in a Reform Jewish family in a multicultural area in North London and did not have any direct interest in interfaith work for most of his upbringing. However, when he started his university degree in a whiter, monocultural British city, he was taken aback by the lack of diversity and was drawn to an interfaith student society to find a more varied group of people. Initially, the activities were very casual and focused on leisure, but Sam later became much more involved to make sure young Jews were represented:

There was a very, very small number of Jewish students so I used to go to interfaith events because it was like free food and stuff (laughing). They did ping-pong or something and the standard of ping-pong players was really low so I felt really good about myself because I could win, like, left-handed. So yeah, I was always like the one Jew or there were two of us out of, like, 50 people. So, in a sense of duty, I kept going because if they wanted to run an event with a Jewish person to make it a genuinely interfaith event rather than like maximum two faiths on show. I would just go along to do my duty as this exotic zoo animal (laughs).

Sam's account is intriguing in several ways. First of all, he shows how casually interfaith journeys can begin and, again, put emphasis on the social importance of interfaith work. Throughout our interviews, it becomes clear that the social side of interfaith work is very important to Sam and is one of the main reasons why he is involved: he wants to bring people together. But the ways he describes himself as 'an exotic zoo animal' and attending the interfaith events out of "a sense of duty" are also interesting. Although Sam said this ironically, his account points to minoritisation and the challenges that might face young people from minority

religions in interfaith work when it comes to representation. While Sam did not express any personal troubles with this, he also knew that there would have been no Jews present if he had decided to stop coming. None of the other young people (including the other Jews) in this thesis described their interfaith work in the same way as Sam did and it is possible that he is alone in feeling this way. However, this still raises important questions around the social and ethical pressures of attending interfaith work that go beyond social and theological interests. When I asked Sam what made him keep going to the interfaith events, he quoted Jewish ethical teachings around ‘if not me, who? If not now, when?’ For Sam, it is important to do something and contribute rather than sitting opportunities out. He organised a wide range of events together with other student faith societies, partly because he realised that he would get more funding from the Jewish student society if the events were interfaith but also because he believed in working with people from many different backgrounds. Similarly to Laura’s fear of narrow theological frameworks, he was very critical of interfaith work including only two or three faiths and wanted to see more broad collaboration with a wide range of different belief systems (including atheists). After graduating from university, he applied to do an internship at the Faith & Belief Forum and this internship transformed later into the job he held at the time of the interview.

Student faith societies at campus also played an important role for some of the young people in forging their interest for interfaith work. This was most visible in the account given by Elizabeth, a 24-year-old Methodist working for the CCJ. She had grown up in a predominantly white and, according to her, a very Christian town in England and although she loved the RE subject and had many discussions with her non-Christian friends at school, it was not until she started university in a

bigger, multicultural English city that she started to participate in interfaith work. Meeting the interfaith officer in her Christian Union (CU) made her interested in becoming active herself:

In my first year there was a talk during one of our weekly meetings by the then sitting interfaith officer who told us what he did and that they were looking for someone to take over the role and it was so interesting so I went up and spoke to him about it afterwards and we had a long conversation and I ended up becoming the interfaith officer for the CU the time after him...So just hearing him talking about it what he did was so interesting.

She became an interfaith officer in her third year at university and this experience came to shape not only her understanding of the importance of interfaith work but also her future career. While Elizabeth described many positive experiences of interfaith work, it was the challenges that most affected her. Although all the young people described challenges they have experienced (something I will focus more in-depth on in Chapter 6), Elizabeth differed from them as these challenges played a significant role in developing her passion for interfaith work. What was most notable in her account was not only her experiences of verbal and physical fights between young Jews and Muslims around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (something I will also come back to in Chapter 6), but also tension within her own Christian Union as it became much more evangelical. Initially, the CU at her campus had its own interfaith officer responsible for working with other student faith societies (particularly the Jewish Society and the Islamic Society) and when Elizabeth started out the CU was positive about doing interfaith work. But as time passed and the CU became much more evangelical with new members coming in, it became much more unfriendly towards interfaith work and this affected Elizabeth in several ways. Not only was she excluded from committee meetings and did not

get any funding to set up activities, but she also found it much more difficult to recruit young Christians to participate in interfaith work with her. Elizabeth described this period as incredibly stressful and how angry it made her. But instead of being discouraged, it made her more passionate in interfaith work and made her realise that she wanted to make it her career:

People kept on saying to me that 'I think God is saying that you should do interfaith work' and I finally believed them. I looked for interfaith internships and by googling I found out about the Faith & Belief Forum and their internship programme. I got the internship which was amazing and my manager there was just brilliant. I was initially going to do three months but I stayed for the full six months to get the most out of this and it was through that internship that the job at the CCJ was advertised, which was about university interfaith that had been my interest from the start. Because the reason why I got into it was because I have seen bad relations on campus and then I have been doing training for universities. It really seemed to fit and I applied to it and I am so pleased that I got the job because it is just all about what I am really passionate about.

Elizabeth's account is important because it provides insights into the role student faith societies might play in young people's experiences of interfaith work and particularly the consequence theological shifts might have on how interfaith work is perceived at campuses. Student faith societies in general and the Christian Unions in particular are not homogenous; the CU at Elizabeth's campus was made up by several different Christian denominations and more charismatic and evangelical frameworks were dominant. Here we can see how intra-faith tension might shape how interfaith work is perceived and the consequences this might have on how interfaith work is carried out on campus. It also reconnects with the divide above between more progressive and conservative theological frameworks that were at the forefront of many of the research participants' accounts. Although Elizabeth was

not one of those young people to talk about this explicitly, it was clear that her theological understanding was that interfaith work is important and that she did not agree with the evangelical focus of the CU. Instead of quitting, she decided to remain as interfaith officer and later continue working to help university students to organise interfaith events on their campuses. As we will see in the next chapter, this work is embedded in Elizabeth's theological and ethical understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

#### **4.2.3. Frustration with the RE subject**

Another example of frustration with theological frameworks can be seen in Isaac's account. By the time of the interview, he was a 25-year-old Jew and working for the CCJ. He described how his interfaith journey began as a result of frustration with the lack of religious education in his secondary school. Isaac had grown up in a Liberal Jewish family and congregation, but attended an Orthodox Jewish secondary school bordering on Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox Judaism) where all RE focused on Judaism:

I thought it was a massive problem that there was this whole world of people thinking totally different things and we're not getting told any of it. So, I started doing interfaith stuff while I was in school and the school told me that it was really great and were happy with it, but they wouldn't do anything with it. That they...you know, they were very happy that I was doing it, but happy that I was doing it separately, which I also thought was a problem.

He joined a Jewish-Muslim dialogue forum online that was run from the United States and later participated in a scriptural reasoning programme in East London with young Muslims and Christians. The reasons why Isaac chose to become

involved in interfaith work was because he wanted to meet people who practiced the religion instead of merely reading about it. It also correlated with his wish to expand his religious knowledge and how this intersected with his attempts to understand his own religious identity and sense of belonging:

Religion has always been an interest for me. How I interact with religion has been of interest for my own religious journey or whatever...that I have never really known where to fit or what to think, so a wider range of opinions as possible was what I wanted. And again, the fact that I wasn't getting any of that in school and had to get it from somewhere else...and interfaith dialogue or engagement was a prime way to do that from people who actually understood it, rather than just, you know, go on Wikipedia and look up Islam, I would rather talk to someone who is Muslim.

Isaac's account is significant because it shows both a sense of agency and taking responsibility of one's religious education, but also how the young people's own religious journeys can be an important reason to become active in interfaith work. Isaac expressed not only frustration with how his school organised the RE subject, but also how theological boundaries prevent young people in the classroom to understand the world around them. As we will see in the next chapter, this is a theological critique that several of the young people share and also pivotal in how they do interfaith work.

#### **4.2.4. Unexpected engagement**

So far, we have seen how young people have sought interfaith work for a wide range of reasons. But for some of the young people, their journey into interfaith work was much more unexpected and developed gradually over time. Jacob, a 28-year-old Catholic who volunteered in one of the CCJ's local branches, started his interfaith journey by attending international interfaith conferences as a university student:



The theology department wanted to send someone to Istanbul for a conference on Christian-Jewish relations and they thought that maybe I would like to go. But I had no real interest as such in Christian-Jewish relations. I was...I had a passing interest in Judaism, but not anything beyond that. But you know, *free trip* (embarrassed laughter) and it was also Istanbul, so the home of Eastern Christianity, Constantinople. So yeah, that's where I got involved.

At that time, he was more interested in Orthodox Christianity and attended the conference because he wanted to see the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew. During this conference, he also met a Catholic priest from the Vatican who invited Jacob to another international Christian-Jewish conference in Paris, which he accepted. This followed by several other conferences and the 'passing interest' in Christian-Jewish relations became deeper and clearer for Jacob. When he was asked to join the committee of one of the CCJ's local branches, he accepted. What is particularly interesting about Jacob's experience is not only that it is different from the research participants but also that it is much more institutional. Although Jacob was only an undergraduate university student when he was invited to the first interfaith conference, he was already considering the possibility of becoming a Catholic priest and by the time of our interviews he was about to make his final vows to remain in the Catholic order he was a member of (something he also did). For Jacob, one of the reasons why he continued to participate in interfaith work – or interreligious dialogue, which was the term he used, because in “the Catholic Church there is only one faith and that is in Jesus Christ” – was because he wanted to contribute to the Catholic Church. As we will see more in-depth in the next chapter, participating in interreligious dialogue was not only a way to engage with Jews (Christian-Jewish relations keep being what Jacob is interested in) and form friendships but also to get to the theological 'truth'. Whereas many of the research

participants talked about changing society and bringing people together, Jacob was more interested in theological dialogue as a representative of the Catholic Church. In a way, he is the opposite to Laura who firmly rejected strong theological frameworks and this shows that young people participate in interfaith work for different reasons. Nadine and Sana, both working and volunteering for the Feast, also became involved in interfaith work in quite unexpected ways. Nadine, a 24-year-old Evangelical Christian, had no plans to become active in interfaith work before applying for a job as a youth worker at the Feast. She was very active in her church (a Pentecostal church) and, together with Jacob, one of the research participants to express a more conservative theology that guided their lives. She had received the Holy Spirit, could speak in tongues and had been very active in trying to convert people to Christianity in the streets of Birmingham. When she applied to the job at the Feast, she thought that she would only be working with the young Christians in the Feast (as we saw in Chapter 1 and above, the Feast is working predominantly with young Christians and Muslims) and was a bit taken back when she discovered that she would mostly be working with young Muslims:

At first, I was like 'how is that going to work?'. I mean, I can respect people's faith and I know what to say and what not to say, but how...how are people going to get along and talk about things without getting into arguments? Because there are so many debates. And also, being a Christian, you want people to be a Christian too.

What made Nadine remain in the Feast was a conversation she had with the then CEO of the Feast about 'loving the neighbour' which connected with her theological understanding of Christianity and later also the opportunity to work with young Christians. However, she was not completely at ease with interfaith work and, as we will see in the next two chapters, she was one of the young people in this

thesis to express most anxiety and concerns about interfaith work. However, these concerns are also what make Nadine's account very intriguing. It shows both how difficult it can be for young people with more conservative theological worldviews to participate in interfaith work, but also that they can and are involved in interfaith work. So far, we have seen how the great majority of the research participants express more progressive theological understandings, but Nadine's account (as well as Jacob's, to some extent) show that there are young people with other theological frameworks present as well. Sana, a 19-year-old Muslim, had a similar journey into becoming active in the Feast as Nadine. Just like Nadine, she got in contact with the Feast because she was looking for work:

I was never meant to be involved with the Feast. One of my friends said 'let's do this scheme together' so we could get a job in New Look and I had to do a couple of volunteering hours to get the job interview. In the end I ended up not going to the job interview and I ended up staying at the Feast volunteering instead because it was just like...wow, this is such an amazing place to be and I had forgot about what it was like to be around people who just loved their faith and wanted other people to love their faiths as well.

But what was different from Nadine was that she did not know that the Feast did interfaith work because it had not been clear in the description of the organisation, but despite the fact that she never had thought about doing interfaith work until that moment she was pleasantly surprised to find out what the Feast work was all about. It also helped her find her way back to start practising her religion. In contrast to the other young people who were already practising their religions when they became involved in interfaith work, Sana did not practise her religion when she joined the Feast. She firmly emphasised that she still believed in Islam at that time and had not 'abandoned' her religion, but a bad group of friends made her stop

practising. At the Feast she found a group of people who helped her find her way back and fall in love with Islam again:

I don't like what happened, but at the same time I am so grateful that it happened because now I can say that I am a Muslim and I genuinely love saying that. Before I just said it because I am a Muslim because that was what I was born into and this was what I was brought up to be. And I think it just took me being in the wrong crowd of friends to realise that I genuinely loved being a Muslim, I loved being Pakistani, I loved the way I was brought up. And the friendship group I have now is so much more supportive, always pushing me to be the better version of myself within Islam.

As with Mayah, Billy and Minerva above, Sana put emphasis on the social context provided by the Feast. She described the adult youth workers as her friends and she spoke passionately about her feelings for the organisations. But her emphasis on how she re-connected with her faith is also integral to why she decided to continue volunteering with the Feast. For her, the interfaith component of the Feast work was not only about building bridges between different religions but also about being allowed to love her faith and express it. The Feast both provides a social context that has forged her interest in interfaith, but her interest is also strengthened the more she learns and re-connects with her faith. As we will see in the next two chapters, this is at the forefront of why Sana thinks interfaith work is important.

### **4.3. Chapter summary**

This chapter has focused on how the young people's interfaith journeys began. It has answered the first two research sub-questions: (1) how did the young people become interested in interfaith work? and (2) what actors and contexts have been important in forging and sustaining the young people's interest in interfaith work?

The chapter answered these questions through two major themes: ‘growing up’ and ‘choosing interfaith’. The first section attended to the role of parents in influencing the young people’s religious and political socialisation, but also on how the research participants make sense of their religions and religious belonging. The second section explored how the young people became interested in interfaith work and why they decided to choose their interfaith organisations.

If we look back at this chapter, it is possible to draw a few conclusions. The first is that the young people’s upbringing is important in how they later became interested in interfaith work. Only two young people grew up with parents who were active in interfaith work, but many more described how their parents had been important role models for them and critical in providing the young people with knowledge about their religions and the need to challenge conservative theological understandings. These frameworks were also present in how the young people understood their religions. As we could see in section 4.1.2, many of the young people made a distinction between more progressive theological frameworks (where interfaith is considered to be important) and conservative or radical interpretations of their religions. With the exception of Jacob and Nadine, who did not identify themselves in such a way, all the young people identified themselves as the former. If we reconnect with the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, we can see how critical the micro level is for making the young people interested in interfaith work. Contexts where young people spend their lives – the home, school and other important organisations (which includes interfaith organisations) – and the relationships they make in these contexts are important factors in how the research participants choose interfaith work. What is interestingly lacking in the young people’s accounts about actors and contexts that have been important in

forging their interest in interfaith work are faith leaders and religious congregations. With the exception of Jacob, who became involved in interfaith work partly through the Catholic Church, none of the young people mentioned their congregations as important in them becoming interested in interfaith work. On the contrary, frustrations with narrow theological interpretations and congregations can be reasons to become involved in interfaith work (as we could see in Laura, Elizabeth and Isaac's accounts). This raises significant questions around the impact being involved in interfaith work might have on the young people's religious identities and sense of belonging.

Another significant finding in the young people's accounts was how many different reasons there are to participate in interfaith work. Although a majority of the young people expressed an interest in lived religion and meeting people from different religions, there are other reasons too. The social importance of participating in an interfaith organisation – expressed most strongly by the young people in the Feast – can sometimes (at least initially) be more important than an interest in religion. But interfaith work can also be a way to contribute to their religious congregations, as seen in Jacob's account, or reconnect with their faiths (as Sana expressed). These different reasons to participate in interfaith work raise important questions around what it is about it that the young people find important. In the next chapter, I will focus more in-depth on how the young people do interfaith work and particularly the social, political, theological and ethical dimensions of interfaith work.

# 5.

## Doing Interfaith: Means and theological commitments

This chapter focuses on how the young people do interfaith work and what it means to them. It aims to answer the third research sub-question: ‘what does interfaith work mean to young people socially, theologically, ethically and politically?’ The chapter builds on what emerged in the previous chapter in relation to how the research participants understand their religious and political identities and senses of belonging, and explores what impact this might have on how they do and think about interfaith work. It is divided in two sections: ‘interfaith work as a means’ and ‘interfaith work as theological commitments.’ Whereas the first section focuses predominantly on the social and political functions of interfaith work, the second section explores more in-depth the theological and ethical aspects of the young people’s interfaith work. However, as we will see in the chapter, there is some overlapping across the sections. As with the previous chapter, I end this chapter with a summary of the main arguments.

### **5.1. Interfaith work as a means**

When I asked the young people what interfaith work means to them, they all focused in different ways on how interfaith work makes it possible to achieve social

and political goals. As we will see in the following subsections, ‘interfaith work as a means’ is not only about specific tools and frameworks but also about the end-goals and hopes the research participants have with their interfaith work. This section is the result of several questions, most notably ‘what does interfaith work mean to you?’, ‘why do you think interfaith work is important?’ and ‘what is your goal with your interfaith work?’.

### **5.1.1. ...to form friendships**

For a great majority of the young people, interfaith work is about forming friendships between people from different religions and belief systems. These friendships are both personal and strategic, and they are directly linked to how to communicate with each other. For Jacob, who as we saw in the previous chapter became involved in interfaith work partly through the Catholic Church, friendship is critical to be able to discuss theological similarities and differences:

Maybe it's the sort of framework that I want to work in so maybe it reflects more my personality than anything, but I want to talk and wrestle with ideas with friends. To talk about what is true, because I believe in an objective truth and I want to convince people of that. But I also want to listen to what they think is true or not true and I think that is best done in a context of friendship. You can do it in a purely academic sphere and never have to talk to the person again, but...again it goes back to my interest in priesthood and everything, it has to do with...it's personal.

Jacob's emphasis on the role friendship plays in moving beyond ‘academic’ knowledge about religions to learn how religion is lived by people is something many of the young people in this study consider to be important. It is through these personal relationships that it is possible to discuss and tackle stereotypes, as well as building trust and cohesion. Jacob also described an episode where friendship



played a pivotal role for his understanding of interfaith work. It was during one of the interfaith youth conferences he attended in Jerusalem, where he became good friends with a young Jewish man. After debating and discussing theological issues, they took a walk down a street in Jerusalem to buy salmon sandwiches for lunch when they suddenly found themselves in a situation where interfaith tension was immediately visible:

I was dressed in my [name of Catholic order] habit and he had his hat on. And just when we were talking about stereotypes, we were stopped in the street by this old lady, this Ultra-Orthodox Jewish lady and she turned to my friend and said ‘Are you Jewish?’ and he said ‘Yeah’ and he showed her his hat. She said, ‘then what are you doing with *him*?’ and pointed at me, ‘you can’t trust him, he will take you away, he will kidnap you’ and the list went on. And he said ‘no, no, it’s not like that, we’re friends’ and she said ‘you can’t be friends, it’s impossible’. It was genuine fear in her eyes, she thought I was going to kidnap him and baptise him or something. But yeah, that calmed down and my friend and I sort of looked at each other and said, ‘okay, well...’. It confirmed the need to do what we’re doing.

This experience was something Jacob came back to several times in my interviews with him. It both informed his understanding of the theological and political importance of interfaith work, but it also made him aware that this cannot happen without friendships. By knowing somebody from a different religion, it is possible to tackle stereotypes and fears about different religions that might exist within faith communities. Billy and Sana share Jacob’s understanding of the importance of friendship in interfaith work, but they put even more emphasis on the need to see the person beyond group identifications. For Billy, interfaith work is about connecting with people and working to remove labels as much as possible:

I would say that I'm not involved in interfaith to get involved in other religions, I am involved in interfaith to get along with other people. To connect with other people, that's what it is for me. It's not about 'I want to get along with that Hindu person over there or that Christian person there', because then I would already put a label on them. I might not necessarily be wrong, but it's already putting a label on them and it's about getting rid of these labels and see the human, and that's what it is for me.

This is a stance that is more common amongst the young people in the Feast than in the other interfaith organisations. One possible explanation can be that the Feast put more focus on talking about faith through everyday means, such as movies and songs, than the other interfaith organisations do. Interfaith work is about forming friendships that make group identifications, if not invisible than at least irrelevant. This does not mean that the young people in the Feast were not interested in talking about religion with their friends, it was only secondary to the friendships they formed. Their interfaith work was less about theological discussions and more about meeting people and doing social activities together. For Sana, this was initially very challenging. She had attended a school where most people were Muslims and where the pupils only spent time with pupils from similar backgrounds. She told me how she struggled with the whole idea of talking and being friends with somebody who is different from her when she first came to the Feast. It felt alien and difficult. But with time she became much better at it and it is now key to why she is doing interfaith work:

Interfaith means looking beyond people's faiths and just getting to know them for the person they are. Just being able to make friends and not feeling that, 'oh no, I can't be friends with her because she's Christian and we are so different' or 'because she's Sikh and we're going to have too many differences to get on'. It's just generally about looking past that say, 'no, I can be friends with you even if you are different to me'.

This is what interfaith means to me, just being able to talk to people knowing that they are different.

Nadine also described friendship as an important aspect of her interfaith work and this has both personal and ethical significance. Through her work as a youth worker at the Feast, she has realised that only having friends from the same faith not only deprive people from learning about other faiths but can be a form of exclusion:

I think when I see...when I work with people and I see that they have no knowledge about other faiths, but they talk about it as if they do. And I'm like 'you can't say that, you can't judge people like that'. You can genuinely have really good friends from a different faith and they are better than the friends that you've got now. But you let the faith be a barrier and I think those barriers make us as human beings more isolated and we shouldn't just hang around people of our own faith. Because how can that be inclusive? You are only being inclusive to your own faith.

Nadine's emphasis on how faith can be a barrier to friendships is directly related to her own experience as an evangelical Christian. Before coming to the Feast, she had only Christian friends and considered being friends with people of other religions as difficult. But being in an interfaith environment and meeting people from other religions who take religion just as seriously as Nadine has made her reconsider this and she has also been able to explore what friendships means from a theological standpoint. As we could see in the previous chapter, the ethical teaching of 'loving the neighbour' was an important factor in why she decided to remain in the Feast and it also played an important role in how she justified her interfaith work. However, in contrast to the other young people in the Feast who put more focus on the social relationships beyond religion and other group identifications, Nadine was still very aware of theological differences and this informed her interfaith friendships. I will come back to this more in-depth in the

next chapter. Several of the young people also described how the friendships they have formed through interfaith work has provided them with a sense of belonging and how this has helped them handle difficult situations. This was most visible in Lalon's and Baile's accounts. During the time of Lalon's internship at the Faith & Belief Forum, the British soldier Lee Rigby was murdered by jihadists in London and for the first time in his life he was confronted with fierce anti-Muslim rhetoric which put his identity as a British Bengali Muslim under scrutiny. Being surrounded by friends in the Faith & Belief Forum made it easier for Lalon to handle the disturbing feelings around identity and provided him with a sense of acceptance and belonging:

Lee Rigby was the first time when I was old enough to think 'this isn't right' and that I had a part to play in this. Not a part to play, that I had the responsibility to do something. It helped that I was in the Faith & Belief Forum, I was already in a conducive atmosphere for me to foment these feelings, right? Because they really made me feel that I belonged. I still remember just kind of finding a place where there were so many different kinds of people and they all just got along and they all...wanted to get together for the sake of humanity and I was like 'this is lovely'. It was the first time I felt accepted as a Muslim [outside of his religious community].

These friendships and the feeling that Lalon had of being surrounded by people who not only accepted him for who he is but also shared his world-views had direct impact on his decision to continue being involved in interfaith work. It also helped him think deeply about the political aspect of interfaith work and I will come back to this shortly. Baile also put emphasis on feeling acceptance and given a space where she feels she belongs. She described how she had told her colleagues about her reckoning with her faith, her mental health and her bisexuality, and how the friendships she formed have helped her come to terms with some really challenging

times in her life. When I asked her what it is about the people at the Faith & Belief Forum that is so special, she thought for a while before answering (with a laugh) that it is “probably something in the water” and that the people who are employed by the Faith & Belief Forum have a special spark around them. But she also thinks it is the training and skills the Faith & Belief Forum provides that help in forming these friendships:

I think it is because everything is so focused on...everyone who works at the Faith & Belief Forum or volunteers at the Faith & Belief Forum takes part in the Faith Awareness training and often Speaker training as well, so everyone is already...like from the moment when they step into the door is already learning how to talk sensitively, how to communicate sensitively, how to...think about things deeply from many different perspectives and try to speak in a way which doesn't represent anyone other than themselves.

This focus on friendship is not unique for the young people in this thesis. As we saw in Chapter 1, friendship is one of the most common factors why people are involved in interfaith work and why they see it as important (Cornelio & Salera, 2012; Krebs, 2011; Liljestrand, 2018; Henry, 2015). It is also one of the reasons why there is a political interest in interfaith work, particularly for young people (Cornelio & Salera, 2012; Krebs, 2011). The young people's experiences show how being involved in interfaith work provide them with skills to build meaningful relationship and friendships, but also how interfaith work as an idea becomes an important means to handle stereotypes and differences. But, as we will see in the next chapter, this focus on friendship and moving beyond difference can also be a challenge in interfaith work.

### **5.1.2. ...to find middle ground**

Another theme that many of the young people focused on was how interfaith work provides a platform to work to find common ground and build bridges between people of different religions. This theme is similar to the focus on friendships above, but is more structural and less personal. When I asked Mayah what interfaith work means to her, she put most emphasis on working together develop a middle ground that is founded in respect:

For me it means working with people from different faiths. Working with them rather than against them and understand what they are saying and respecting what they are saying. There are lots of things you might agree with and disagree with, but that doesn't mean you have to disrespect someone because they believe it. Do you know what I mean? It's just not...civil and that's where humanity breaks because people are like roaring at each other from both sides. Things don't work like that. We can work together. We have similarities and differences, everyone has similarities and differences. So, it's just about finding that match in the middle, finding that and securing that and working with that rather than forgetting that that exists.

Although Mayah's account is more a reflection of her idea of what interfaith work is, it is also embedded in the work she is doing with the Feast. What Mayah likes the most about the Feast is how the organisation is determined to actively work towards a society where people can meet and talk, despite their differences. Her emphasis on "working with them rather than against them" also gives insight into her understanding of interfaith work as something that provides an alternative to and challenges more isolationist and radical groups. This is linked to her own distinction between peaceful and fundamentalist understandings of Islam reported in the previous chapter. For Mayah, doing interfaith work with the Feast directly challenges this distinction and provides an alternative that not only actively tries to

break down barriers that keep people apart but also conveys an inclusive message of respect and acceptance. Sana has a very similar view to Mayah. She told me that the work she is doing in the Feast is all about trying to find a middle ground that encourages people to interact:

I feel like we need to find that middle ground. Yeah, it's okay if you get to know someone even if you say that you don't like their personality because you are not going to like everyone and not everyone's going to like you. But at least make the effort and take the step forward and try to get to know them and just find your middle ground with people. Like in the Feast there are people with whom I have very different viewpoints to, but we find middle ground. Just find your middle ground and be willing to talk to them and just be more open.

This middle ground can be different things. Sana focuses particularly on how using popular culture, such as movie nights of Marvel, makes it possible for young people to come together, discuss and bond. But she also mentioned how litter picking in the community, which the Feast has frequently organised, is another example of how to work to find middle ground. At the centre of Sana's understanding of interfaith work lies the notion of a platform that brings people together around shared issues, despite differences. Sam also shares this view and considers this to be one of the reasons why interfaith work can be effective. He rejects the notion that it is necessarily shared theological and ethical frameworks that brings people together and more that interfaith work provides opportunities to meet and work on issues that people are concerned about:

There is a difference between this and saying that all religions are really aiming for the same thing because many religions strive for many different things or aims for different goals and have different ethical systems. But no matter what your religion is, you still care about things that people are really worried about. Like global warming

and the effect it might have on themselves and maybe their children and maybe people who are living in different bits of the world. Even if there are issues they don't share passions about, there is something bigger that they can connect over.

What is significant in Mayah, Sana and Sam's accounts above is how flexible the notion of interfaith work as a means to find middle ground is. None of them goes in to any great detail about what 'middle ground' actually means to them and it is obvious that it can mean different things. For Mayah, it is about finding the common ground that makes it possible to challenge isolationism and disrespect (feelings that at least partly can be traced back to her upbringing), whereas Sana and Sam focus more on specific social issues that people can come together around. Minerva had a different way of describing it. When I asked her about what interfaith means to her, she focused immediately on the concept of 'community':

Interfaith just means a community to me. A community of people of different faiths or no faiths. Because you have...even in my own religion it tells you not to like discriminate other people or think lower or higher of them. Other people do, you know, think that 'Christians are this', do you know what I mean? People try to put themselves higher or lower. But we are just different for me. Interfaith for me is just different, there's no kind of hierarchy. Well, obviously there's a difference, but that's not important. You do your thing and I do mine, and we can talk. Do you know what I mean? We can hang (laughing).

This is an account that is similar to what we have seen above. Interfaith work is about coming together despite differences, working together for a shared goal and not putting one religion or belief system as superior over any other. But what is evident in Minerva's account is the emphasis on 'no hierarchy', which can be read as an emphasis on equality and balance. The interfaith space is not only an opportunity to come together and work, but also framed around the notion that no



religion or belief system is superior to any other. This ‘no hierarchy’ is something that Laura enjoys with interfaith work. As we could see in the previous chapter, Laura had grown up in a church that she felt was too evangelical and the reason she chose to become involved in the Faith & Belief Forum was because it provided a diverse theological space. Being in an interfaith space where no religion is more dominant or important than the other has made it possible for her to enjoy her religion more:

Here I feel like I can really bring in my views and really explain them and everyone would say like 'oh, that's really interesting' and no longer be like the dominant voice. Someone else has an equally as dominant voice and I don't feel that it's been quite like that way in any other environment I have been in. From other places you are speaking from a place of privilege because you can and everyone understands your framework. But here it's not like that at all and that's been really interesting because I think it means that I can enjoy myself a bit because it's not oppressing anyone else.

This is an interesting and different way of describing how interfaith work as a middle ground makes it possible for young people to not only learn about other religions, but also to explore their own. Laura is the only one of the young people in this thesis to focus on the fear of oppressing other people with her religion. This could partly be explained that she is belonging to the state church in the UK – the Church of England – but also about her own conflicting emotions in relation to ‘too intense’ religious practice. The more individualised focus in interfaith spaces, where no one is considered a representative of their religion, makes it possible for Laura to enjoy her religious identity and explore what it means to her. Some of the research participants also emphasised that interfaith work makes it possible for people to understand how people with different world-views think and this was a common reason why several of the young people were involved in interfaith work.

For Isaac, one of the strengths with interfaith work is that it makes it possible to see the person beyond what he or she believes and understand where they come from. He considers this vital in today's mediated and hyper-connected society:

Once you develop an understanding you can still disagree and you can still, you know, not wanting to do things the same. But once you are understanding why they are doing it, it becomes much more difficult to attack them for it because that is not so dissimilar to your rationale. That people, I think, generally reason things in quite similar ways, they just come to different conclusions. And once you start to actually acknowledge that the person opposite you has had as complex a series of thoughts and as complex chains of experiences and everything else that makes that person come to that decision they come to, it makes you much more aware of the fact that they have come to a decision that is not so much a spur of the moment thing and that you could really change their minds if you just gave them, you know, this new information.

When I asked Isaac how this way of thinking informs his interfaith work, he put emphasis on the need to create opportunities for people of different religions to understand where they are coming from. He described several ways of doing this, ranging from producing information material about Jewish and Christian practice to organising events where Jews and Christians can learn from each other. But what was central to his interfaith work was to provide a platform where people can understand the complexity of religious identities and practice:

I want people to understand each other better, and in a Christian-Jewish context it is about Christians and Jews understanding each other better. The CCJ provides a space for bilateral dialogue and there's a space for conversations that is just for a Christian and a Jew. Because as much as people think that they have sorted all the problems, they haven't. Now more than ever we need that conversation because otherwise that conversation wouldn't have been had. And once people are having the conversation

they enjoy it and they are engaging in it, but they need the space to have that conversation otherwise they would not have it.

It is in relation to finding this middle ground, and the importance of learning the skills to meet people half way, that makes many of the research participants think it is important that young people are involved in interfaith work. Baile opines that one of the biggest challenges facing society today is that people get stuck in their echo-chambers and only surround themselves with people who have the same backgrounds as they do. Young people need to be given platforms and spaces that challenge such mindsets:

Young people should be learning how to criticise and how to challenge and how to unpack and how to be inquisitive. And being encouraged to do all of those things while they still can and while they still have the mental space to do so and while there still is a temporal space for them to do so. Because there is only so much you can learn from people who are the same as you. Because if someone is the same as you then that implies that they know roughly the same things as you, so how could they introduce you to new things? You have to go out and....consciously choose to learn about those things or have someone make you go out and learn about those things in order to expand your horizon.

According to Baile, interfaith work is an opportunity to break echo-chambers, particularly interfaith organisations like the Faith & Belief Forum that work with young people from a wide range of faith and belief backgrounds. Laura also agrees that interfaith youth work provides young people with opportunities to encounter difference, but put even more focus on religion:

If you are from a young age exposed to different views and beliefs, you are used to having different ideas of what God is and different ways of how you are interacting with society...but you are still coming together to do work and I do think within interfaith you find more similarities than differences. You build upon the principle of

that even if there are fundamental things you disagree on you can still get stuff done together and you can still interact with one another and build friendships and stuff.

This subsection has shown how the young people understand interfaith work to, in different ways, provide opportunities to find middle ground and understand each other. Their accounts indicate that interfaith work can be seen as a specific space where people of different religions and belief systems can meet despite differences, but also an idea and framework that encourages people to find common ground to work together. In the next subsection I will look at how this takes a more specific focus: in politics.

### **5.1.3. ...to change society**

Although most of the young people described interfaith work in more local and community-based ways, some of them focused on how interfaith work also can be a way to do politics and change society. For Elizabeth, one of the strengths of interfaith work is that it offers both platform and people to make social action projects more efficient:

I think one thing that a lot of faiths have in common is to do social action. And yet we often do them very separately to each other so to be able to come together and share our resources can make a much bigger impact and I think it's important that social action isn't just in our own little groups...In particular when it comes to food banks. I mean, most places of worship would be running a food bank at the moment, but there is no coordination between which areas are being covered and some areas might be missed. And here I think more and more faith organisations should come together and work out how we can become more effective.

Elizabeth described how she had been involved in several social action projects through her work at the CCJ and how this is an important aspect of her interfaith

work. Although she does share the other young people's understanding of interfaith work as forming friendships and building bridges between faith communities, working to change society for the better is integral in what interfaith work means to her and this is best done through social action in communities. Interfaith work, particularly interfaith organisations with a well-known name such as the CCJ, can be a way for faith communities to share resources and come together to work against poverty and social exclusion. This is something she shares with Lalon and Frank Temple (FT). As we saw in the previous chapter, Lalon identifies as a socialist and his political identity is embedded in the ideas of egalitarianism and communitarianism. His internship in the Faith & Belief Forum made him realise how intersected interfaith work is with egalitarianism and his understanding of socialism:

I realised that communitarianism fits perfectly into interfaith, into interculturalism, into multiculturalism. Into building a vision that no matter who you are, no matter where you're from, you don't view another with hatred and distrust. But you view another, no matter what's their background and no matter what they are about, as...with compassion and trust. After [the internship at] the Faith & Belief Forum that fuelled my direction.

Along with Sam, who in the previous chapter described how he understands interfaith work as being about bringing people from a wide range of faiths and non-faiths together, Lalon does not separate interfaith work from intercultural work. For him, faith and culture need to be seen as intersected and during both our interviews he mentioned both interfaith and interculturalism when he spoke about interfaith work:

It's weird how I see interfaith because I don't just see interfaith but intercultural as well. When I consider it, I see faith and culture and not just faith. And...and then it

becomes different. I've led discussions and talks, I've got different people together and some of them might be Christians but they come from different cultures and they have different readings of Christianity, etcetera. And it's just about, really, getting people together.

Although some of the other young people also put emphasis on the need to understand cultural diversity, they did not explain it as explicitly as Lalon. A possible explanation could be Lalon's political understanding of interfaith work as embedded in the ideas of egalitarianism and communitarianism, where interfaith work becomes a means to change what Lalon considers to be underlying injustices and inequalities in society. Interculturalism – the need to develop frameworks of shared values – is key in this political vision (cf. Meer & Modood, 2012; Meer et al, 2016). But it is also another example of how broadly the notion of interfaith work can be interpreted and how this has been embraced by some interfaith organisations. The Faith & Belief Forum, for example, describes the work it does as both interfaith and intercultural in order to capture the diversity of its many programmes and projects. It is possible that one of the reasons why Lalon found belonging in the Faith & Belief Forum was this intersection between interfaith and intercultural work, and that his time at the Faith & Belief Forum further convinced him of how interfaith work and intercultural work are embedded. Frank Temple (FT) puts emphasis on how interfaith organisations should be more involved in politics. He argues that interfaith organisations should be more courageous in taking a political stance on sensitive issues and exemplifies this by referring to the formation of the CCJ as an organisation:

I mean, the CCJ was founded in 1942 and it was founded as a response to Jewish refugees and to the growing awareness of what the Archbishop William Temple spoke in the House of Lords, a very powerful speech in 1942 about how it could still be

possible to get Jews out of Europe and to come to some sort of deal whereby they could find a home for potential refugees who are suffering persecution. And I think interfaith projects should do more of that kind of stuff and I think there is where our roots are. And I think they are doing it to some extent, particularly on issues like the Dubs amendment [offering unaccompanied refugee children safe passage to Britain] and, you know, the response to [the refugee camp in] Calais. Yeah, people of faith should unite because we have those common beliefs and present that in a challenge to Trump and others.

FT's account is significant in several ways. The first is his understanding that the roots of interfaith work lie in social resistance. It is not only about forming friendship and work to create inclusive platforms, it is also about using these relationships and platforms for common good. Although FT was the one of the research participants to express this most clearly, many of the other young people also shared this sentiment. The second is that people of faith should unite because the values and beliefs they share can directly challenge political leaders, such as the US President Donald Trump. Although FT does not state it clearly in his account, these 'people of faith' do not all refer to every religious person but specifically people who are active in interfaith work – those FT identified as 'progressive' in the previous chapter. For FT, it is important that people of faith do not exclude themselves from political activity but put their beliefs and values into action. This is clearly visible in his emphasis on how faith and politics intersect:

I passionately believe that faith is the clearest way individuals can engage with other individuals, get alongside them and understand their lives. Hear their doubts, hear their worries and anxieties and inspire them with some hope of the future. And that's what politics should do as well. So yeah, more faith in politics!

This section has focused on how interfaith work can be a means for the young people to achieve social and political goals. By focusing on three forms – forming

friendships (which are both personal and strategic), providing platforms to find middle ground, and to change society – we can see how interfaith work takes different forms for the young people. It is also obvious how much these different forms intersect with each other and for most of the research participants all three forms are important. If we reconnect with the theoretical framework and Kate Tilleczek's social levels, it shows how micro, meso and macro levels inform young people's interfaith work (Tilleczek, 2011, 2014). It is not only about the relationships they form at the micro level or how platforms provide opportunities to find common ground at meso levels, but also how interfaith work can be (and should be, for many of the young people) a call for action to challenge issues at the macro level.

## **5.2. Interfaith work as theological commitments**

But interfaith work is not only a means to achieve social and political goals, it is also about theological commitments and directly connected to how the young people understand their religious identities. This section will explore the role of religion and theological and ethical frameworks in the young people's interfaith work. It is the result of questions like 'what role does your religion play in your interfaith work?', 'has your interfaith work had any impact on your religious identity?' and 'are there any ethical teachings that inspire your interfaith work?'.

### **5.2.1. The role of 'faith' in interfaith**

What was obvious very early on in the interview process was that 'religion' and 'faith' in relation to the young people's interfaith work was more complex than I



first had anticipated. For some of the research participants, religion was at the centre of why they do interfaith work; for others, it was more complicated. There were also differences depending on what religion the young people identified with. The young Christians in the study expressed the most explicit link between their interfaith work and their religious identities. This was most visible in Elizabeth and Frank Temple's accounts. When I asked Elizabeth about the role religion plays in her interfaith work, she put it front and centre:

To me it came from a religious perspective, it was always Christian organisations that got me involved and I really like the parts in the Bible about action. My favourite is the Book of James that talks about that it's not good enough just to say that 'Peace and let God be with you' if you are not actually going to feed people who need it or help those who need it. And that's always sent a strong message to me so I think it's very important.

She came back to the importance of the ethical teachings in the Book of James several times in our two interviews and here we can see a link between Elizabeth's religious identity and the emphasis she put on social action in the previous section. For Elizabeth, being a Christian means more than merely praying for a better world; it also requires social action. Frank Temple (FT) shares this view. His firm emphasis on the need for interfaith organisations to take a stand on political issues and his wish for more faith in politics are directly connected to what Christianity means to him. As we saw in Chapter 4, he describes himself and his family as 'progressive Christians' who think interfaith is important. When I asked him if there are any specific ethical teachings that inspire him, he laughed and said "Yes, of course" but that there are many and he also apologised for being bad at paraphrasing them. After a while he picked 'A City Upon the Hill' as an ethical teaching that is particularly relevant for his interfaith work. When I asked him why, he said that the metaphor

of 'the city' is helpful "because I see a city as a community of diverse people and not everyone is the same but you all get together and you make the city work because you are all different." But most important in how Christianity plays into FT's interfaith work is Jesus's Jewish background and ability to engage with people who are different from him:

I don't see Jesus starting a new religion, for example. I see him as a Jew, talking to a Jewish audience and context about Jewish law and tradition and beliefs. But, at the same time, I am a Christian so I am part of the heritage that came after. But I do see Jesus as someone who sat down with people who were different from him, who learned from people who were different to him, who...you know, didn't have all the answers himself and was more kind of surprised by the Samaritan woman at the well and, you know, other characters and had good relationships with people who were different to him. And I see that as a model for my own interfaith work because I might speak as a Christian in a Christian context, but I learn so much from people of other faiths and that helps me to deepen my relationship with God because I think God speaks to them as much as he speaks to me.

FT's makes several points in this account. First, it shows how interfaith plays into his understanding of Christianity. He fully embraces the theological links between Christianity and Judaism, and tries to figure out what this means for him as a Christian. While some of the young Christians acknowledges the links between Christianity and Judaism, none of them express this as explicitly as FT. His account shows a theological awareness that he brings into his interfaith work and which is also linked to his upbringing as 'a son of a manse' who was involved early in Holocaust education. In contrast to many of the other young people, FT has from an early age met Holocaust survivors and Jewish leaders who have also shaped his theological worldview. But FT also put emphasis on Jesus as an important role model in how to work with people from different backgrounds. He is not alone in

bringing up important religious figures as inspirational actors in interfaith work – as we will see below, many of the young Muslims do the same thing – but what is particularly interesting about FT’s description is his emphasis on learning from others. It provides a theological meaning to the importance of friendships in section 5.1.1, but also a divine purpose: by learning from others, FT feels that his relationship with God becomes stronger.

However, not all young people spoke so directly and explicitly about the role of religion in their interfaith work. The young Jews – particularly Baile and Isaac – asked me to define what I mean by ‘religion’ when I asked them what role religion plays in their interfaith work. Baile was the first person to ask this question. Since I wanted to avoid putting my understanding of ‘religion’ at the centre of the interview, I asked her what they meant to her. She explained that, to her, there is a difference between ‘religion’ and ‘faith’, where the former is focus on community and the latter her personal relationship to God. I then asked her what role ‘faith’ plays in her interfaith work, she thought for a while before answering:

I think it's really hard to even pin-point what faith is, let alone what role it has in interfaith. Like when I'm thinking of my own, sort of, position towards interfaith, so to speak... I began my journey in interfaith as an Orthodox Jew, sometimes observant, sometimes less observant, in my own attempts of interpreting what that meant. And now, I'm a Jew. Very, very strongly identifying as a Jew, even though I practice nothing, other than the few tenants that I think are things that matter to me, regardless of Judaism. Things like charitable work and charitable giving and volunteering. But is that what I bring to interfaith? Because if that's what I bring to interfaith then faith isn't really playing a part. It's more about personal and moral principles and ethics and those are certainly things that people can find a lot more agreements on than they can theology.

Baile's account provides several important insights into the role faith can play in young people's interfaith work. She problematises theological and ethical frameworks, and asks questions to herself what drives her interfaith work. Later in the same interview, she described how important the notion of social justice is to her – she encouraged everyone to become a 'social justice warrior' – and she is still following the mitzvah of giving 10% of her monthly salary to charities. But despite the Jewish links, she does not necessarily see this ethical framework as 'Jewish' to her. Instead, it is embedded in her ethical identity about what it means to do good and she finds it difficult to separate from her upbringing with the moral compass passed on by her mother.

But Baile brings also attention in her account to the short-comings of academic concepts and the importance of thinking deeply about the epistemological and ontological roots of these concepts. When I asked the young people about the role of 'religion' in their interfaith work, I did not consider how the concept of 'religion' is understood differently across and within religious traditions. Interviewing Baile made me aware of the importance of concepts and I will come back to this more in-depth in Chapter 7. Having interviewed Baile, I was more cautious when I asked Isaac about the role religion might play in his interfaith work. I framed the question as 'religion' or 'faith', in case he had a similar way to differentiate them as Baile had. When he still asked me what I meant by 'religion' and 'faith', I gave him a broad overview of ethical teachings that might inspire and that some young people found that being involved in interfaith work because they think it is an important part of being Christian, Jewish or Muslim. To make it even more specific, I asked him "if Judaism had played any role in his interfaith work?"

and he answered “Yeah, it does. I'm engaging in it as a Jew.” When I asked him what that meant, he thought for a while before answering:

I think that Judaism does wants me to talk to people of other faiths, even though there are many who say that I shouldn't. You know, Judaism is not a religion that wants people to think the same. It wants people to disagree and to argue and to challenge each other, within a Jewish context but also outside of that. I think Judaism wants you to live in the world, I think it wants you to affect the world. It's not...I don't think Judaism has ever been a religion of closing inwards, I think it has tried to make you live outwards.

What is significant about Isaac's account is that he focuses much more on Judaism as a religion than Baile did. Whereas she wrestled with her personal relationship to the faith Judaism and its ethical teachings, Isaac speaks about the theological importance to engage and talk to people as a form of religious practice. Although he also puts emphasis that this is his theological understanding of Judaism and a result of his upbringing in a Liberal Jewish congregation, he is not as introspective in his reflections as Baile is. This is probably due to differences in personality, but there is also another important difference between Isaac and Baile: Baile has stopped practising Judaism, whereas Isaac has become more religiously practising. At the time of the interviews, he described his religious practice as “affiliated, vaguely, to the modern Orthodox Jewish world.” The move from having a strong Liberal Jewish identity to Orthodoxy occurred gradually during his time at university. It was a result of learning more about religion, where interfaith work was an important part, but also about reflections around what kind of life he wanted to lead. He explained that while he now identifies more with Orthodox Judaism, his ethical and theological framework he formed during his up-bringing still remains. Here we can see another example of the importance of exploring what different

concepts mean to the young people when asking a question about the role of religion. The interviews with Isaac – and Baile – made me more sensitive in how I used concepts such as ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ to make sure I captured the research participants’ personal feelings and understandings of them. While I continued to use the concepts in my interviews with all the young people, I made sure to ask questions about their personal relationship with them and how they understood them. This was visible in the interviews with the young Muslims. In contrast to the young Jews, none of the young Muslims asked me what I meant when I asked them about the role religion or faith played in their interfaith work. They also used both religion and faith effortlessly in their accounts, which might suggest that these are not difficult concepts for them. It was also clear that Islam played a very personal role in their interfaith work: they all, in different ways, put emphasis on ‘being a good Muslim’ and how interfaith work makes it possible for them to be a better Muslim. When I asked Lalon what role religion played in his interfaith work, he gave a very similar answer as Isaac did: it plays an identification role and this has both religious and political meanings:

[Interfaith] has identified me as a Muslim and someone who can't survive without interfaith. And that brings me to...that makes my position very much like 'am I going to die? Am I going to be stopped by the police?' It means that in order to survive I need to do this stuff, but more so...in order to be a good Muslim and to lead by example I need to create a better world. That's where it plays a part. Because it's part of being a good Muslim. And it comes back to that thing that, at the moment, interfaith is the best way to create a better and a more understanding world. To leaving a better world behind than when you found it and to leading a life of a good Muslim.

Here we can, again, see how intersected Lalon’s religious and political identities are, and the role interfaith work plays in this intersection. It connects with his

experience of the Lee Rigby murder in section 5.1.1. and how the Faith & Belief Forum provided him with a sense of belonging, but it also shows how ‘being a good Muslim’ to Lalon is to work for a better world. When I asked him what it means to be ‘a good Muslim’, he made references to the life of the Prophet Mohammed and how he fought for a just and equal society. It also meant fighting to change the perception of Islam as violent and radical, and be the good person that other people thought of when they heard the word ‘Muslim.’ This emphasis on being good and doing good is visible in Sana and Minerva’s accounts as well. Neither of them became involved in interfaith work for religious reasons, but interfaith work has with time become integral in their understanding of what it is to be a good Muslim. Sana made a similar point as Frank Temple made above in relation to how interacting and working with people of other faiths has deepened her faith:

And I feel like, in terms of how I view Islam and how I view to be a good Muslim is to be a good person and just being nice and spread positivity as a fundamental basic. Not being willing to do interfaith wouldn't have worked for what I fundamentally view Islam to be. So it has definitely influenced me and I am more willing to be open and I help other people to learn as well. And I like that, it's just influences you in ways you don't realise. How someone else from a different faith could help me become a better Muslim. If I had said that to people they would be like 'what? That makes no sense' and I'm like, 'I know, but it makes sense to me' and that's how it happened.

Here we can see a connection with what Sana described in the previous chapter about how being active in the Feast has made her reconnect with her faith and fall in love with it again. Having left a bad group of friends, she found herself in a space where people were passionate about religion and interested in learning more about it. This made Sana find her way back to the religion she grew up with and she also started to read up more about Islam and the Prophet Mohammed. Sana’s account

shows how interfaith friendships and feelings of belonging to an interfaith space can bring about a constructive learning process about religion and what it means. When I asked Minerva what role religion plays in her interfaith work, she provided me with a slightly different answer than Sana. Although she also puts emphasis on the need to be ‘a good Muslim’, she also points to the social and political responsibility she feels Muslims have to be active in society:

I think it is a responsibility...I don't know if I am in a majority or a minority thinking this, but I don't think Muslims should just help Muslims. I think helping people in general, regardless of your religion whether it's the same religion or a different religion, is equally as important. You know, you hear a lot on the news where people say 'charity starts in the home, it's our people first', whether that is English white people or British Asian people thinking 'helping our own first' and everyone else come after that. And I don't share that opinion.

For Minerva, being involved in interfaith work is one way of breaking such barriers between communities and it also informs her understanding what ‘a good Muslims is’: somebody who is active, interested and kind to other people, whether it is through social action projects or just smiling to somebody in the street. It also reconnects with her account in section 5.1.2 on interfaith as a form of community. By participating in interfaith work and challenging the narrative of ‘putting one’s own people first’, she lives in accordance with what she understands Islam to be all about and the responsibility she has as a Muslim. But not all the young Muslims made a firm connection between their interfaith work and their religious identities. Billy, who in section 5.1.1 explained that he wants to get rid of labels that differentiates between people, did not consider his Muslim identity to play any significant role in his interfaith work:



Being involved in interfaith work for me is not really a Muslim thing, it is more for me as a person, as a human being. Obviously as I am a Muslim I see it as important and I want to get along with many people and explore different faiths and people. That's what it is for me really. It's about getting on well with people, not because 'oh I am a Muslim', more that it is a human being thing to do, that's how I view other people. I don't view them as 'that's a Christian', I see them as a human being really.

Billy makes several important points in this account. First, he reconnects with what he said earlier in this chapter about the need not to put labels on people. His emphasis that he participates as a human and not a Muslim can be seen as an example of this. But his account is also similar to the reflections Baile made above in relation to what role faith played in her interfaith work. What is her ethical framework and what comes from her Jewish upbringing and practice? Billy expressed very strong admiration for the Prophet Mohammed, whom he considers to be his role model and wants to follow. He told me about how the life the Prophet Mohammed lived, the sacrifices he made and the emphasis he put on bringing people together, informed his interfaith work. Through such a lens, it is possible to raise the question whether Billy's ethical and political understanding of 'interfaith work as a human thing' stems from how the Prophet lived and, as such, is deeply connected to his Muslim identity. This shows how intersected religious, ethical and political identities can be, and it again raises the question around what impact the theoretical concepts we as researchers use might have on how research participants interpret a question. I will come back to this discussion more in Chapter 7.

### **5.3. Chapter summary**

This chapter has focused on how the young people do interfaith work and what interfaith work means to them. It has answered the third research sub-question

‘what does interfaith work mean to the young people socially, theologically, ethically and politically?’. The chapter has explored this by focusing on two areas: ‘interfaith work as a means’ and ‘interfaith as theological commitments.’ Whereas the first area focused on the social and political importance of interfaith, the second explored more in-depth the theological and ethical aspects of interfaith work.

Looking back at the chapter, a few conclusions can be made. The first is that interfaith work means several different things for the young people: friendships, building a platform to find middle ground, challenge isolationism and build bridges, and changing society are all examples that emerged. Interfaith work is both important at the very local level – in friendships formed between people to discuss theological ideas, in forming sense of belonging in times of need – as well as on the societal and national level. The second is that these different ways of doing interfaith work often are embedded in each other. For many of the research participants, the friendships they form in local interfaith spaces and the platform they build together with other people should result in societal change – for some, this is by making labels (such as religion) irrelevant, to others it is by actively working for political change. The third conclusion is in relation to the theological and ethical structures that inform how the young people understand their interfaith work. While religion and faith might play very different roles and have different meanings, their accounts show how religious, political, social and ethical identities intersect. In some cases, these identities have developed, deepened and changed as a result of interfaith work. This indicates that doing interfaith work can have a direct impact on how the young people think and reflect on their understandings of what it means to belong to a religion. But it also shows the overlaps between the young people’s upbringing (as we could see in Chapter 4) and their decision to become

involved in interfaith work. In the next chapter, I will continue to focus on how the young people understand their interfaith work, but this time focus on a different angle: the challenges, boundaries and politics of interfaith work.

# 6.

## The Politics of Interfaith: Challenges and boundaries

In the previous two chapters, the focus has been on how the young people's interest in interfaith work has emerged and why they are active in interfaith work. In this chapter I attend to the challenges the young people think face interfaith work in the UK, what they feel needs to be done to change this and how they want to go about making this happen. It answers the final research sub-question: 'what challenges have the young people experienced with interfaith work?'. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on general interfaith challenges, the second challenges facing young people in interfaith work and the third challenges that are more specific (but not necessarily exclusive) for Christians, Jews and/or Muslims. As in the other chapters, I end the chapter with a summary of the main arguments.

### **6.1. Challenges facing interfaith work**

In this section I focus on general challenges that the young people have experienced or think that interfaith work faces. Most of these reflections are a result of the questions 'what challenges do you think face interfaith work?' and 'how do you

think these challenges should be tackled?’ that were asked of all participants. But some of the reflections are also a result of other questions and topics.

### **6.1.1. Preaching to the converted**

When I asked Sam about what challenges he found with interfaith work, he had the answer straight away:

The people who come to interfaith events are people who already get...they are already fine with interfaith, so you don't have to convince them about the value of understanding people of different cultures and backgrounds. They are already on-board with that idea. It's largely people from the Abrahamic faiths who are already sold on the idea of going to interfaith events.

This is the most common challenge identified by all the young people. Despite the fact that interfaith work is considered by them to be an important means to counter stereotypes and build inclusive spaces – as we could see in Chapter 5 – they are also aware that there is a specific kind of people who are interested: those who are already convinced that interfaith work is important. Although this is part of creating the community that many of the young people think is key to why they have continued being active, it is also a major challenge and many of them thought about how to best solve this. For Sam, it is difficult because many of those active in interfaith are retired people and they might not want to change the ways they are doing interfaith to include other people:

So, dragging people away from that is difficult because it is how they define what they do and even if they would be broader in how they define their own work it's still very brave to step into new stuff. But I think that if you want to bring in new people you need to sort of meet them where they are...so you're already getting to the people who love text study, but what you need to do is getting people who love music or love

politics or love art or love whatever else and do things that are really interesting to those people and bring interfaith in through the back door.

This emphasis on changing methods and trying to bring in ‘interfaith through the back door’ is something that has become more common in the UK in recent years, particularly in attempts to broaden the concept of interfaith work to also include ‘intercultural events’ (cf. Ipgrave et al, 2018). As we saw in Chapter 5, Sam is one of those who thinks interfaith should become more intercultural to accommodate more people (e.g. non-religious) and develop its methods. The Faith & Belief Forum’s Interfaith Summit, which he took part in organising in 2016, is one example of this with activities that were not explicitly ‘faith connected.’ For example, alongside sessions on faith and identity, there were also sessions focusing on intercultural cooking, choir singing and slam poetry. Lalon shares Sam’s view. As we saw in the previous chapter, he also puts emphasis on interfaith and intercultural work, and when I asked him how to make more people involved in interfaith work he replied “by not calling it interfaith work.” When I asked him why, he said that it puts a label on something that should speak to all humanity and not only people of different faiths. While he did think labelling events ‘interfaith’ can be important to gather people of different faiths together, this should not disguise what he considers to be the main goal of interfaith work – bringing people together:

I think getting people into an arena when they have to...not confront, but have to realise that they are one and the same. That they have the same troubles, the same issues...or different issues but the same levelling. In my opinion at least, that's bringing people together and talking about faith, talking about unity, talking about humanity without putting categorical labels on things so people are forced to confront to one

book or another. You know? It's not a 'them or us' situation and all in a sudden it becomes a 'we', it starts off we a 'we'. We who believe. We who are.

Several of the other participants have similar thoughts to Sam and Lalon in relation to bringing in those who are not already open for interfaith work, but have other views about how it should be done. Frank Temple (FT) puts emphasis on also trying to reach out to those religious groups who one might not think are interested in participating:

I also think that you do need to preach to the...unconverted in the sense that it should be no no-go-area. So, if you as a Christian are trying to engage other Christians in interfaith you shouldn't fear that there is a particular denomination or a particular church you shouldn't engage with. You should still try to engage with them and encourage them towards interfaith, even if it's a real challenge. It is still important because often it is the middle-class churches which are dwindling which are doing interfaith, whereas the churches which are growing are more evangelical in their outlook so it's important to get alongside them as well and see how they can do interfaith as well.

FT's point, that it is the middle-class churches which tend to be active in interfaith whereas many, particularly young, people are drawn to more evangelical and Pentecostal churches, has been stressed elsewhere (Weller, 2013; Woodhead & Cato, 2012; see also Sthran, 2013). As we saw in Chapter 1, there has been a shift in the religious landscape in the UK in recent decades and many churches struggle to find people to come to their services. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are often more focused on evangelism and less likely and willing to participate in interfaith work (Guest et al, 2012). But FT's emphasis that there should be no 'no-go-areas' is also interesting because it brings attention to the boundaries of interfaith work and who is participating in constructing these boundaries, as well as how these

boundaries should be handled. Baile had a similar approach and criticism when I asked her about the challenges she thought were facing interfaith work:

It's a sort of interfaith dogma almost of 'this is what we talk about' and 'this is what we won't talk about' and 'if we are going to talk we do it in this way'. And 'these are the kind of events that are suitable' and 'these are the kind of events that are not suitable' and 'this is how we *do* interfaith'. And that's not to say that there are no interfaith interventions out there which aren't innovative and challenging and really shake up attitudes and throw a really big fox in the hen-pit or whatever the phrase is. But most of them, it's just a kind of 'nice touchy feeling, isn't it great that we are all friends together' kind of thing. It's like the photo opportunity of interfaith and I think...I think that that can sometimes do more harm than it does good. The people who most need it look there and they say 'that's people doing interfaith, that's not my religion interacting with other religions, that's people doing this *thing* called interfaith'.

Baile's lengthy account raises several important points. The first is the politics around what interfaith work entails and is, and how this frames what is possible to talk about in interfaith settings. It also brings attention to *who* decides what kind of work is considered 'interfaith.' Since Baile does not give any specific examples, it is difficult to estimate whether it is only her political understanding of what interfaith work is or if this understanding also has clashed with established forms of doing interfaith work. But regardless, it shows a political critique of interfaith work and the need to challenge established forms of doing interfaith work. As we will see throughout this chapter, it is something she shares with most of the other research participants. The comment Baile made about 'doing this thing called interfaith' is also significant because it points to a common criticism some interfaith practitioners face: that interfaith work is not only a form of activism but also a religion in its own right with the ambition to remove theological differences that



make religious communities distinctive (cf. Weller, 2013; Chetham et al, 2013). This is closely related to the political and theological framings of interfaith work itself, and it can have direct consequences for who decides to participate in interfaith work. As we will see in section 6.1.3 focusing on fear and security, it is not unusual for interfaith to be considered to be threatening to minority faith communities because of fear of losing one's distinction and, in some cases, existence as a result of conversion and/or mixed-marriages. Trying to include these voices in interfaith work is therefore a big challenge and we will see an example of this in sections 6.1.3 and 6.1.4, when Nadine, who belongs to that evangelical strand of Christianity that FT mentions, talks about the challenge she experiences in and with interfaith work.

#### **6.1.2. 'Superficial' and 'meaningless' interfaith**

Another challenging theme that several of the young people, in different ways, expressed is 'superficial' or 'meaningless' interfaith. Although the meaning of this differs, the general sense is that interfaith work can easily become focused on what people have in common, downplay differences and never touch on controversial or difficult topics for fear of offending other people. This is a tendency that frustrates Isaac and he said that "the interfaith clichés of people meeting up and eating nice food are real" and although he has seen waves within the interfaith world to tackle this by having 'difficult conversations' (often in a theological and/or political sense), there needs to be a change:

You know, you have to start the conversation superficially because that's how you start a relationship with someone. But if it doesn't evolve past that, if week after week you are sitting in a circle of people and you are agreeing, that's not a relationship.

That's not really anything. I think that too often it's just a room full of people having nice conversations.

This limitation of interfaith practice is something many of the other young people mention and are frustrated with. Laura, who appreciates and likes the 'safe space' at the Faith & Belief Forum that prevents the participants from becoming spokespersons of their religion, can also see the downside of it and that it prevents people from having theological discussions:

And I think from my experiences in interfaith, especially at the Faith & Belief Forum, it's all down to the individual and we've talked about faith from an individual perspective so it's always 'I' statements, which is definitely something I agree with that we should do. But when there's something you *really don't agree with*; how can you ever challenge that? How can you come to that if you're trying to use the principles that we are all getting along, and we are all discovering things about each other? I think that's a challenge that needs to be tackled.

This is a critique she shares with Jacob and Nadine. Both mentioned the lack of theological discussions and the frustration they feel as a result. Jacob felt it was too much niceties and too little action for him, which he thinks partly is caused by intergenerational differences in the purpose of interfaith work:

It's not that I think we need to tear each other apart, but the idea of truth is not even on the cards basically. I think we are too busy about defending each other to a ridiculous extent. I don't say that we should go up and offend people, but it's clear that there is a real friendship in this council for Christians and Jews to the point that I think that you could be more open. But again, it reflects a generational difference and that's my problem with it.

Here we can see a connection with the importance of friendships in interfaith work that Jacob described in the previous chapter: friendships are critical to be able to

challenge each other's theological standpoints. But it also shows the need to find the right interfaith space. As we saw in the previous chapter, theological dialogue is important for Jacob and he is not as interested in social interfaith activities. In the CCJ, he does not only feel that he is unable to do the kind of interfaith work he wants to do, but he also feels there are generational barriers in the way. At the time of the interviews, Jacob tried to solve this by creating his own Catholic-Jewish youth group where he hopes they will be able to have more in-depth discussions about religion and theology. Nadine's issues were in relation to the Guidelines for Dialogue, which prevented her from going deep into theological differences when she was working with Muslim youth in the Feast. She described this situation as 'holding her tongue' and how she at times finds this frustrating:

Because we only hit the surface we can get these kids to talk, but we can't explore enough because it gets deep into the faith then, whereas I would gladly talk more about the things I know, but I can't because then I become a spokesperson of my faith. You have to say, 'do you all agree with that?', but you can't say 'I don't agree with that' so you have to say, 'what do you guys think about that?' in a respectful way. I think it's obviously the whole 'holding your tongue', but you do it for the right reason because you don't want to belittle anybody because people are at different stages in their faith and you have to realise that as well.

Nadine's account both touches upon her own wish to have more theological discussions with the young people she is working with and make her theological positioning clear, but it also points to frustration with the guidelines framing the interfaith setting. While Nadine accepts these guidelines and follows them, it is also clear that they frustrate her and this affects the way she speaks to the young Muslims. Minerva also describes how the Guidelines for Dialogue initially frustrated her and how she thought they made discussions repetitive:

In the beginning I just thought we were saying the same thing again and again and again. You know? Maybe as you go older you develop more opinions as well, so maybe that's why this has progressed. I felt like we were labelling the same point again and again and again. We fast, we pray, we fast, we pray. Again and again and again. We get it, you fast and you pray. You know...like the Christians are like 'yeah, we know what do you, tell us something different.'

It is interesting to note that Nadine and Minerva – both working or volunteering for the Feast – mention awareness about age and faith development. This is something they share with the other research participants in the Feast, but none of the young people in the other interfaith organisations brought it up. This is probably because the Feast, in contrast to the CCJ and the Faith & Belief Forum, works with children to a much higher extent, and Minerva has also been with the Feast since she was a child. While none of the participants in the Feast mention age as a direct challenge in interfaith work, the accounts above show how age also can be a limiting factor in what can be expressed and talked about in interfaith settings.

### **6.1.3. Fear, security and ‘scared society’**

As we have seen in the previous chapters, interfaith work is considered to be an important means to prevent tension, counter stereotypes and create inclusive spaces. By using methods such as safe space and awareness training, interfaith projects and organisations hope to mitigate fear and need of security. Still, fear and security are considered as two of the most profound challenges facing interfaith work. How this is described differs depending on what religion the young people belong to. When I talked about this with the young Muslims, many of them talked about societal fear and people's prejudices. Mayah described it as we are living in a ‘scared society’:

Everyone are scared, I think. We are living in a scared society where everyone's just defensive. Because that's the best thing to do, be defensive. Like 'oh, I'm better than you because I'm this and this and this.' You're just going to fight your own corner, really. But you shouldn't be like that, you should meet in the middle and bring humanity back.

When I asked her why she thought we were living in a scared society, she thought for a while before answering:

Because no one wants to take part in interfaith, no one wants to...*help*, no one wants to...like, how do I put this into words? People don't want to socialise in that way anymore. They just don't want to socialise in that way. I don't see it happening much. Obviously with the Feast they are trying to do it and it's amazing that they are. But yeah, I think we're living in a scared society because people are afraid of what they might find out or being told that they are wrong.

Mayah's account is significant in several ways. On the one hand, she provides a political critique of a society she finds isolating and unjust, and where people do not want to do what it takes to work for a better and more inclusive society. She reconnects with the point she made in the passage quoted in the previous chapter about interfaith work as providing a middle ground to work together, which she considers to be one of the most important things about interfaith work. But Mayah also draws attention to the difficulties facing interfaith organisations (such as the Feast) in attracting people to participate in interfaith work. Because people are scared and do not want to interact, the work the Feast does is also affected. Sana shares Mayah's concerns and describes how prejudice and racism shape relationships and destroy community cohesion:

When I'm looking at society and I see how kids are brought up to hate each other, it's not right. We shouldn't be brought up to blame someone else and to hate someone else

for blaming them. If you take a young Muslim and a young Christian, and to think that a young Christian is brought up to blame the Muslim for things are going wrong and the Muslim is being brought up to hate the Christian for blaming them. And when is this okay? That from a young age we're teaching kids that we are going to blame this group and we are not going to like this group? That is not okay, they are kids, they shouldn't ever think like that.

Sana's account describes a picture of British society that many of the research participants in this thesis bring up, but that is particularly common amongst the young Muslims. The main challenge facing interfaith work is also the reason why they think interfaith work is important: to fight racism, challenge stereotypes and build a more equal society where people are not only spending time with people like themselves. As we saw in the previous two chapters, this is not only something they accuse society at large for but also fellow Muslims and other Asians (as noted above, the young Muslims in this thesis are Pakistani or Bangladeshi). Sana described in Chapter 5 how she went to a secondary school where white students sat by themselves, Asians by themselves, Blacks by themselves, and so on. This was something that frustrated her and made her ask "if we need to go through another civil rights movement where we stop labelling things as a certain colour area?" Sana felt that interfaith work was a way to challenge this mindset, but was also concerned that the societal structures and people's prejudices made it difficult to do it. Billy also shares Mayah's and Sana's concerns, and when I asked him why he thought this was the case, he put emphasis on how people do not want to leave their comfort zones:

They don't want to get out of that zone, you just want to stick to your comfort one, you don't want to challenge yourself, you don't want to grow as a person. And that's what it is. People don't want to find out anymore, people don't want to go out and

find out more and unfortunately that's what it is in today's society. I think the society and the media make you want to stick to yourself, stick to your own people. Not going and embrace others, but nothing of this is ever mentioned. Unfortunately, the society's norms are that you stick to yourself and if someone's different to you, you don't go to them. It's a fear, a fear of finding out what you don't know.

Billy's frustration with 'sticking to one's own people' is directly linked to what he considers the most important thing about interfaith work: removing labels from people. This is a political vision that is not possible to realise as long as people stick to their comfort zones and own groups. But Billy also feels that the media are spreading messages that people should stick to their own, which prevents interfaith encounters and friendships from developing. Lalon is also critical of the media, which he blames for capitalising on people's fears and worries:

People are scared of the other. And the other is fed to them because the other makes good news and good news make good profit. And sometimes...I don't want to believe or think so much that media agencies are only there to make profit. They only report of what other people think is going to be good because it only takes a bit of discourse analysis and critical media analysis to see that discourse is being created by media that then goes into feeding audiences which then goes into...it's just a vicious circle

As we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, Lalon describes himself as a socialist, to whom there needs to be changes in the political structures to make real change. Although his interfaith and intercultural work is directly aimed at this – for example by challenging the definition of what it means to be British – he also stresses the importance of structural change from the government. According to him, there needs to be policy-making and a government that “understands integration, that understands multiculturalism, understands interculturalism, understands interfaith, understands...understands *people*.” The young Jews focused more on the fear and

the need for security felt by minority faith communities and, as we saw in section 6.1.1, the implications this might have for interfaith work. Sam explained that many faith groups do not want to be involved in interfaith work because they are concerned with their own security and are afraid of “bringing new unknown quantities into their spaces because there’s such a strong emphasis on security. They want to take that seriously before everything else.” When I asked him what he meant by ‘security’, he said:

It’s about property, about the people, the members of the community.... That sort of thing. They are worried about things getting destroyed. So that could be a problem, especially at the moment with the significant rise of hate crimes. And the government often.... definitely recognises the security issues which legitimise the worries that people have. So huge investments in things like big gates for minority communities, like buildings and things. So that is something to overcome, to basically win the trust of people. One of the things is that some of the more traditional communities are worried that if you have, like, mixed faith events you have people marrying out of the faith and that is something that could hold people back from engaging.

Sam captures two forms of ‘security’ in this account. First, he describes the need for a physical sense of security as a protection against hate crimes. This need for security is particularly felt by the Jewish and Muslim communities, and many of these gates and CCTV are used to protect the communities from intrusion and attacks. Sam’s emphasis on the political validation by the government is something that some of the others also mention, and the consequence this might have on relations in and across communities. In one way, security needs are met and the threat is publicly acknowledged. On the other, this might strengthen isolation and prevent encounters and interactions from taking place. But Sam also mentions the fear that mixing with other religions and cultures might lead to interfaith marriages,



and how this can be a barrier to participate in interfaith work. Marrying someone outside one's faith can have direct implications on religious socialisation of children, religious practice and even the existence of faith communities. This concern is particularly evident in Jewish communities (Kahn-Harris & Gidley, 2010; Samson et al, 2018), but also in other faith communities as well. Isaac agrees with Sam's account and adds that this needs to be taken seriously:

People are afraid of what they will find out and, you know, the threat of assimilation, the threat of conversion, the fear of the other, is real. And even if they don't think that is why they are not willing to engage as much, I think that is a massive reason why people don't want to engage so much.

The fear of conversion is also mentioned by the young Christians, but in different ways than was mentioned by Isaac. This fear can take both sympathetic (in relation to other faith communities) or personal (in relation to one's own community) forms. Jacob is taking a sympathetic standpoint and acknowledges the Christian history of forced conversion and the impacts this might have on interfaith work:

I think people are scared because of historical connotations, misunderstandings, bad practices, I think, more than anything. Certainly, with my Jewish contacts...you know the fear of forced conversion and so on. And, in fact, actually, most of the Jews think...partly the reason why some of them don't engage in [interreligious] dialogue is because they think we are just there to convert them. But the conversation I would like to start is...what is conversion and what is evangelisation? Because they are not the same thing, although deeply related. And why they [the Jews] needn't fear, so to speak.

As we will see in section 6.3.1, this overlaps with the role of evangelism in interfaith work that all the young Christians wrestled with. For Nadine there is personal fear

in relation to conversion and that is to ‘lose’ one of her own. This account is unique in the sense that none of the other participants have mentioned this:

I would hate to see one of the Christian kids I am working with convert, because I would feel that I have partly been an instrument in that conversion which I would not like to be. Because I think that would be a loss to what I believe and that I *failed* as a Christian to... *nurture* what God has planted in them as well. And I’m sure there are Muslims who would feel the same way if one of theirs would convert. Like I said, it’s a choice and we can’t force it and it’s a choice they make, but...having an experience like that might happen or it might not, but I pray it doesn’t because I don’t know how...how it would affect me, if it happens. But that’s the danger of it, really.

In order to understand the personal fear that Nadine expresses, it is important to also pay attention to another part of her biographical account: about what it means for her to be Christian. As we could see in the previous chapter, Nadine described how being involved in interfaith work has made her more aware about what it means to be ‘showing love’ to other people and that Christian love needs to tolerate other people. But to her, she feels that she is given a purpose by God to work with other people and if one of the young Christians she is working with decides to convert, that also means that she has failed that mission to God. To Nadine, conversion does not only mean losing a fellow Christian to another religion, it also means not living up to the task God has given her. This fear is personal, but it is also the main challenge that she experiences with interfaith work and she thinks that Muslims feel the same way. Whether they actually feel this way is difficult to say since none of the young Muslims in this thesis found conversion to be a challenge. The only young Muslim who brought up the topic of conversion in relation to a challenging situation was Mayah when she described a fight she had with another Muslim student in her science class:

He was like 'Mayah, they are going to convert you, you shouldn't be going to them' and I was like 'can you just do your work?'. I remember that science lesson so well because he was like 'Mayah, you must answer a few more questions' and I was 'alright, fire your questions' and he 'are they bribing you?' But we were young then, I don't know what he's doing with his life right now. But that science lesson was...it was like 'seriously?!'. And I remember getting so defensive, like 'what?!'.

Mayah did not go into what religious background her classmates had and if he fell into the category of 'practising your religion in the wrong way' she found problematic in Chapter 4. But what was clear was how fiercely Mayah protected what the Feast was all about and how proud she was over what she was able to achieve during that lesson. She said that she did not remember much about the content in that science class, but she became even more convinced that interfaith work was important. In a way, Mayah's experience is a good example of what happens when two different understandings of interfaith work (and perhaps also theological understandings of what it means to be Muslim) collide. But since Mayah did not know if her passionate defence of interfaith work actually had any impact on her classmate's points of view, it could also be seen as a failed dialogue encounter that only resulted in confirming each participants existing world-view and enforcing boundaries rather than building bridges.

#### **6.1.4. Religious congregations and religious intolerance**

Another challenge to interfaith work comes from the young people's congregations and the religious intolerance that particularly the young Christians experience amongst their fellow church members. As we could see in Chapter 5, being involved in interfaith work has had an impact on how many of the young people think about what it means to be Christian, Jewish or Muslim, and relations with other religions.

For Elizabeth being active in interfaith work has made her not only learn a lot about Judaism, but also become aware of how Judaism is spoken about in her church and this upsets her:

Because you always hear Judaism being taught from the pulpit, but it is the Judaism 2000 years ago and there's this assumption that it hasn't changed and that this is what Judaism is. So, you hear these remarks being made about Judaism and it makes me *so angry* because obviously they haven't taken the time to look into it and I do think the Gospels and the New Testaments were written with God in mind in a particular perspective, and people are just taking it as neutral about Judaism. So that is probably what I notice the most.

She was also frustrated when fellow church-goers asked her about her work and initially thought it was all about converting Jews to Christianity:

People assume that the CCJ is a missionary organisation of Christians converting Jews, so I have had people telling me that 'Oh, you are doing a really good job spreading the message' and I have to explain that it is *not* what my job is about. And when I am explaining what I am doing, they are sometimes uncomfortable with that and saying 'well, Jews haven't realised about Christianity' and it gets me quite angry. There are some people, of course, who are very positive about it and think it is a very good work, but the ones who get the strongest reactions are the ones who can't understand what on earth I would be doing something like that. So, it's *really* difficult.

This is not an uncommon feeling and many of the young people share this experience. On the one hand, many in their congregations are initially supportive of their work and think it is good, but – on the other – this support can turn to criticism when it becomes clear that interfaith work does not mean supporting the theological and/or political standpoint held by the congregation. Isaac has a similar experience to Elizabeth, but instead of evangelism and conversion his Jewish community focuses on Israel:

And then they ask me about ‘how did you impact on this particular policy and that particular policy?’ and it is always about Israel. And the question almost always revolves around that the Christians generally like Israel and they know a lot of Christian Zionists, so what’s the problem? And then you start explaining that not all Christians are that friendly about Israel and they go off Christians very quickly and suddenly your work is important and valuable because you are defending Israel. And then I say that, actually, that’s not what I’m doing, I’m not doing the advocacy work. So, it’s challenging and it’s very difficult because they really want to...I think they want to engage and they do want to understand, but there’s this very powerful sense of threat to engaging and the conversation really revolves around Israel more than anything.

What makes Isaac’s account even more intriguing is that another common remark he gets is why he deals with Christians and not Muslims, ‘where the real problem is’. According to many of the Jews he encounters, Jews do not have any problems with Christians and they can therefore not see the point in Christian-Jewish relations. It is not until they hear that not all Christians are Zionists that some of them change their minds. Israel and particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is considered as a major interfaith challenge by both Jews and Christians, and I will come back to this in section 6.3.2. Elizabeth’s and Isaac’s accounts are examples of the theological and political interests of religious communities clashing with interfaith experiences, and how these interests become visible in these settings. As we could see above in the section on fear and security, these are often reactions against changes and risks (perceived and/or real) to protect one’s community. Evangelism is for many Christians in the UK not only a religious duty, but also a necessity to gain more members and prevent Christian congregations from diminishing (Davie, 2005; Guest et al, 2012). How to combine the evangelical component in Christianity with interfaith work is something that concerns the

young Christians and I will come back to this in section 6.3.1. But being involved in interfaith work has also made some of the young people aware of short-comings in their own congregations. Sam's interfaith work and learning about what other faith communities do in society have made him very critical of his own Jewish community:

Seeing other religions definitely gives me questions about what Jews really do in the world. Like Sikhs who give out basically free food to everyone who comes on the street all over Britain every day or once a week or whatever. That is actually doing something. Reform Judaism is actually called the *movement* for Reform Judaism and I'm just like, what kind of rubbish movement is this? We do nothing! We do nothing really outside ourselves and that is rubbish.

He also acknowledges that it is easy to "pick and choose the best parts of every religion" and forget the good thing about one's own religion, but he still would like to see his community more active in society and reaching out, although he does not elaborate how that should look.

## **6.2. Challenges facing young people in interfaith work**

So far, I have focused on the general challenges the young people have identified in relation to interfaith. But I also asked them if they thought there were any challenges that faced particularly young people who are or want to be involved in interfaith work, and what they think needs to be done to make young people more active in interfaith work. This section will focus on this.

### **6.2.1. Becoming active: the question of participation**

One theme that several of the young people mentioned was the challenges in relation to participation and what needs to be done to attract more young people to become active in interfaith projects. Although several of the young people in this thesis are active in interfaith youth organisations, they have found that only a minority of young people are active in interfaith work and they think that several things need to change to increase young people's participation. One aspect, pointed out by Elizabeth, is the importance of including young people in organising the events:

When you're having panel events they are far too often only including older men and that is not going to encourage young people to come because hearing their faith described by someone who is very different from them isn't going to help them relate to them. If they can't relate to their own faiths, how are they going to relate to what they hear about other faiths? If you have a panel of, let's say, young people who discuss their own experiences, that's *so much easier* to bring young people to. There would be much more sharing.

This involvement in organising is not only about being active, but also being allowed to do something that the young people are passionate about. But in order to do that, according to Elizabeth, the young people must be given the time, resources and space to do that. If the directions come from above without youth involvement, they might be counterproductive and stifle young people's sense of agency. I will come back to this in the section focusing on voice and agency below. But there is also a matter of time and being able to attract people. When I asked FT about this, the first thing that he thought was the lack of time and place to organise interfaith work. According to him, young people face a lot of distractions and must make a lot of priorities, and if interfaith work is not something they already consider

to be important they might be difficult to attract. It is therefore important that the events are compelling and young people want to change the world:

I think more of the social action stuff is more attractive to young people. I think if it's not about making the world a better place than it's not...I mean, I think everything applies to that. But I think, actually, there are huge issues facing Britain and the world and, you know, maybe...whatever we can do for those situations I think are absolutely vital and would probably attract young people.

But although being involved and finding the right projects are important, Lalon also stresses that there is an inequality in who can participate. He grew up in a working-class area in North London and discovered the Faith & Belief Forum by chance through an event he went to through another leadership programme. Without this he might never have discovered it:

You are never kind of told about these things in university when you are from my background. No one is there to tell you. The guys are from middle-class backgrounds, they have their networks, they have their...people to give them advice and so on and so forth.

Through his interfaith and intercultural work, he tries to change this by working with young people from similar backgrounds to his own, to create these networks and get access to the same privileges as middle-class youth have. But he is also critical of the current established interfaith organisations and wants them to do more to make it easier for young people from working-class backgrounds to participate. Billy raises another structural challenge that might make people less likely to participate in interfaith work and that is the role of parents. As we could see in Chapter 4, parents can be really important in making young people interested in interfaith work. If parents socialise their children into narrow theological



frameworks, this might make young people less likely to participate in interfaith work:

I think the challenges that...if one young person assumes that the other person's faith is wrong, he or she will think that all the people of that faith is like that. And that is a challenge sometimes. But I think one just has to be patient when one goes through that process. But I also think it is...sometimes the influence of what our parents might say have on that young person and that could have a negative impact, really.

Considering how important many of the young people felt their parents were, it is interesting to note that only Billy mentioned that parents also could be a challenge. The other research participants only mentioned parents briefly in the background of their accounts, such as Sana's account in section 6.1.1 about how children are brought up to hate each other. This could be a result of how the young people interpreted the questions about challenges facing interfaith (youth) work – predominantly about structural challenges – and they did not consider parents to be important in this. But it can also be that they do not consider parents to be particularly important challenge facing interfaith work, which also is significant.

### **6.2.2. Voice and agency**

Another challenge that several of the young people mentioned was that while young people are highly sought after by interfaith organisations and projects, they are often treated like they were tokens or 'filling quotas.' Yet quite commonly they were simultaneously treated with joy – 'oh, isn't it nice to have a young person on the panel!' – but felt that they were not listened to, either because they lacked the experience or because no-one really believed they would be able to do the task. This theme is closely related to 'participation', but deals with more psychological issues

of what being excluded or feeling excluded might cause. For Isaac, who was the one who spoke most intently about this, this raises the question about whether older people *really* want young people there:

I think the main challenge is the people who don't want to let them in. Everyone talks about, you know, *engaging young people* and 'we want to build the leaders of the future', but when they actually ask young people about their opinions they are not listening. And that is a *huge* problem that, as a young person, I might not be able to deal with because when I do talk people might not be listening. Often, they are not engaging in the conversation. They are not spoken to, they are spoken *about*. I think a lot of the time working with young people is really tokenistic, that it's just about having a young person on the panel because you should have a young person on the panel. Actually, start listening to what people are saying.

Several of the other young people, particularly those who are active in the CCJ with an older membership, also mentioned how frustrating it is to feel that the only value they have is that they are *young*. But, as FT said, it could also be a good thing to be young as it opens exciting doors:

I think...sometimes it gives you a good way in, in the sense that older audiences quite like hearing from a younger voice because they are so used to hearing from the same old people, but actually sometimes when you hear from a young person it gives you a different perspective.

For Isaac, the most important thing is to give young people the confidence and belief that they can do what they want to do. Young people should be included because they are valuable and competent as people, and the older members need to give young people the space to develop and get experience. At the moment, he argues, there is a Catch 22 when young people are not getting a job or are not chosen for a project because they do not have the right experience – but since they are not

given the chance they will never get the experience. There needs to be more risk-taking from organisations' point of view if they want more young people to get involved and he uses the Jewish youth movement with its peer-led leadership as a good example. Although he himself has good experiences working for the CCJ and felt that he was given the space and resources he needed to do what he wants to do, he also acknowledged that there is a difference working for an interfaith youth organisation and working for an interfaith organisation with an older membership base. None of the young people working for or being active in the Faith & Belief Forum or the Feast mentioned this challenge, which could be explained by the fact that they are youth organisations made up of predominantly young staff members, interns and volunteers. But it could also be a result of structural and political factors that shape the work carried out in and by the organisations, and the impact this might have on the space given to young people. I will come back to this in the next chapter. Minerva put emphasis another challenge facing young people's involvement in interfaith work. She was concerned that what is talked about in interfaith youth spaces might be turned against the young people and create more damage than good:

Anything you say can be construed and it's the same for Christian people and same for Muslim people. You know? If a Christian says 'we believe in this' which is different to the Muslim faith, they say 'This Christian says something bad about Islam'. Do you know what I mean? Words, as I'm sure writers are aware, can be manipulated. So, I think that's a *big* barrier, a *massive* barrier.

Minerva's concern touches upon two important topics. The first is the risk that the interfaith youth setting is not safe enough for young people to raise important and/or sensitive topics and how this can put them at risk of being ridiculed or worse. The second is that there might be topics that the young people do not want to talk about

because they are too sensitive or personal to them. Although this might not necessarily be a problem, the fear of being misunderstood can prevent the young people from talking and this can be a barrier for constructive dialogue and discussions. As we will see in the next section, this is a challenge many of the other young Muslims have raised in relation to their own interfaith work.

### **6.3. Challenges specific for Christians, Jews and/or Muslims**

In this section I will focus on challenges that are more specific for Christians, Jews and/or Muslims. Although these matters are sometimes mentioned and experienced by people across religious traditions – and we will see this in the section on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – there are some challenges that are more important for some religious groups than others. Two of them – evangelism and Israel – have come up before in relation to general challenges facing interfaith work, but the focus here is more in-depth to look at the relationship between the politics of faith communities (or the politics of ‘monotheistic’ communities) and the politics of interfaith.

#### **6.3.1. Christians: The evangelism/conversion narrative**

One of the most striking themes that come up amongst the Christians is the question around evangelism and whether evangelism has any role to play in interfaith work – is it a resource or an obstacle? As we could see above, evangelism is something that concerns Christians and this was something that came up early in the interviews with the young Christians. That Christianity is an evangelising faith – a religion that is rooted in making new Christians by spreading the word about Christianity – is

acknowledged by all the young Christians, but it became obvious that there is a difference in how evangelism is defined and understood, and its links to conversion. It was Jacob who first made me start thinking about the role of evangelism. Having already done interviews with FT and Elizabeth – who both firmly distanced themselves from evangelism in interfaith – I did not think much about it until I met Jacob who said that evangelism is a key reason why he is active in interreligious dialogue:

From my point of view dialogue is important because it is a platform on which I can talk about the church, the gospel in a non-hostile way and in a non-coercive way. So, I'm not forcing anyone, I'm merely telling them, informing them and it's not even that the immediate aim is to convert people, so to speak. I mean, I have an issue with the term for what a Catholic, at least, is doing when they evangelise. But...it is incumbent upon me to share what the Church teaches...and it's also for her benefit as, I think, media widely distorts things. Most people's knowledge about the Catholic Church comes from the BBC or whatever, which for the most part is not accurate. So, this gives me an opportunity to tell the story as someone who lives it.

For Jacob, evangelism means *talking* and *informing* about what Catholicism stands for, and challenging the stereotypes about the Catholic Church that people might have. As we could see above, he is also aware of the historical connotations of the term evangelism and its links to forced conversion, an exercise he firmly rejects. Instead he wants to challenge this by changing the narrative around what evangelism means. For him, it is about informing about Catholicism and Christianity, and then letting the people do what they want about that information. He does not shy away from saying that he would like everyone to become Catholic, but he is also acknowledging that it is their choice and the only thing he can do is to simply give them the information. Interfaith, for him, is a good way to carry out

evangelistic work in a friendly, non-hostile environment. This way of looking at evangelism and its role in interfaith made me go back to Elizabeth and FT, and ask them about what evangelism means to them and whether it could play any role in interfaith. FT laughed a bit when I asked him and said:

It depends...or *no* (laughing). I mean, evangelising, I think, is a more specific term than *mission*. So, *mission*, I think, comes in different forms. I think mission is about being a good Christian in the world and it therefore depends on what you mean by being a good Christian...For me, being a good person is being an advocate for Christ, being an advocate for God. And, you know, you don't have to mention the J-word...Jesus, I mean (laughing) or Christ or even God to be a good person. And I don't think God personally expects you to always be talking about him. You don't need to, you just need to be a good person to other people and that's mission, whereas evangelising I think, you know, is...yeah, in people's faces.

When I asked Elizabeth, she thought for a while before acknowledging that she thinks she used 'evangelising' as something directly linked to conversion. "I probably blur the words when I talk about them" she said, "I think there is a difference between proselytizing and evangelism." When thinking again, she had a similar position as Jacob and thought evangelising could play a role in interfaith as long as it is about informing what Christianity is all about:

We are called to share the good news and if someone has...well, a stereotypical view of Christianity, I do feel that I am meant to show them what it really is. The ways it is portrayed in the news is *so not true* and it upsets me. And that was something I particularly found at university when I was among people who didn't know many Christians and had no Christian background. And what they thought about Christianity and what they thought I as a Christian would be was very different from what it was. So, in a sense, I think evangelism was quite important because it allowed

me to show to them what my faith was and why I believe it, but I wasn't trying to convert them.

Nadine, who above considers the risk of conversion being the main challenge in interfaith, shares this stance on the role of evangelism in interfaith, but stresses that evangelism has no role to play in the work she does at the Feast:

It is all about having the knowledge, but like you don't want to set yourself up for a debate. You know what to say, but it is about saying it the right way as well and not being arrogant about it. So, I think there is place for evangelism in interfaith, but the Feast doesn't really focus on that and obviously since we are working with people it's a matter of respect. We are trusted that we are talking about this for being...cooperative? Not to getting other people to change, just to accept them for who they are really. All people see just God in you really.

Here is an example of when the politics of interfaith and important concepts within faith communities 'clashes', and adjustments are made. One reason why Nadine mentions this and not the others could be that she is the only one working directly with young children. This means that the Guidelines for Dialogue set up by the Feast are very important and actions that might break this are avoided. But it could also be seen as a way for Nadine to be able to keep the balance between her standing in her church community and the work she does for the Feast. When she talked about this with me she deliberately separated herself "as me" from the person she is in the Feast. When she was herself, she could openly talk about her faith and evangelise, but she is reluctant in doing that in her capacity as youth worker at the Feast. Whether this balance is working for Nadine in the long run remains to be seen, but it gives insights into the negotiation process that takes place when one's theological standing is not entirely in sync with one's interfaith work. The questions of conversation and evangelism never came up in the interviews with the young

Muslims and Jews more than briefly in relation to ‘fear and security’ in section 6.1.3. While this could mean that they do not have any personal experiences of evangelism in their interfaith work, it can also mean that I did not explore this deep enough with them. I will come back to this in relation to the methodological discussion in the next chapter.

### **6.3.2. Jews (and Christians): Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

For the young Jews, the major challenge that they focused on was Israel and particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – especially at university campuses. Both Isaac and Baile have personal experiences of how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has shut down interfaith work during their time as interfaith officers at university. The scenario was very similar: a fruitful interaction between the Jewish Society and the Islamic Society was shut down when the Islamic Society elected a pro-Palestinian President, who did not want to have anything to do with the Jewish Society. Baile mentioned how they did not have any Israel and Palestine Societies at her university – societies often focusing on the political side of this issue, whereas the Jewish and the Islamic Societies focused on religious issues – and had as a policy to always elect someone from another religion as their Vice President. She served as a Vice President for the Islamic Society for one year and enjoyed it, but everything changed the following year with the election of a new President of the Islamic Society, who used her platform to spread her pro-Palestinian standpoint. Baile told me how she challenged some of the statements the President had made that went, according to Baile, “from anti-Israel into anti-Jewish and antisemitic.” The situation turned ugly and in the end the Student Union got involved. I asked Baile how it felt to be a young Jew in that situation, but she said that:



I don't think I've ever really viewed it from a 'young Jewish person on campus' perspective, although...I mean, it certainly made me very wary of being anywhere near her. Mostly just because things have got so awful. It did...this isn't how it affected me as a Jewish person on campus, but it made me stop going to Islamic Society events. Previously, even after I'd stopped being the Vice President I was still going to events. But once that happened I didn't feel safe to be in the same facility as her...I don't have issue with Israel-Palestine being explored as an issue as long as it's done sensibly and not antisemitically or Islamophobic. But it did change the nature of that society and I don't think it changed it for the better.

Many of what Isaac described as 'difficult conversations' in interfaith settings concerns the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the impact it has on interfaith relations, but also how antisemitism becomes mixed with anti-Zionism. He had experiences of Muslim friends unfriending him on social media and shutting him out because of an escalation of the conflict. This is something that concerns him, and he argues that the discussions must be held, even if they are difficult:

You know, essentially it became Muslims versus Jews and a lot of the time that is how it's framed. There are Muslims on the one side who think one thing and there are Jews on the other who think another thing. And it's *such a problem* and I don't know how to tackle that apart from actually trying to talk to each other. But even once you started the conversation something can happen, and it can completely close it down. So, is there an answer to how we can actually talk about it? I don't know. I actually find it easier to talk to [name of Palestinian friend] who is much more engaged with this issue, because he gets it and gets why it's important to...everyone. Whereas others they don't understand why it is important and why they relate to it from a distant position.

But, although this was a central challenge for Jewish participants, it was not only Jews who mentioned the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Christians who are active in the CCJ also put emphasis on this conflict, either through earlier interfaith work

or experiences from churches taking a political stand in the conflict. Elizabeth described how, half-way through her time as an interfaith officer at university, there was a physical fight between Jewish and Muslim students because of the conflict and that the police got involved. “It was just absolutely awful” she said “and both the two officers of the ISoc and the JSoc didn’t really want to speak to each other anymore and I played an almost mediator role between the two to get the interfaith work back on track.” She also said that this made her even more passionate about interfaith work: “this is something that really needs to happen, because it results in people getting injured if we don’t have good interfaith.” These are experiences that also come up in Ruth Sheldon’s (2016) study of young Jews and Muslims who are involved in student activism around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on British campuses. Sheldon’s participants express similar experiences in their accounts, both in terms of the challenges facing dialogue groups trying to talk about the conflict but also how passionate feelings about different narratives about the conflict could lead to physical violence. Sheldon describes this in terms of how embodied memories, narratives and diasporic identities are activated through student activism, and how this can form convictions that either lead to bridge-building or enforcement of already existing boundaries. For the research participants in this thesis, these experiences reinforce their conviction that interfaith work is important and needed to happen to prevent emotional and physical violence from occurring. Frank Temple also mentioned the challenge social justice can play when some Christians take a stand in the conflict and how this can cause confusion amongst Jews who do not understand why Christians would do that:

Christians are saying ‘it’s part of our Christian faith that we stand up on issues on social justice’ and then Jews are saying...they understandably can’t understand why

the Christians would pick up on Palestine and Israel as an issue and Christians do not understand why Jews in Britain would take it so personally and it's a real breakdown in understanding.

According to FT, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be talked about in interfaith settings, but this needs to be done carefully and sensitively. In his daily work at the CCJ, he is bringing religious leaders from Christian and Jewish communities to Israel and after that forming a dialogue group in which the leaders can talk about issues in relation to the conflict. This, he hopes, will trickle down into what their organisations are doing and down to the activists. Jacob has a similar standpoint and argues that it is important for young Catholics to have a good knowledge about the role Israel plays in Jewish identity:

Every Catholic-Jewish event I have been to have involved politics to do with Israel. So, you just can't separate it. If you want to engage in Jewish-Catholic dialogue as a Catholic and don't want to be interested in politics, then it's going to be pretty fruitless. So, you need to have an interest in Israel and what is going on there, because it really does pervade Jewish identity today. I'm not saying to agree with Israeli policy, but to fully understand the significance of Israel in Jewish self-identity, whether we like it or not. And I think to show some sympathy.

Interestingly though, none of the Muslims mentioned this conflict at all and a possible explanation for this could be found in the choice of organisation and its focus. The Feast (in which all but one Muslim are active in) is predominantly focusing on Christian-Muslim encounters, and from what I heard the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not something that is discussed. The Muslims talked instead about self-censorship and terrorism, on which I will focus in the next section.

### **6.3.3. Muslims: Self-censoring and Prevent**

This is a theme that has emerged both as a result of direct questions from my part, but also in the young Muslims' reflections about the particular time when the interviews were carried out. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I carried out the interviews with the young Muslims during the time when two terror attacks happened in the UK (Manchester in May and London in June) and this had an impact on the interviews. I conducted the first interview with Sana on the day after the Manchester attack that killed 22 people at an Ariana Grande concert, and she explained to me the challenges she faces as a young Muslim in the UK today:

You do feel that you have an obligation to be the best version of yourself that you can be out in public because it's just...if you say the wrong thing at the wrong time, even if it isn't intended to be said the way other people perceive it to be, there are such severe consequences. There are actually certain words that I avoid saying altogether and it's genuinely out of fear that someone might think 'oh yeah, she's going to be a terrorist' and I'm just like...the word 'terrorist' itself is a word that I avoid using. Because genuinely you kind of developing this fear of just saying certain things out loud and what people might think...So especially in public now I am very wary, and try to be the best version of myself that I can be, being as polite as possible to everyone, I smile at people even when they are giving me a deadly look.

Sana's description of how she smiles at people who clearly did not like the look of her concerned me and I asked her how she was able to smile to those people. She smiled sheepishly and said that this was how she managed to psychologically handle the anxiety and fear that also emerge in these situations. By smiling and keep on walking she is able to develop a shield without risking escalating the tension further. She also added that what one Muslim does affects all Muslims: "You have to be really careful because what you say or do reflect on the rest of the...*ummah*,

like we say.” These stories are not unique for this thesis. Similar accounts have come up in many studies of young Muslims in the UK (although none of these studies focus on interfaith work). As we saw in Chapter 1, the Prevent Strategy – the UK’s counter-radicalisation strategy aiming at preventing people from becoming radicalised and joining terror organisations – has been accused of stigmatising Muslim communities and creating feelings of being watched (Dinham, 2012; Thomas, 2011; see also Modood, 2019). Politicians are encouraging the public to act when ‘they encounter something that doesn’t look right’ and this has caused discomfort amongst many Muslims (Heath-Kelly, 2014). What is significant about Sana’s account is how young Muslims bring these experiences with them into interfaith work and how this can shape how young Muslims talk. Sana told me that she was sad to bring her sister, who is not yet aware of how political discourses around Muslims shape what can be said in a public space, into a society where she must be careful of what she says because “she might be arrested for saying that.” I asked Sana what she thinks needs to be done to prevent this and she answered that there needs to more organisations like the Feast where young people can feel safe and not be afraid of being judged by others:

If people were more involved in this maybe we wouldn’t have such an issue with division in society because we would be more open, and we would be more willing to talk. And kids wouldn’t feel scared to talk. It is *so important* that we do this for the kids because when they are growing up in a society with so much hate, it’s important to remind them that there is love in the world. You just have to find it and be willing to spread it.

This account is linked to what she said in section 6.1.1 in relation to how young people grow up in a society where fear and prejudice make them hate each other. Interfaith organisations, such as the Feast, provide opportunities to break such

barriers and discourses by offering a safe space where young people can form friendships. Minerva agrees with Sana that interfaith organisations can offer such spaces, but stresses that it requires a lot of both the young people and the staff to build spaces that are safe enough for young people to have the courage to raise sensitive topics. This is linked to her account in section 6.2.2 of how words can be construed and turned against the young people. In order to help young Muslims – or young people in general – to be brave enough to voice concerns and fears, there must be acceptance, understanding and enough time:

I think you have to be *really* well-versed in interfaith....it takes a lot of years to being able to phrase an opinion that is not...too common. It's difficult, I don't really know. I think it's just...enough time, sometimes. Or maybe talk more often and talk more about a certain subject, going into it in more detail from both sides, whatever the other religion is as well. I don't think this just goes for Muslim people, I also think Christian people also find some things quite hard to divulge in. And it's probably the same things as well, you know. The same subjects. They are quite similar, Christianity and Islam, in certain aspects so maybe just talk more to each other and don't be afraid of getting a little bit of detail. But again, be respectful and follow the guidelines. So maybe that's the answer. It sounds, you know, kind of generic, but talking more and learning how to talk in a positive way and not in a negative way.

What is notable in Minerva's long account is how the politics of interfaith work – in this case seen in the Feast's 'Guidelines for Dialogue' – can be helpful in providing young Muslims (and young Christians) with a safe space. While these structures can be a challenge, as we have seen above, it can also be the solution to challenges facing some young people. By knowing what is expected and that no person is considered a representative of their faiths, the young people can voice opinions or thoughts that they might otherwise not have done. On the other hand, as Minerva also points out, it requires more than guidelines to make this work:

trustful relationships and time are also important, as well as learning *how* to talk about difficult subjects in a sensitive way. These are all possibilities of interfaith work, as we saw in the previous chapter, but they are not easy to achieve and need hard work. But it is not only the political situation in the UK that might cause challenges for young Muslims. Growing up in a family and a neighbourhood that might have very different values from the majority society can also impact on how young Muslims express themselves. For Billy, this is the main challenge facing young Muslims today and they need a space to talk about these things:

Growing up in a predominantly Asian area where the views are very literal and rigid, they can't say what they want. Because they are scared to even have doubts. It's okay to have doubts, it's okay to say what's on your mind. They feel very scared because unfortunately of the world that we're living in, they would outcast that person, 'how *dare you* have those beliefs?' or 'are you even Muslim after saying stuff like that?'. But I'm just questioning it, it doesn't mean that I am not a Muslim anymore. I don't question what I believe, or you believe. So, I do believe that that space is really needed for them to communicate and say what they want.

Here Billy develops the concern he raised in section 6.2.1 in relation to how parents can be a challenge for young people in interfaith work by socialising them into narrow theological frameworks. He describes the challenges young Muslims face if they go against what is commonly held as 'acceptable' or preferable. Interfaith situations can provide young Muslims with diverse contexts where they can raise sensitive topics and develop their way of thinking without feeling constrained by their faith communities:

You meet people of different faiths and you get to know *their* beliefs and *their* morals. And it's quite nice and it could answer the questions that perhaps you have in our own

mind. And interfaith is important because it is a space to talk, it's about saying what you want.

Billy's emphasis on how the interfaith space is not only about talking but also about 'saying what you want' is another example of how some young Muslims experience that the guidelines framing interfaith spaces provide them with a safe zone to talk freely. While the topics are constrained by what these guidelines allow, it is a different form of space than young people might face in their own communities. Here is an example of how the boundaries and politics of interfaith – the topic of this chapter – are not necessarily negative, but can also have positive functions.

## **6.4. Summary**

This chapter has focused on the 'politics', challenges and boundaries of interfaith work. It has answered the final sub-research question – 'what challenges have the young people experienced with interfaith work?' – and identified three major themes in the research participants' accounts: general challenges facing interfaith work, challenges facing young people in interfaith work, and challenges that are more specific for Christians, Jews and Muslims. General challenges included 'preaching to the converted', 'superficial or meaningless interfaith work' and 'fear and security' and 'religious congregations and religious intolerance.' Challenges facing young people focused on 'participation' and 'voice and agency', whereas challenges that are more specific for Christians, Jews and Muslims raised the question of evangelism in interfaith, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and self-censorship. If we look back at the chapter, a few conclusions can be made. The first is that the young people identify several important social, political and theological framings and challenges facing interfaith work. While several of the challenges



identified by the young people are not new – for example, the emphasis that interfaith work only attracts those who are already on board and not those who might need it has come up in other studies (e.g. Siem, 2017; Nordin, 2017; Patel, 2007; Halafoff, 2013) – the young people’s accounts provide insights into how they understand these challenges and what they think need to be done to fix them. For some of the research participants, it is by changing approaches and methods to make interfaith work even more inclusive – in some instances by not even calling these activities for ‘interfaith.’ In other cases, it is by actively challenging political, theological and social discourses and prejudices in society that make people less likely to participate in interfaith work.

But it is also clear that several of the young people are deeply critical of what they consider to be the ‘dogma’ or ‘politics’ of interfaith work – or, as Baile expressed it, ‘the photo opportunity of interfaith work.’ Here, the challenge is not only with those who *do not* participate in interfaith work (but might need it), but also those who *do* and how preferred political, theological and social frameworks shape what is possible to achieve in an interfaith space. Many of the young people expressed frustration with what they saw as ‘too much niceties’ and lack of interest in challenging the boundaries of what is possible to do. In some cases, age played an important role – both in how interfaith spaces are experienced, but also the challenges facing young people who want to be involved in interfaith work. It is interesting to note that most of the young people (with the exception of Frank Temple) only brought up the topic of age in relation to challenges with interfaith work and not, for example, as a strength. While this does not necessarily mean they consider their age as negative – they might just not put much effort to think about it – it is significant that the social identity of being young is activated in challenging

situations. But the research participants also identified several theological challenges and tensions in relation to interfaith work. For some of them, like Nadine, these tensions are deeply personal and provide insights into how interfaith work and theological frameworks might collide. For others, theological tensions are predominantly seen in their relationship with their religious congregations and communities. These accounts are important because they show how being involved in interfaith work might change theological frameworks and the impact this might have on young people's relationship with their religious communities. This is particularly obvious when exploring challenges that are specific for different religious traditions. Being involved in interfaith work can bring about deep questions in relation to theological and political frameworks of religious communities, and it is clear that many of the young people their interfaith work has resulted in new understandings of their religious traditions.

But it is also clear from this chapter that challenges, boundaries and 'politics' of interfaith work might not only be negative. For some of the young people, the young Muslims in particular, guidelines and frameworks provide them with a greater sense of safety than they might otherwise had. This connects with the themes in the previous chapter of interfaith work as a means to form friendships, form middle ground and change society, but problematises them by showing the strengths and limitations of such frameworks. In the next chapter, I will turn the attention to what all these findings – from this chapter, as well as the two previous chapters – tell us about young people's experiences of interfaith work and the impact(s) it might have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities.

# 7.

## Building bridges, Negotiating boundaries:

### Discussion and conclusion

This thesis has explored young Christians', Jews' and Muslims' experiences of interfaith work in the UK. It focused on 13 young people from three different interfaith organisations: the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ), the Faith & Belief Forum and the Feast. In order to answer the main research question – *what impact(s) might young people's interfaith work have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities?* – I have asked four research sub-questions: (1) how did the young people become interested in interfaith work? (2) what actors and contexts have been important in forging and sustaining their interest in interfaith work? (3) what does interfaith work mean to them socially, politically, theologically and ethically? and (4) what challenges have the young people experienced with interfaith work? Chapter 4 answered the first two research sub-questions. It identified multiple social actors and contexts as important in making the young people interested in interfaith work, but also showed that the young people's theological reckonings with what it means to be Christian, Jewish or Muslim played significant roles. Chapter 5 focused on the third sub-question and showed that interfaith work is a means to fulfil social and political goals, but also forms of theological commitments. The final sub-question was answered in Chapter 6 and

explored challenges the young people have experienced with their interfaith work. The young people identified several challenges – general as well as specific – and showed how the politics and boundaries of interfaith work can provide both challenges and possibilities that inform that work. These chapters have contributed to filling a significant knowledge gap. As we saw in Chapter 1, young people's interfaith work is an underexplored area of research and we have very little knowledge about why young people participate in interfaith work and how they experience it.

If we look back at the main findings from the empirical chapters, an approach based on research addressing three areas can be identified. In order to understand young people's interfaith work, we need to explore (1) their interfaith work from a multidimensional approach that attends to social and theological dimensions in young people's lives; (2) how interfaith work is a means to fulfil social and political visions, but also forms of theological commitment that are deeply linked to how they understand what it means for them to be Christian, Jewish or Muslim; and (3) how the challenges of interfaith work inform young people's experiences in different ways, particularly theological, social and political tensions in relation to interfaith space, religious congregations and faith communities, and British society at large. This final chapter explores these three areas in depth. The first section focuses on the areas in relation to the research literature and theoretical framework in Chapters 1 and 2. In the second section, I turn attention to the methodological strengths and limitations of the study and what these say about the result. The third section summarises the conclusions of the thesis, as well as discusses the implications for future research and social policy. I end the chapter with some final reflections about what this research has meant to me.

## **7.1. Understanding young people's experiences of interfaith work**

In this section I discuss the three areas above in relation to previous research and the theoretical framework, and reflect on what these areas mean for our understanding of young people's interfaith work. The section is divided into three subsections, where each of the above-mentioned areas is discussed separately. However, it will become clear that these three subsections overlap and, in order to understand the young people's interfaith work and the impact(s) it might have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities, they need to be seen as intersected.

### **7.1.1. Multidimensional approach to young people's interfaith work**

The first claim this thesis is making is that, in order to understand young people's interfaith work and how they became interested in it, we need to have a multidimensional approach that attends to social and theological dimensions in young people's lives. If we look back at Chapter 4, we saw that the young people become involved in interfaith work in different ways and for different reasons. For many of the research participants, documenting the religious and political socialisation processes in the home is important to understand how their interest in interfaith work emerged. Parents are described as particularly important in socialising young people into theological, moral and political frameworks that inform their religious identities and interfaith work. A few of the research participants grew up with parents involved in interfaith work and/or political activism that shaped how religion was practiced in the home. What is notable in the young people's biographical accounts was how several described themselves as having 'progressive' or critical approaches to their religions, and criticised more

conservative or radical theological frameworks for being ‘too much’ and ‘narrow-minded’. They are also highly active in trying to make sense of what these theological frameworks mean to them. While some of these young people (like Mayah) expressed a wish to follow their religion ‘the right way’, others had more flexible approaches and a few (particularly Baile) also struggled to make sense of what it meant for them to be Christian, Jewish or Muslim. Those young people who identified with more conservative theological frameworks, such as Nadine and Jacob, also emphasised the need to be ‘a good neighbour’ and expressed interest in wrestling with theological ideas with people of other faiths. Interest in religion – both as a concept and as a lived, social phenomenon – are at the forefront of the young people’s thinking. It is clear from the young people’s biographical accounts that these theological frameworks are critical to understand why they chose to become active in interfaith work. As Chapter 4 showed, the research participants mentioned several social actors and contexts which – alongside parents – have been important in starting their interfaith journeys: university, interfaith organisations, work, volunteering and internships, and frustration with the Religious Education subject in faith schools. Most of the young people chose to become active in interfaith work in these spaces because they were in alignment with their theological and political preferences and/or they were looking for diverse spaces. Some of the research participants – particularly those in the Feast – joined interfaith organisations because they provided a good social alternative, but remained active because they also found interfaith work interesting and important.

These findings are significant in several ways. First, they provide insights into the socialisation processes that result in young people’s interfaith work. This is an area that previous studies on young people’s interfaith work has not explored

in any great depth (often not at all). As I mentioned in Chapter 1, we have very little understanding of how and why young people become interested in interfaith work, and the contexts, actors and frameworks that are important in forging this interest. Instead, more generalised perceptions, like Diane Eck's (2006) emphasis on how young people belong to the first 'true interfaith generation' and are more likely to be attracted to interfaith work because they have grown up in religiously diverse societies, are dominating the discussion about young people's participation in interfaith work. By attending to the young people's biographical accounts, this thesis has identified different pathways into interfaith work and also contexts that have been important in making young people become (and remain) active. The importance of parents is particularly noteworthy, albeit not theoretically surprising. As we saw in Chapter 2, parents belong to the group of primary socialisation agents who are important in the formation of young people's religious identities (Lövheim, 2012; Sherkat, 2003; Madge & Hemming, 2013) and the fact that several of the young people have grown up with parents who have provided them with theological, moral and political frameworks that inform their religious identities and interfaith work confirm previous research. This shows the need to pay attention to the role of microsystems – particularly the home – to understand how and why they become interested in interfaith work.

The interplay between the young people's religious identities and why they become involved in interfaith work is also significant. As we saw above, many chose to become involved in interfaith work because it aligned with their theological (and sometimes also political) frameworks. What are notably absent in the young people's accounts are religious congregations. With the exception of Jacob, who partly become involved in interfaith work through the Catholic Church,

none of the young people mentioned their religious congregations as important in making them become involved in interfaith work. The only time religious congregations were discussed in relation to young people becoming involved in interfaith work was implicit, such as in Laura's experiences of growing up in a charismatic Anglican church which she felt was 'too much'. This church's theological framework and approach not only made her leave the church, but also become wary of organisations run by churches or other religious congregations. She chose to become an intern in the Faith & Belief Forum because it was an organisation that was not run by a religious congregation. Although none of the other research participants described such strong discomfort with religious congregations (some, particularly the young Christians, are active in congregations), the absence of religious congregations in their accounts in relation to their interfaith work indicates that they do not play any significant role in making them interested. Instead, progressive and critical theological frameworks are formed in other microsystems – particularly the home. These findings show the need to attend to different social and theological dimensions in young people's accounts to understand their interfaith journeys.

### **7.1.2. Building bridges: the meaning(s) of interfaith work**

These social and theological dimensions are also important in relation to the second claim this thesis is making: that young people's interfaith work is a means to fulfil social and political visions, but also forms of theological commitment that are deeply linked to how they understand what it means to be Christian, Jewish or Muslim. These different forms of meaning of interfaith work shows not only the social, political, theological and ethical aspects of interfaith work, but also need to



be seen as intertwined and informing each other. If we look back at the results in Chapter 5, interfaith as a means took three forms: form friendships, find middle ground and change society. The importance of friendships in young people's interfaith work has been stressed also in previous research (Cornelio & Salera, 2012, Krebs, 2014), but the young people's accounts show that friendships had different purposes and functions. For some of them, friendships are necessary to be able to carry out interfaith work and, particularly, have theological dialogue. For others, they are about getting beyond (and even getting rid of) religious labels and making these unnecessary. A few, such as Lalon and Baile, also discussed how friendships with like-minded young people provide them with a strong sense of belonging which made it possible for them to deal with difficult moments in their lives and make sense of different sets of identities. For these research participants, the interfaith space made them feel accepted for who they are. What the young people put more focus on tended to relate to what interfaith organisations they belonged to: the CCJ tended to focus more on strategic friendships, whereas the Feast and the Faith & Belief Forum members described friendships more in personal terms. This can partly be seen as a result of the different focuses of the interfaith organisations, but also the young people's different visions and goals with their interfaith work.

The same is visible in the second form: interfaith work as a means to find middle ground. As with friendships, there were different understandings of what 'middle ground' meant. For some young people, it meant that interfaith work provided a platform for people to come together despite differences to fight against religious and societal intolerance. Others had a more internal focus in relation to 'finding middle ground' and emphasised how interfaith spaces provide a sense of

community with ‘no hierarchy’ where no religious tradition is more dominant than any other. The focus on ‘finding middle ground’ provides insights into the meaning of the interfaith space, but also show how political identities can be influential in how interfaith work is understood by young people. This is particularly visible in the final form: interfaith work as a means to change society. Here, interfaith work is seen as not only a way to bring faith communities and their resources together to work for a better society, but also the need for interfaith organisations and interfaith participants to take a stand on political issues.

These three forms provide several insights into young people’s interfaith work. They show the need to pay attention to how young people envision and use the interfaith space and the relationships, frameworks and ideas that guide these spaces. Although many of the young people emphasised all three forms of interfaith work, they meant sometimes different things for the research participants. Interfaith organisations, as I mentioned above, play a role in this, but the young people’s biographical accounts also show different forms of interfaith participants. Some of them, like Frank Temple and Lalon, call themselves ‘interfaith activists’ and their accounts show how their religious and political identities intersect and become meaningful in interfaith faith. Others, like Jacob, are predominantly interested in more traditional forms of theological dialogue. A few, like several of the young people in the Feast, prefer to spend time with friends, have movie marathons and talk about how their faiths inform their everyday lives. This shows how critical it is to avoid talking about young people’s interfaith work in general terms, but also the importance – again – to attend to their biographical accounts and the social, theological, ethical and political dimensions that inform them. But it is also important to attend to how interfaith work has different theological meanings for

young people and how the role of religion plays different roles in interfaith work. As we saw in Chapter 5, the young Christians most strongly described their religious identities to play a vital role in their interfaith work. They also quoted ethical teachings from the Bible that guided their interfaith work. The young Muslims also considered their religion as playing an important role in their interfaith work and their understandings of what it means to be a Muslim – often ‘being a good person’ and living in accordance with the Prophet Mohammed – informed their interfaith work. The young Jews, in contrast, did not describe their religious identities in the same way as the young Christians and Muslims. They asked critical questions about what I meant by ‘religion’ and ‘faith’, and they also provided insights into what these concepts meant to them. Baile, for example, reflected about what was Judaism and her own ethical and moral framework, questioning whether Judaism played any role in her interfaith work at all. Isaac argued that he engages in interfaith work as a Jew and that Judaism wants him to be involved in interfaith work, but did not put the same emphasis on theological frameworks and ethical teachings as the young Christians did.

These findings not only show how religious identities can play different roles in interfaith work, but also the need to attend to differences between religious traditions. This is something previous studies on young people’s interfaith work have not explored. As we saw in Chapter 1, research on the role of religion and religious identities in interfaith work has tended to have a more general focus and not to explore any deeper differences between religious traditions (e.g. Krebs, 2014; Cornelio & Salera, 2012).

### **7.1.3. Negotiating boundaries: challenges and interfaith ‘politics’**

The final claim this thesis makes is that in order to understand young people’s interfaith work, it is important to attend to how challenges with interfaith work inform young people in different ways, particularly the theological, political and social tensions in relation to interfaith space, religious congregations/faith communities and British society at large. In Chapter 6, the young people identified several challenges in relation to interfaith work. Some of these are general, such as ‘preaching to the converted’, ‘superficial or meaningless interfaith’, ‘fear, security and scared society’ and ‘religious congregations and religious intolerance’. Others are more specific and focusing on young people and challenges facing faith communities (evangelism in interfaith, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and self-censorship).

Several of the general and some of the more specific challenges in interfaith (youth) work have been acknowledged in previous studies. Preaching to the converted – that is, that interfaith work only attracts those who are already interested in interfaith work and not those who might need it – is a challenge that many interfaith practitioners identify (young people as well as adults). Chapter 1 also showed other challenges, such as the need to attend to the political and social structures making up the interfaith space (Liljestrand, 2018; Maira, 2016; Siem, 2017; Krebs, 2014; see also McCathy, 2007; Cheetham et al, 2013). But what this thesis has done is not only identify challenges, but also explore what these mean to the young people and how they inform their experiences. As with the other two claims above, this thesis has shown the need to not only look at challenges from a more general perspective but attend to how challenges with interfaith work are experienced differently for the young people depending on different backgrounds

and, particularly, different religious traditions. In this section, I will focus on three different forms of challenges: in relation to the interfaith space (both the interfaith space in general as well as being young in interfaith work), religious congregations and faith communities (where the question of religious identity and belonging becomes important) and in relation to British society at large (where the more political form of interfaith work becomes visible, but also societal challenges).

The young people identified several challenges in relation to the interfaith space. Most notable were the concerns that interfaith work only attracts those who are already convinced that interfaith work is important and how the political, theological and social structures of the interfaith space shape what is possible to achieve. Baile, for example, criticised what she considered to be ‘an interfaith dogma’ about what interfaith work is and should be, and how this risk making interfaith work ineffective. Others mentioned that there were ‘too many niceties’ and how guidelines in the interfaith space makes it difficult to have difficult theological discussions. Although many of the young people appreciated guidelines around how to speak sensitively and not consider other people to be representatives of their faiths, several pointed out that this can have negative consequences for the kind of change interfaith work can bring about. A notable example is how theological tension between religious groups is not tackled in any deeper sense (such as around the Israel-Palestine conflict) and how this can make interfaith work ‘superficial’ and even meaningless in the long run. There is also a concern amongst some of the young people that people ‘hold their tongues’ in interfaith work when difficult topics are addressed instead of participating, which can shut conversations down. By emphasising this, the research participants not only show awareness of the power and political dynamics of the interfaith space, but also provide insights

into how they make sense and negotiate these dynamics. How this was expressed in the research participants' biographical accounts varied, again, depending on what interfaith organisation they belonged to. Those who expressed the most need to change methods and approaches to make interfaith work more 'accessible' tended to belong to the Faith & Belief Forum, whereas the young people in the CCJ to a larger extent put emphasis on the need to have more difficult theological and political conversations. Some of the young people in the Feast also expressed concerns about the impact guidelines might have on discussions, but were overall pleased with the safe space that guidelines created. This shows, again, the need to pay attention to the interfaith organisations young people are active in and how this correlates with their visions and understandings of interfaith work. Interfaith organisations can be seen as a form of microsystem, made up by relationships and frameworks, that – in different ways – shape young people's experiences. It also shows how guidelines can be productive and constraining at the same time.

Another significant challenge the young people identified in relation to the interfaith space is age. While some of them consider being young in interfaith work to be a strength – Frank Temple, for example, mentioned how being a young person can open up doors because older people want to see more younger people involved – age is a social identity that is predominantly mentioned as a challenge. Some expressed how young people too often are seen as 'tokens' and not given opportunities to lead their own interfaith projects. Others put emphasis on how intergenerational differences shape how interfaith work is interpreted and carried out. Although none of the young people in this thesis mentioned personal experiences of exclusion in interfaith work based on their age, it shows the need to pay attention to how young people are seen and treated in interfaith contexts. This

is particularly important since, as we saw in Chapter 1, young people are seen as bringing energy and unique perspectives into interfaith organisations (Halafoff, 2013). If young people experience that they are seen as ‘tokens’ and are not given the opportunity to carry out interfaith work that is relevant for them, it could explain why only a small minority of young people are involved in interfaith work and shows how age can be a boundary that needs to be negotiated. However, intergenerational differences about what interfaith work is and is not also brings attention to the politics and power dynamics of the interfaith space. It is notable that most of the young people who considered age to be a challenge are active in the CCJ. Although the young people in the CCJ did not consider the CCJ to be problematic – on the contrary, they emphasised how it is a very supportive environment – they do meet and work with older people and have experienced tensions between young and older people to a higher extent than the members in the Faith & Belief Forum and the Feast (which predominantly are youth-oriented organisations). This is another example of the need to pay attention to how young people’s experiences of interfaith work are shaped by the interfaith organisation they are involved in.

Two other challenges with interfaith work the research participants identified were in relation to their religious congregations and British society at large. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, none of the studies on young people’s interfaith work have focused on what impact young people’s interfaith work might have on their sense of belonging to religious congregations. Instead, a focus has been on how interfaith work has ‘deepened’ young people’s religious identities and formed interfaith friendships that have informed their religious practice (Krebs, 2014; Cornelio & Salera, 2012). Although these findings are visible in this thesis as well

– as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, participating in interfaith work has made several of the young people reconnect with their faith and learn more about it – the young people’s biographical accounts showed that this also can bring about tensions in relation to their religious congregations. Several mentioned how being involved in interfaith work has made them aware of religious intolerance in their religious congregations and they have also experienced members of their congregations believing that interfaith work is about fighting for important issues for the faith communities, such as evangelisation for Christians and Israel for Jews. This has put many of the young people in difficult situations, not knowing how to balance their interfaith work (which includes becoming angry at what is preached in their houses of worship) with their religious belonging to their congregations and faith communities (which, at least for some, are important to them). A few, like Nadine, decided not to tell their congregation about their interfaith work unless they trust and know the people they are telling.

The research participants’ accounts also show that while interfaith work might deepen religious identities, these religious identities might not necessarily be in accordance to what is preached in the congregations. Some – most notably Frank Temple and Elizabeth who were active in Methodist churches – want to use the knowledge they have got through interfaith work to actively challenge what is preached in the congregations. This shows the need not only to focus on what impact interfaith work might have on religious identities, but also how the young people use these religious identities and the impact this might have on religious belonging. Lastly, the challenges the research participants identified in relation to British society at large also inform their experiences of interfaith work in different ways. As we saw above and in Chapter 6, several of the young people discussed



general challenges such as how some faith communities are concerned about the risk of interfaith marriages, losing one's theological distinction and physical security (particularly Jewish and Muslim congregations) making it difficult to carry out interfaith work. Some of the young people also expressed anger and frustration that people don't want to leave their comfort zones and blame polarising political and media rhetoric for dividing people further. Although all the young people mentioned these issues – showing how young people's interfaith work not only is the result of micro- and mesosystems but also informed by political and policy frameworks in macrosystems and embedded in a historical context in the chronosystem – they were most clearly expressed in the young Muslims' biographical accounts. If questions in relation to belonging to religious congregations and faith communities were mostly visible in the young Christians' and Jews' accounts, the young Muslims focused on belonging to the UK. Their interfaith work was not only about working for a more inclusive society in which multiple religious and ethnic identities are accepted, but also to create a society in which *they* are accepted and challenge what it means to be 'British'. To reconnect with the concept of belonging in Chapter 2, the young Muslims put emphasis on both 'belonging' in its more intimate form (often expressed in 'feeling at home') and 'politics of belonging' (political belonging, seen in citizenship and belonging to a nation). Interfaith work provided all of them with a sense of belonging and several expressed how being involved in interfaith work made them feel accepted for who they are (this is something they shared with most of the other research participants).

But interfaith work is also about challenging societal norms and frameworks that turn them into 'the not British other'. This was most clearly

expressed by Lalon, who described his interfaith work as being about his right to exist, but the other young Muslims also mentioned similar rationales. Some also saw interfaith work to be a way for young Muslims to be able to talk about sensitive issues and challenge perceptions and expectations in their Asian communities about what it means to be Muslim and British. While they all emphasised how important it is for interfaith organisations and spaces to have the resources and trustful relationships for these discussions to happen, many experienced the guidelines and structures making up interfaith spaces as providing a safe space for young Muslims. As I mentioned in Chapter 6, here is an example of how challenges facing interfaith work might not necessarily only be negative and also shows the importance of exploring the meaning of challenges in relation to young people's biographical accounts. In addition, while there are many similarities between young people involved in interfaith work, this thesis has shown that there are also significant differences and these differences provide important insights into what interfaith work is and can be.

## **7.2. Methodological strengths and limitations**

Looking back at the previous section, it is important to reflect on the methodological strengths and limitations and how confident I am about the claims I have made so far in this chapter (and the thesis in general). I will focus this discussion on three areas: choice of research method, the selection process and issues in relation to reflexivity. These three areas capture the strengths of the methodological framework in relation to the main findings and claims, but also point to limitations that need to be discussed as they raise important questions in relation to this thesis and researching young people's interfaith work. I will end with a short summary.

### **7.2.1. Choice of research method**

As I mentioned above and explained in Chapter 3, in order to understand the young people's experiences of interfaith work, I have used biographical interviews. I chose these interviews because they are flexible enough to allow research participants to tell their stories freely, but also structured enough to focus on their interfaith work. The choice of research method was also linked to the theoretical framework. Kate Tilleczek (2011, 2014) considers biographical methods as critical in her 'complex cultural nesting approach' and argues that this form of methodology makes it possible to attend to young people's experiences and the contexts, relationships and structures that shape their experiences. This is a methodological stance she shares with other youth scholars, who consider biographical methods to be a good way to study young people's identity formation and sense of belonging (Thomson, 2007; see also Johansson, 2017).

For this thesis, the choice of conducting biographical interviews has been an appropriate method. As we have seen in Chapters 4 to 6, a flexible form of interviewing has produced rich data and I have been able to attend to a wide range of experiences, contexts, actors and structures that are important to understand young people's interfaith work. To follow the young people's stories and not be tied down to a set of already specified questions have made it possible to explore what interfaith work means to them in deeper and more open ways. It was also clear that this was a type of interviewing that suited the research participants. A possible explanation of this can be that this form of questioning is similar to what they encounter in their interfaith work and they are therefore familiar with open questions and storytelling. While this could mean that at least some of the young people told me stories they have already told others in interfaith contexts, it still

gave them the chance to expand and go deeper into issues they found important, as well as allowing me to follow up on issues I found interesting. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, several of the young people described how the interviews made them think about their interfaith work and understand it in new and deeper ways. But there are also some limitations with this method, especially in relation to the kind of questions I asked the young people. While I tried as much as possible to ask them similar questions to be able to explore similarities and differences between and within religious traditions, there were some instances where I did not follow up as much as I might have. This is particularly evident in relation to challenges that were specific for the different religious traditions in Chapter 6. For example, I did not ask the young Jews or Muslims any specific questions about how they felt about evangelism and conversion in interfaith work. Although Isaac raised the question about conversion, I did not pursue this by asking how he experienced it or talking to him about the young Christians' experiences. None of the young Muslims talked about conversion or evangelism, nor did I ask them about this. This was a missed opportunity for me to explore deeper what this could mean for young Jews and Muslims and the implications this might have on interfaith work. Asking them questions about this would have made it possible for me to explore further what conversion and evangelism mean to non-Christians.

Another missed opportunity was that I did not ask the young Muslims about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. None of the them mentioned this conflict in my interviews with them and in Chapter 6 I argued that the specific formation of the interfaith organisations might play a role in this. All the young Muslims, with the exception of Lalon, were active in the Feast and, perhaps because the organisation focuses on young Christians and Muslims, the conflict was not a topic

of discussion. But not asking the young Muslims about this conflict makes it impossible to know how they feel about this issue. It would have been very interesting if they did not consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be a challenge in interfaith work, since it is seen by many interfaith practitioners and scholars as an obstacle in interfaith relations between Jews and Muslims (and also, in some instances, Christians and other religions) (e.g. Maire, 2016; McCarthy, 2007; Cheetham et al, 2013). It became clear when I analysed the transcripts that I sometimes was too focused on issues that were important for the different religions and did not follow up on themes that also could be important for others. Although it is difficult to estimate what impact this might have had on the result overall, it does make it harder to do any deeper analyses of the challenges facing religious communities in interfaith work.

The same criticism could be directed to how I used certain concepts – such as ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ – in the interviews. I have already discussed this in section 7.1.2 above, but it can also be seen as a methodological limitation. To avoid letting my own understanding of ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ guide the young people’s reflections, I tried as much as possible to rely on how they understood these concepts. This approach is not unique for this thesis but used in empirical studies on religious identities (e.g. McGuire, 2005) and it can be seen as a strength with biographical interviewing. But it also shows the need to be aware of how different concepts can be perceived and understood when using them, and communicate them in ways that do not cause confusion (which I felt it sometimes did with the young Jews). While all the young people provided me with interesting and in-depth reflections about what ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ mean to them, the conceptual discussion made me sometimes feel uncertain about my interviewing and made me

more cautious with how I framed questions. It might also be linked to my lack of knowledge of Judaism in particular, which I will come back to in relation to reflexivity below.

### **7.2.2. Selection: interfaith organisations and young participants**

The impact of the selection of interfaith organisations and research participants is also important to discuss in relation to the results. As I described in Chapters 1 and 3, I chose three established interfaith organisations in the UK (the CCJ, the Faith & Belief Forum and the Feast) because they represent different shifts in the interfaith sector in the UK and brought diversity to the thesis in terms of focus, activities and ethos. By recruiting the young people from these organisations, I was also able to get a breadth of experiences, religious backgrounds and positions (employed, interns and volunteers). As we saw in Chapters 4 to 6, the interfaith organisations play a role in how young people experience interfaith work and what they think is most important about participating in it. Including different kinds of interfaith organisation made it possible to not only attend to the impact these different visions, structures and guidelines might have on the research participants' experiences of interfaith work, but also explore further how particular interfaith organisations intersect with the young people's visions of interfaith work and what it means to them. One difference between the interfaith organisations I was interested in looking closer at was the Christian constitution of the Feast. Whereas the CCJ and the Faith & Belief Forum are interfaith at their core, the Feast is a Christian charity and this is visible in governance structures of the organisation. While staff members can be Christians or Muslim, the sitting CEO and trustees must be committed Christians. The Feast also clearly states on its website that an important ethos in the

Feast is the biblical teaching of ‘loving your neighbour.’ I was interested in whether this had any impact on the young people active in the Feast and, if yes, how they reflected on it. The answer to this question is twofold. The first is that it was not particularly visible. All but one of the young people from the Feast were Muslims and when we talked about the Feast and its ethos, none of them had any issues with the Feast being a Christian charity. Instead, as we saw in Minerva’s account in Chapter 5, they felt the Feast had ‘no agenda.’ The only participant where the Christian constitution of the Feast seemed to matter was for Nadine. As we saw in the previous chapters, she is the research participant who has most issues doing interfaith work and she was persuaded to give it a go by the then sitting CEO. The ethical teaching ‘loving your neighbour’ – the ethos of the Feast – played an important role in how she legitimated her interfaith work. It is interesting to note that the Christian constitution in this case was more relevant for another Christian than it was for the non-Christians.

However, as mentioned in Chapter 3, by only including established interfaith organisations I did not get perspectives from young people who are involved in other, perhaps more temporary projects with different ethos and visions. While some of the young people in this thesis have participated in more short-term interfaith projects in the past, their experiences might be very different from young people who are not involved in established interfaith organisations. As I discussed in Chapter 3, including established interfaith organisations provides a certain kind of stability to the study and short-term interfaith projects are often difficult to find for research purposes. To choose established organisations was therefore a good decision for the thesis. But it is important to note that the young people’s experiences might have been different had I also included research participants

from other forms of interfaith organisations and projects. It would also have been valuable to have included interfaith organisations focusing on young Jews and Muslims, especially considering how challenging the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the relationship between Jews and Muslims are for interfaith work. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I tried to include such interfaith organisations but was not successful.

When it comes to the selection of the young people in this thesis, I recruited them with a similar approach to that taken with the interfaith organisations: to get diversity in terms of religious backgrounds, age, gender, ethnicity and interfaith positions (e.g. volunteers, interns, employed). As we have seen in the previous chapters, these different backgrounds have shown the similarities and differences in how interfaith work is understood and experienced. To have young people from different religious traditions, denominations and branches made it possible to attend to differences within and between religious traditions in how interfaith work is perceived theologically, socially, ethically and politically (which, as we saw above, is something previous research has not explored in any great depth). As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I initially had a broad age group (16 to 30 years old) but ended up with participants who were closer in age (with the exception of Billy who was 18 by the time of the interview and Jacob who was 28). Most participants were between 23 and 25 years old. Although there were some differences between them – particularly in terms of work and education (Billy was preparing for applying to university and most of the other participants were already done with their education) – there were also many similarities between them, and the younger participants replied just as enthusiastically and analytically to the questions as the older ones, which at least partly confirms Jeffrey Arnett's



(2000, 2014) emphasis on how the twenties are an important period for identity formation. The fact that the youngest participants had been active in interfaith work for as long – sometimes even longer – as the older ones might also have been an important reason why there were so many similarities. Although it is impossible to know what the material would have looked like had I included participants as young as 16 in the sample, I am glad that the sample turned out as cohesive in age as it did. It made the analytical process easier without losing the diversity in the material and it is also representative of how old many young people involved in interfaith work are.

But, as with the selection of the interfaith organisations, it is possible to identify a few limitations. First of all, it is important to note that these young people are experienced interfaith participants: a majority had participated in interfaith work for more than five years and some had even made interfaith work their career. While this makes them ideal participants for a study like this and makes it possible to attend to why young people continue to be active in interfaith work, it does mean that their experiences might be different from young people who do not have as much experience participating in interfaith work or those who have decided not to continue being active in it. The second limitation is in relation to diversity, particularly in relation to ethnicity. Although I did try to get as much ethnic diversity as I could, I was not entirely successful. The young Muslims, for example, all come from Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds. This is not surprising since this is the largest Muslim group in the UK and Birmingham has a large Asian community (Davie, 2015; DeHanas, 2016), but it would have been interesting to include other Muslim groups (particularly with links to the Middle East) to get more perspectives and experiences. All the young Christians, except for Nadine (whose

parents come from the Caribbean), were white, which is another limitation in terms of ethnicity. Although race and ethnicity (and racism) seemed to play a limited role in the young people's interfaith work overall and only emerged when the research participants talked about societal fear and stereotypes, the accounts from the young Christians might have been different had I included more non-white Christians.

A third limitation is how few Jews participated in the study. Whereas I have five young Christians and five young Muslims, there are only three young Jews and, even though their accounts provide an abundance of rich data, it makes it more difficult to make any deeper analyses of their experiences of interfaith work. While the Jewish community is a small community in the UK (Kahn-Harris & Gidley, 2010; Gidley & Kahn-Harris, 2012) and I tried to recruit more young Jews, it still brings about limitations in relation to the analysis and the result. To include more young Jews might not have had any impact on the claims I have made in this thesis but would have provided more depth to the analysis. It is also interesting to discuss in relation to the lack of studies made on young Jews mentioned in Chapter 2. Although this thesis is focusing on a form of faith-based engagement that perhaps not many young Jews are involved in (at least that is the experience of the young Jews in this thesis) and this makes it different from studies focusing only on young Jews' religious identities and practice, it shows the need to pay more attention to this religious group.

### **7.2.3. Reflexivity**

Lastly, it is also important to discuss the impact I as a researcher have had in the production of these findings. As in all reflexive activity, it is critical to consider the effect my presence, background and the questions I have asked have had on the

claims I have made. As I mentioned in the Preface and Chapter 3, I am a white, middle-class, ‘post-Christian’ woman from Sweden with an academic background in Political Science, the Sociology of Religion and Psychosocial Studies. This means that I bring to the table a set of experiences and frameworks that shape how I look at the issues I am researching and analysing. Overall, I experienced my background to be a strength in the interview process with the young people. They seemed relaxed with me and were able to share deeply personal experiences. In a way, my background makes me an outsider: I am not British and I am identifying myself as a secular person who do not represent any religious group (more than my cultural ties to Christianity). I was also there as a researcher (with all the prestige, sense of objectivity and power that follow).

While it is impossible for me to say for sure whether the result would have been any different if somebody else – for example, someone with a visible religious identity and/or who was British – carried out the study, it is likely that it might. This is particularly notable in relation to my knowledge about the different religions and the questions I asked. Although I am not a practising Christian, I am very familiar with the terminology, concepts and practice in Christianity. I have also a good understanding of Islam as a religion as a result of studying it for many years. But my knowledge about Judaism is limited and this has likely impacted on the questions I asked the young Jews and how I understand their experiences of interfaith work. Had I had a more extensive understanding of Judaism, I might have been able to foresee issues around the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ discussed above. However, being the only non-Jewish member of my research team helped me become aware of some lived experiences and theological differences of Jews in the UK, which helped me identify themes in the data material and develop good

follow-up questions to the young Jews in the second interviews. It might also have been different for the young Jews and Muslims if they had been interviewed by someone who belong to the same religion as they do. However, such an insider-perspective could also have had a negative impact on the research participants and prevented them from sharing personal accounts out of fear of being judged. My religious status as being secular is also interesting to discuss in relation to this. While being secular and not identifying with any particular religion can be seen as more of a neutral position in that I am not ‘belonging’ to or ‘representing’ any religious community (emotionally as well as theologically), it also brings with it a set of challenges I did not always expected. Interacting with the young people as well as working with my all Jewish research team have made me become aware of how being secular is not neutral but shaped by cultural, social, political and sometimes even theological frameworks. While my religious status (or lack thereof) never really became a topic of conversation with my participants, their religious identities made me reflect on the meaning of my own and what impact this might have on the research process as a whole. It has shaped what kind of questions I have asked the young people and what I have been able to see in the material. It has undoubtedly made me blind to some theological diversity within religions I might have been more aware of had I been religious myself – but it has probably also made me discover themes and issues I might have ignored otherwise.

But it has also made me think about what being secular means to me – as a person and as a researcher. Being secular is, just like being religious, not fixed or set in stone but shaped by our biographies, worldviews and multiple identities. My secular identity is shaped by my cultural post-Christian background, my academic interest in religion, my political beliefs and my family history. It is embedded in

Christianity to a certain degree, but it is also more than that. In a way, engaging with (young) people of faith as part of this thesis has had a similar impact on my secular identity as the participants describe interfaith work has had on their religious identities: it has made us become aware of and think about these identities in new ways. During the course of this thesis, I did not experience the interaction with people of faith as particularly challenging. This is something I have done before with ease. But analysing the data material afterwards and trying to unpack and understand the complexity of various personal theologies made me realise the limitations and challenges of being secular and doing this kind of research. It is similar to walking in a beautiful but wild forest with so much to see, but not really knowing where to start and where to go. The only thing to do is to take one step in front of the other and keep going – with the help of the theoretical and methodological frameworks – but also knowing that there are things and questions I could have asked that I did not. Whether this had any direct impact on the young people and what they decided to tell me is hard to say, but it probably did. Some of them were kind enough to give me detailed accounts of religious rituals and traditions that they might not have done to someone who was identifying as religious.

But being Swedish and not British might also have impacted on how the young people interacted with me. Although I did not experience that they described the British system in any great detail because I am an immigrant (albeit they might have done this without me knowing) and we had no difficulties conversing in English, my background might still have impacted the interviews and the thesis as a whole. There are without doubt issues in relation to the British political, social, religious and educational systems I do not see or engage with because I am not born and raised in the UK, just as there might be things I acknowledged that somebody

born in Britain might not have seen. To do empirical research in a country that is not my own and lacking deep political, historical and social knowledge of the research context have been some of the more challenging parts of the research process, and at times made me very cautious in the analysis.

One final point that is both a strength and a limitation is my academic and professional background. As I mentioned in the Preface, I have a transdisciplinary background – including Political Science, the Sociology of Religion and Psychosocial Studies – with the theoretical frameworks, ‘glasses’ and understanding of concepts that come from these (sometimes contradictory) fields of study. This is particularly notable in relation to the important discussion about concepts such as ‘religion’ and ‘faith’. At times, I have experienced tensions between different disciplines that forced me to think beyond what I theoretically know and this has not always been easy to do. I am also currently working in a policy-driving environment, where questions in relation to religion, society and security are in the centre. Although I did not work in this environment until the final year of working with the thesis, these months have impacted on what I see in the data and how I understand it. In some sense, the thesis has become meaningful because I have come to understand the political and social realities of the young people’s interfaith work in new ways. Until I started my current job I saw the thesis predominantly as an academic contribution, but consider it now as much a contribution to social policy and practice as to scholarship. I have also experienced a profound interest from policy-makers in the findings of this thesis. While this might not have had any direct impact on the claims I have made, it has shown me the need to understand the findings not only in relation to theory and previous scholarship but also to wider society.

#### **7.2.4. Summary**

This section has focused on the methodological strengths and limitations of this thesis. By attending to the choice of research method, the selection process and reflexivity I have explored strengths and limitations with the approaches I have chosen and identified situations where my way of questioning and background might have impacted on the claims I have made. However, looking back at this discussion, I am still confident in the material the interviews have produced and the findings of my research. It puts the young people's biographical accounts and experience in focus, and attends to the social structures, actors, meanings and boundaries of young people's interfaith work. It shows the different forms of bridge-building and negotiations that are going on, and the possibilities and tensions these processes produce. Most importantly, it has answered the research questions of this thesis and contributed to filling a significant knowledge gap. In the next section, I will summarise the conclusions of the thesis and discuss the implications these might have for future research and social policy.

### **7.3. Concluding remarks**

#### **7.3.1. Conclusion**

As I have stated above, this thesis has explored young Christians', Jews' and Muslims' experiences of interfaith work and the impact interfaith work might have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities. By drawing on young people's biographical accounts of their interfaith journeys, this study has explored why and how the young people have become interested in interfaith work; identified multiple social contexts and relationships that have been important in forging and

sustaining this interest; attended to what interfaith work means to the young people socially, politically, theologically and ethically; and focused on the challenges they have experienced with their interfaith work. It has contributed to filling a significant knowledge gap.

If we look back at this chapter and the thesis as a whole, the following conclusions can be made. The first is that it is necessary to have a multidimensional perspective that takes into consideration the social, theological and political dimensions that inform young people's interfaith work. Not only was it obvious in the research participants' accounts that multiple social contexts and relationships were important in forging their interest in interfaith work – parents, interfaith organisations, universities, internships, work experience to mention a few – but it is also clear that the young people bring theological and political perspectives with them into their interfaith work. Several of the young people had already wrestled with theological notions about what it means to be Christian, Jewish or Muslim, and many described themselves as critical and progressive. These perspectives were important reasons why they decided to become active in interfaith work in the first place. This is directly linked to the second conclusion: that young people's interfaith work is a means to fulfil social and political visions, but also a form of theological commitment that is deeply embedded in their understanding of what it means for them to be Christian, Jewish and Muslim. While the social and political dimensions of interfaith work show how intertwined religious and political identities can be, the theological importance of interfaith work also shows tensions and struggles around what this means in relation to faith communities. Some young people (particularly the young Christians and the young Muslims) described in very personal terms how participating in interfaith work has deepened their faith. The



young Jews, on the other hand, raised critical questions around the notions of ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ in interfaith work that demonstrate how complex these terms can be. This shows the need not only to be aware of how we use academic concepts, but also to attend to how theological and political boundaries of faith communities are imagined and activated in interfaith work. The third and final conclusion of this thesis is about the importance of exploring how challenges of interfaith work inform young people’s experiences of it, particularly the theological, social and political tensions in relation to interfaith space, religious congregations and faith communities, and British society at large. The young people did not only identify several challenges facing interfaith work – general as well as specific – but also how these challenges brought up questions around the theological and political boundaries of the interfaith space and religious congregations. Being involved in interfaith work has made several of the young people (particularly the young Christians) aware of theological prejudices and religious intolerance in their religious congregations, and made them actively challenge these perceptions. The young people’s biographical accounts also showed how societal challenges in the UK inform their interfaith work. While all the young people mentioned challenges in relation to ‘fear, security and living in a scared society’, the young Muslims in particular described how societal challenges informed their interfaith work.

To return to the main research question of this thesis – *what impact(s) might young people’s interfaith work have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities?* – this thesis has shown the need to attend to young people’s biographical accounts to understand what impacts interfaith work has on young people’s lives and identities. As we have seen above, young people bring with them different sets of identities and frameworks into their interfaith work. Many of them have

‘progressive’ religious identities that inform their interfaith work and, for some, these religious identities were also informed by their political identities. For others, the role of religious identities was disputed and ethical identities and frameworks played a more important role. As we have seen above, there are significant inter- and intrareligious differences in how this is experienced. These different understandings also impacted on what meanings and challenges the young people experienced with interfaith work, both as a means to bring about social and political change and what needs to be done to make interfaith work more efficient. Interfaith work makes it possible for young people to actively reflect on what it means to be Christian, Jewish or Muslim in diverse settings and these reflections, in many cases, not only deepened their religious identities but also ethical identities (in some cases making the young people reflect on what is religion and what is ethics).

But interfaith organisations also provide young people with platforms and opportunities to work for the kind of society they want to see, activating political identities in the process. Although not all the young people described their interfaith work as political, being involved in interfaith organisations has made several become aware of how interfaith work can be a way to tackle societal problems. This looked different for different young people – some talked about grassroot actions and others on taking a stand on political issues at the national level – but their accounts show examples of how interfaith work can lead to active citizenship. However, in order to understand what this means to young people, it is important to situate it in relation to their life-stories. Lastly, this thesis has identified two important social identities that, in different ways, are activated and shaped by the young people’s interfaith work. The first is in relation to age. To be a young person involved in interfaith work can be a strength – young people, as we have seen

throughout this thesis, are still a minority in interfaith work and more interfaith organisations want to attract young people to become involved in interfaith work – but also a challenge. But what is also significant in relation to age is the need to see young people’s interfaith work as part of an ongoing interfaith journey. This is closely connected with the second important social identity: being an interfaith participant. Although several of the young people have been involved in interfaith work for a very long time, they are still trying to make sense of what this means to them and what kind of interfaith participant they want to become. They are moving within and across different interfaith spaces, and are shaped by these movements. In other words, their accounts are not only about *being* an interfaith participant but also *becoming* one and finding an interfaith space (and build a society) where they can feel a sense of belonging. In order to understand what impact(s) young people’s interfaith work might have on their religious, political, social and ethical identities, they need to be understood in relation to these journeys and their attempts to make sense of them.

### **7.3.2. Implications for future research**

As I mentioned above, this thesis has contributed to a still underexplored area of research and identified possibilities and challenges with researching young people’s interfaith work. This has several implications for future research. On the one hand, this thesis has shown the importance of paying attention to how young people from different religions experience interfaith work. It has pointed towards the dangers if young people’s interfaith work is understood in general terms and little attention is paid to how different religious traditions shape young people’s experiences. By using a multidimensional approach, such as Kate Tillecze’s (2011, 2014)

‘complex cultural nesting approach’, it is also possible to attend to different dimensions that might inform young people’s interfaith work and the contexts, relationships and frameworks that are important in forging and sustaining their interest in it. But the thesis has also shown the challenges with engaging with such diversity. The use of concepts such as ‘religion’ and ‘faith’, for example, might be interpreted very differently by young people from different religions and this can create difficult moments. While such a conceptual discussion might provide valuable insights into the theoretical, political and theological constructions of concepts, it might also make the analysis difficult and this requires an approach that attends to these possible tensions. In this thesis, I turned back to the young people’s biographical accounts and let their understandings of these concepts guide the analysis, but I also – as mentioned in section 7.2 – became aware of the challenges with such an approach when it comes to analysis, particularly the danger of making theoretical concepts too vague and subjective. For future research focusing on young people’s interfaith work, these implications need to be considered in the development of the theoretical and methodological frameworks.

There are also several new pathways for future research. The first is to explore how young people from religions other than Christianity, Judaism and Islam experience interfaith work and what their interfaith journeys look like. It would be particularly interesting to see if there are any differences from what we have seen in this thesis in relation to religious and political socialisation, religious identity and senses of belonging, and visions of interfaith work. It is also relevant to look closer at similarities and differences between monotheistic and polytheistic religions when it comes to interfaith (youth) work. This thesis’ focus on the Abrahamic religions have shown a diversity of different theological, ethical and

political frameworks in how interfaith work is understood, and – as I mentioned above – the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ also have different meanings. It would be very interesting to see what it looks like, for example, for young Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists. A second, related, pathway is to study how young people who identify as non-religious – e.g. secularists, atheists, agnostics or humanists – experience interfaith work. Some interfaith organisations, such as the Faith & Belief Forum, attract young people with a wide range of belief systems and how and why these young people participate in interfaith work raise important questions around the political and social visions of interfaith organisations. There are also important questions in relation to how young people understand their non-religious identities and how these identities are activated and negotiated in interfaith settings. As we have seen in this thesis, ethical teachings and theological frameworks of religious identities are important to understand young people’s interfaith work. Attending to what draws young non-religious people to interfaith work and the contexts, relationships and narratives that inform their activism would bring breadth and depth to the study of young people’s interfaith work. It would also show the need to include another topic in the interdisciplinary subject of ‘interfaith studies’: the study of non-religious identities and secularity (cf. Lee, 2015, 2017).

A third area that would be interesting to research further is the impact young people’s interfaith work might have on religious congregations. As this thesis has shown, participating in interfaith work has made young people aware of theological and political shortcomings of their religious congregations. Some have also actively challenged their religious congregations’ understanding of other religions and want them to be involved in interfaith work. To focus on the impact this might have on religious congregations and how they experience this would provide insights into

the dynamics between people who are active in interfaith work and those who are not. It also raises questions about the impact interfaith work might have on religious congregations' theological and political frameworks, relationships between members in the congregation, and – in a longer perspective – the development and survival of religious communities. A related topic to delve deeper into is whether young people's interfaith work might change how they engage with their religious communities in the long term. This is connected to the question about affiliation and senses of belonging, but with a longer perspective in mind. While this thesis has shown that interfaith work is important in how the research participants understand their religions – in many cases, their theological frameworks were formed before they became involved in interfaith work – it is impossible to say what impact this might have in the future. Will young people who have been involved in interfaith work in their youth remain interfaith activists or similar – or will their perspectives change as they grow older? This approach touches on the longevity of interfaith activism, but also how theological frameworks develop and change and the impact this has on religious congregations and communities – particularly in religiously diverse and multicultural societies.

Lastly, it would be interesting to see more psychosocial approaches to research on young people's engagement with religion (both generally as well as in relation to interfaith work). In this thesis I have tried to develop a psychosocial approach by attending to how individual biographies and social contexts are embedded and intertwined. Psychosocial studies as a transdisciplinary field of study comes with a wide range of approaches – from psychoanalysis to post-structuralist theoretical frameworks – and attempts to explore how experiences, feelings and identities are embedded, activated and formed in relation to social and political

contexts, structures and discourses. For research on young people and religion, predominantly studied within the sociology of religion, it would open up new perspectives on how young people's religious identities are experienced, felt and understood. It would also raise new critical questions around the genealogy of theoretical frameworks and concepts, and the impact it might have on what we (can) study. It would be particularly interesting to explore what impact theological and political discourses around what it means to belong to a faith community might have on how young people identify with their religions – not just in relation to religious congregations, but also how religious identities are felt and negotiated by young people. It would also be interesting to focus more on the affective aspects of young people's interfaith work. As this thesis has shown, being involved in interfaith work can bring about various emotions – from anxiety in relation to one's religious congregations to feeling safe and accepted. To explore this deeper would be an important contribution to the growing field of interfaith/interreligious studies.

### **7.3.3. Implications for social policy**

It is also relevant to reflect on the implications this thesis might have on policy making. As we saw in Chapter 1, there is a growing policy interest in young people's interfaith work to build community cohesion (particularly by providing 'bridging' social capital), form active citizenship and provide young people with skills to live successful lives in diverse and multicultural societies. This thesis both confirms and challenges this vision of interfaith youth work. On the one hand, the young people's accounts show how fruitful interfaith work can be to get the skills and knowledge needed to build bridges between communities and challenge

stereotypes and biases. All the young people in this thesis describe, in different ways, how their interfaith journeys have made them form friendships with people of different religions and learn about different faiths and belief systems, and several have also mentioned that they participate in interfaith work to change society to the better. From such a perspective, it is obvious that interfaith work can be a fruitful way to bring young people together and provide them with skills, platforms and contexts to become active citizens.

But this thesis has also shown the importance of paying attention to the political and social framings of interfaith work and this can have implications for social policy. As we could see in Chapter 6, the young people identified several challenges facing interfaith work, particularly how it tends to attract only those who already consider interfaith to be important and how concerns around ‘fear’ and ‘security’ might prevent people from participating. But the young people also identified challenges facing young people’s participation in interfaith work. Some mentioned how young people are seen as tokens, invited to activities that might not be suitable for them and that young people need to be given opportunities to lead projects of their own. In order for interfaith work to be successful from a policy perspective, these challenges need to be taken seriously. It is also significant to consider the theological, social and political factors about why interfaith work is important and what it *means* – both to policy makers and to interfaith (youth) participants. As we saw in Chapter 1, interfaith work is considered important in social policy because it makes it possible to develop ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ social capital – that is, relationships and connections between people who belong to different religious, cultural and social groups (Dinham, 2012; Furley et al, 2006; see also DCLG, 2008). These ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ social capital, in turn, would



make it less likely that people bond only with people in their own community (also known as ‘bonding’ capital’) and result in building more cohesive communities (Furley et al, 2006; Cattle, 2008). While the young people’s biographical accounts to some extent confirm these policy visions, many of the research participants also criticise the theological, political and social frameworks of interfaith work and those participating in it for not being able to bring about any real change. Some argued that rather than providing opportunities to have difficult theological and political conversations about stereotypes, truths and misconceptions, interfaith work is too often experienced as being about ‘defending each other’ and ‘being too nice’ to each other. In a way, this criticism could be read as ‘interfaith work as bonding social capital’ and while this is not necessarily a bad thing – as we could see in Chapter 5, forming friendships and building a platform with like-minded people are important functions of interfaith work – it can also be a challenge. Although this has not only to do with policy, it raises important questions around how the way interfaith work is framed and understood in policy might impact on what is possible to do on the ground.

Lastly, there also need for policy formation to be aware that young people are involved in interfaith work for different reasons and have different understandings of what it means. They bring different theological, political, social and ethical frameworks to interfaith work, which shape what they can and will do. Sometimes these frameworks collide with the expectations in interfaith organisations, sometimes they are closely intertwined. Based on the result of this thesis, if policy makers want young people to participate in interfaith work, they have to be aware of these differences and provide young people with resources and opportunities to develop the interfaith spaces they need. They should also consider

that not all interfaith projects (or activists) are the same or have the same end-goal. Some young people prefer social action projects with clearly defined political goals, others want to wrestle with theological ideas around truth and practice, and some just want to meet up with friends, have a movie marathon and discuss how faith influences their everyday lives. The political and societal signification of these different interfaith projects are difficult to estimate; sometimes even impossible (particularly in the short term). But this thesis has shown that, when given the opportunity, participating in interfaith work can have a positive impact on young people's participation and engagement in society. It can make their religious and political identities become more meaningful, and provide them with spaces where they can express and wrestle with ideas around faith, politics and society. As long as challenges and frameworks are considered and taken seriously (by policy makers, interfaith organisations and young people alike), interfaith work can be a way for young people to work for a Britain they want to see and live in.

#### **7.3.4. Some final reflections**

In the Preface, I reflected on how I ended up writing a doctoral thesis about young people's experiences of interfaith work in the UK. I described how the September 11 attacks have shaped my academic and personal interests, and my attempts to understand these attacks in more depth. I also mentioned how interviewing the young people in this thesis has introduced me to a new academic pathway and I will use this final section to reflect on this more in detail. As with most journeys we embark on, the work with this thesis has felt like a rollercoaster, at times incredibly challenging, at times immensely enjoyable – and often a combination of the two. It has been a personal journey as much as it has been an academic one, and resulted

in more than a few important discoveries. From an academic perspective, it has opened up a new field of study where I can use my somewhat unconventional academic background and explore issues and questions that brought me to this topic. During the course of this thesis, I have developed a new approach to how we can understand people's experiences and the role religion might play in political and civic engagement. In a way, this thesis has provided the stark contrast to radicalisation and violent extremism that I thought it would when I started the project. But it has also problematised it. While interfaith work definitely can be a force for good and bring people together, it is also a complex form of engagement in its own right and this complexity needs to be attended to. I see this every day in my current job at the Swedish Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism, where interfaith actors are amongst those with whom I am in regular contact. There are tensions within and across interfaith groups, between interfaith groups and religious congregations, around what should be done in relation to challenging events. There are different interpretations and different outlooks, without doubt linked to theological and political understandings. Working with this thesis and interviewing the young people about their interfaith work have helped me make sense of these complexities and differences. It has also made me eager to continue doing empirical research on and with participants involved in interfaith work – young people as well as adults – to explore further what interfaith is and can be.

This thesis has also been personally valuable for me. Interviewing the young people has taught me important lessons about privilege and trust. More than once during the interviews, particularly with the young Muslims, was I reminded of what a privileged position I find myself in. During the interview process, this privilege was mostly around 'white' privilege and class. I remember how uncomfortable and

heart-breaking it felt hearing Mayah, Sana, Lalon and Nadine talk about their experiences of racism and comments that they do not belong in the UK (despite being born in Britain), when I (an immigrant to the UK) had never heard anything other than positive comments about my own presence. At times it was painful to transcribe their interviews and I remember how angry I felt about the injustices of the situation. Until then, I had never really thought about my own position as a white, middle-class Swedish woman who speaks fluent English with a peculiar accent that makes it difficult for many people to identify where I come from. But, in these moments, I became aware of how these privileges shape me as a person. Before moving to London, I had never lived abroad before and never had to reflect about experiences of being an immigrant – let alone that of a ‘wanted and accepted’ immigrant. Finding myself in that situation was difficult, but also important and revealing. It helped me understand my situation in a new light and has continued to shape me, even after I moved back to Sweden again.

But this thesis and the people involved in it has also made me feel strong feelings of gratitude, not only for the opportunities that have been given me during the course of all these years but also in the trust the research participants put in me. Listening to their stories has informed my outlook on life, personally as well as academically. They have taught me important lessons of building bridges and negotiating boundaries. I entered this field with a wish to understand what makes young people want to be involved in interfaith work, but I left also with a better understanding of myself. It shows, again, how intersected our lives can be with the research we do, but also the value of having a psychosocial approach to what we do. When I started this thesis, Psychosocial Studies was (like the sociology of religion during my MA) a very new field of research for me and I struggled initially

to make sense of what it means to me. While I should not suggest that I have a clear definition of it right now, it has become a way to question and challenge boundaries, to critique attempts to colonise thoughts and words into a specific format, and to combine different approaches – methods as well as theories – to make this happen. This thesis, with its focus on how young people build bridges and negotiate boundaries in relation to their interfaith work, is one attempt to make this happen. But it is also, as with the young people in this study, the start of a new journey with new questions, bridges and boundaries. I look forward to embarking on it.

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# Appendices 1-8

# Appendix 1: Information sheet



**Department of Psychosocial Studies**

**BIRKBECK**

**University of London**

**Malet Street,**

**London WC1E 7HX**

**020 7631 6000**

**Title of Study:** *Being, Becoming and Belonging – Young Christians', Muslims' and Jews' experiences of interfaith work in the UK*

**Name of researcher:** Lenita Törning

The study is being done as part of my Ph.D. degree in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. The study has received ethical approval.

## **Aim of the research**

This research aims to explore young Christians', Muslims' and Jews' experiences of interfaith work in the UK. In the past decade there has been growth in both academic and policy interests in interfaith projects as a means to bring people together and build peaceful communities. Still, we have very little knowledge about the impact being involved in these projects might have on people and particularly on young people and young adults who are fairly recent participants in this kind of projects.



In this Ph.D. thesis I am interested in what it means for young Christians, Muslims and Jews to be active in interfaith work and the impact this activism might have on their religious identities and everyday lives. In particular, I would like to know how young people themselves describe their interfaith activism, how they got involved in interfaith work and why it is important to them. I am also interested in the role their religion plays in their interfaith work, if there are any religious narratives and ethical teachings they are particularly inspired by, and also the role of their congregations and religious communities in their becoming interested in interfaith work. Lastly, I would like to know if they think their interfaith activism has had any impact on their everyday lives – for example, in school/university/work settings, family and peer relationships, community and neighbour relations. By putting the young people's own voices in focus in individual interviews, I am interested in what it means for them personally to be involved in interfaith work and in the religious, social, ethical and political impacts this activism might have on their lives.

## **Participation**

In this study I am interested in Christian, Muslim or Jewish young people, between 16 and 22 years old who are involved in interfaith work in the UK. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by me about your interfaith work at a time that is convenient to you. The interview will last for about an hour. In some cases a second interview might be needed to follow up on interesting findings that came up in the first interview. For the interview I will ask you to choose a public place in which you feel comfortable but that is private enough for you to not be overheard. With your permission I will record the interviews. You are free to refrain from answering any questions you may find difficult or uncomfortable. You are also free to stop the interview and withdraw at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study both your audio files and all written transcripts will be destroyed and immediately removed from the research.

In order to protect your identity, I will ask you to choose a pseudonym or let me choose a pseudonym for you. This pseudonym will replace your real name in all interview transcripts, the Ph.D. thesis and in any other written work. All your data

and information will be stored in a password protected external hard-drive that only I have access to.

The analysis of your participation in this study will be written up in a Ph.D. thesis for my degree. I will also ask you for permission to use your data in other written works, such as books, book chapters, journal articles and conference papers. You will not be identifiable in the write up of the thesis or any publication which might ensue.

This Ph.D. thesis is supervised by **Professor Stephen Frosh** and **Dr. Ben Gidley**. If you have any questions you would like to raise with them, they may be contacted at the following email addresses:

**Professor Stephen Frosh:**

Email: s.frosh@bbk.ac.uk

**Dr. Ben Gidley**

Email: b.gidley@bbk.ac.uk

If you have any questions or would like to get in contact with me, you can reach me on the following e-mail address: ltorni01@mail.bbk.ac.uk.

**Thank you for considering participating in my study.**

Kind regards,

Lenita

## Appendix 2:

### Overview of the young people

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Org:</b>	<b>Age:</b>	<b>Religion:</b>	<b>Ethnicity:</b>	<b>City:</b>	<b>Gender:</b>
Sam	3FF	24	Judaism (Reform)	White British	London	Man
Baile	3FF	26	Judaism (Orthodox)	White British	London	Woman
Lalon	3FF	25	Islam (Sunni)	Bengali, Bangladesh	London	Man
Laura	3FF	23	Christianity (CoE, Ang.)	White British	London	Woman
Elizabeth	CCJ	24	Christianity (Methodist)	White British	London	Woman
Jacob	CCJ	28	Christianity (Catholic)	White British	University city	Man
Frank Temple	CCJ	24	Christianity (Methodist)	White British	London	Man
Isaac	CCJ	25	Judaism (Orthodox)	White British	London	Man
Mayah	Feast	21	Muslim (Sunni)	Bengali/ Bangladeshi	Birmingham	Woman
Minerva	Feast	19	Muslim (Sunni)	Pakistani	Birmingham	Woman
Nadine	Feast	25	Christian (Evangelical /Pentacost.)	Black Jamaican	Birmingham	Woman
Sana	Feast	19	Muslim	Pakistani	Birmingham	Woman
Billy	Feast	18	Muslim	Pakistani	Birmingham	Man

# Appendix 3:

## Interview guide (first interview)

### **Theme 1: Background (general)**

- Could you please begin by telling me a bit about yourself and your background?  
Age, where you are born, religion, what you do, etc.
- Could you tell me something about your family?
- What role did religion play in your upbringing?
- Did you attend any religious services?
- What does being Christian/Jewish/Muslim mean to you?
- Could you tell me about the schools you attended? University?

### **Theme 2: Becoming and being active in interfaith work**

- How did you become interested in interfaith work?
- Why did you choose the interfaith organisation you are active in?
- Have you participated in any other interfaith activities?
- What does interfaith work mean to you?
- Has the meaning of interfaith work changed?
- What roles does religion/faith play in your interfaith work?
- Has being involved in interfaith work had any impact on your religious identity?
- What is your goal with your interfaith work?

### **Theme 3: Future activism and impact**

- Has participating in interfaith work made you interested in interfaith work in other organisations?
- Has being involved in interfaith work made you interested in other forms of political or civic engagement?

# Appendix 4:

## Interview Guide 2 with Mayah from the Feast

### **Theme 1: Previous interview**

- How did you experience the last interview? Any surprises, thoughts?
- What have you been up to since we last saw each other? Anything with the Feast?
- How are your wedding and London plans coming along? How are you feeling about moving to London?

### **Theme 2: Vocabulary**

- You mentioned several times in the last interview that you found your job rewarding. What makes something ‘rewarding’ to you?
- One of the things that really struck me in your interview was how you described the importance of doing something ‘right’ and that you are not ‘doing anything wrong’, especially when you described your religiosity and relationship with God. What does ‘doing things right’ mean? Doing them wrong?

### **Theme 3: Religion and culture**

- You mentioned several times in the last interview that religion is more important than culture. How do you distinguish them?
- You also said that ‘culture is made from people, religion is from God’. Could you tell me more about what you mean by this?
- How do you feel about the Bangadeshi culture? Has it any role at all in your life? Why/not?
- What about British culture? What does it mean to be British to you?

### **Theme 4: Young Muslims and interfaith**

- Many young Muslims have mentioned that they feel that they need to be careful about what they say in public because things can be misinterpreted and taken out of context. How do you feel about this? Have you experienced it yourself?

- Do you think interfaith projects can be a way for young Muslims to be able to speak more freely?
- Many young Muslims have also described the sadness and fear they have felt after the Manchester and London attacks. How has it been for you?
- What do you think needs to be done to prevent these kinds of attacks from happening again?

## Appendix 5:

### Overview of the interviews

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>First interview</b>	<b>Second interview</b>	<b>Place of interview</b>	<b>Length of interview</b>
Sam	10 January 2017	20 January 2017	1. F&BF office 2. F&BF office	1: 70 minutes 2: 35 minutes
Baile	14 February 2017	23 February 2017	1. F&BF office 2. Caffè Nero, Brix	1. 2,5 hours 2. 66 minutes
Lalon	24 February 2017	28 May 2017	1. Work place 2. Birkbeck	1. 2 hours 2. 2,5 hours
Laura	16 March 2017	5 April 2017	1. F&BF office 2. Birkbeck	1. 80 minutes 2. 90 minutes
Elizabeth	20 February 2017	2 March 2017	1. RADA cafe 2. CCJ's office	1. 57 minutes 2. 35 minutes
Frank Temple	21 February 2017	2 March 2017	1. CCJ's office 2. CCJ's office	1. 58 minutes 2. 45 minutes
Jacob	28 February 2017	20 March 2017	1. Order quarters 2. Order quarters	1. 59 minutes 2. 2 hours
Isaac	8 May 2017	17 May 2017	1. CCJ's office 2. CCJ's office	1. 80 minutes 2. 65 minutes
Mayah	11 May 2017	12 June 2017	1. Starbucks, BNS 2. Starbucks, BNS	1. 60 minutes 2. 62 minutes
Minerva	20 May 2017	7 June 2017	1. Starbucks, BNS 2. Starbucks, LDN	1. 92 minutes 2. 75 minutes
Nadine	22 May 2017	12 June 2017	1. Feast's office 2. Starbucks, BNS	1. 98 minutes 1. 74 minutes
Sana	24 May 2017	13 June 2017	1. Cafè Nero, BNS 2. Cafè Nero, BNS	1. 2 hours 2. 95 minutes
Billy	27 May 2017	17 June 2017	1. Cafè Nero, BNS 2. Starbucks, BNS	1. 70 minutes 2. 62 minutes

# Appendix 6:

## Letter of consent



**Department of Psychosocial Studies**

**BIRKBECK**

**University of London**

**Malet Street,**

**London WC1E 7HX**

**020 7631 6000**

**Title of Study:** *Being, Becoming and Belonging – Young Christians', Muslims' and Jews' experiences of interfaith work in the UK*

**Name of researcher:** Lenita Törning

I have been informed about the nature of this Ph.D. study and willingly consent to take part in it.

I give my permission to audio record both of my interviews and I also give my permission to use my interview data in other written works, such as books, book chapter, journal articles and conference papers.

I understand that I will not be made identifiable in any conversation, documents, publications or talk related to the research.

I understand that I may stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time.

I am over 16 years of age.

Name:

Signed:

Date:

There should be **two signed copies**, one for participant, one for researcher.



# Appendix 7: Coded interview excerpt

## Transcript of interview 1 with Elizabeth (pseudonym) from the CCJ

Date: 20 February 2017

Place: RADA's cafe on Malet Street in London

(we were unable to meet at the CCJ's office on Charlotte Street as they were currently moving offices and there were no furnitures)

**Lenita:** The first question is if you could tell me a bit about yourself, your age, religious background and so on?

*Age*  
*Religion*  
*Background* **Elizabeth:** I'm 25 years old and I am a Christian. I am a part of the Methodist denomination which was a branch of the Church of England, but varied much about your experience, reason and tradition coming together to do religious beliefs and I have always liked that approach so I have stayed Methodist (smiling). *Belonging*  
*Religion*  
*denomination*

**Lenita:** Could you tell me a bit about the role of religion in your upbringing and when you were growing up?

*Family*  
*Religion*  
*social*  
*→* **Elizabeth:** I was a part of a Christian family. My parents and my sister are also Christian, but none of my grandparents were so I've got to see the different perspectives in them. But my parents were very keen that I learn a lot about Christianity growing up, they would tell me stories about it, they took me to Christian festivals, I went to Sunday school... Then I went to a Christian secondary school. So a very Christian up-bringing (laughter). *Intergenerational diff.*  
*Positive feelings for upbringing*

**Lenita:** What role plays religion in your identity? Is it something that has been a big part throughout your life or is it something that has become important when you got older?

*Religion*  
*Identity*  
*Childhood* **Elizabeth:** I always accepted that Christianity was true, because that's what I've been told since I was very young and I probably believed more than my parents because I was convinced that if I have been told that God is real he must be. So if they ever doubted I was like 'No, no, you just need to pray and it will be fine' (laughter). I once saw a dead crab on the beach and I thought that if I put a big stone by it, it can roll away and be resurrected. So I didn't quite understand it but everything was always about Christianity with me and it wasn't *Belonging*  
*practices*  
*Childhood religion*

# Appendix 8: Ethics form

**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY,  
BIRKBECK, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

## **PROPOSAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL**

### **NOTES TO THE APPLICANT:**

The purpose of this form is to make sure that you as a researcher, your research participants and the College are safeguarded.

Please think carefully about each of the questions and give as much information as possible about what your research with human participants, sensitive topics, sensitive materials or human remains will involve.

If you are a student then your form should be sent for consideration to your supervisor in the first instance.

Students should be aware that the submission process may vary by Department, please refer to your own Department for how to submit your proposal

If you are a member of academic staff your completed form should be submitted directly to the department ethics officer (listed on the website).

Once approval has been received, the supervisor or staff investigator is responsible for ensuring a copy of form is logged with your department office.

No research with participants may begin before ethics approval has been granted.

Please refer to the additional guidance on ethical research provided by your department, the school and the college.

## **Your details**

**Name of investigator:** Lenita Törning

**Academic Status (e.g. staff, PhD student, postgraduate, undergraduate):** MPhil/  
PhD student

**Department:** Department of Psychosocial Studies

**Programme of study (if you are a student):** Psychosocial Studies MPhil/PhD

**Name and department of supervisor:** Professor Stephen Frosh (main supervisor) and  
Dr. Ben Gidley (second supervisor), both in the Department of Psychosocial Studies

**Contact email:** ltorni01@mail.bbk.ac.uk

## **Your project**

**Title of your study:** Being, Becoming and Belonging – Young Christians', Muslims' and Jews' experiences of interfaith youth projects in London

**Main research question (brief abstract of your study):** This thesis is interested in exploring young Christians', Muslims' and Jews' experiences of interfaith projects and particularly the religious, social, political and ethical consequences of being involved in these projects. There are several reasons why these under-explored questions are relevant to look at. The growth of interfaith projects, the policy interest in them and how they are emphasised as an important means to bring people together all raise new questions about how these projects can be understood and particularly how they affect people involved in them – not only in terms of the actual experiences of the interfaith projects per se, but also the ways they might influence the sense of belonging to the religious communities of origin and in more secular contexts (such as in school, in the workplace, in community life, etc.). This is particularly relevant for young people who are not only relatively recent participants in interfaith projects but also seen as a generation growing up in a society that is described as simultaneously Christian, secular

and religiously diverse (Weller, 2009). The scholar of religion Diana Eck (2006) has even described this generation as “the first interfaith generation” (p. x) and with this in mind, one could ask what this means for young people. How do they experience interfaith projects and how do they reflect on the effect it might have on their sense of belonging to their religious communities and everyday lives? Against this background, the main research question of this thesis is: What impacts have young people’s interfaith activism on their religious, ethical, political and social identities?

## **Research schedule**

**Date of ethics application:** 10 October 2016

**Date project started or is due to start:** September 2015

**Proposed starting date of data collection:** November 2016

**Date by which research must be completed:** September 2018

## **Other organisations**

**Are you applying to an external body for funding? YES/ NO**

**Are you involving an external body (e.g. a school, charity or company) in your data collection or for access to participants? YES/ NO**

**If yes, does that external body have their own ethics approval process?** Neither of the organisations I have been contact with or plan to contact state anything about having their own ethics approval process.

**If yes, please give details of committee, stage of process/decision:** X

**If no, does that external body require institutional certification of ethics approval from Birkbeck?**

Yes, it is likely that they would like to see an institutional certification of ethics approval from Birkbeck as this research project involves access to young people and I plan to include a copy of this (as well as the certificate from the DBS check) when approaching the interfaith projects.

**If you are a member of academic staff applying for external funding (e.g. from the AHRC, ESRC, etc.) are you seeking approval for: X**

Outline proposal                      YES/NO

Full proposal                              YES/NO

Modification to your previously approved project   YES/NO

If this is an application for approving a modification, please provide the title and date of your initial application.

## **Methodology**

### **Your participants:**

**Who are they?** The main research participants will be young Christians, Muslims and/or Jews who are active in interfaith youth projects in London. But I will also include other people who are working with the young people in the projects. It could be interfaith coordinators, faith leaders and youth leaders in congregations, local authorities and funders of interfaith projects. This in order to complement the young people's stories with a broad overview of the projects and the interfaith youth scene in the UK.

**How many?** As estimated at the moment, this thesis will involve around 12 young people in two interfaith projects and approximately six gate-keepers who are working with or in relation to the interfaith youth projects. As many of these interfaith projects are fairly small in size and this thesis will use a narrative methodology, around six young people per interfaith project is a realistic amount to include and would also give a mix of views of each project. As for the gate-keepers, these six people will include both people who are directly involved with the interfaith youth projects (probably around two people per project), as well as around four people who are involved in interfaith youth work in a different way (e.g. funders, faith communities, interfaith organisations) to get a broader view of the projects. Together these people will provide the project with both in-depth and general accounts of interfaith youth work.

**How will they be selected?** The young people will be selected through the interfaith projects they are involved in. This means that I will begin by contacting gate-keepers of the projects I find interesting for the research – perhaps an interfaith coordinator, youth leaders or another person who is the contact person – and tell her or him about my research. If they approve, I will ask them to help me to get in contact with young people who are active in the projects and might be interested in participating. This means that I will, initially, be using snow-balling to recruit research participants, but I also hope to be able to recruit and select participants myself by attending events and activities organised by the projects. To rely on gate-keepers as a start is a good (and often necessary) way to get access to the field and to the young people through a contact that they trust. However, to only rely on gate-keepers might increase the risk of biased selection process (e.g. gate-keepers only choosing those young people they might see fit to 'represent' the projects) and an active involvement of me as a researcher in the selection process is an opportunity for me to talk about the research and answer questions about what participating will involve. A third selection process might be the young people themselves who might recommend me to friends they think could be interesting for me to talk to. As for the other participants – such as interfaith coordinators, faith leaders, etc. - they will be selected based on their connection with the interfaith projects and the interfaith scene, and I will ask them personally if they would like to participate in the research. For people who are not connected to the selected interfaith projects, they will be selected based on their knowledge of the interfaith scene in the UK. For example, this could be funders of interfaith youth projects in general.

**Are there any inclusion/exclusion criteria?** As this thesis is interested in young Christians', Muslims' and Jews' experiences of interfaith activism, it will only include interfaith projects aimed at these faith groups – either only two or all three of them. This means that other interfaith projects including, for example, Christians and Buddhists or Muslims and Sikhs, etc., will not be included. Nor will interfaith youth projects involving Christians, Muslims, Jews and other faith groups be included. Although including more diverse project would be interesting, it is outside the focus of the thesis and including projects involving other faith groups might cause conflicts as it would mean that some young people are included and others are not. Another exclusion criterion that will be used is the age of the participants; in this project I am interested in young people's experiences of interfaith activism and although young people is not a straight-forward age category, in this thesis it will mean people between 16 and 22 years old. This does not mean that those above 22 years old are firmly excluded from participating (it depends on the projects and how they are organised), but it means that age will be one of the selection criteria in this thesis. This will, however, only apply to the young people. Other people whom I might interview to get insights into the projects and the interfaith scene in the UK – for example, interfaith coordinator, faith leaders, funding bodies – will be selected based on their profession and involvement in interfaith youth work, not their age. For all interview participants in this study, I will only talk to those who can give their informed consent and not to vulnerable young people.

**If you are using live participants, does your research involve:**

- Unpleasant or emotionally difficult stimuli? YES/NO
- Unpleasant or emotionally difficult situations? YES/NO
- Invasive procedures? YES/NO
- Deprivation or restriction of basic needs (e.g., food, water, sleep)? YES/NO
- Drug administration? YES/NO
- Any procedure which could cause harm to the participant? YES/NO
- Any participants whose physical/mental health could be put at risk? YES/NO
- Actively misleading or deceiving the participants? YES/NO
- Withholding information about the nature or outcome of the study? YES/NO
- Any inducement or payment to take part in the study YES/NO
- Any procedure that might inadvertently cause distress ? YES/NO

**If you answered YES to any of these questions please details the steps you will take to additionally safeguard your participants:**

Although none of the questions asked in the interviews are intended to cause distress, it could be that some questions might remind the young people of difficult memories or experiences (their own or someone they know). It could also be that the young people themselves bring up sensitive and difficult topics in their responses that might cause distress – something that might come as a surprise even for the young person. As this thesis is interested in exploring something as personal as religious belonging and identity in the lives of young people – an age group that is characterised by bodily and psychological transformations, negotiations between different (sometimes contradictory) identity positions, in their journeys from adolescence to becoming young adults – it is important to be prepared for the possibility that reflections around this might inadvertently cause distress. For example, it could involve experiences of racism, Islamophobia, anti- Semitism and securitisation (e.g. being singled out for being a security risk by the police or airport staff because of one's look, ethnicity and/or religion). In order to mitigate this, I will go through the written consent form with the young people before the interview begins to ensure they are aware about their right not to answer questions they are not comfortable with or take a break if they need to; that I will not use a specific part of the interview in the research if they don't want me to; and that they can, at any time, withdraw from participating in the research. I will also end every interview by letting the young person reflect on how she or he experienced the interview and ask if they have any questions or would like to add something. This information will also be included in the consent form the young people will sign before participating in the interviews.

**Where will your investigation take place? Provide details of the setting for your interaction with participants:** The setting will be a public place chosen by the interview participants and will aim to be as neutral as possible. As for the interviews with the young people, the interviews will take place in a place the young people feel comfortable. For the group interviews it might be the place where the project is taking place and for the individual interviews it might also be the place of the project, but it can also be another public place where they feel at ease (e.g. coffee shops, libraries, rooms provided by their faith congregations, etc.). The same choice will be given to the other people (e.g. interfaith coordinators, faith leaders, funders, etc.) interviewed in this research. For all participants, only if it is absolutely necessary (e.g. illness, disability) will the interview(s) be conducted in the participant's home. Important to note that even though the interviews will take place in public spaces, care will be taken to ensure privacy. For noisy and social places like coffee shops and libraries, this would mean finding secluded spots away from the noise that give the participants privacy and mitigate the risk of being overheard or interrupted by people they might know. I will ask the participant to consider public locations in which they would both feel comfortable and would allow them privacy so they are not disturbed.

**How will you collect your data (e.g. experiments, questionnaires, interviews, group discussion)?** The primary source of data collection will be individual interviews and focus group interviews with young people involved in interfaith youth projects. I plan to carry out two individual interviews with each young person (one interview each with other people involved in interfaith work) and one focus group interview per project. This in order to both get access to the young people's personal stories and narratives, as well as the social perspectives and experiences of being involved in interfaith youth work. The interviews will be structured so I will begin by having an individual interview with all participants, then have the focus group interview and end it all with another individual interview. The advantage of such a structure is that I begin by getting the young people's personal accounts and experiences, which makes it possible for me to identify patterns and topics that are important for the individual. Although the focus group interview aims to allow the young people to discuss with each other what it means to being involved in interfaith work, it also makes it possible for me to see the young people together as a group and consider if there are any differences in how I experienced them in the individual interviews. Finishing with another individual interview makes it possible for me to both follow up with questions that emerged after the first individual interview, but also in relation to the focus group interview and how the young people reflect on what came up in that interview. Together these three interviews aim to gain both individual and social experiences of being involved in interfaith youth work, and allow the young people to reflect both individually and in groups around what it means to them. All interviews will be recorded via a dictaphone and I will ask for permission by the participants to do this in the written consent form they will sign prior to the interviews. In addition to this, I also plan to conduct observations in events and activities organised by the interfaith youth group in order to get greater insight into the project, get to know the participants and see how young people do their interfaith activism. This could mean only being present during an activity (e.g. sitting in a corner and observe the activity from a distance), but it could also mean participating in activities or events (e.g. helping



out, being active in tasks and activities). Being active makes it possible for me to engage with and get to know the young people, whereas only observing makes it possible for me to study the young people in action. Whether I will only observe or carry out participant observations – or both – will be dependent on the projects and what is appropriate at the particular moment. It is likely that both types of observations will be used. In order to collect the data from the observations I will make notes in a fieldwork diary and I will ask the participants for verbal consent to do this before the observation begins.

**Are you using any forms, questionnaires, interview schedules or other materials to gather your data? If yes, please provide copies.**

Yes, I will use interview guides for the semi-structured interviews, one for the individual interviews and one for the focus group interview. Please find attached. I will also use a fieldwork diary in which I will make notes during the observations.

**Briefly describe what participating in your study will involve:**

For the young people, participating in my study will involve being interviewed – in groups and individually – about their experiences of interfaith youth work and the impact this might have on their religious, social, political and ethical identities. In the individual interviews I will ask the participants about how they became involved in interfaith work, the reasons behind their interest and why it is important to them; if their activism has influenced their sense of belonging to their own religious communities and why this might be. I am also interested in getting to know if being involved in interfaith work has affected the young people's everyday lives – for example, in the school settings, peer relationships, family relations, activism in other organisations, etc. - and how they reflect around this. The interviews will be open and flexible, and the focus will be on the young people's own stories about their interfaith activism. The focus group interviews will focus on what it means to be involved in interfaith youth work for them as a group. It will focus on why they consider interfaith work to be important, the challenges they identify and the goals they have with their work – and let them discuss this with each other. The aim with both interviews is to get insights into what it means for young people to be involved in interfaith work and the impact this might have on them – both in both in religious and secular contexts, as individuals and in groups. For the other people who are interviewed in this study – for example, interfaith coordinators and funders – participating means being interviewed about their work in interfaith youth work, the interfaith scene in the UK in general and their views in relation to this. In addition to this, I will ask the young people and their gate-keepers for permission to observe one or a few interfaith activities they arrange and make fieldnotes. In these activities I am interested in how young people carry out their interfaith work in practice, what kind of activities they are active in and what this involve.

## **Informed consent**

**How will you explain to participants what will be involved in taking part in your study?**

**Information sheet distributed to each participant** YES/NO

**Information sheet displayed on screen for all participants** YES/NO

**Information included in header of questionnaire** YES/NO

Other (please provide details):

Do your participants include minors (under the age of 16 years) YES/NO

**Please indicate which age groups will be involved:**

0-4 years (Requires consent from parent or guardian.)

5-12 years (Requires formal consent from parent/guardian, informal consent from child.)

13-16 years (Requires dual but independent formal consent needed from parent/guardian and from the young person)

**If you are diverging from this practice of consent for minors please provide your rationale and the steps you will take to gain consent.**

**Do your participants include vulnerable individuals or those with limited legal capacity? YES/NO**

**If YES, please provide details of who else will give informed consent:**

**Will this study be conducted in a school or other institution where the researcher has a duty of care?**

YES/NO

If YES, please provide details of opt in/opt out consent from parents or guardians:

**Are you using the Birkbeck template information and informed consent forms?**

YES/NO

If NO, please provide details of how you will gain informed consent.

**Please provide the information sheet and consent forms you plan to use.**

Please find attached files.

## **Confidentiality**

**Are you seeking to ensure the confidentiality/anonymity of your participants?**

Yes, I will.

If NO, provide details of what steps will be taken to ensure that participants understand and agree that their participation will not be kept confidential and the reasons why?

If YES, provide details of how will you ensure the confidentiality/anonymity of your participants:

### **During data collection and analysis?**

All participants will be anonymised from the start of the data collection, the transcribing period and the analysis. Their real names will not be mentioned in any writing. Instead, the participants will be named by pseudonyms chosen by either themselves or by myself. Only I as a researcher will have knowledge of the participants real names and I will carry out both the audio recording and the transcribing myself. As for anonymisation of the names of the interfaith projects and the locations of the projects I would like to leave this open for discussion with my supervisors when the field sites are chosen. There are

several reasons why anonymisation of the interfaith projects might be a challenge for this research project. The first is that the projects themselves might want to participate in research to spread awareness about their work and anonymisation could prevent this from happening. They might also already be a well-known organisation, such as the interfaith organisation Three Faiths Forum, that would like to use the findings in this research to develop their own work and mention it in their reports. In other words, it might be in the interest of the interfaith youth projects to not be anonymised and it could even be a requirement from them that in order to participate in the research they should not be anonymised. As for the specific locations of the projects, mentioning them would make it possible to carrying out an ethnographic analysis of place that could be of value for the bigger Ethical Monotheism project (in which this PhD thesis is a part). It could also raise contextual questions that might be important in order to understand the development and success of the interfaith youth project in that particular place. Instead of complete anonymisation of the interfaith projects and their locations, I would like to ask for ethical permission to not anonymise the projects and locations as long as my supervisors are satisfied that the individuals will not be identifiable and the projects would like me to use their names. If they are not, I will use pseudonyms for the projects (e.g. Project A and B) and only describe the locations in general terms (e.g. North London). As for the fieldwork diary from the observations, I will only use code names for all participants, projects and location when making fieldnotes. This in order to prevent important and/or sensitive information to get in the wrong hands in case I lose the fieldwork diary.

**In the dissemination of your research (e.g. in essay, theses, talks, websites or research publications):** In all dissemination of my research (including the PhD thesis), I will use the same procedure as during the data collection and analysis as mentioned above.

## **Storage and Dissemination of Data**

### **How will your data be stored, transferred, transcribed?**

The data will be stored in a password protected external hard-drive that only I will have access to and as soon as this is done the audio files on the dictaphone will be deleted. The interviews will be entirely transcribed by me and these will stored in both my private computer and printed copies will be kept in a secure file. All transcriptions will be anonymised from the start and I will keep a private record over whom each pseudonym belongs to and the real name of this informant. This record will only be accessible to me and be kept strictly separate from the audio files and transcriptions. As mentioned above, the data from the observations will be kept in a fieldwork diary and in order to mitigate the risk of losing it, I will re-write the fieldnotes in a word file on my computer when I get home and store it in the password protected hard-drive. In order to protect both the participants and the projects, I will be using code names (e.g. 'Project A' for a project and 'L' for a participant) and will not mention the real names of the participants and

projects or the locations in my notes. My list of what each code name means will, as with the participants' real names, be stored in the same password protected external hard-drive as the rest of the data material – but in a different secure file than the re-written fieldnotes.

**How will your data be saved, shared and disseminated after the project is completed?** The audio files, transcriptions and fieldnotes will be kept in my external hard- drive for future use (if not explicitly required by the participant that their data should be destroyed). This hard-drive is protected by a password and not accessible to anyone else except me. I will ask the participants for permission to use their data in writing projects, such as journal articles, book chapters and books. This information will be included in the consent form they sign before participating in the research.

## **Risk**

### **Risk to the Research Participant/Materials**

Does your research involve: (If YES, please provided details)

### **Live participants? YES/NO**

Yes. This project will involve young people between 16 to 22 years old who will be interviewed about their experiences of being active in interfaith youth projects. It will also include interviews with people who are otherwise involved in interfaith youth work (such as interfaith coordinators, faith leaders, funders, etc.) to get a better insight into the selected projects and the interfaith youth scene in the UK.

### **Sensitive topics? YES/NO**

Although this research project does not intentionally aim to involve sensitive topics and questions, since it involves questions in relation to religion, belonging, identity and young people's everyday lives in London, it might bring up sensitive topics that can be difficult for the young person to talk about and that need to be handled with care. For example, it might be experiences of Islamophobia or anti-Semitism, racism, family history, bullying, etc. As this project involves more than one faith group, there might be differences in what topics are experienced as sensitive. As I mentioned above in relation to the risk of inadvertently causing distress, I will remind the participants that if the interview brings up sensitive topics they do not want to talk about, they have the right to refrain from answering the question or if they – during or after the interview – feel that they do not want me to include these topics in the research, I will not use it. This information will also be included in the written consent form they will sign before the interviews.

**Sensitive materials (e.g. diaries, letters, confidential papers)?**

YES/NO

**Human remains?**

YES/NO

**Wider community? YES/NO**

Although the focus will be on the interfaith youth projects, I am interested in interviewing people outside the projects (e.g. funders of interfaith youth projects, local authorities, faith leaders, etc.) in order to get a broader view of the interfaith scene in the UK. However, as long as I have not come in contact with the people through the chosen projects, I will not reveal which interfaith projects are included in the research and in any case I will not reveal any information about the participants to any outsider. Furthermore, the interviews with these people will not be about the chosen interfaith projects but on the interfaith scene in general.

**If your research involves minors or vulnerable individuals have you had the necessary criminal background check required?**

YES/NO

Yes, I have got a DBS check (previously Criminal Background Check) that has come through and I will include the DBS certificate with the ethical approval of the project when approaching participants.

**Risk to the Researcher**

(If YES, please provided details)

**Is the research environment potentially dangerous?**

YES/NO

**Will the investigation involve illegal activity or the discussion of illegal activity?**

YES/NO

**If you are involving live participants, will you be alone with them? YES/NO**

Yes, I will be alone with the participants when conducting both the individual interviews and the group interviews. In order to preserve my own safety, I will notify both my supervisors and friends about my whereabouts and be careful to always contact them after the interview to make sure everything is fine.

**Risk to the College**

(If YES, please provide details)

**Might the research raise media/social/legal concern in the public domain? YES/NO**

It is unlikely that it will raise any concern in the public domain. However, as the focus of the thesis is on young people's engagement with religion, it is one of the first projects of its kind, and as interfaith projects have attracted policy interest in the recent years, the results of the research might attract media and policy attention and interest. Although this generally is a good thing and it is impossible to fully control how the result might be used and interpreted by readers, it is still important to include this in the ethical considerations of the project and also make the participants aware of such possibility.

**Could this potentially compromise the reputation of the college?**

YES/NO

**Do you envisage needing help or advice in managing legal or media attention?**

YES/NO

**If you feel the proposed investigation raises other ethical issues please outline them here.**

**FOR COMPLETION BY THE RESEARCHER:**

**I have answered the above questions as fully and honestly as possible.**

**YES/NO**

**I agree to inform my supervisor/departmental ethics officer if there is any change to the research project detailed here and if my supervisor deems necessary will seek additional ethical approval.**

**YES/NO**

**I agree to carry out the study in an ethically informed way and to ensure that participants, researcher(s) and the college are safeguarded.**

**YES/ NO**

**I agree to carry out the study in line with current Freedom of Information and Data Protection practices, including storing and transferring data securely.**

**YES/NO**

**I confirm that the research conforms to expectations of ethical research in my discipline.**

**YES/NO**

**SIGNATURE of researcher:**

**Date: 2016-10-10**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'John Doe', written in a cursive style.



## **Ethics form\_ltorning**

### **GENERAL COMMENTS**

GRADEMARK REPORT: 100/100

Instructor

BRENDAN MCGEEVER COMMENTS:

This is a thorough and very well thought out ethics application to carry out research on Christian, Muslim and Jewish experiences of interfaith projects in London.

Just one comment to think about as you conduct the research: you state that you want to ensure anonymity for the participants ("only I will have knowledge of the participants' real names" - p11). Bear in mind that they may well reveal their participation to others in the Interfaith project or to others outside of the group. In other words, there are limitations to what you can do to secure absolute anonymity. I am happy to sign this off.

REVIEWER 2

A methodological issue: In selecting young people to be interviewed for this study - there seems to be no commitment to ensure that young people from all 3 faith groups are involved in the study. Surely this is important and needs some consideration.

Otherwise happy to sign this off

Word count bibliography + appendices: 12287