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Blessed are the uncertain, for they will experience excess

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Abstract:

In this paper I look at the possibility that uncertainty may not merely be a stage in the research process, but an outcome in itself. Exploring how university and scholarship collided with my own personal experiences and identity I discuss how a combination of poststructural theory and my encounters with peace, conflict and religion enabled me to value uncertainty, and I make the case that uncertainty can open up the future to the gift of chance. By intertwining discussions of both lived experience and academic work, the organisation of the paper reflects how the two became inextricably linked, continuously folding into each other, so that my sense of self influenced my research, and conversely, my research influenced my sense of self. The outcome is a discussion of how I incorporated uncertainty into my research and personal life, which I explore using the example of religion, and how I lost *and* gained my faith, rejecting my previous Christianity while reconstructing a kind of faith found in uncertainty, a sense of place and ethical space to come.

Key words:

Derrida, the event, irreducible, uncertainty, the gift of chance, openings, post-structural theology.

Prologue

When I saw the call for this Special Edition: "*Learning in the ruins"* for a paper which asks what happens to our knowing when we enter academic spaces, I was at first excited, and then daunted at the prospect of submitting something. The "engagement with the emotional aspects of learning in the ruins" described in the brief, would require a very personal story. I knew it would be difficult and exposing to put together something so personal, and instinctively felt this should be a narrative piece, something I was also nervous of. And yet I persevered, partly because this paper is the paper I wish had existed when I started this journey (not in exact content, but in essence) and partly because I feel there should be more room for reflection like this in the academy. What follows is an auto-ethnographic, narrative account of how learning impacts identity. It speaks to issues of knowing and unknowing, uncertainty and flux, and predominantly religion, however it does not claim an authority on these themes (I have no expertise in theology), it is simply my story. My modest aim is to offer one example (of many) of how engaging with theory and scholarship impacted my personal life and identity, and the emotions this evoked. True to a narrative approach, I attempt to 'show, not tell'. However, while the personal story is prevalent in what follows, because the subject of the story is the complex and subtle emotional impact of scholarship, one cannot escape addressing the theoretical underpinnings of the journey directly. Through

trying to engage with "the emotional aspects of learning in the ruins and the theoretical frames invoked" (brief) this paper attempts to walk a fine line between personal narrative and theory.

Introduction

When I asked a friend how she thought I had changed over the course of my PhD she replied that I don't know as much now, I used to know more before – she laughed and quickly added that this was surely just an impression, that a research trip and PhD later I probably knew more now.

I'm not sure I do.

The crisis of unknowing is nothing new to the fledgling academic. Uncertainty is something tolerated, and sometimes even valued, as part of the generative process. However, while we may stay with uncertainty for a while, traditionally we are encouraged to move on at some point, to have answers (complete with argument and counter-argument, exposition, discussion and 'evidence'). I currently find myself in the field of education, where an evidence-based policy agenda is prevalent in much research and informs a methodological will of relevancy and political utility. In this context the uncertainty experienced can be seen as merely a stage in the research process, a means rather than an end. This paper looks at the possibility that uncertainty may not be merely a stage in a process, but an outcome in itself.

Getting to the point where I was able to embrace the, at first seemingly illogical, proclamation that the uncertain are blessed was not easy. I do not want to give a false impression, at times uncertainty was debilitating. Even now, while I have learnt to hold uncertainty for the most part, on occasion I find myself wanting to know, to decide, to have some certainty. However, while I was, in the words of this special edition's title 'Losing it' – in my case losing certainty - I did have some help on the way. I was helped in understanding my experiences and given a language for describing, and theory for framing, them by a number of scholars whose influence can be seen in my work and in what follows here. For this I have to thank the philosophy of the poststructuralists, and in particular Anker, Caputo, Derrida, Rollins and Lather.

Knowing less – a potted history

My journey with uncertainty is not neat, it works backwards and forwards, and intertwines my personal experiences with my academic experiences. As multiple spaces, both physical and intellectual, converge and fold into each other, my research is influenced by my sense of self, and conversely, my identity/self is tainted by my research. My inability to compartmentalise my research sees theory and philosophy permeate my own life and choices, producing both losses and gains.

Uncertainty has been a flirtation throughout my life but I always kept it at arm's length – asking questions, but too fearful to allow myself to ask too much. I moved beyond flirtation to a more sustained relationship with uncertainty when I moved to Mindanao, the Philippines, in 2001, where I lived and taught in a Christian school for two years. Mindanao became the

context of my PhD research, but this experience predated and became the catalyst for my post-graduate studies. By encountering another culture in a depth impossible to experience as a tourist, I gained new experiential knowledge that enabled me to see how much I am product of my own cultural heritage. Presented with the complexities of cross-cultural living, in all its excitement and frustrations, my ethnocentricity and linked concepts of who I am and the basis of beliefs I held as true, began to decrease with each new encounter and perspective I experienced.

This experience started to erode the firm footing of any certainty in my life. Since then I have met many other people who have had a similar reaction to cross-cultural living. For some, like me, this sparked a continuing pursuit of questioning, unravelling and trying to stitch back together, but for many it seemed that while they had a similar initial experience, it was not significant or prolonged enough to leave any lasting impression. I think this may have been the case for me had I not nurtured these beginnings by starting post-graduate study.

Knowing Less – the longer version

What follows is an exploration into uncertainty, a kind of mapping of my own meandering relationship with uncertainty.

I will punctuate this version with extracts from a blog that I wrote between May 2006 and March 2007, a decisive period in my relationship with uncertainty. They are edited and the date they were written does not always relate to the period they reflect upon. (At first I was reluctant to include these entries. My blog was written as a type of vent at a time in my life when I was very angry, it was not meant for academic audiences. Having moved on from that place it is not a time I am proud of. However anger was, in my experience, a part of my journey into uncertainty, and therefore relevant to the theme of this special edition).

Certainty unravelling in Mindanao

I cannot be sure when the processes of unravelling began, but for the purpose of starting this story somewhere, living in Mindanao seems as good a starting point as any, although I could construct an alternative narrative which starts much earlier. I first went to Mindanao because I was a committed Christian. The beginnings of an erosion of my certainty found in cross cultural-living seemed to be inflated further by my situation, where as a teacher in a Christian school I was surrounded by co-workers and missionaries who seemed to possess a certainty in everything they believed in and did. While they saw this certainty as a sign of faith my perception was that it actually diminished their experience of God. A Mennonite friend of mine became the subject of much murmuring and speculation when she asked a Friar friend of hers to conduct a house blessing at her new address. The unfamiliar practices (for Evangelical Protestant missionaries) of sprinkling holy water and reciting liturgical prayers led to some of those present questioning the authenticity of my friend's Christianity. I felt shocked at the implied categorisation of recognised and standard Catholic practices as somehow unchristian, and, as well as being generally frustrated at what seemed to me quite narrow attitudes, I was saddened that their certainty in their own interpretation and experiences of Religion had resulted in an inability to embrace the multiple and diverse aspects of the manifestation of God, even from within the same religion as theirs

(Christianity). Many conflated their own culture with that which was Biblical, and used this to further legitimise and sure-up their certainty in their actions and beliefs.

When I first arrived in Mindanao I was surprised to discover that drinking was frowned upon by Protestant Christians (informed by a North American Evangelical Protestantism), and, apparently, I shocked a few people when they learnt that I enjoyed beer. I rather begrudgingly incorporated this knowledge into my life and made sure that I was discrete about where I drank in order not to offend others (which was a shame because Filipino San Miguel is a rather nice beer). I was amused, then, to find myself shocked when I found Western Christian missionaries drinking Nescafe! I laughed as I realised the sense of shock and outrage I had over them drinking Nescafe was the same as their response to me drinking beer. It all fell together for me, it was simply a difference in culture: In the U.S. Conservative Christians frown on drinking alcohol and promote a coffee culture alternative, whereas in the UK even conservative Christians tend to drink alcohol, but in my Christian circle coffee had to be Fair Trade. However, while my interpretation of coffee etiquette became cultural, their interpretation of drinking alcohol remained 'Biblical'.

> **Blog Extract 31st Jan 2007**
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> The emphasis on personal salvation, in my opinion, is a Western addition, in keeping with our modern individualistic society. Within Asian culture the collective action is much more important than the individual. When I was working in the Philippines it always used to amuse me when the Southern Baptist missionaries got frustrated at this cultural difference. They would insist that each individual person experience an individual conversion, when the reality was that if the village elders converted, then the village would convert enmass. The emphasis on the collective can be seen in the bible verse 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord' (Joshua 24:15), where the head of a family takes the decision for the whole collective. Also, throughout the bible, the focus of salvation is us, the people, the nation, and the marginalized...

I witnessed an American Missionary instruct a Filipino that his cultural approach to resolving a dispute (using a third party mediator) was unbiblical, and instead he should have it out face-to-face. To legitimise his claim the missionary quoted "do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4 v 26). I was unsure about how this quote gave Biblical legitimacy to the claim for the superiority of "having it out face-to-face" or the claim that the Filipino tradition was inferior. While it did promote conflict resolution this verse didn't dictate the way the conflict should be resolved. I consider this an example of how the missionary was actually using 'biblical' to legitimise cultural imposition. 'Biblical' had become synonymous with the 'right' way, and face-to-face was his way, therefore the right way, therefore the biblical way (regardless of how literally biblical it was). I do not think the missionary had any awareness of this, or that it was his conscious intention to cause harm, but to me this revealed an attitude of cultural imposition tied up in ideas of colonialism/neo-colonialism. The violence of cultural arrogance and cultural imposition maintained through claims of religious legitimacy were, unfortunately, not rare. As an aside, there is a verse he could have used, that teaches to keep a private sin between you and your brother, however I have always

interpreted this as not slandering your brother rather than an instruction on conflict resolution. But this is by-the-by, because he did not use this verse.

In Mindanao these encounters took place in the context of a long-running, protracted, low-level armed conflict couched in religious language. My time living there coincided with 9/11, the launch of the Afghan assault by US and UK forces, and the lead up to the 2003 Iraq invasion, arguably escalating fighting between Islamic autonomous armed groups and the predominately Christian government of the Philippines in Mindanao. The sense of insecurity and fear nurtured by the so called *War on Terror* that ensued arguably secured Gloria Macapagal-Arroya, the then president of the Philippines, US$92.2 million in military aid and loans (Cotton 2003), helping to launch a full scale military offensive to pursue 'criminal elements' in Muslim controlled territories, creating a security situation in central Mindanao on the scale of an humanitarian emergency.

The religious conflict seemed to me to magnify the harm such closed and certain perceptions of a 'right' religion can have, and I was confused and disturbed to encounter Christians that not only were unable to see the outcomes of their 'strong' faith, but actively endorsed and promoted those outcomes. For example the aforementioned Missionary used his position as preacher to lend apparent biblical legitimacy to the invasion of Iraq during a Sunday morning sermon. While he was alone in using his position of influence so directly, others were happy to share this opinion and many openly professed quite Islamaphobic views.

> **Blog Extract 23rd Feb 2007**
> Joke:
> A peace educator died, and he went to heaven. At heaven's gates the peace educator met God, and God said to him:
> "Now that you have met me you can ask me any one question you like, and I have to answer you honestly"
> Without hesitation the peace educator asked "Will there ever be peace on earth?"
> God smiled and replied, "I have some good news and some bad news. Yes, there will be peace on earth, but never in my lifetime."
> (Source unknown)

I encountered many Western missionaries that were certain they were doing 'God's will', while the same cross-cultural experience in me sparked the doubt that any understanding of 'God' I had was nothing more than cultural. I left Mindanao uncertain about the thing in my life I was most certain about.

Continuing to unravel...

When I returned to the UK, motivated by my experiences in Mindanao, I started a Masters degree in Education and Development. I continued to go to the Evangelical Church I attended before moving to Mindanao and joined a Christian house-share associated to that Church. Yet, wary of a violence of certainty within Christianity after my experiences in Mindanao, I remained somewhat detached. While the preacher here did not advocate the

War on Terror or explicit distrust of Catholics or Muslims, I started to question how he challenged these views.

I also retained a sense of having a cultural understanding of God from my time in Mindanao. Even though my Christian friends in the UK had a shorter list of things they were certain about, there was still a sense of certainty amongst them that I felt I could not share. I wondered if my own cultural understanding and experience of God could be enriched and extended by the perspectives and experiences of other cultural understandings of God. This motivated me one summer, after I had been back in the UK for about a year, to take a little tourist like trail of other denominations in my city. Together with a friend (now my partner) each Sunday we went to a different church, including a different evangelical church, the Roman Catholic cathedral, an Anglo-Catholic Church, a High Anglican (Episcopalian) church, and an Eastern Orthodox church. It made us both realise that we never wanted to go back to our usual Evangelical church where we had been committed members. We were shocked at the strength of our reaction – a holiday became emigration.

In my Christian house-share eating Sunday lunch together during my summer tour, talking with my friends about the church service I had been to that morning, explaining the liturgical practices to them and recapping the sermon, they all took a polite interest and we moved on to other topics. And then, at the same meal, one of my housemates exclaimed "we're all worried about you, you don't even go to church anymore". I was genuinely speechless because I could not understand this statement, had I not just shared with them the very church service I had been to that morning? It took me several seconds to realise that there was only one true church in their minds, and not in the Catholic sense, but literally one physical building – theirs. I decided I needed to find another church, and home.

At this point I started to read Christian books that introduced me to ideas influenced by post-modern theory, such as *Losing My Religion? Moving on from Evangelical Faith* (Lynch 2003), and *The Post Evangelical* (Tomlinson 2003). Although I would later come to critique these books for not going far enough they provided me with temporary comfort for this season.

> **Blog Extract 22nd Jan 2007**
> There are several books now on people rejecting The Church… I guess my reasons and gripes and struggles are nothing new, and appear well documented. However, all of these books are about leaving a particular type of faith or church. Lynch (2003) and Tomlinson (2003) focus on leaving the Evangelical Church, while Jamieson (2002) focuses on Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic Church leavers. None goes as far as to reject The Church as a whole, only choosing to critique parts of it… However, what if The Church in its entirety, including these para-church activities are to be rejected?… For me, mirroring the words of Sach's (1992) in relation to development discourses, it is not the failure of The Church that is to be feared, but its success. For me all of the above mentioned books fail in their uncritical affirmation of alternative *ways of doing* church when they should be calling for alternatives *to* church…

Understanding uncertainty as a life tinged by the irreducible

Simultaneously I was enjoying my postgraduate studies, and I practiced the critical thinking it nurtured on the Evangelical Church community. My reading and general scholarship was starting to give me a language and theory to help me describe and understand my experiences, while simultaneously encouraging me and equipping me to question further.

> **Blog Extract Dec 11ᵗʰ 2006**
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> As far as being a Christian goes I have quite a few issues. I have an immense distrust of meta narratives, believe that there is no 'versionless' reality, and reject universal truth claims. As odd as this might be though, I do however identify with Christianity. I have learnt that life is a paradox, and have no problem holding things in tension. Actually, for me, far from these above mentioned, and some might think insurmountable, barriers to faith it is actually not these but the church itself that provides the biggest challenge to my faith. It seems almost a daily wrestle to keep grasp of some kind of version of faith in the face of the actions of the church and those who affiliate with it.
>
> It just seems to me that the church isn't very good for people. It's not just the obvious stuff: male cronies protecting their power by blocking the appointment of female bishops, the crusades, discrimination (both past and unfortunately sometimes still present) against women, other races, other religions and homosexuals, their role in the slave trade etc. It's what's behind this, it's the power of the church. I have recently been subject to a whole barrage of phrases revealing assumptions of arrogance and power in the church. The two which stand out most in my memory are 'To speak the truth in love' and 'This is what I believe and I do not apologise for it'. What a load of crap. These two phrases are essentially a justification to sit in judgment over someone or something, removed from any requirement to justify your stance or call to account. Behind these two phrases is the assumption that what has been uttered is right, and 'belief' or 'love' is the only demonstration required to the 'truthfulness' of the statement.
>
> …My friends need saving from the church – both my churched and unchurched friends. I think it's about time the church stopped evangelizing, by which I mean stopping this arrogant insistence that it is right and everyone else needs to come around to its point of view (usually one of discrimination and hurt). I don't think the church is good for individuals, communities or the world. Far from the church saving the world, the world needs to save the church! My anti-evangelism project involves dismantling the discourses of arrogance and unlovingness in the church, so that once the 'obvious' is shown not to be, we are freed from our relationship to our past and traditions, enabling change.

> An example: A couple of years ago I found myself at odds when I first experienced this feeling of anti-evangelism. I was living in a large 'Christian community' at the time, and due to a rather odd sequence of events a Hindu friend of mine ended up staying in this community for a few weeks… However, at the time, I was nervous of her experience in the house. I kept warning her that they were trying to 'convert' her, and to be careful. In the end, to my relief, she wasn't converted to Christianity. I get the feeling that some people within the community might have viewed her stay with us as a 'failure' because it did not end in a conversion, but conversion is a very narrow criterion to judge success. Why not dismantle the (western/recent?) tradition of 'personal salvation' as the sole purposeful outcome of Christianity, and change it to something else. The Christian community provided a place for my friend to stay when she was at need, and she felt welcome and included. It also helped my friend to reignite her own (Hindu) spirituality and ponder on her own faith journey, and my friend also contributed to the house, enriching the lives of the people living there in a multitude of ways. Could this be alternative criteria for success?

In this time I also moved on from my Masters degree and secured funding to undertake doctoral research. Eventually I would research peace education in Mindanao, inspired by my experiences there. I employed the work of Derrida in my PhD thesis, incorporating his work on the event with Bloch's idea of the Not Yet (1986) to evoke the idea of peace as continuously becoming, irreducible, and full of potential 'to-come'.

It was this encounter with Derrida that would provide the grit to push on with my engagement with uncertainty, and eventually come to a way I could live with it.

I did not approach Derrida directly at first; I was introduced to him by Caputo in his book *The Weakness of God* (2006), which my partner recommended to me. The excitement and adventure this scholarship sparked in me eventually enabled me to cut the final ties I had with certainty, and taught me how to live with the implications of uncertainty.

The Weakness of God (Caputo 2006) uses the writings of Derrida to explore the idea that God is an event, whose presence and meaning is eternally deferred. This was the catalyst for exploring Derrida's work further, which provided me with a theory to engage with peace as an event. My subsequent exploration of Derrida's ideas revelled in irreducibility, *différance*, deconstruction, translation and openings, which not only guided my research, but I started to re-orientate my own life around the (uncertain) potential "to come".

It is worth just pausing at this point to briefly discuss the Derridean event and my work on peace as an event, as this becomes the main theoretical frame that simultaneously invokes and affirms my uncertainty. This will help to inform my discussion on the implications of uncertainty later.

I was excited by the event as that which cannot be captured in language, the potential which language fails to contain. An event will have a name, that which signifies it, however that name will never be able to signify it completely because the event is greater than language, history, culture or geography. In other words in it irreducible - it cannot be reduced to a signifier, name, time, place or culture. The paradigmatic example of the event is justice. The law tries to set out justice and provides a framework and structure to implement justice. However, for Derrida the law attempts this but will always fall short, as any attempt to institutionalise justice immediately betrays it. For example the destruction of private property is unjust (illegal) until it is done in the name of justice (a revolution). Instead we are left to conclude that *"This idea of justice seems irreducible in the affirmative character"* (Derrida 1992: 25). The event therefore always exceeds its name and any attempt to codify, thematise, or objectivise the event immediately betrays it by trying to contain it/reduce it.

However, while the irreducibility prevents a complete understanding it enables the translation of the event through the *différance* between the signifier and event. *Différence* is the name Derrida gives to the spacing between a name and event, which characteristically is different and eternally defers. I will use the example of the event peace developed in my research to illustrate this: The name peace is inadequate for capturing the meaning of the event peace, which always exceeds it. The inadequacy of only partial understandings of the event peace, due to its irreducibility, spark new attempts to better capture more of the event peace's meaning, setting off chains of new understanding which continually surpass each other. In this way peace is endlessly translatable, where each new translation moves understanding forward, yet continues to fall short. For example, when fighting in a war 'peace' can be seen as the end of the fighting to come in the future, however after the fighting/war has ceased 'peace' may be reconstructed to mean the end of hate crime or representation in government. The *différance* between the event peace and its signifier, in resisting closure, retains an opening and opportunity for meaning to move forward. By dwelling in the *différance* a deconstructive space emerges where new opportunities for reconstruction emerge as deconstruction and reconstruction play in the tentative and open differential space between the signifier and the event they attempt to signify. In this sense the event peace is continuously becoming, and defers an ethical space 'to come'. As Derrida explains regarding democracy to come:

> *"its 'idea' as event of a pledged injunction that orders one to summon the very thing that will never present itself in the form of full presence, is the opening of this gap between and infinite promise... and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise. To this extent, the effectivity or actuality of the democratic promise... will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event and of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated"* (Derrida 2006: 81)

For me, *différance,* openings, spacing, "to come", and becoming, are all steeped with uncertainty. Any serious engagement with the event reorients you to a world in translation, one which is continually becoming, moving forward, in flux, as it attempts to surpass itself. It is a place where there is no firm ground of certainty beneath your feet but where meaning is only ever partial and always prone to unravel, in need of being stitched back together "in a

new way" (Derrida). The partiality and flux of meaning makes it prone to unravelling, and consequently tinged with uncertainty.

Up until encountering Caputo, and through him Derrida, while I acknowledged my uncertainty and somewhat dwelled in it, it left me angry or frustrated. When I reviewed my old Blog posts in the process of writing this paper it struck me how angry I actually was during this time, which seems so foreign to me now. But here, in Derrida's writing on the event, I found a theoretical frame that moved from merely acknowledging uncertainty to affirming it and invoking it. And I reveled in it, where once I sat and discussed the implications and interpretations of the Bible with friends, now I find myself discussing the ideas of Derrida.

Through creating a theoretical framework that imagines peace as an event, peace as utopia (see Horner 2013) I was finally able to find a way forward in tackling some of the questions and experiences that haunted me from my time living in Mindanao. In the event peace, which cannot be captured in language, the potential which language fails to contain, I located an "absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event" (Derrida 2006: 81).

Instead of seeing the erosion of my firm footing that started when I was living in Mindanao prior to my research as solely a loss, the reading and scholarship I retreated to helped me to see that it was also a gain. My exploration of the irreducible, *différance* and deconstruction helped me to understand that my beliefs and values which seemed so challenged through my experiences living in Mindanao were never that firm in the first place, that they were always only ever partial and prone to unravelling. However, rather than seeing this lack of closure and certainty negatively I could start to view it positively as an opening. Rather than losing beliefs I had once held true or dear I was gaining exciting and unlimited possibilities for learning and translating those ideas to exceed themselves with each new encounter and perspective I experienced.

Living with uncertainty
To begin with I found freedom in my newly acquired uncertainty. It felt OK that I didn't know the answers. Having always been aware that I was expected at some point to move beyond my uncertainty to write a thesis, the recognition that this was an impossibility lifted this pressure. However this was short lived, as the realisation that this was precisely what I needed to do (the impossible) brought its own new set of challenges.

It soon dawned on me that a life and learning, as this special edition calls it, "in the ruins" was not going to be effortless – embracing uncertainty was not going to be an easy option. It was not just that I was supposed to 'know' in my identity as an academic, but also, my life beyond the academy. What responsibility did I have to my family, my friends, my community (including my research community: my participants, colleagues, funder) and myself? How could I draw political conclusions from my experiences? On what basis could I make ethical decisions? How could I relate to religious friends?

I have some experiences that may contribute to incomplete answers, so let me try to give some examples of how I have related to religious friends. (Incomplete answers around ethics and politics may become two further papers in their own right at some point, and for the sake of space I will not address them here, other than to hint at an approach to ethics which embraces the indecision inherent in the ethical dilemma. Such a dilemma is undecidable and must reject all decision making technologies that rely on the certainty of the law or religious or moral codes, *"that ethics, politics, and responsibility, if there are any, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia"* (Derrida 1992b: 41). This compliments an approach to politics which "calls us toward thinking here and now, a here and now, however, always open to a non-totalised elsewhere and a future to come" (Anker 2009: 48)).

It wasn't always possible to maintain former friendships, as many friendships formed in a Christian context became strained after I voiced uncertainty about my faith. I had to go through a phase of mourning the loss of these connections. We did persist in our friendships for a while, however, my doubts wielded too hard a blow for some of these ties to last. There is a persistent myth in the Church in general that church-leavers are somehow "backsliders", fringe people, or those who never seriously converted in the first place. Despite evidence to the contrary (Jamieson 2002) I think that the myth persists because the alternative raises too many questions. In my case, for those friends that knew me well, it was hard to make a case that I was merely a backslider or non-committed Christian in the first place and this raised difficult questions and reared the prospect that they too could experience the same. For others the notion of salvation became a problem, and their genuine and well-meant desire to help re-kindle my faith became a barrier to us having any kind of equal relationship, as I perceived them to be disregarding my experiences as a mere phase.

For those Christian friends I now have, we have learnt through trial and error how to maintain our much valued friendships. For some we just simply don't 'go' to certain areas, both in terms of conversation or physically, we don't discuss theology and they don't invite me to church 'socials'. For others they like to discuss theological and philosophical ideas with me, but we are careful to respect each other's opinions and experiences, and we converse instead of debate. For the most part a negotiation between the different approaches works out in the end. Occasionally, after a conversation around ethics a friend might joke "you'd make a good Christian", which does annoy me but I let it go. I suspect they let go annoying things that I say.

The implications
On a trip to China several years ago I made the decision not to plan ahead of time but instead took in-the-moment opportunities, opened-up through chance meetings with fellow travellers (from NGO workers with local knowledge to a National Geographic photographer). I quite literally got lost when hitching along the Tibetan plateau and realised I had no idea where I was or where I was going! On this journey I experienced an excess of wonderment, friendship, hospitality and enjoyment that were opened up through chance encounters. This experience can be contrasted to a well organised holiday in Japan. I had a wonderful time in Japan, however these experiences were expected. By mapping my trip out in advance I got exactly what I expected – the conceivable.

While my faith was increasingly becoming uncertain, I started to imagine it, and my life in general (including my research journey which had become so intertwined), as an adventure which continually stirred me to push beyond my present horizons, an open-ended adventure with no end, where the journey itself is the goal. While for many of my conservative Christian friends such an uncertain journey was full of peril and would erode my faith, I started to see it as a something similar to a pilgrimage, as it had an appropriately profound spiritual impact on me.

In my faith, or more accurately, my religion (that which I had faith in, in this case Christianity), I became even more uncertain. At times it was (and still can be), extremely hard. However, as I started to practice holding uncertainty each day it got a little easier, and my feelings of anxiety, frustration and anger decreased over time. I started to write a blog, which although I did not know it at the time, would publically document my eventual deconversion from Christianity.

Blog Extract Dec 18th 2006
I have an ebb and flow… There are seasons in life, there is a cycle and rhythm, an ebb and flow. But, somehow, we have replaced a cyclical interpretation with a linear one. The classic example is 'the testimony'. This practice, typical of Evangelical churches… is the perfect example of our linear attitudes. The general formula goes along the lines of the once sinner, now saint, professing their journey to Christ; nasty, then saved, now nice, a simple linear route to 'salvation'. Except in reality it doesn't end there. Because, I believe, life is cyclical as opposed to linear it never does, because we are constantly growing, questioning, modifying our beliefs and behaviour. For me 'the testimony' fails hideously. Those who give their testimony relay a magic formula, only to be dropped by the church when they go through their next cycle and their ebb doesn't fit with the church's linear formula, leaving the individual racked with guilt and a sense of failure. The church is, once again, guilty of failing the people it is called to love, causing alienation, guilt and isolation to their now 'backslid', once 'golden convert'.

Having been around the church for far too long (maybe it's about time I left?) I've seen how this linear perception of a faith journey has damaged my friends and loved ones. … As each season comes around I'm a little bit more experienced at it, a little closer to addressing the parts of it, I'm growing, modifying, changing my behaviour and beliefs. My faith is organic…

As I have mentioned deconversion here, I think a brief description of my conversion may add some understanding to what I mean and the type of theology I adhered to. I should state here that I was raised in a Christian family and the language of being 'born again' is not a language I would use, however the concept of conversion was important in my theology in that I believed that I needed to decide to be a Christian for myself, not because of my family situation. In this sense my 'conversion' did not relate to a fixed point or moment in time, but a

period of gaining my own understanding of Christianity and developing my own faith. The faith I eventually owned as mine was quite different from my family's.

My 'conversion' into the type of Christian I became was strongly influenced by my experiences working in inner-city North America. As a teenager growing up in the Church I developed an interest in social justice, and at the age of 17 this interest took me to work as a summer volunteer in inner-city North America. For three consecutive summers I worked in a camp-counsellor style role at the same church-based summer schemes in one of the poorest and most violent cities in North America. On a daily basis I was confronted with challenges around poverty, drugs, child abuse, racism, failing schools and a general lack of opportunity, and gang culture. Living in the heart of a community which seemed to have been forgotten by most at such a young age was formative in the development of my faith, and consequently a 'Christian' outlook for me became synonymous with challenging injustice and fighting for equality. It was this understanding of Christianity that took me to the Philippines, where I was hoping to use my position as a teacher in a Christian school as a spring board to explore the country and different development/missionary projects broadly, with the intention of eventually retraining to join one of those projects.

At the end of my summer tour of churches in 2004 I settled in a high Anglican church, which became my spiritual home for a couple of years. My life was enriched by some amazing old women. Their commitment to social justice is immense, as they endlessly worked to raise money for Christian Aid and Amnesty International, help staff a soup run rota with other churches on Saturday mornings to the homeless in the city, support a shared day of fasting and breaking fast together in Ramadan (organised through the university multifaith chaplaincy) and host public lectures. Despite their diminishing health and energy these women dedicate themselves to these activities, and when they had down time to relax they would share stories with me about their fight to ordain female vicars, the use of the church building to bless same-sex unions, election monitoring in Guatemala and South Africa, meeting the Dalai Lama. I found inspiration at this church, not only in their commitment to fight inequality and injustice, but also in their sense of adventure for embracing and learning about God from others.

I simultaneously attended an 'emergent church', which mixed art installations, multi-media, liturgy, contemporary music, cultural references and reflective and meditative practices to create services. This group was a refreshing bunch of Christians that used a lot of post-modern language and thinking to inform their faith. I stayed at the edges of the group in terms of the services, but relationally I threw myself in and made some lasting friendships, particularly from those of us who 'fellowshipped' in the pub. However, while I had found two localised Christian communities I was happy to belong to it I was still acutely aware of the wider Church I belonged to, and was still struggling to maintain a faith in the religion I had taken as my own as a young adult.

> ### Blog Extract Jan 11th 2007
> As one can probably guess from my blogs, to say that I was not fully taken with the Church would be a bit of an understatement. This is quite a problem because the Church happens to be the institution representative of

my particular faith, Christianity... I would love to say that I could separate the Church from my faith, but such a simplistic view would not allow for the complex and emotional nature of faith and belief systems.

So, once again, Tuesday night I find myself grappling with my faith, as I ponder the actions a few members of the Church from its conservative branch who, armed with placards, sing praises to Jesus (Shine, Jesus Shine) outside the House of Lords as part of a protest *against* anti-discrimination laws. It appears this part of the church interpret Jesus' teachings as pro-discrimination, and rather than concerning themselves with binding up broken hearts and liberating the oppressed they are much more intent on trampling on people's emotions and oppressing and discriminating against the marginalised...

...My faith is intertwined with my identity, who I am has something to do with my image of God (and vice versa?), and Jesus has been a reference point throughout my life. To stop being a Christian would be like stopping being female, or a sister, or a daughter, or British. My faith is so ingrained into my identity I'm not sure I could actually lose it. Faith is not just a belief system, it is a culture and an identity, and just as I am British, female and middle class, I am Christian.

Not only would losing my religion/identity be traumatic (if not impossible) enough, but I don't subscribe to any of the alternatives. I am not an atheist (A/theistic maybe, as Pete Rollins explores in his book 'How (not) to speak of God' (2006)). I have no faith in science. It's not just an indifference to science; I have a distrust of this hegemonic Western discourse which creates the non-existence of alternatives so powerfully and effectively, as explored in Santo's (2004) work on the Sociologies of Absence. Furthermore, I do not wish to trust my personal development to the randomness of an amoral process such as evolution. As for choosing an alternative religion, I fear that the issues I have with Christianity are not exclusively Christian, but apply to religion in general. A secular spirituality is no more appealing to me, Douglas Coupland's excellent novel, 'Life After God' (1994) has become a kind of social commentary for me on my generation, the first generation to grow up without God. Without ruining the story for any of you who may wish to read it, his amazing insight into secular spirituality leaves me, and the story's main characters, wanting. Maybe my closest alternative would be agnosticism. The true definition, according to dictionary.com, of an agnostic is "a person who denies or doubts the possibility of ultimate knowledge". However, while I would certainly concur that human knowledge is limited to experience, this assertion, to me, does not preclude any possibility of knowing there is a God, just of knowing him/her fully.

Eventually I accepted that, while I loved these communities, and they had restored my hope in Christianity, they had not restored my faith in Christianity, I had lost my religion. The final acceptance of the loss of my religion only really came when I publicised it on my blog.

Blog Extract March 14th 2007

… Now that I have ended my deconversion journey, I'd just like to acknowledge how edifying and transforming it has been. In Christian discourse, Evangelical discourse in particular, the processes collectively leading to deconversion are seen as negative, but I feel on the contrary, that, while the journey has been difficult and painful wounds re-opened on the way, I now find myself in an amazingly liberated space thanks to my new found agnosticism.

It was really difficult to leave the faith communities I had become part of, especially the Anglican Church, as the way they practiced their faith really was something special.

Blog Extract Jan 26th 2007

After my last post, which was written during a heightened state of emotional stress, I was starting to wonder if I had maybe been a bit hard on The Church. This was not out of any sense of guilt for what I had said, not that I did not believe what I had said, or that I want to retract it. It was merely to do with the fact that I love and cherish the members of the Anglican congregation which I attend, who love me in return. This small, but significant, acknowledgment is what makes all of this so painful…

…Right now it's two in the morning. I can't sleep. The jeering of our representatives in the House of Commons I heard on Radio Four's *Today in Parliament* broadcast still ring through my ears. The Church is yet again at the centre of a controversy, they are arguing that if Human Rights legislations infringe on their Christian beliefs they are not bound by them. This isn't the Christianity that I am familiar with, this isn't the Christian love I have experienced within the safe communities I belong. So why do I let it get to me?

…Many members of the Christian community I am part of have gone through something similar, they have been appalled at the actions of The Church, angry at the Church, deeply hurt by the Church. Yet they have remained within its folds. I'm just not sure how. How can I take an institution which has used its power to attack, condemn and oppress me, and find comfort in it? Maybe I can in its corners, where I can find likeminded people who will help me through this, but I'm not convinced. I hope I can.

After my deconversion I tried practicing religion without Religion (Caputo 1997). With a small group of similarly minded friends we formed a group called *threshold*. We met together

monthly for a 'reflective' meeting along religious, cultural and philosophical themes. Initially we weren't quite sure how to describe the group, we all had religious baggage, but our experiences and their outcomes made any over-arching religious definition difficult, and while we all had a Christian heritage the aspiration was that we were open to those of 'all religions and none'. Eventually a member of the group suggested that we were a post-certainty group, and that seemed a good fit, so it stuck. As the name of our group suggested 'post-certainty' was not a negative thing, but we actively sought out thresholds, the in-betweens, those places which seemed impossible to inhabit we attempted to occupy – in between faith and atheism, certainty and nihilism, right and wrong. We spent a long time thrashing out the ground rules. Religious ideas and beliefs from any religion or denomination could be used in a reflective, but belief in any part of it should not be required or assumed. We were also incredibly vigilant against proselytising, and guarded against claiming anything for threshold, resisting it becoming its own kind of church for us.

We held monthly reflective meetings in pubs, which generally explored ideas using creative activities. For example on one meeting we wrote our own creeds using a specially made Magnetic Poetry inspired writing kit, on another we wrote a threshold 'dayenu' song as a counter-cultural reaction to new year's resolutions, on another we discussed twilight spirituality and imagined what an associated festival might look like, I led a reflective based on my reading of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (2006) around mourning Religion. There is not enough room to describe the many reflectives or their outcomes here, but they can be found on the threshold website which we left up after we disbanded: http://thresholdbristol.wordpress.com/.

Eventually all the members of threshold decided to fold the group. We agreed that most of the group had crossed the threshold and moved onto different places (back into mainstream church, or completely outside of any type of religion, or joining congregations outside of the mainstream, e.g. the Quakers). We did, however decide to leave the website open as a symbolic way of leaving threshold open to future potentialities and the possibility that it might reform in some guise some day. Threshold was my last attempt at any joined-up and community based endeavour to live out any semblance of faith I may or may not have.

Gaining through loss?
In what follows it is not my intention to suggest that the scholarship I have discussed is inherently theological, just how I have used it to understand religion.

When I returned to Mindanao as a researcher I had to struggle with my religious identity again. I had anticipated this in advance and, on reflection, believe that this had something to do with my reluctance to research the Mindanao conflict – it took me five years from living and working there until returning to conduct research. During my fieldwork I found that the identity of 'Christian' is one that my participants seemed to ascribe to everybody who was not a Muslim. This was an identity I resisted, but it was quite pointless in a non-secular culture.

The Philippines can be described as a non-secular culture, and consequently the concepts of 'religious' and 'secular' are not as well distinguished in Filipino culture, where in the

UK/West we might consider something secular, in the Philippines it will be considered a variation of the religious. There is a joke that goes: if you say you're an atheist they ask, are you a Protestant atheist or Catholic atheist? I never actually heard this response uttered, partly because I do not identify as an atheist, so never said that I was one. However, it does offer a good metaphor to understand non-secular culture.

When I said I did not pray to a Filipino Christian missionary I was told "of course you do – you are a thinker, you contemplate a lot. What is that if it is not praying?". This is a good example of how something that would be considered secular (e.g. scholarship) in the West is considered a degree of the spiritual in a non-secular context. In the end I accepted my identity as Christian, partly because it was futile to resist, but also because I learnt that it had a different meaning. In the Philippines Christian and Muslim refer to an ethnicity or culture as well as a religion. That it is possible to be a protestant atheist reveals that you are a Christian regardless of your faith! Nancy, in his book *Dis-Enclosure* (2008), talks about Christianity as the "religion that provided the exit from religion". He explores how in the West all our thought is thoroughly Christian, no matter how atheistic our personal beliefs are: "the only thing that can be actual is an atheism that contemplates the reality of its Christian origins" (Nancy 2008: 140). For Christians therefore, a move outside of institutional religion is not necessarily a rejection of previous spiritual experiences, but is as part of the nature of Christianity itself where the act of self-surpassing is one of the longest-standing and deepest Christian traditions. Here, again, we find the idea of a protestant atheist, but in the West.

By embracing uncertainty, although I lost my previous Christianity, I was able to find a new translation borne out of my experiences and learning in the Philippines. When I want to talk about divinity and spirituality 'Christianity' is the language I speak most fluently, regardless of how familiar what I say is to the Christian canon.

To recognise my culture as Christian is to be a Christian agnostic (I do not consider myself an atheist), and this has informed a cultural understanding of faith. By coming to understand faith in a Filipino way, as culture framing our understanding of divinity, I am beginning to come to a cultural understanding of faith which has nothing to do with dogma or doctrine and requires no certainty. This has combined with Wrathall's (2003) exploration of Heidegger's *"poetical dwelling"* to inform a new way of approaching an ethical space to come – that in the absence of any universal understanding the search for the messianic can reside in your own culture. Wrathall uses Heidegger's work on the four fold to ask what is the possibility of a religious life after the death of God? Rejecting the assumption that Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God was atheistic, Heidegger instead interprets the madman as "clearly, according to the first, and more clearly still according to the last sentence of the passage, for him who can hear, the one who seeks God, since he cries out after God" (1997: 112, cited in Wrathall 2003: 71). In the proclamation that 'God is dead', therefore, we do not find a triumphant declaration or cause for a celebration but a dramatic and ominous event which requires a new divinity "*that can withstand the loss of the old God"* (Wrathall 2003: 70).

Through Heidegger the death of God is not about the non-existence of God, but in how God has in a technological age become 'resource' – that which is available to use as needed rather than that which makes demands on us. Using Heidegger's 'referential context' where

meaning is derived from a sphere of references related to how objects and practices are used in the contexts that embed them, it is only when we engage in an activity that any particular thing comes to hold any significance. By exploring the idea of a faith rooted in culture, my experience of the divine is not situated in the heavens but in my own sense of place. Religious life is therefore not about the correctness of my understanding of a universal God, or any certainty I may or may not have, but about embracing my positioning, culture, practices and experiences.

Wrathall concludes from this that the possibility of experiencing the divine (something significant enough to make demands on us) is made possible by allowing the features of the environment around us to condition us. Through our sense of place, by engaging with people and practices, it is possible for these people and practices to condition us, they cease to be self-contained and interchangeable resources and become significant to our sense of self: they matter. While one is conditioned in a particular sense of place, the divine is not limited to that single context, but also the world beyond it as there is no restriction to the web of references that create meaning, so that one's immediate environment is not self-enclosed but refers beyond itself to a much larger world.

My uncertainty has taught me that my beliefs and values are only partial and likely to deconstruct. However, while a cultural understanding is all I have left, luckily it is all that is required for a faith rooted in culture. While I have no reason to believe that Christianity is *the* way to God, it is my culture's traditional way. By incorporating the features of my environment I can partake in Christian practices as cultural practices. This is a way of opening up the chance of experiencing the divine independent of any pressure to be certain. I experienced these ideas as a relief, a way to engage without needing to know.

I have yet to find a satisfactory way of putting these ideas into practice. At the moment this means listening to (usually Anglican) Sunday morning services on the radio and observing the non-church based Christian rituals, for example I have started to observe the fasts as well as the feast, practicing restraint during Lent and Advent. This has brought back a sense of balance to my life and I enjoy the rhythms and sense of season it brings. Apart from being quite small steps towards practicing a cultural Christianity, these simple activities are also solitary activities, and the absence of a sense of community is marked. This absence is a barrier to practice as fellowship is an important part of any religion as it enables others to make demands on us. However it is also probably the reason why I have been able to persist in them.

I have also, very recently, started to question my initial reading of Wrathall's Heidegger. I wonder why when I thought about engaging in my sense of place I interpreted my sense of place as Christian, and considered my community to mean solely my religious community?

While, living in a predominantly Christian culture, my sense of place could be interpreted as Christian, taking a closer look my immediate neighbourhood homes a few churches, but also a Gurdwara and Hindu Temple, and is bordered by a couple of Mosques and a progressive Jewish Temple. My sense of place is a multi-cultural and multi-religious one. If my best

chance of catching a glimpse of deity can be found in emerging myself in my context, then this does not necessarily mean emerging myself in Christianity. Once that would have been my context, but my context has changed.

Also, because I approached Wrathall/Heidegger from a perspective of a faith crisis while trying to understand and frame my experiences of religion as culture, references to place and context were interpreted as religious place/context. However, what if my experiences of deity – that which could make demands on me - came from outside of a religious framework? If the possibility of experiencing the divine is made possible by allowing the features of the environment around us to condition us, then this may or may not have anything to do with Christian culture.

Instead "experiences of the divine" can be found in experiencing the people and places around me: Through chats with fellow dog-walkers in the park, volunteering as a governor at a local school and acts of charity and hospitality. There is no need to embed my faith in my traditional religious context of Christianity, and yet even as I write this, in a beautiful poetical movement that brings the discussion back to Christianity, I find confirmation and solace in this conclusion from a bible verse buried in childhood Sunday School memories, that teaches that divinity is found in those around us:

> *'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*
> *'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*
> (Matt 25 v:34 and 40)

Conclusion

In all of this I have gained much more than I lost in the excess and eventness of the unknown. The potential of Christianity as a cultural practice excites me. In addition, based on my reading of Caputo's *The Weakness of God* (2006) which explores the idea of God as the irreducible event, I have adopted the idea that God is a symbol, whose presence and meaning is eternally deferred. While this says nothing about God as an entity, I have disregarded the question of God's existence as unimportant, finding the call of the ethical space to-come much more pressing a concern, considering the existence of God as a scientific question, instead theology is about the nature of God. While this is not an outright endorsement of Fideism, when it comes to exploring questions of deity "evidence is neither here nor there from the religious point of view" (Turner, quoted in Žižek, Milbank and Davis, 2009: 6).

Blog Extract Feb 23rd 2007

…While I'm not sure if I am atheist, I am sure that any view I have of God is inadequate and have been interested in Rollins' writing on a/theistic Christianity, where Christianity *"holds both atheism and theism together in the cradle of faith"* (2006:25)… Although the question 'Does a Christian God exist' seems rather futile to me, a better question would be 'Is a Christian God worth believing in?'…

Uncertainty isn't something that is easy to live with, and when we realise the indecipherable complexity of our situation it can be debilitating. For me it meant the loss of the familiar, my religion, and previous 'knowledge'. However, it also brings with it immense gains such as the poetic, the gift of chance, excess, freedom. If we can find a way of living with uncertainty then, I argue, it offers far more than it takes away.

I feel an evangelist's passion again when I emphasise that it is important to note that uncertainty is not an absence but an opening. To miss this point would be to make any case for uncertainty madness. However, I embrace uncertainty out of some rather sane intentions, to move meaning forward, to open-up the future to unforseen opportunities, to anticipate an (uncertain) ethical space to come. When put like this it is the case for certainty that seems a little mad:

A metaphysician's ambition to maintain a forlorn position may actually play a part and finally prefer a handful of 'certainty' to a whole cartful of beautiful possibilities; there may even exist puritanical fanatics of conscience who would rather lie down and die on a sure nothing than an uncertain something (Nietzsche 2003: 40).

As I revisit this paper to write this conclusion I am struck by the sense of journey. My metaphors of 'tourist trail', 'emigration' and 'pilgrimage' speak to the corresponding physical movements to my intellectual, emotional and spiritual shifts. There does appear to be a connection between the physical places I inhabit and the twists my spiritual journey takes. I do not know how coincidental this is – if one place leads to another? After spending my summers in inner-city North America was it predictable I would pursue work among the 'marginalised' and end up in a developing country context? After witnessing the abuses of strong Christianity in an Evangelical church setting could it be expected that I would seek refuge in the weak Christianity of the emergent church? Does my physical situation trigger a spiritual/emotional/intellectual shift, or vice versa? As I find myself in a new space once again: a new home and a new junction in my academic career I start to reflect on where I am now and the ethical and spiritual challenges this poses. In writing this paper I very much concentrated on my past journey, and in reading it back I turn to my future and ask myself why I don't return to the high Anglican Church I loved so much and practice a cultural Christianity there? But then I remember that they are part of a wider Church context, and that this larger context does not embrace me and I do not embrace it. I wonder if I have meandered, unintentionally, from emigration to exile?

I do not know where my journey will take me next, but I intend to stick with uncertainty in all its excess and evocation, aware that "with only certainty and knowledge as our guide, very

little in this world would change" (Anker 2009: 61), and "where certainties come apart there too gathers the strength that no certainty can match" (Nancy 2001: 457).

To remind myself of this, and in keeping with the spiritual thread evident throughout this paper, I wrote my own beatitude. Those familiar with the Christian scriptures will know that Jesus made some rather topsy-turvey proclamations, such as "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt 5 v3-10). Part way through writing up my thesis I added my own to his, which I wrote on a post-it and stuck it to my monitor to keep me going when things got tough: Blessed are the uncertain, for they will experience excess.

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