A qualitative exploration of university students' meaning-stories and meaning-story practices

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Abstract

This thesis explores the student experience of religion and belief in higher education through the telling of students' meaning-stories. Existing literature highlights the positive impact of a religious identity to the student experience. It also, however, identifies a gap in the understanding of students' *actual* experience of religion and belief on campus. Furthermore, the individual and complex nature of religion and belief and the experience of those that do not affiliate to a religion is relatively underexplored, and current debates on religious literacy highlight that we do not have the right words to talk about religion and belief as it is lived today. With these gaps in mind, this research captured the individual nature of religion and belief on campus. The thesis has used the term 'meaning-stories' to reflect the breadth of the students' contributions and the telling implicit in the students' engagement with the research. It also uses the term their 'thing' interchangeably with meaning-stories to reflect this breadth, a term directly derived from the students' use of words. This study is interpretative in its approach, drawing upon lived religion to capture the complexity of students' meaning-stories, and presents a new 'postcard method' created for this research. The findings provide insight into students' 'thing' as told in their meaning-stories, including how this supports their university life. Unique to this research is the identification of students' meaning-story practices that often take place on campus and may be hidden from peers. The research reveals that the individual nature of their meaning-stories is also reflected in the students' communication and identifies a need for an expanded understanding of connectedness. Based on the findings, the thesis makes recommendations about religion and belief on campus, the development of religious literacy, improvements for policy and practice, and areas for further research.

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List of Abbreviations

AHRC Arts and Humanities Research Council
CU Christian Union

CUE Christianity and the University Experience

ESRC Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

HE Higher Education

HEI’s Higher Education Institutions

PEI’s Photo-elicitation Interviews (also called photo interviews in this thesis)

YWAM Youth With A Mission

Publication arising from this thesis

The following book chapter relates to the ethical dimensions of this research as outlined in Chapter 3 (section 3.9). This was published prior to thesis submission.

Lawther, S., 2021. Telling their own story in their own way: negotiating the ethics of a diary-like photo-elicitation method to capture faith and belief from students' own starting point. In: Cao, X., and Henderson, F., eds. *Exploring Diary Methods in Higher Education Research: Opportunities, Choices and Challenges*. London: Routledge, 2021, pp. 115-128.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis aims to contribute towards addressing current gaps in the understanding of the student experience of religion and belief by exploring the breadth of meaning-making of students in higher education (HE), how this is currently communicated, and appropriate methodologies with which to do this. This is important to explore because having a religious identity has been found to improve the student experience, such as providing an anchor in the transition between pre-university home life and university life (Sharma and Guest 2013), and for many students their religious identity can be more important than any other aspect of their identity (Stevenson 2013). However, Stevenson argues that religion is rarely valued on campus, and there is an "absence of positive discourses about religion" (2017, p. 73). Universities have a duty to provide for religion and belief on campus, both in response to the Equality Act (2010) which established religion or belief as an equality strand with legally protected characteristics (ECU 2011) and as a requirement to annually report on provision and compliance with the Prevent Duty (HEFCE 2018). In addition, argues Dinham, the increased weight given to student satisfaction, widening access, and attracting international students is placing increasing pressure upon universities to provide for "the personal beliefs and identities of students" (Dinham 2020, p93). However, there is relatively little research on understanding student faith and belief and how this contributes to the student experience compared to other aspects of the HE student experience, and much of this has tended to focus upon students that affiliate to a religion. It does not explore, for example, the experience of the 49.8% of students in the sector data reported by Advance HE (2020) that declared that they had no religion or belief. The body of work so far that has explored the student experience of religion and belief has highlighted that understanding the student experience is complex, with students of different faiths reporting both similar and differing experiences, with some students preferring to keep their faith hidden on campus, for example, and others becoming more, or less, religious. The importance of understanding religion and belief in higher education is stressed by Dinham (2020) who argues that there is a "growing gap" between what "appears to be a *real* religion and belief landscape and one imagined by policymakers, professions and publics" (Dinham 2020, p. 92). This thesis argues that to better understand the student experience of religion and belief on campus as it currently *is*, research in this area needs to begin at the students' starting point to explore the individual nature of religion and belief in order to be inclusive of a range of students and their everyday practices. It draws upon the term 'meaning-making' as used by Guest (2017) to capture this breadth in its first aim, 'to explore a breadth of meaning-making in HE'.

This thesis also aims to contribute towards the current debate that we haven't got the right words to talk about religion and belief as it is lived and experienced today (Orsi 1997; Woodhead 2012; Davie 2013) and has as its second aim, 'to explore how religion and belief is currently communicated'. The view taken within this thesis is that in order to learn how to communicate about religion and belief as it is lived today the starting point needs to be to find out how it is *already* being talked about rather than beginning with already existing academic categories that may not be reflective of individuals' experience. It has also aimed to explore beyond verbal communication, to explore how meaning-making may be communicated beyond words. This research therefore aims to explore how religion and belief is being communicated on the university campus as a way of contributing to current debates in this area, with the view that if we start with how religion and belief is currently being talked about this can then *also* inform how to describe, research and analyse religion and belief as it is experienced today.

This thesis has as its third aim, 'to explore methodologies to research religion and belief', aiming to contribute to debates within sociology of religion about how to research religion and belief in an inclusive way that doesn't delegitimise any forms of meaning-making. The methodological challenge of finding the right words to ask about meaning-making in an inclusive way became part of the project, and the challenge of finding a method that would allow for anonymous contributions and contributions beyond words led to the development of a new 'postcard method'.

The study is interpretative in its approach in that it aims to understand meaning-making from the view of the students, and draws upon a lived religion approach in order to capture the individual and complex nature of meaning-making and students' everyday meaning-making activities. In line with Interpretivism, the methodological approach is qualitative, small-scale, and in depth, enabling an insight into individuals' interpretations of the world around them (Henn et al., 2006). Key to this research was allowing participants to use the language that they choose to and not confining them by external definitions of what is or is not religious, and here it drew upon work by others who have also used non-religious words to explore this area such as Dunlop (2008), Day (2013a), and Ammerman (2014a). The research took place at a post-1992 university and used three different methods to achieve the research aims: an innovative 'postcard method' that was devised for this study; participant–generated photo-elicitation interviews[1]; and a 'card sort' method that built upon the Connectors Study 'configuring matters' method (Varvantakis 2018). Throughout the project the students were asked for their feedback and views on the use of language.

[1] Throughout this thesis the photo-elicitation interviews have been described as PEI's or photo interviews interchangeably.

Reflecting the difficulty of religious literacy in practice as identified by (Orsi 1997; Woodhead 2012; Davie 2013), throughout the research and the writing up of this thesis I found that the words that we currently use to describe religion and belief were not sufficient to describe the breadth of experiences uncovered in this research. This not only influenced the direction of the research but has been a challenge in the writing up of the thesis: I was aware that in the analysis and discussions about the students' contributions I was limited by using terms that readers would be familiar with and that these may not fully represent the complex and individual communications used by the students. I was also aware that textually representing participants' multi-textural reflections may be limiting, therefore visual data that I have permission to share has been presented in the appendix. This difficulty with how to communicate the breadth of religion and belief has therefore been an important aspect of this thesis, and reflections on this, and words used, have been included in this thesis to illustrate the challenges and decisions made when writing this thesis.

This engagement with the difficulty of religious literacy has led to an evolving use of language within this thesis as the terms used are reflected upon and become broader in scope as I gain a greater understanding of the students' contributions. The words 'religion', 'belief' and 'meaning-making' and 'everyday practices' are used in the research aims and reflect terms used in the literature that this research draws upon. Following the analysis, the terms 'meaning-stories', 'meaning-story practices' and 'regular practices' are used when describing the students' contributions to the research as they more accurately reflect the students' contributions The term their 'thing' is also used interchangeably with 'meaning-stories': a term directly derived from the students' use of words (see section 3.5). The terms religion', 'belief' and 'meaning-making' and 'everyday practices' continue to be used where appropriate when discussing what can be learnt from the students' contributions, particularly in relation to the aims of this study and existing theory and literature**.**

1.1. Thesis layout

This thesis contains seven chapters.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Following this first introductory chapter, Chapter 2 reviews the current literature that outlines the importance of conducting research in this area, and identifies the gaps in the current understanding about religion and belief in higher education that led to the development of the research aims.

Chapter 3:

Chapter 3 begins by describing the research aims that arose from the literature review before outlining the research approach, research design, research methods and analysis conducted for this study, as well as strategies that were used to support validity and reflections on researcher positionality and ethics. The methodological approach used in this study captures students with a range of religious identities and a diversity of experience and enabled individualised private practices to be captured. This chapter describes the development of the term 'meaning-stories', derived from the findings and analysis in this study and from the advice of the students, and its use to capture the breadth of students' contributions without the constraints of existing definitions and categories. These contributions included where they find meaning, regular practices as part of their meaning-stories, what they gain from their meaning-stories, and stories of self and identity. It introduces a new 'postcard method' that can be used in future research that is particularly useful to invite anonymous contributions and offer alternatives to textual communication (both for the researcher to explain the research and for the participant to contribute) and to provide artefacts that convey the 'feel' of the students' contributions.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the findings of this research. These chapters present the data before the discussion due to the complexity of the data.

Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 focuses upon *what* students do as part of their meaning-stories as described by the students. It illustrates that students describe *what* they do as expressed in their meaning-stories within the themes of Self', 'Connections', 'Religion/faith/spirituality' and 'Being in nature'. A feature unique to this research is that all but one of the students interviewed described practices that support their meaning-making that they do at least once a week, and these have been called regular practices and examples of these included within the thesis. It has found that these practices may be hidden from their peers, that students are making (often private) spaces on campus to do this. It argues for the importance of nature as a consistent thread throughout their stories, and recommends that the space for religion and belief on campus is better captured and understood, and that religion and belief monitoring on campus is further developed to understand the real (rather than imagined) experience of students.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 focuses upon the students' stories of *why* students do their 'thing' as expressed in their meaning-stories and can be described in the overall themes of:

‘Self’, ‘Connections’, ‘Connect with religion/faith/spirituality’ and ‘Bigger than me’. This chapter provides an illustration of where perhaps students may be conveying aspects of their meaning-stories that may be difficult to put into words in their use of pictures on the postcards. It argues that the examples of connectedness within the students’ meaning-stories challenge the theory of individualisation as they emphasise connection and relatedness, and that the theme ‘Bigger than me’ and the importance of being in nature suggest the need for an expanded notion of connectedness. Unique to this study is that many of the students’ regular practices on campus support the students’ wellbeing whilst at university, and this chapter argues that the role of religion, faith, and spirituality to support wellbeing that is illustrated in this thesis is notably absent in discussions about supporting wellbeing in higher education.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 explores how the meaning-stories of the students is communicated, providing an illustration of religious literacy in practice, contributing therefore to the second research aim: ‘to explore how religion and belief is currently communicated’. This chapter identifies that the students are using their own terms and definitions of words, reflecting the complex and individual nature of the students’ meaning-stories, whilst at the same time, it has found instances where students used delegitimising language to describe aspects of their meaning-stories, their practices, and themselves. It also provides two illustrative examples of communication from the starting point of the student, to illustrate the complexity and the ‘feel’ of the students’ stories. This chapter reveals that there are aspects of their meaning-stories that are not shared with others. The chapter argues that this may be due to the university context and due to a lack of shared language as predicted by Berger et al (1974). The findings from this chapter inform recommendations discussed in Chapter 7 about how to communicate about religion and belief on campus in an inclusive way and promote positive conversations about religion and belief on campus, and the importance of expanding the understanding of religious literacy to include how to *communicate about* religion, belief and meaning-stories in an inclusive way.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 considers the findings in relation to the aims of the thesis and discusses the original contributions that this research has made to current understanding about religion and belief on campus. It argues that this thesis has provided an understanding of students’ meaning-stories, their ‘thing’, on campus, and that the data suggests the need to expand the notion of connectedness. This chapter argues that this study has uniquely captured students’ regular practices on campus and how this contributes positively towards university life, and that it has captured religious literacy in practice on campus leading to the recommendation for the need for

increased literacy about how to *communicate about* religion and belief. The chapter concludes that this thesis has responded to the challenge outlined by Dinham (2020), that there is a need to account for the real and diverse experience of religion and belief, by providing an illustration of the complexity of identities, experiences and practices that can be used to aid understanding of students' actual experience on campus, and makes recommendations for areas of further research to further develop this understanding.

Chapter 2. Literature review

This chapter begins by reviewing current literature that highlights the importance of exploring the student experience of religion and belief in HE, both from the perspective of the university and the student experience. It considers the university context and identifies the gaps in the current understanding about religion and belief in HE that led to the development of the research aims of this thesis.

2.1. The importance of exploring the student experience of religion and belief

It is important that universities understand the student experience of religion and belief given that having a religious identity has been found to improve the student experience, such as providing an anchor in the transition between pre-university home life and university life (Sharma and Guest 2013), and that for many students their religious identity can be more important than any other aspect of their identity, including ethnicity, gender, or class (Stevenson 2013). Dinham (2020) suggests that, on the one hand whilst the purpose of university has shifted in focus towards employment (following in particular the 2010 Browne Review) and away from personal development, on the other hand the increased weight given to student satisfaction, widening access and attracting international students is placing increasing pressure upon universities to provide for "the personal beliefs and identities of students" (Dinham 2020, p. 93). In addition, recent research by Perfect et al (2019) has highlighted the contribution of faith and belief societies in: educating the public and student body about religion and belief including, for example, interfaith issues and discussions; to society through social action projects; female leadership opportunities p. 65); providing pastoral and spiritual support; and a sense of community. However, there is an "absence of positive discourses about religion", argues Stevenson, and religion is rarely valued (as distinct from culture) on campus and this can "make the campus a problem space" for religious students (2017, p.73).

It is also important because the most recent sector reporting data indicates that many students in HE belong to a faith group. Institutions have only been required to submit religion and belief data since the 2017/18 academic year, and because of this, 2020 is the first year that this sector religion and belief data has been reported upon (Advance HE 2020). Students were asked to self-declare their religious identity and given the following response options: 'no religion', 'Christian'[2], 'Hindu', 'Jewish', 'Muslim', 'Sikh', 'Spiritual', 'Any other religion or belief' and 'Prefer not to say' (Advance HE 2020, p. 6). Of the 2,343,095 UK higher education students that

[2] Students in Scotland and Northern Ireland are given further denominational options.

provided their religion and belief data in the academic year 2017/18, just over half (50.2%) declared a religious identity, and 49.8% said that they had no religion or belief (Advance HE 2020, p8). Of those students that declared a religious identity, 65.5% said that they were Christian, Muslim (17.8%), Hindu (4.4%), 'any other religion or belief' (3.6%), Buddhist (3.5%), Spiritual (2.6%), Sikh (1.7%) and Jewish (0.9%) (Advance HE 2020, p. 8).

When exploring the experience of students, it is important that the student is considered as a whole, rather than just one of their characteristics as captured above. Intersectional data, for example, indicates that "there is a strong relationship between student religious identification and their declared ethnicity" (Advance HE 2020, p. 3) and this was also found in research by Guest et al who found a "strong relationship between religion and ethnicity" (Guest et al., 2013, p. 172). Similarly, there appears to be differences between religion and domicile, with UK domiciled students more likely to say that they had no religion or belief compared to those students not domiciled in the UK (42.1% and 35.4% respectively) (Advance HE 2020, p. 14).

Across the sector, universities are increasingly striving to attract, retain, and ensure good outcomes for, a diverse body of students. Reflecting this, there is a growing amount of sector research to better understand what is working to support the retention, engagement, and success of all students (Advance HE 2018a). The focus of data collection and research to address differences (particularly differences in attainment) and to improve the student experience has, in response, primarily focused on gender, ethnicity, and disadvantage (HEFCE 2015). This is also the first year that the attainment of students and their religion has been explored at this scale, and it has identified a difference in attainment between the religion and belief groups measured, with a higher proportion of Jewish students being awarded a first or 2:1 and Muslim students being the least likely of these groups to be awarded a first or 2:1 (Advance HE 2020, p. 22). The Advance HE report identifies that further work is needed here to understand these differences, but reasons for these differences are likely to include the intersectionality with ethnicity, prior school experiences and attainment, and particularly for Muslim students, their experiences whilst at university as found in research by Stevenson in 2018 (Advance HE 2020, p. 22). A greater understanding of the student experience of religion and belief and how this may intersect with students' other identities, as well as understanding both the benefits and difficulties of having a religious identity whilst at university, will therefore also inform how to address differences in student outcomes.

2.2. Religion and belief in the university context

Religion in higher education, as with religion in society, needs to be understood in terms of its context. Gilliat-Ray carried out research to better understand universities and religion, including religious dynamics in universities. She concluded that universities are not a neutral space, although they are often perceived as such: they have a history of dominance of Christianity that is rarely questioned and remains largely unspoken. Where universities are less religious, more secular, often universities "have simply moved from one kind of 'establishment (Protestant), to another (secularism)" (Gilliat-Ray 2000, p. 146). Secularism, argues Gilliat-Ray, is also a form of elitism, so that most institutions, religious and secular, "have in-built structural biases that empower and privilege some faiths and worldviews rather than others" (2000, p. 142).

> Even those [universities] that have adopted a radically secular approach still tend to privilege some faiths rather than others, or allow religion into university life in ways that conform to a definition of religion held by a dominant power-holding minority (Gilliat-Ray 2000, p. 141).

Institutions also differ in their approaches to religion and belief as has been found, for example, in the typology developed by Dinham and Jones (2010) who identified the following indicative (but not exhaustive) responses universities might make to religious faith: Soft Neutrality, Hard Neutrality, Repositories and Resources and Formative-Collegial (Dinham and Jones 2010, p. 17).

Since Gilliat-Ray's research, there have been a number of changes that have meant that universities now have legal obligations to include provision for religion and belief in HE. The Equality Act 2010 established religion or belief as an equality strand with legally protected characteristics (ECU 2011). Since September 2015, the Government Prevent duty has required all relevant higher education institutions to provide "sufficient chaplaincy and pastoral support for all students" and "to have clear and widely available policies for the use of Prayer Rooms and other faith-related facilities" (Prevent Duty Guidance para 25 and 26). Prevent was further developed in 2009, and in 2015 a Prevent duty was created specifically for Higher Education Institutions (HEI's). HEI's in England are expected to report annually on their provision, and their compliance with the Prevent Duty is monitored by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2018). The original Prevent documentation came under criticism for its focus on Muslims as extremists (and not other possible extremist groups) (House of Commons 2010) and since then, a revised Prevent strategy states that it has been updated to include "all forms of terrorism and non-violent extremism" (H.M. Government 2015, p. 3) however in this Prevent document there is more text

given to discussion of Islam, Syria, and Iraq, than other extremist groups. Stevenson (2018) found that Prevent "can worsen Islamophobia as it is often enacted by those with little religious literacy or understanding of Islam or Muslim students" (2018, p. 9) and Guest et al (2020), that Prevent can both reinforce negatives stereotypes whilst at the same time also prevent the questioning of these stereotypes. This Prevent duty therefore places requirements upon HEI's for provision for religion and belief such as chaplaincy and pastoral support, at the same time as affecting the Muslim student experience and this is discussed further in section 2.3 below.

2.3. Understanding the complexity of the student experience

A benefit of exploring the student experience of religion and belief therefore is that it may provide further clues as to how to support the whole student (with religion being an important part of many students' identity), how to improve the student experience, and how universities can further support student engagement and success. The gaps in understanding religion and belief in HE lie in both data: "very little is currently known about the participation and outcomes of students from different religious backgrounds in higher education" (Advance HE 2020, p. 3) *and* in understanding the student experience. This understanding has increased in recent years through recent work exploring this area (such as Guest et al., 2013; Aune et al., 2019; Perfect et al., 2019; Guest et al., 2020; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). There is still relatively little research, however, on understanding student faith and belief and how this contributes to the student experience compared to other aspects of the HE student experience, and much of this has tended to focus upon students that affiliate to a religion, and does not explore, for example, the experience of those 49.8% identified by Advance HE (2020) that declared that they had no religion or belief. This suggests that there is more to be explored here to add to the current body of work that has aimed to understand the student experience of religion and belief in HE.

Recent research by Guest et al (2020) and Scott-Baumann et al (2020), for example, has explored Islam on campus, and the work of Aune et al (2019) has focused upon chaplaincy provision, and Perfect et al (2019) on student faith and belief societies. The large-scale research of religion in HEI's (across 13 universities, with 4,500 students) by Guest et al (2013), the Christianity and the University Experience (CUE) Project, focused upon students who identify as Christian and their experience at university. This work identified that university was a time of religious change for some students with 11.4% of the students in their survey saying that they had become less religious since being at university, and 11% saying that they had become more religious, and 77.6% of the students that their religious perspective had not changed since being at university (Guest et al., 2013, p89). Guest et al (2013) argue that

religion on campus provides opportunities for both bonding and bridging social capital, through for example, social groups and multi-faith centres, and they found examples of both bonding and bridging social capital in their study. Social capital refers to resources derived from social networks and connections, and they cite Putnam who defines bonding social capital as supporting intra-group connections and relationships, whilst bridging social capital looks outward and refers to inter-group relationships and more diverse social networks. They also identified chaplaincy as a source of support for students, particularly for ethnic minority students (Guest et al., 2013). Similarly, Sharma and Guest conclude that a Christian identify provides students with "a source of familiarity and helps them forge new relationships" (2013, p. 74).

Research by Stevenson has similarly focused on affiliation and student experience, with her work drawing on, for example, research with Jewish, Christian, Sikh and Muslim students' experiences at university (2013). Stevenson found that students felt both invisible in terms of their religious identity (and students felt that universities colluded to keep their religious identity hidden), but also visible in that their religious dress (such as clothing, jewellery) marked them as 'different' from others (Stevenson, 2013). Stevenson (2014) found that students can feel stereotyped and 'othered' because of their religion. The reality, for religious students, summarises Stevenson, is "one of exclusion, invisibility, and silence" (2013, p. 39) and their "voices need to be heard and their presence on campus recognised" (2013, p. 40). In her introduction to her work exploring the experiences of international Doctoral students (that included Muslim, Anglican, Catholic and Buddhist students) Stevenson argues that "religious students" are "positioned as both invisible (their religious identity frequently unknown and unacknowledged on campus) and highly visible (under surveillance and positioned as potential threats) and, simultaneously, regarded as both potential victims of violence and responsible for it" (Stevenson 2017, p. 63). Stevenson highlights the importance of further research to explore the experience of religious students, and the current discourse about religion on campus (2013, p. 40).

Stevenson (2013) and Guest (2017; 2019), both found that some students may choose to keep their religious identity hidden from others, including their peers, whilst at university. Guest cites US research by Clydesdale that found students "typically placed their religious identities in an 'identity lockbox'", a pattern that was also found in the CUE research in which it was found that students may compartmentalise their subject learning as separate from their religious identity as a coping strategy whilst at university (Guest 2017, p. 216-217). Research has also found students who chose to keep their religious identity hidden from their peers, that students "choose to become 'invisible' rather than be openly religious and face the opprobrium of the university and their peers" (Stevenson 2013, p. 37). Stevenson here cites the experience of a

Christian student who chose to keep her religious identity hidden as she already felt 'different enough'. In both this research, and research by Guest et al (2013) Christian students felt that Christianity was more likely to be mocked by others in a way that atheism or other faiths, particularly Islam, wouldn't be. It may be that this choosing which aspect of religious identity to be shared is not solely due to the university context and that this may also occur in other social contexts. Arweck (2013), for example, found that the young people in her study downplayed their religious identity once outside of their home and in the public domain and suggests that this may be an illustration of the young people revealing different aspects of their identity according to the social context within which they are in.

Research by the National Union of Students (NUS) has also identified that students may have experienced, or may be fearful of, a hate incident because of their religious identity. The NUS (2011) online survey of 9,229 students found that "19 per cent of hate incidents were thought to have an element of religious prejudice, making up seven per cent of all incidents reported in the survey" (NUS 2011, p. 9), with Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh students more likely to say that they had experienced a religious hate incident. The subsequent NUS (2012) report that focused upon students with a religion or belief found that Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Jewish students in particular were worried about abuse because of their religion or belief, and that at least a fifth of all the students surveyed said that they had "altered their behaviour, personal appearance or daily patterns due to worries about prejudiced abuse", with Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim students most likely to have done this (NUS 2012, p. 14). Whilst this NUS research had a large sample of students, this was a self-selecting sample and therefore not representative of the student population (NUS, 2012, p. 4) and was funded by the Home Office as part of a project to reduce student victimisation (NUS, 2012, p. 1). The NUS further explored the experience of Muslim students in 2018 and found that a third of the students in their sample (of 578 students) had experienced a form of abuse, and a third of these students were worried about becoming victims of abuse, with female students who wear a religious Islamic garment much more likely to be concerned about this. A third of the sample also said that they "felt negatively affected by Prevent" (NUS 2018, p. 7). The majority of students in the sample believed that Muslims and Islam are not positively represented in the media (91%) nor attacks on Muslims equally reported in the press (86%) (NUS 2018).

This discrimination of Muslim students can be compounded by students' other identities such as race, gender, and immigration status and can include micro-aggressions which, suggests Stevenson, may particularly impact upon these students' experience, affecting their engagement, confidence and motivation (Stevenson 2018).

The experience of Muslim students has been explored in greater depth in the Re/presenting Islam on Campus project (2015-18) (Guest et al., 2020; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). This work highlighted that the Muslim student experience is additionally affected because Islam and Muslims are treated as a "special case" because the way that they are seen is politicized in a way that other religious identities are not (Scott -Baumann et al., 2020, p. 219). It found that Muslim students' experiences of discrimination and vulnerability can have an effect on their everyday and student lives and this may particularly be the case for female Muslim students who face additional stereotypes. This research also found that Muslim students (just over a quarter of their sample) were more likely than Christian (17%) students or students that say that they have 'no religion' (2.1%) to say that they have become more religious since being at university, with UK Muslim students (29.8%) more likely to have become more religious than international Muslim students (15.6%) (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020, p. 57-58). They suggest that this may be because Muslim students are more likely to see their experience at university through the lens of their faith: that these students are more likely to reflect upon how their faith is affected by their university experience and less likely to feel that their university life and their student experience are incompatible (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020)

The body of work so far then, that explores the student experience of religion and belief, has highlighted that understanding the student experience is complex, with students of different faiths reporting similar as well as differing experiences, and that students' experiences are also being affected by other factors such as their ethnicity and gender. Students' experience of their faith during their time of university may also differ, with some students preferring to keep their faith hidden on campus, for example, and others becoming more, or less, religious. It has also highlighted that universities are not neutral spaces and the challenges faced by students as a consequence, including the additional challenges faced by Muslim students. Whilst the research has found the positive benefits that affiliation to a religion can bring to the student experience (such as work by Guest et al., 2013; Sharma and Guest 2013; Perfect et al., 2019,) there is perhaps more that can be explored here in order to contribute towards positive conversations about religion and belief on campus.

2.4. Importance of including a breadth of voices and experience

The existing research has primarily focused upon the experience of students that affiliate to a religion, and focusing only on affiliation to a religion, it has been argued, is just part of the picture. Focusing on affiliation is only one lens from which to view religion (McGuire 2008). What has been defined as 'religion' and 'religious', 'real' religion, and religious action, has been fought and contested by those with social,

political, and military power (McGuire 2008). How we understand, describe, and study religion, therefore, has been determined by its social and historical context and is limited in scope (Bender et al., 2013; Woodhead, 2013). These definitions and boundaries (such as, what is religious or not, who is excluded and not, what is 'correct' belief and practice), can be seen as social constructions (McGuire 2008), with the power to normalise certain types of belief and practice, and disregard others. McGuire cites Wolff who argues that the power to control these definitions, the discourse of religion, is, argues Wolff, "a particularly effective and invisible form of power" and has been used throughout history to dominate others (McGuire 2008, p. 43). Definitions of what constituted 'real' religion, and what was disregarded as 'other', were used, for example, to legitimise the colonial possession of land and resources in South Africa. Tribes were described as without religion, as therefore 'other', not fully human, and this "not only legitimized but virtually mandated domination" (Orsi 2002, p. 170). Orsi argues that this was also the case with the creation of a class of world religions by the World Parliament of Religions. These religions, "identified by enlightenment characteristics" (Orsi 2002, p. 171), were portrayed as 'real' religion, normalised, with the effect of disregarding other forms of belief and practice as 'other', as illustrated at the Columbian Exposition:

> The Columbian Exposition performed this distinction spatially by putting the world religions into massive buildings and the others on the midway and while representatives of the former traded pieties, a carnival atmosphere took hold of the latter space, where religions marked as other were depicted in mock demonstrations of cannibalism and human sacrifice (Orsi 2002, p. 171).

Woodhead, developing Certau (1984), uses the term strategic religion to describe this form of religion that has arisen through discourses of the powerful, as opposed to tactical religion, the religion of ordinary laymen and women, the least privileged (Woodhead 2013). Although described separately, the strategic and the tactical are also inter-related and dependent upon each other (Woodhead 2013). Much of the debate about religion (including in the media and in schools), argues Woodhead, has focused primarily on the powerful, on the loudest two ends of the secular and religious, rather than the voices of the middle majority:

> We're stuck in [a] dreadful, clanging moment in which religious and secular extremes are shouting much louder than the more extensive middle-ground – and each has its own reasons for presenting religion as dogmatic, socially conservative and *unchanging* (Woodhead 2012).

Woodhead describes strategic religion as “that which gives space and place to the powerful”, and, typically throughout history, it has been the “privileges of masculinity, dominant ethnicity, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, class and ‘whiteness’ [that] reinforce and are reinforced by strategic religion” (Woodhead 2013, p. 17). The strategic, argues Woodhead, has a vested interest in maintaining and consolidating its power by, for example, guarding sacred spaces (such as Churches, Mosques) as separate from the mundane (Woodhead 2013). Strategic religion therefore describes the institutional, religious prescriptions, and the hypervisible (Dessing 2013). Woodhead here cites Smith (1998) who argues that the identified ‘world’ religions are those that are “the most strategically successful” (Woodhead 2013, p. 17).

Tactical religion refers to the non-institutional, the experience of everyday laymen and women, including the subordinate and least privileged groups in society (Dessing 2013). There is increased value here placed on the importance of ‘inner’ space (Woodhead 2013). This type of religion typically focuses on religious practice (Dessing 2013), and has remained largely invisible, and without a voice (Woodhead 2013). Tactical religion, suggests Woodhead, has seen an increase in Europe because society is changing. Improved communication and an increase in travel and education, has led individuals to look for meaning in a way that makes sense in their own lives, at the same time that strategic religion has become more distant from its adherents because it has aligned itself with social and political power (Woodhead 2013). This research aimed therefore also to include the less visible, everyday experience of practices, and capture the individual nature of religion and belief (both within those that affiliate to a religion and those that do not) on campus.

2.5. Exploring young people and the changing nature of religion and belief

In capturing the experience of students on campus there also needs consideration of the changing nature of religion and belief, particularly amongst young people. “Religion in Britain”, argues Woodhead, “has changed” (2012). There has been a decline in Christian Church attendance, changes in what people believe such as in increase in a belief in angels and an afterlife and a decrease in those that believe in a ‘personal God’, changes in religious identity illustrated in the rise of those that say that they have ‘no religion’ and those that choose a “mash-up” combination of religion, and a move towards a more individual, idiosyncratic religious identity (Woodhead 2012). This rise in those that have ‘no religion’ is particularly seen in those aged 18-24: “if you are younger, being non-religious is the norm” (Woodhead 2017, p. 251).

There have been differing theories put forward to explain the decline in the influence of institutional religion. The decline in religious attendance was explored in Davie's theory of 'believing without belonging' in which Davie used the term 'unchurched' to explain why "the majority of British people – in common with many other Europeans – persist in believing (if only in an ordinary God), but see no need to participate with even minimal regularity in their religious institutions" (Davie 1994, p.2). This is a view that Day argues is one that "reflects a Christian-centric idea that a natural state is one of being churched" (Day 2013a, p.8). Voas and Crockett question whether Davie has assessed the nature and strength of belief in her theory, claiming that "between the extremes of full faith and noncommittal assent there is naturally a middle ground of more or less Christianized belief, but the passivity of so-called 'believers' is itself a sign of religious decline" (2005, p. 24). Following Day's 'believing in belonging', Davie further developed her theory (2007) to reflect the British religious landscape, using the term 'vicarious religion' to describe:

> The notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing (Davie 2007, p. 22).

Davie argues that individuals may still 'believe' but without 'belonging' (so we see here the decline in attendance) but what is usually implicit is illustrated in events such as national tragedies where this belief becomes explicit (Davie 2007, p. 29). Davie noted (2016) that whilst 'vicarious religion' may explain patterns for later generations, it may not be applicable to the younger generation: a view also supported by Day (2016) who notes the increasing number of young people choosing to say that they have 'no religion'. Following Day's critique which emphasises the need to look beyond the Christian-centric and to acknowledge the differing patterns of younger generations, this thesis aims to add to the understanding of religion and belief in young people beyond the Christian-centric.

Heelas and Woodhead explain the move away from external sources of authority in their 'subjectivization thesis'. Heelas and Woodhead in their 'subjectivization thesis' describe the 'subjective turn' which they see as a move away from what they term "life as", that is, "life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligations" towards "subjective life" which is "life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic" (2005, p. 2). Explaining the move away from external sources of authority, they argue that in this 'subjective life' "personal experiences become "a source of significance, meaning and authority" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 11). Whilst the goal becomes to know oneself, and to "become one's own authority" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 4) this is in relation to

others and involves, “self-in-relation rather than a self–in-isolation” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 11).

If we are to better understand the changes in religion and belief in society, and future trends, says Collins-Mayo, we need to look at young people and their engagement with religion and belief (Collins-Mayo 2010). Research here, says Collins-Mayo, citing the work of Davie (2000) and Voas and Crockett (2005), has found that in Western societies young people “are less likely to identify with any one religious tradition than their older contemporaries, less likely to subscribe to the creed of a major world religion and less likely to attend a place of worship on a regular basis” (Collins-Mayo 2010, p. 1). Research exploring young people and religion is an under-researched area within sociology (Day 2020, p. 125) and this thesis draws in particular on work conducted by Collins-Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006) who explored the faith of young people they refer to as ‘Generation Y’, that is, those born from 1982 onwards (also known as the Millennial Generation) (Savage et al., 2006).

Savage et al explored the worldview of 15–25-year-olds, with a sample of 124 (as they describe) “socially included” young people from towns across England, 40% of which identified themselves as Christian and 60% as non-Christian (2006, p. 35). Their aim was to understand the relationship of the popular arts to young people’s worldview, and the nature of young people’s spirituality. They define worldview as “the shared framework of beliefs, knowledge and understanding through which young people experience the world” (Savage et al., 2006, p. 8). The importance of exploring the worldview of young people, they argue, is that it is from one’s worldview that one can explore answers to “ultimate questions in life” that would have traditionally been addressed by religion such as “’Who are we?’ What is the purpose of life’, ‘Does God exist?’” (2006, p. 9). An understanding of young peoples’ worldview then, they suggest, will give insight into the source of meaning for young people now that they are less likely to turn to the Church for the answers to these questions, arguing that one’s worldview enables individuals to “deal with the questions and concerns that have traditionally be seen as the province of religion” (2006, p. 9). Their research uncovered a world view that was shared amongst the young people, a “Happy midi-narrative”, that sees the goal of life as finding happiness for themselves, their friends and their families and that when young people face obstacles to their happiness it is family, friends and the popular arts that help with resolving the difficulties to return to this “happy ideal” (Savage et al., 2006, p. 38-39). They conclude that “the spirituality we have uncovered is formative, based in the normal day-to-day relationships of everyday life” (2006, p. 51). Formative spirituality is a broad definition of spirituality that they describe as focusing upon “an individual’s sense of raised awareness of relationality (with, for example, self and others, and possibly God, the universe, etc.),

which may include mystery sensing (awe, wonder, dread), meaning making and value sensing (delight and despair, right and wrong, existential meaning)" (Savage et al., 2006, p. 12). Formative spirituality, then, they suggest, may not be recognised as spiritual by the individual themselves and it may include actions and experiences such as "appreciation of the natural world… loving and delighting in family and friends" (2006, p. 12). They found that there was an "almost total lack of interest in transformative spirituality" (2006, p. 141) that is, spirituality that "involves the individual in deliberate practices (whether overtly 'religious' or not) which aim to foster mindfulness of the Other (howsoever conceived – e.g., God, Self, Universe) and help maintain a sense of connectedness" (2006, p. 12).

Collins-Mayo et al (2010) built upon this work to explore the religious identities, beliefs, and values of young people using structured questionnaires and semi structured interviews (in phase 1) and a research tool that explored young people's perspectives (in phase 2). Although the sample of students did include both those that frequently and infrequently attended Church, perhaps because the participants were recruited through Christian youth work contacts, the sample of students included a higher proportion of frequent churchgoers than nationally, and a predominantly Christian identity, although it did also include participants that said in the questionnaire that they were, 'atheist', 'agnostic' and 'don't know' (Collins-Mayo et al., 2010, p. 30). They found that the 'immanent faith' of young people, that is the "this–worldly faith" (2010, p. 19) of the worldview based very much on this world that was implicit in their earlier work, was more explicit in this research and faith was particularly found in the "'secular trinity' of family, friends and the reflective self" (Collins-Mayo 2010, p. 32). The young people for example spoke about family and friends providing support and security, and the need "to believe and trust in themselves" (2010, p. 37). When individuals did draw upon their Christian tradition it was in prayer and this was often private prayer in what Collins-Mayo et al have termed 'bedroom spirituality' (2010, p. 45).

Whilst the work of Collins-Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006) provide useful large-scale studies of young people, they interpret these findings through a lens that looks at how to encourage young people back to the Church and the "future shape of the Church's mission" (Savage et al., 2006, p. 156). The final third of Savage et al.'s book is dedicated to the implications of the findings for youth work and Church, how the Church can authentically reconnect with young people. Mayo et al., 2010 describe that they divide their book into two parts: the first includes their research and findings from a sociological perspective, and the second, considers the findings in terms of their implications of mission and ministry and claims here to take a theological perspective, and makes recommendations for the Church's response to

their findings of patterns of contemporary faith. Using Hauerwas, Collins-Mayo et al argue that because “Christianity is incarnated rather than abstract truth”, it becomes real when it is acted out in a community of faith, and that Generation Y are lacking these communities that they belong to through which to do this (Collins Mayo et al., 2010, p. 94). Through this lens, they delegitimise formative spirituality and the ‘Happy mid-narrative’ found in their research using language such as “lesser”, “basic” and “deficit” to describe them. The ‘Happy midi-narrative’ they argue, is a “fraud” (p. 164), a “blindfold” (p. 151) that prevents true happiness which can be found only through experiencing the story of God: it makes them blind to “their true situation and their need of Christ” (Savage et al., 2006, p. 151). The focus, they argue, needs to be on moving this generation from formative to transformative spirituality. The assumption here is that transformative spirituality will be one in which the possibility of the Christian God is acknowledged and ultimately encountered, rather than other forms of transformative spirituality that may be realized other ways such as yoga and Paganism. Collins-Mayo et al use the term ‘unstoried Generation Y’ to argue that young people are, due to “memory-less” liberalism (p. 105), lacking the stories of God, with the implication that the only story of value is the Christian story: they are a “generation of people without a cohesive Christian story” (Collins-Mayo et al., 2010, p108). On the one hand then, Collins -Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006) present useful sociological research of the worldview of young people, however their theological interpretation of findings is to be questioned as it delegitmises the worldview of the young people without basis in their findings. This thesis therefore focuses upon their sociological investigations and findings as informative for this study, rather than their latter theological interpretations.

Day (2013a) explored the beliefs of young people without asking religious questions as an alternative approach to the closed questions that ask about affiliation that are often found on surveys that, Day argues, may not uncover the subtleties of religious identities and belief. Day’s research aimed to explore why the majority of British people in the 2001 census self-identified as Christian by asking people what they believe in. Day identifies the problem that belief “means different things to different people and varies according to the social context” (Day 2013a, p. 155). Within academia, belief is rarely explicitly addressed, remaining an “unspoken, implicit assumption within scholars’ work” (Day 2010b, p. 9). Day (2020) therefore advises of the necessity to define what is meant by ‘belief’ and how this may be distinct analytically from religion. In order to address this issue, and the ‘census question’ puzzle, Day devised a belief framework arising from her research findings that identifies seven dimensions of belief within two predominant belief orientations: anthropocentric and theocentric, arguing that belief is both organic and multidimensional. The seven dimensions of belief developed by Day (2013a) were:

content, sources, practice, salience, function, place, and time. Anthropocentrism is orientated towards the human and describes "the idea that human beings are 'centric' to their lives and it is with them they locate power and authority" (2013a, p. 157). Theocentrism is orientated towards the divine, with theocentrics citing "God and their relationship to him as central to their lives" (2013a, p. 157). These orientations, from which meaning, mores and authority are derived, may change over time and place. Day concluded from this work that "most people believe in their relationships with other people" (2013a, p. 173), with "those with whom they have adherent, affective reciprocal relationships, most commonly partners, family, and friends" (2013a, p. 156). This includes those with both an anthropocentric and a theocentric orientation, both having a similar function of creating a sense of belonging, although for those with a theocentric orientation whilst this may appear initially as individualistic, "closer examination usually shows a more connected sense of belonging" (Day, 2013a, p. 203). Day therefore relocates belief to the social, and argues that belief is more than the content of belief, that it also involves activity and is "relationally produced":

> The activity of 'doing belief' is described as an active, reflective orientation towards belief arising from human, emotional interaction and personal reflection (Day 2013a, p. 193).

Therefore Day (2013b) argues that belief can be more than propositional belief, that is a 'belief that', and illustrates three varieties of belief that were present in a further exploration of the data with young people in which she further developed her typology of belief. This exploration of the data from the 25 of her 68 interviewees that were young people aged 14-19 (from three schools in northern England) as well as class discussion found that the findings reflected those of her overall study. These young people were more likely to believe in belonging, to find meaning and happiness in the social and the everyday, and that their moral authority was guided by social rather than religious authority. Belief therefore has become located, says Day in the "mundane and temporal" rather than "the transcendent and spatial" (Day 2010a, p. 103). Day found that young people, in particular, displayed this sense of "belonging to connected selves", that their identity was expressed in relation to others, to belonging, to being connected to one another, and "belonging to adherent, reciprocal, emotional, legitimate relationships" (Day 2013a, p. 204). This finding therefore, says Day, challenges dominant theories of individualism as the young people in her study in particular, had narratives of belonging and connectedness, rather than individualism.

Day's typology of belief included propositional belief, performative belief, and felt (emotional, embodied) belief, all of which are inter-linked and inter-dependent and,

rather than being an exhaustive typology of belief, Day argues, acts as an analytical tool to understand the complexity of belief and how it may change (Day 2013b, p. 290). Propositional belief refers to 'belief that': "a statement that can be held as true but not provable" (2020, p. 196) such as a belief that God exists or a "belief in the doctrine of ever-lasting life" (Day, 2013b, p. 286). Day refers to 'felt' belief as emotional and embodied, such as a belief in the importance of family and argues that "felt beliefs do not act independently from propositional beliefs. Together they fuel transformations that become performative through repeated practice" (Day 2013b, p. 287). Performative beliefs are described as "beliefs that are brought into being through rituals or social acts and then repeated to reinforce their salience and function" (Day 2013b, p287). Day asserts the importance of not only defining belief but using research methods that explore the varieties of belief. Day (2010b) gives the example of Davie who, Day argues, does not clearly define how she uses the term 'belief' in her 1994 'believing in belonging' work. Day argues that Davie's focus on propositional forms of belief may therefore mean that her findings reflect her research approach rather than the experiences of the participants. Day's approach therefore helps to understand the 'census question' puzzle because non-religious individuals may, for example, claim a religious identity for social reasons and a sense of belonging (Day, 2013b). The 'census question' puzzle is also addressed by developing the nature of nominalism and the variety within it: 'natal', 'ethnic' and 'aspirational'. The multi-dimensional framework developed by Day (of the seven dimensions of belief) was used to uncover how these varieties of belief varied in salience "according to the sources of belief and the time and place in which they were experienced" (2013b, p. 283). This multidimensional approach that identifies these interdependent orientations, argues Day, allows a move away from the binary categories of belief as 'religious' or 'secular' because it can include both the religious and non-religious (2013a). Following Day, this research asks students to self-define their religious identity using an open question, rather than offering binary choices of 'religious' or 'no religion or belief' as found in sector data. Day's work allows for a secular belief in the supernatural "without shifting the locus of power and authority from human" (2013a, p. 202) and this, she argues, contradicts some of the arguments for common, folk, invisible or implicit religion and challenges Davie's theory that people are 'unchurched'. Rather than using terms such as 'unchurched' or 'secular', Day suggests the term 'anthropocentric' which:

> …best describes people who may or may not describe themselves as Christian and may or may not attend church, but believe that human life is social, with meaning, power, and authority located in the social without a divine origin or authority (Day 2013a, p. 203).

These current studies then, have had a focus on Christian young people as their sample, and this, say Shipley and Arweck, is true of much of current research:

> Generally speaking, social scientific research on young people and religion has focused on Christianity and young people's socialisation in congregational contexts (Shipley and Arweck 2019, p. 3).

This focus on Christianity may in part be due to the availability and source of funding. The research by Aune et al (2019), for example, was funded by the Church Universities Fund and the work of Perfect et al (2019) by St Luke's College Foundation and published by Theos which describes itself in the introduction to the report as having a broad Christian basis. The work of Savage et al (2006) and Collins-Mayo et al (2010) are both published by Church House Publishing, which states that it is the official publisher of the Church of England. This is not the case for all research on religion and belief in higher education, however, with the CUE project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the Religion and Society Programme" (Guest et al., 2013, p. xi) and the 'Re/presenting Islam on campus' research project also funded by the AHRC and the ESRC 2015-18. The impact of sources of funding being gained from religious organisations is that this may steer the focus of the research. Whilst this work is of value, it means that there is proportionally less research that captures the individual nature of religious identity, and those that do not affiliate to a particular religion or belief, so these experiences may be under-represented. This research aims to also include the voices of those students that may not affiliate to a particular religion or belief to add to a breadth of understanding of students in higher education.

Whilst many of the students in the recent sector data that self-declared their religious identity affiliate to Christianity, we also see that almost half of the students stated that they have 'no religion or belief' (Advance HE 2020). It may be that students have chosen this category because they didn't feel that the other categories offered were suitable, rather than they have 'no religion or belief'. Wallis (2019), for example, in his photo- elicitation research with 23 fourteen-to-fifteen-year-olds that had chosen 'no religion' on the 2011 census found that that often the participants had chosen this because they didn't feel that any of the other options expressed their identity. Some participants here for example spoke about their belief in God, spirits, karma and reincarnation, others spoke about choosing this option because they wanted to convey that they were free to follow their own beliefs and to keep their options open, or that they didn't feel that they clearly fit into one category because they did not practice their faith regularly, or that their beliefs were not strong enough. As well as this category of 'no religion or belief' in the HE sector data then potentially not

representing the beliefs of the students, it also does not capture potential differences amongst those that do not have a religion or belief.

2.6. Questioning current discourse about religion

Drawing on the literature outlined above, this thesis argues that in order to better understand the student experience of religion and belief on campus as it currently *is*, research in this area needs to be inclusive of both the strategic (those affiliated to a religion) *as well as* the tactical, the mundane, ordinary lives of the students and their everyday practice. It needs also to explore the individual and changing nature of religion and belief and the individual and complex nature of belief both within the category of religion, non-religious, and in-between. It needs to include those students that may be choosing to be less visible on campus, and those that may be less visible because they are not measured in a way that would render them visible (such as the categories used to measure religion and belief used by Advance HE). The importance of this is stressed by Dinham (2020) who argues that there is a "growing gap" between what "appears to be a *real* religion and belief landscape and one imagined by policymakers, professions and publics" (Dinham 2020, p. 92).

This research aims to contribute here, and in doing so, in broadening the lens to include a diverse range of students and experiences, it involves broadening the view on how religion is defined and measured and looking beyond the conceptual apparatus of the powerful. It is argued that the scholarly study of religion has also developed within, and been influenced by, its historical, social, and political context (Orsi 2002; McGuire 2008; Bender et al., 2013), that the strategic has informed religious scholars understanding of religion (Woodhead 2013). Those who study belief and practices beyond the dominant definitions, have until recently, suggests Orsi, been seen as working on the fringes, "working the midway" (Orsi 2002, p. 171). The conceptual apparatus through which the academic study of religion is viewed and studied, it is argued, is limited by its context because it has been created by those with power, and therefore focuses on the experience of the powerful (McGuire 2008; Bender et al., 2012). McGuire (2008) cites Luckmann as an example of this, who argued that there was a range of individual religious practices and beliefs that did not fit into authorised 'official' religion and therefore had not been regarded in research as religious, and therefore has remained largely 'invisible religion' (McGuire 2008, p. 17). The voice and experiences of ordinary laymen and women, disregarded as 'other', may be missing from this conceptual apparatus that has been based on "elite individuals' religious expressions" rather than "ordinary laypeople" (2008, p. 25). These conceptual tools are typically Euro-American in bias, and therefore may not be sufficient for those religions not made in this image:

> Are there not serious biases affecting our interpretations if we privilege, by our fundamental definitions, those expressions of religion that served (intentionally or not) the political purposes of social elites, colonial powers, males, and victors? (McGuire 2008, p. 24).

In broadening the lens then to include this range of experiences and considering that what has been defined as religion (or not) may have been socially constructed involves engaging in current debates about what is and is not religion, and challenging current definitions and academic discourse on religion. It is argued that the current definitions and academic discourse surrounding religion do not sufficiently capture the complex, often incoherent, and changing nature of individual everyday experience (McGuire 2008) and the idiosyncratic nature of religious identity (Woodhead 2012). The restriction of these definitions (and academic discourse) has meant that beliefs and practices that do not conform to the dominant view of what is considered 'real' religion have either been ignored or discounted (McGuire 2008), or redefined as, for example 'superstition' or 'magic' (Woodhead 2013). Woodhead gives the example within sociology and anthropology of practices and belief that do not fit in to the elite definitions of religion being defined as 'fuzzy', and 'insubstantial' (2013, p. 11). Questioning these definitions and boundaries, and acknowledging their limitations because of the social, political, and historical context within which they were created, involves the recognition that properties of 'religion' and 'the sacred' are not inherent (McGuire 2008). It involves questioning, says McGuire, whether the sacred can be experienced within everyday life, rather than the sacred being separate from the mundane (as Woodhead argues, the strategic had a vested interest in separating the sacred from the mundane in order to maintain power). Ammerman, as does McGuire, therefore questions the distinction between sacred and profane spaces as it was found in her research that the sacred may, for some individuals, be found in sacred spaces, and for others it may be found in secular and social spaces. She also found that the sacred and profane can sit alongside one another, such as keeping religious objects on the desk at work, or praying with work colleagues about personnel issues (Ammerman 2014a). McGuire also questions whether 'religion' necessitates the worship of a supra-human being, a deity, or the supernatural, and whether religion that doesn't fit into 'official' definitions of religion is any less religious (McGuire 2008).

Questioning the discourse and current definitions of religion also involves reflecting on the language, questions, and instruments that are used when researching religion (Woodhead 2013). Day found that changing the questions used to explore religion and belief gave insight into how individuals' responses in the census survey may differ from their beliefs. She gives the example here of a young man who, when asked in an

interview ‘What do you believe in?’ answered "…I'm Christian but I don't believe in owt" (Day 2009, p. 95). Day used open-ended questions that were not overtly religious and encouraged participants to challenge her definitions and language. She found that this method allowed informants the opportunity to discuss their beliefs without using a religious framework. This provided an insight into a more complex nature of belief, one that is tied up with identity and social belonging, than was uncovered by the questions on the census survey.

This challenging of the current definitions and academic discourse about religion is, Beckford argues, one of the current challenges facing the sociology of religion, that between the ‘social’ and ‘religion’:

> Overall, then, the sociology of religion faces challenges to its central categories of ‘the social’ and ‘religion’: it appears to be trapped between a rock and a hard place. According to Milbank, there is nothing social with which to explain religion. And according to the advocates of critical religion there is no such thing as religion to ‘sociologise’ about (Beckford 2018, p. 209).

Savage et al (2006) explain that there have been two broad approaches to the study of religion within the social sciences: substantive and functional approaches. Substantive definitions of religion focus on what religion is, and “have to have an explicit connection with a transcendent or supernatural reality” (Savage et al., 2006, p11). A substantive approach is one that has been particularly favoured by sociologists of religion that adopt a Weberian view. Weber focused upon the role of the individual, believing that “all people share a search for ‘meaning’” and believed that spirituality was becoming more individualised due to the rationalization of society (Day, 2020). This assumption that all individuals are searching for meaning has, argues Day (2020), rarely been challenged, despite its influence within the sociology of religion. Durkheim saw the function of religion was to provide social stability, to connect the individual to society to support the individual’s “need for belonging and society’s need for stability and cohesion” (Day 2020, p. 17), and predicted that religion would always be present. All religious categories were therefore seen by Durkheim as social, rather than deriving from a transcendent universal reality as Weber believed. Day (2020) explains that he believed that when individuals are together and feel a sense of “collective effervescence”, a sense of unity, interconnectedness, and part of something bigger than themselves, this feeling is projected onto something outside of themselves which then becomes sacred (Day 2020, p. 14). However, these narratives have since been viewed as “gender-blind” because their focus has been on male experience whilst claiming to explain universal experience (Woodhead 2001b), and there is a need for this gender imbalance in social

theory to be addressed (Day, 2005). Day argues that belief "has its own genealogy as it moves through time and spaces, taking on the assumptions and hues of the people who use it (Day 2010b, p. 9). A functional definition of belief is one that, argues Day, has been favoured by anthropologists of religion, seeing belief as a "social reality" (Day 2013a, p. 191), and focuses upon "what religion does" (Day 2020, p. 20). A substantive approach is one that has been particularly favoured by sociologists of religion that adopt "a Weberian, meaning-centred understanding of belief", tracing belief "to a transcendent universal reality that could not be reduced to other social realities" (Day 2013a, p. 191). Anthropological research has tended to focus upon the everyday and domestic, whereas sociological research has tended to focus upon the institutional and societal (Day 2013a, p. 27). However, as raised by (McGuire 2008) and Day (2013b) what has been defined as 'religion' and 'belief' has been determined by its social and historical context. Day here describes how religious leaders, for example, "shifted the emphasis of religious adherence from observable practice to private religious belief" with the influence of the rise of science in the seventeenth century (Day 2013b, p. 282).

On the one hand, then, religion has been considered (and therefore studied as such) as existing independently of the social, with a connection to the sacred (in the substantive view). However, a critique of this view is that what is 'sacred' in itself "is also ripe of analysis in terms of its own social and cultural constructions" (Beckford 2018, p. 204). On the other, if we view religion as socially constructed, at what point are we only studying the social rather than religion, at what point does there become, as Beckford argues, "no such thing as religion to 'sociologise' about" (2018, p. 209). Beckford argues that a "critical attitude towards the concept – or better concepts – of religion is essential" (2018, p. 210), and as part of achieving this understanding, argues for the importance of studying 'the social' as an "indispensable category for understanding religion" (2018, p. 207) in order for the sociology of religion to continue to contribute towards understanding the social dimension of religion. As 'religion' is a term that continues to be used within both social and cultural life, it is important, says Beckford "to be as clear as possible about the diversity of meanings that 'religion' carries and the variety of ways in which the term is used in different social settings" (Beckford 2018, p. 210). This study aims to also contribute here, to explore how the term 'religion' (alongside other terms such as 'spiritual' and 'meaning') are used and understood in the social setting of the university campus to add to this current debate within sociology of religion. In exploring this social aspect of religion on campus, it views the social, as Beckford describes, "as one dimension of reality alongside others - not necessarily as a 'social totality'" (Beckford 2018, p. 207), so does not disregard the substantive view of religion, rather, as explained (in section 3.2) it will start from the students' starting point. Beginning from the

students' starting point will also enable the differing experiences of religion and belief on campus to be captured that has been seen in previous research, such as the effect of other factors such as ethnicity and gender, students reporting both similar as well as differing experiences, and that some students become more, or less, religious during their time at university.

2.7. Communication about religion and belief

Previous research has highlighted the need for increased religious literacy (Dinham and Francis 2015; Modood and Calhoun 2015; Woolf Institute 2015; Dinham 2017; Guest et al., 2020), and this need is identified in society and educational institutions. The 'Living with Difference' report, for example, highlighted the need for improved religion and belief literacy "in every section of society, and at all levels" (Woolf, Institute 2015, p. 8), and Dinham highlights that the poor quality of conversations about religion in the public sphere is reflected in our educational institutions (Dinham 2015a). These conversations, argues Dinham (2017) need to account for the individuality and complexity of religion and belief, and recognise "that the same religions and beliefs are different in different people and places. Sometimes they differ within the same person, from one day to the next" (Dinham 2017, p. 212). Following their work exploring the experience of Muslim students on campus, Guest et al (2020) recommend that universities enhance "religious and cultural literacy, especially concerning Islam" (2020, p. 54). Religious literacy has primarily been defined as knowledge and understanding about religion. Modood and Calhoun, for example describe religious literacy as "promoting general knowledge of religion – one's own and those of others" (2015, p. 20). Dinham's (2020) work expands the notion of 'religious literacy' in recognition of the challenge of the "elasticity of lived religion" (2020, p. 4) to use the term "religion and belief literacy" in order to incorporate a range of beliefs, worldviews and values (Dinham 2020, p. 5).

This project is particularly inspired by one aspect of religious literacy that is perhaps less explored, and that is that not only is religion and belief changing, but that we have not got the *words* to talk about how it is actually being lived. Davie (2013) identified that we haven't got the vocabulary to talk about religion today, not only because religion and belief has changed, but because there was a period when secular theory was dominant, so it was less spoken about during this period:

> At precisely the moment that British people need them most, they are losing the vocabulary, concepts and narratives that are necessary to take part in serious conversation about religion (Davie 2013, p. xii).

Dinham cites Davie's address to the annual conference of the Religious Literacy Programme in 2011 in which Davie argues that this combination therefore "leaves us ill-equipped for the conversation now" (2015a, p. 51). Woodhead similarly identified this challenge about how to talk about religion in way that would reflect how it is actually being lived and experienced. The challenge is, argues Woodhead, as well as questioning existing definitions, to find the right words, the language, to describe current experience, to "talk about religion in the way it is actually being lived" (Woodhead, 2012):

> I feel as if I've been fighting two battles throughout my career. The first was to get religion taken seriously – and there's been progress. The second is to get the way we talk about religion linked up with the way it's actually being lived – and that's proving much harder (Woodhead, 2012).

Within the sociology of religion existing definitions and the boundaries of definitions are being questioned and new terms suggested that also have their limitations. Orsi argues that how we describe and analyse categories within sociology of religion may not reflect religion and belief as it is lived today, and that "a new vocabulary" is needed to reflect this (Orsi 1997, p. 11), and as has been discussed above, what is regarded as 'religious' or not is bound up with issues of power. This difficulty with what words to use to research, analyse and describe religion as it is lived today has been discussed by McGuire (2008) who suggests that often religion in practice does not fit into logical categories that intellectuals may wish to use to describe religion. As has been discussed above, McGuire (2008) also questions definitions of religion: whether 'religion' necessitates the worship of a supra-human being and whether religion that doesn't fit into 'official' definitions of religion is any less religious. Woodhead, reflecting on this issue of definitions, suggests perhaps using the term 'culture' or 'the sacred' to break away from the boundaries of the term 'religion' but reflects that these terms may also have limitations (Woodhead, 2013, p. 12). Day, whilst acknowledging that "terms such as 'meaning', 'belief', 'religion', 'change', and 'identity' are all, of course, contested" (Day 2013b, p. 278) is particularly critical of the use of the term 'meaning' when there is no acknowledgement of its limitations. Day (2013b) also cites Robbins who suggests that 'meaning' may be indicative of the researchers' search for meaning. Robbins (2006, p. 212) describes Barthes' view that the idea that one must make and find meaning in life derives from Christian inheritance:

> Furthermore, through Christianity, the problem of meaning, of making it, and finding it, confronts Westerners as an imposition…finding and making all of life meaningful is not an option, it is a duty (Robbins 2006, p. 212).

Robbins (2006, p. 213) describes that Asad takes this further, by linking the term 'meaning' to issues of discipline and power, and Day (2020) suggests that a focus on meaning is gendered, with male scholars seeming to "privilege the contemplation of 'meaning'" (Day 2020, p. 23), reflecting the issues with which I have been aware of throughout the project, that what has been regarded as 'religious' for example, has been influenced by those with power (Orsi 2002; McGuire 2008).

The complexity that is seen within 'religion' is also seen within the terms 'no religion' and 'non-religion': Day, for example, argues that 'no-religion' may not mean the "rejection of an other-worldly numinous quality of life, or even of afterlife" (Day 2020, p. 194). Day cites the work of Lee (2015) who described the secular as the "absence of religion", and 'non-religion' as "anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion" and found that self-identification of 'non-religion' was not necessarily an indication of secularisation (Day 2020, p. 195). Lee concludes that there are limitations of 'non-religion' as a category but that it acts as a necessary 'placeholder' category from which to continue further work to develop these categories (Lee 2015, p. 194). Cheruvallil-Contractor et al (2013) caution against using the frame of religion to research non-religion, and advise against the narrowing of categories to either 'religious' or 'non-religious' in order to understand and capture the diversity of the non-religious:

> If it is possible to conclude anything at this early juncture it is probably that, as far as might be possible, an effort should be made to understand the 'non-religious' in their own right and in all of their diversity (2013, p. 189).

The categories of religious and non-religious, they argue, should be considered as "poles to which individuals relate, rather than as tightly sealed boxes" (2013, p. 188). In addition, the existing categories used to describe religious identity in terms of affiliation to a religious organisation may also not be adequate. Research with young people aged 13-16 by Arweck (2013), for example, found that in many cases the young people's religious identity was more complex than the labels used to describe them. Whilst those from religious families were more likely to describe a distinct religious identity, some young people were using an ethnic identity to refer to their religious identity, and others using the term 'religious' independently of a particular affiliation to an established religion. Those with a non-religious identity described this in different ways, such as "'not settled in a religion' or 'interested in religion'" (Arweck 2013, p. 117) illustrating a diversity of identities within the same label. Exploration of the student experience of religion and belief on campus then, needs to also consider the diversity both within and in-between the categories of the religious and the non-

religious, and acknowledge, as Scott-Bauman et al (2020) advise, that the categories of religion and non-religious may not be sufficient to understand the student experience (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020, p. 230).

This research then, also aimed to explore how religion and belief is being communicated on the university campus as a way of contributing to current debates in this area, with the view that if we start with how religion and belief is currently being talked about this can then *also* inform how to describe, research and analyse religion and belief as it is experienced today. It is particularly interested in this aspect of religious literacy *in practice*, that is, how words and definitions are used in conversations and descriptions by the students, as well as *communication beyond words*.

2.8. Chapter summary

This chapter has identified that there is relatively little research on understanding student faith and belief and how this contributes to the student experience compared to other aspects of the HE student experience, and much of this has tended to focus upon students that affiliate to a religion. Focusing only on affiliation to a religion, it has been argued, is just part of the picture, only one lens from which to view religion, and does not include the experience of students that declare that they have no religion or belief. In addition, the existing sector data and research does not capture the extent to which the nature of religion and belief is changing, particularly among young people, its individual nature, and the everyday experiences in the ordinary lives of students and their practices. It has argued that the current definitions and academic discourse about religion is one of the current challenges facing the sociology of religion: the limitations of binary academic definitions of 'religion' and 'non-religion,' for example, do not sufficiently reflect the idiosyncratic and individual nature of religious identity. It has identified a gap in understanding about how religion and belief is currently communicated on campus and argues that an understanding of how religion and belief is currently communicated (rather than beginning with existing academic categories) can be a first step to inform these debates.

The next chapter presents the aims of this thesis and how these contribute to the gaps identified in this literature review. It draws upon the term 'meaning-making' as used by Guest (2017) to reflect a breadth and diversity of experiences, as well as reflecting upon the limitations of this term. It outlines the research approach, design, methods and analysis used, as well as reflecting upon the methodology, validity, researcher positionality, and ethics.

Chapter 3. Research methodology

This chapter describes the research aims that arose from the analysis of the current literature and reflects upon the challenges faced with language when phrasing the research aims for this project. It then states the research approach and research design and outlines the research methods used: a postcards method that was devised for this project, participant-generated photo-elicitation interviews and a 'card sort' method. It describes the development of the term 'meaning-stories', derived from the findings and analysis in this study and from the advice of the students, and its use to capture the breadth of students' contributions without the constraints of existing definitions and categories. This chapter also: describes the method of data analysis; reflects upon the methodology; outlines strategies that were used to support validity; and reflects upon researcher positionality and ethics.

All visual materials referred to in this chapter are illustrated in Appendix 1.

3.1. Research aims

In writing this thesis, I was aware that existing words and academic categories (such as 'religion', 'belief', 'meaning-making' 'affiliation to a religion') needed to be used to conduct the research as well as to describe and discuss the findings, because these are the words that are currently used and understood. As argued by McGuire, individuals' experience of lived religion, and therefore the way that they talk about their beliefs and practices, may be unlikely to fit into neat categories that academics may use (McGuire 2008), and there may not be consistency between individuals' beliefs and practices and rational cognitive thought (McGuire 2008). As discussed in the literature review, the current terms that we do use such as 'meaning' and 'belief' are also contested terms (Day 2013b). However current terms and categories to describe religion and belief are, from a practical research point of view, what are currently used and understood (both socially and academically). This posed methodological challenges, and became part of the project itself, to explore not only individuals' lived religion, their meaning-making and practices, and how they communicate about these, but also how can we ask about religion and belief in a way that is fitting and inclusive of the changing landscape of belief as it is today.

The research aims drew upon existing words used within literature and research that explores the student experience of religion and belief in higher education. Advance HE use the terms 'religion' and 'belief', when reporting upon the student experience (2018b: 2020). However, as discussed by Day (2020), from a sociology of religion viewpoint, the terms 'religion' and 'belief' should be analytically distinct and defined. The focus of Advance HE is primarily upon quantitative data collection using religious

vocabulary and as such, focuses upon what Day would describe as propositional belief: what has been captured therefore may reflect the research approach rather than the totality of experience (Day, 2013a). When devising the aims, I needed to find a word to use that would include the breadth and diversity of student experience that I was aiming to capture in the first research aim. As we have seen already, Dinham (2020) progressed the use of the term 'religious literacy' to 'religion and belief literacy' to be inclusive of the range and diversity of experience, and this study wanted to find a similar term to use that would be inclusive of a range of beliefs and practices. However, it was felt that using 'religion and belief' wouldn't be broad enough to also include those with non-religious beliefs (or anything in-between). I therefore drew upon the term 'meaning-making' as used by Guest (2017) for the first research aim because it can be used to reflect a breadth and diversity of experiences. Guest here calls for "…future studies of student faith taking an ethnographic approach alert to the subtleties of meaning-making among the student population" (Guest 2017, p. 218). Here, Guest is referring to this as a way of exploring student reflexivity and reflection on their faith as they study at university and a further exploration of student identity (particularly in relation to the compartmentalisation of faith from study as discussed in the literature review). The term 'meaning' is not without its limitations as discussed in section 2.7, and this, along with the benefits of this term is discussed further in sections 3.4, but it was decided that was the best word to reflect the breadth of experience that I was aiming to capture in this study. The term 'meaning-making' in this study was used to describe a breadth of experience that includes students' religion, belief, their everyday practices, and where they find meaning. The second aim uses the terms 'religion and belief' because these are the words most commonly used to describe the gap within religious literacy, and the third research aims uses the terms 'religion and belief' and refers to meaning-making in order to reflect the breadth that the method aimed to capture. However, as will be discussed in section 3.5, following the analysis, the terms were further developed as the research progressed to reflect the breadth of the students' contributions: 'meaning-stories' and 'regular practices' were favoured to better reflect what has been captured within this thesis when referring to the students' contributions.

The research has the following aims:

<u>1 To explore a breadth of meaning-making in HE</u>

In order to be inclusive of the range of experiences of religion and belief, this research aims to also include the voices of those that may be less visible, and everyday practice on campus. It also aims to also capture the mundane, the everyday experiences in the ordinary lives of students and their practices, and the individual, complex, and changing nature of religion and belief that is seen in students both within the categories of the 'religious' and 'non-religious' and those in-between.

2. To explore how religion and belief is currently communicated

This aims to contribute to current debates about religious literacy and the gap identified previously, that we do not have the religious literacy to talk about religion and belief as it is lived and experienced today by exploring how religion *is* being communicated in order to add to this debate. Religion and belief literacy in this research is used to mean the aspect of literacy in the sense of *communicating about religion and belief,* such as the words that are used, as distinct from the broader meaning of religion and belief literacy as knowledge and understanding about religion. This research also aims to contribute practically here, to use the findings to inform and make recommendations about how to talk about religion and belief on campus in an inclusive way and contribute towards positive conversations about religion and belief on campus as called for by Stevenson (2017).

3 To explore methodologies to research religion and belief

This research aims to contribute to debates within sociology of religion about how to research religion and belief in an inclusive way that does not delegitimise any forms of meaning-making. It also aims to contribute to current debates about how to ask about religion and belief without using religious language, as well as, practically, how to research that which may be difficult to put into words, and that which may be very private, such as how to capture the thoughts of those students that do not want to share their religious identity with their peers.

3.2. Research approach

Day (2020) explains that the view of religion as either functional or substantive may guide the research approach taken. A functional view, that focuses upon what religion does, "will include researching its mechanisms and effects", and a substantive view, one that focuses upon what religion is, is more likely to focus upon the object of worship and the nature of worship (Day 2020, p.20). However, as discussed in the literature review, Beckford (2018) argues for a critical approach to be taken towards the concept(s) of religion. Beckford recommends that social scientists do not impose their own definition of religion because of the "wide extent of uncertainty and disagreement about what counts as religion in everyday life" (Beckford 2003, p. 20) and here refers to the work of McGuire (2003), that "the history of disputes about what counts as religion or 'true' religion is long and bloody" (Beckford 2003, p. 13). Beckford states his position as nearer to that that of the" methodological agnostic" in that he recommends focusing upon "the uses human beings make of religion" (Beckford 2003, p.29) as this leaves open the more difficult to prove question of the existence of divine or supernational powers. Rather than focusing upon definition, therefore, Beckford advises to "map the varieties of meaning attributed to religion in

social settings, to discern the relative frequency of the prevailing meanings and to monitor changes over time" (Beckford 2003, p.20). As discussed in the literature review, Beckford (2018) argues for the importance of studying 'the social' as one dimension of religion (rather than its totality) in order for the sociology of religion to continue to contribute towards understanding the social dimension of religion, and the importance of understanding the different ways that 'religion' is used in social settings, and the different ways that the term 'religion' is used and understood.

This study takes a critical approach to the definition of religion, as recommended by Beckford (2018) and does not impose a definition of 'religion' (or terms such as 'spiritual' or 'meaning'), rather as part of the approach will raise the problem of language with the students and ask for their view (see section 3.4.). Rather than starting from the position of whether the everyday experience of meaning-making can be categorised as either 'religion' or 'social' the research aims to explore this from the individuals starting point: asking in a way that starts with the individual, how they describe and communicate about their meaning-making, in a way that does not exclude those forms of meaning-making that may not include the transcendent, and that regards non-religious beliefs (and other forms of meaning-making) as just as important as other kinds of meaning-making. The study therefore aimed to avoid externally determined categories in favour of allowing respondents to contribute what is meaningful to them, using their own categories, to provide the space to hear their words, their language and communication beyond words, without being constrained by social or academic categories. It listens to how students communicate about their meaning-making to gain insight into how meaning-making is communicated, rather than beginning from the starting point of existing academic categories. In taking this stance, then, the research design needed to ask about meaning-making in a way that was: inclusive, to include a breadth of meaning-making; and non- judgemental, that would not, for example, delegitimise non-religious beliefs as has been found for example in the work of Smith and Denton (Day 2013) or place more value on some aspects of meaning-making than others.

This study is interpretative in its approach in that it aims to understand meaning-making from the view of the students. An interpretivist epistemology reflects the view that people and their institutions cannot be effectively studied using a scientific model because of their fundamental difference to the natural sciences. Interpretivism therefore focuses upon understanding human behaviour rather than forces that may act upon it (Bryman, 2014). Drawing on Weber's notion of *verstehen*, interpretivism therefore aims to understand the social world from the perspective of those that are being studied rather than focusing on the cause of social action (Henn et al., 2006). However, as discussed in the literature review, whilst Weber's work has greatly

influenced the sociology of religion, his work has been critiqued because of the assumption that he makes that people are searching for meaning (Day 2020) and that his work claimed universal experience whilst focusing upon male experience (Woodhead, 2001b; Day 2005).

When taking an interpretative approach, Bryman argues, there are two further interpretations that take place. Firstly, that the researcher provides their own interpretations of others' interpretations and secondly, that these researcher's interpretations are then "further interpreted in terms of the concepts, theories, and literature of a discipline" (Bryman 2004, p.15). This study therefore acknowledges the researcher's interpretations in the telling of the students' stories and argues that the photographs are, as artefacts, aspects of the meaning-stories that, in themselves, are not retold by the researcher (see section 3.5). In line with interpretivism, this study uses qualitative methods to allow the students to describe their meaning-stories in their own way.

Lived religion as an additional lens

This study draws upon the use of an *additional* lens put forward by Ammerman in order to explore experience, that of lived religion. It draws upon a lived religion approach to capture the individual and complex nature of meaning-making, and students' everyday meaning-making activities, with a focus on *what* students do as part of their meaning-making and *why*, from the *individual student view.* The concept of 'everyday' religion is also used to "privilege the experience of nonexperts", and to focus on "activity that happens outside organized religious events and institutions" in order to add to our understanding of religion (Ammerman 2007, p. 5). 'Lived religion', says Ammerman, involves exploring activities that are seen as spiritual or religious by those engaged in them, even if they would not be defined as such by others (Ammerman 2014a). Ammerman (2014a) explored actions that would be described as 'spiritual' by those that were describing their actions, and asked participants to describe "activities that were important enough to them to try to make sure to do them every day". Ammerman here uses the term "practices of everyday life" (2014a, p. 15) and "stories about practice" (p. 58) to describe these. McGuire similarly starts with individual experience, rather than affiliation, and uses the term 'lived religion', defining it as "how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives" (McGuire 2008, p. 12). The focus is on understanding individuals' religion as experienced in everyday life, and here McGuire uses the terms "religions-as-practiced" (2008, p. 5) and "everyday practice" (2008, p. 80):

> What might we discover if, instead of looking at affiliation or organizational participation, we focused first on individuals, the experiences they consider most important, and the concrete practices that make up their religious experience and expression? (McGuire 2008, p.4).

A range of methods have been used to better understand individuals' everyday lived experience of religion. McGuire, for example, conducted research in the US over several decades to explore lived religion using interviews, including interviews that avoided using the term 'religion' (2008, p. 10). Bender used participant observation to explore "how volunteers practiced religion in the course of their everyday lives", in a volunteer-run kitchen in New York that provides meals for those with AIDS (2003, p. 1). More recently, a variety of different methods have been used to explore everyday lived Islam in Europe such as: life-story interviews and participant observation (Jeldtoft 2013); interviews that included a self-identification exercise (Nilsson DeHanas 2013); mixed methods (Roson 2013); a large-scale survey and interviews (Jenson and Kuhle 2013); and long-term ethnographic research (Tiilikainen,2013).

McGuire, in her study of lived religion, found that individuals may not agree with the institutional beliefs of the religion that they are affiliated to, that they may choose to engage with more than one religion, and that their engagement with religion may change over time. Interviewees gave examples of their spiritual practice in everyday life, such as gardening, meditation, preparing food, and social activism (McGuire 2008). Individuals' religion was complex, malleable, and diverse, with sometimes inconsistency between the professional life and personal life of an individual, and here McGuire gives the example of a nurse, who in her personal life offers healing. McGuire also found that lived religion could be both an individual and a shared experience. Similarly, Woodhead argues that everyday religion is not restricted to the domestic sphere, and that a current gap in the study of everyday religion is that which takes place in the social domain, of "'lived – life' trajectories", such as in schools and the workplace (Woodhead 2013, p. 15). It is important, argues Woodhead, that everyday religion is not seen as only experienced in the domestic and private sphere, and therefore not relevant to social, political and public life. A focus on everyday religion provides a view of less visible forms of religion, and "prompts the question of what *more* there is to religion" (Woodhead 2013, p. 12).

The use of lived religion and its focus on the everyday, the mundane, to explore religion and belief on campus will therefore provide access to the less visible, and will enable the everyday practices of students to be captured of those that both affiliate to a religion and those that do not. It does not privilege lived religion as a *better*

approach as is cautioned by Cotter (2016) rather one that is fitting in this context to explore the individual experience and diverse nature of religion and belief on campus.

Whilst this study draws upon a lived religion approach, the 'religion' aspect of the term 'lived religion' conveys a narrower focus than the breadth of this study: as discussed in section 3.5 'meaning-stories' was chosen as a broader term that was more appropriate for this research. The research also follows the work of Ammerman (2014a) who regarded activities as religious if they were treated as such by those that were engaged in those activities rather than the views of outsiders, and will take the views of the students themselves about their meaning-making activities, rather than the views of outsiders. In doing so, therefore, it will start at the students' starting point, and will not privilege any forms of meaning-making over another.

It is worth noting here then the boundaries of this study. In keeping with the aim of not privileging one view above another, this research will not assign categories (such as religion, belief, spirituality) to students' meaning-making, nor will it test the effectiveness of their meaning-making (such as evaluating whether an activity does provide meaning to the student). It also does not measure whether what gives students' meaning changes during their time at university. These are beyond the scope of this study but there is potential for further exploration of these areas in future studies.

3.3. Research design

In line with interpretivism, the research approach is qualitative, small-scale, and in depth, enabling an insight into individuals' interpretations of the world around them (Henn et al., 2006). An interpretative approach aims to allow participants to "provide an account of their world in their own words" (Henn et al., 2006, p. 14). Henn et al argue here that because language is a tool with which meaning is made, it is important to allow individuals to express meaning as they normally would through their language (2006, p. 14). Key to this research then is allowing participants to use the language that they choose to and not confining them by external definitions of what is or is not religious, as well as providing opportunities for contributions that are beyond words, and this was a consideration in the design of the research. Here it drew upon work by others who have also used non-religious words to explore this area such as Dunlop (2008), Day (2013a), and Ammerman (2014). The research has also drawn upon the pragmatist world view when designing the methods of data collection. The pragmatist worldview is driven by practicality: "what works" to address the research question" (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011, p. 41). The research context was also considered when designing the research methodology to create an inclusive method that encourages a range of students to take part.

3.4. Research methods

The research took place in one post-1992 university[3]. As argued in the literature review, universities are not a neutral space (Gilliat-Ray 2000), with universities positioning themselves differently with regards to faith and belief. The university has a chaplaincy team, and chaplaincy space on each of its campuses. At the beginning of this project, I would argue, the university sat within 'Soft Neutrality' according to Dinham and Jones' (2010) typology, with the institution primarily seen as secular, and faith as primarily private. However more recently there are some signs that religion and belief is becoming more visible, such as the appointment of a Multi-Faith Manager, and a Faith Ambassadors Scheme, so it appears that the university is moving towards the 'Repositories and 'Resources' aspect of Dinham and Jones' typology, in which faith is seen as a resource. The University (2018) Equality Information Data reports that for 2016/17, just over half of those students that provided this data (including overseas students), stated that they had 'no religion or belief', approximately a third declared that they were Christian, approximately 6% declared that they were Muslim, and the following categories all received responses of less than 3%: Hindu, Buddhist, Spiritual, Sikh, Jewish, and 'any other religion or belief [4].

The project used three different methods to achieve the research aims: a 'postcard method', participant–generated photo-elicitation interviews[5] and a 'card sort' method. Table 1 summarises the participants and timeline of these methods, and these are individually discussed in more detail in the following sections.

[3] The university has 3 campuses, named in this thesis: Campus 1, Campus 2 and Campus 3.
[4] These figures are intentionally vague to preserve the anonymity of the university.
[5] Throughout this thesis the photo-elicitation interviews have been described as PEI's or photo interviews interchangeably.

<table>
<tr><td>1 Postcard method</td><td rowspan="3">September 2017 to July 2018</td><td>2 Photo-elicitation interviews</td><td rowspan="3">February 2018 to July 2018</td></tr>
<tr><td>Field notes were taken of informal discussions with students whilst completing the postcards.</td><td>3 Card sort method</td></tr>
<tr><td>Participants:
• 306 postcards completed by students in a range of settings across three campuses (such as Welcome Week, Global Space[6], Chaplaincy, Wellbeing Week)</td><td>Participants:
• 17 interviews with students' self-declared religious identity as follows: Muslim (5); Christian (2); Buddhist (1); Pagan (1); Atheist (1); Atheist/Agnostic (1); Agnostic (2); non-religious (2); 'belief' (in interview described as own belief from a range of faiths) (1); and belief in a higher being (1)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Students were invited to challenge the language used at each stage of the project, and their views sought on how to talk about faith and belief with students.</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1: Summary of data collection methods and participants

3.4.1. The postcard method

To capture the views of those students that may not wish to share their religion and belief with their peers, and to provide opportunities for students to communicate beyond words, I devised what I have called here a 'postcard method'. As far as I know, this method has not been used before. This method also allowed me to use an image to explain the purpose of the research, and to invite students to take part in further research using a tear-off slip.

A postcard was created that asks students to draw or write a response to 'I find meaning when....' and includes a tear off slip that invites students to take part in further research (See Figure 3: Front face of postcard and Figure 4: Rear side of postcard). Students were provided with pens and a sealed collection box so that postcards could be collected anonymously.

The research design considered the current social and political climate where religion is viewed with anxiety (Dinham 2015b, p. 26) and fear (Orsi 2002). This is reflected in the university context, where, because the Prevent duty has been developed as part of the UK's counter terrorism strategy, religion and belief is often discussed in deficit terms, such as dealing with extremism on campus and where Muslim students in particular have been seen as a potential threat (Stevenson 2013). The research design aimed to be sensitive to students' experiences of discrimination, hypervisibility, and the context of anxiety and fear about religion, particularly for Muslim students both in society and on campus. It also aimed to be sensitive to those

[6] This is space open to all students that provides opportunities to connect with others through a range of events such as cultural events and opportunities to learn new languages, and events run in conjunction with the chaplaincy such as the community lunches.

students who may be choosing to keep their religious identity hidden from others, including their peers, and to those students that may feel that their religious identity on campus is unacknowledged and who wish for their voices to be heard. The design also needed to provide an opportunity for students to take part, for their voices to be heard, whilst remaining anonymous, even in front of their peers, and this was a particular consideration when choosing the postcard as a method of data collection. The choice of postcards as a method of data collection was therefore a pragmatic one in that it offered anonymity even when in front of peers because the postcards were collected in a sealed box, and students could post their postcards into the box themselves. The postcards also offered the option for participants to draw as well as write their response, as well as the opportunity for me as a researcher to use an image to explain the breadth of what I was trying to capture in the research. It was hoped that the postcard would engage students with the project, provide a safe method of starting conversations about religion and belief with students, and would elicit interest in taking part in the photo-elicitation interviews. Initially it was designed as a trial, so it was experimental as to how it would be received by students.

Reflections on language: what words to use on the postcard?

I wanted to find a way of asking about meaning-making on the postcard that would engage students with the project, that would encourage students in conversation about religion and belief, in a way that would include a range of beliefs including non-religious beliefs. In deciding which question to ask, I referred to previous studies and the words and questions they had used in their research. Ammerman (2014a) used a variety of methods including an interview asking participants to "tell the story of your life" (2014a, p. 14) and invited participants to use a disposable camera to take photographs of the "*important* places in your life" (2014a, p. 15). The participants were told of the researcher's interest in religion and spirituality and they believe that whilst this "influenced their selection of events for inclusion in their life story" the participants "were not utterly constrained by our interests" (Ammerman 2014a, p. 14).

Dunlop (2008) asked young people about "what they hope for, their beliefs, about the afterlife, their search for meaning, and the things that are significant to them in their daily lives" (Dunlop 2008, p. 17) and used the term *significant* in the 'Significance 'Week of my Life' Photograph Project', asking participants to "take three pictures a day for a week, of things that were significant to them" (2008, p. 31). Here, significance was defined as "that which tells us who we are and gives a sense of purpose to their existence" and included in the questions here was "whether the photos revealed how they find meaning in life" (2008, p. 31). In Dunlop and Ward's (2012) photo-elicitation exploration of the sacred with Young Polish migrants in

Plymouth participants were asked to "take photographs of what was *sacred* to them" (2012, p. 436). Like Dunlop (2008) this was one of several methods used including participant observation, focus group sessions, and taking part in a photography workshop. Following Day (2009) in the interviews they also asked participants 'what do you believe in?' as they wanted to explore "more about the sources of meaning making and the beliefs of the young Polish adults, but avoid overly religious overtones" (Dunlop and Ward 2012, p. 446).

Drescher (2014) used a variety of methods including focus groups, surveys, interviews, and participant observation to explore the "spiritual Lives of America's Nones" and asked directly about spiritual practice (2014, p. 253). Drescher defends this approach (in relation to Ammerman's approach of asking using non-religious terms then "looking for evidence of the spiritual in these narratives" (Drescher, 2016, p. 267)), by arguing that asking directly meant that participants reflected on their own spirituality. It was then the participants' interpretation of what was spiritual rather than a researcher's interpretation, and these direct questions Drescher suggests, "often prompted participants to consider as spiritual activities that they might not initially have thought of as such" (2016, p. 267). This, she suggests, contributed to the "elevation of relationships and practices of everyday life that would not often be marked by researchers as "spiritual"" (2016, p. 268).

Day, in her research that explored "What do people really believe in and how would we find out" (2013a, p. 28) opened semi-structured interviews with the question 'What do you believe in?' (2013a, p. 29) and explored morality, meaning, and transcendence within the interviews. Day (2013b) revisited this research in a longitudinal study that explored changes in belief over time, how theories of belief that arose from this initial research would be useful in explaining these changes, and whether the beliefs and relationships of the young people that Day had interviewed had supported them during times of change and transition. With reference to 'meaning', Day found in her initial research, that "few people, young or old, thought about the 'meaning of life', as they preferred to focus on the present and their more urgent concerns of relationships, jobs, and health" (Day 2013b, p. 278). She cites work by Smith and Patricia Snell, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), that found that "young people who are more religious think about the meaning of life more than those who are non-religious" (2013b, p. 278). As has been discussed in the literature review, the term 'meaning' is problematic when it is used without a consideration of its limitations (Day 2013b) because of the view it assumes (stemming from Christian inheritance) that meaning in life must be found, and its association with issues of discipline and power (Robbins 2006).

After reflection on the words used in the research above, the word that seemed most fitting to use for the postcard to include a range of beliefs, and that would engage students was to draw upon the term used by Guest (2017) of 'meaning-making' and ask about 'meaning' and to be open about its limitations. The advantage of using the 'term' meaning is that it is non-theistic and would therefore fit with the aim to keep a breadth of definition to include non-religious beliefs. It is a term that is broad in its usage, and indeed even within anthropology, it is one that has rarely been defined (Tomlinson and Engelke 2006, p. 8). It is also a word that is in everyday use, rather than words that may be seen as academic, such as 'everyday beliefs and practices', and 'lived religion', which may not be language and concepts recognised by students. 'Meaning' also appears to be a word that would engage students. Research by Astin and Astin (2010) with 3,700 college and university students in the US, found that three quarters of the students said "that they are "searching for meaning/purpose in life," and similar numbers report that they have "discussions about the meaning of life" with friends" (2010, p. 3). As all words considered are contested, and there didn't appear to be one word that would not have limitations, it was decided to use 'meaning' on the postcard and use the opportunity to explain the difficulty with participants, and gain their feedback and advice about how to talk about faith and belief. It was hoped that using the term 'meaning' therefore would be engaging and relatable for students from which to start conversations. The broadness of the term 'meaning' meant that it was also open to students' interpretation, and not limited to just the transcendent, that is, it was an open question and a definition of meaning wasn't given. This difficulty in finding the right word to use is therefore a reflection that religion and belief literacy (here meaning how to communicate *about* religion and belief) has been unable to keep up with the changing nature, breadth, and complexity of beliefs as they are lived and experienced today.

There was also consideration about how to phrase the statement on the postcard. 'I find meaning when…' was chosen (rather than 'where' or 'through' for example) because it was hoped that this would capture a breadth of responses and it was decided to use a picture on the front of the postcard to explain the breadth of possibilities. I therefore created a picture[7] to explain the breadth of what I was trying to do with the research. Day found in her research (2013a, p. 40) that participants wanted reassurance that they could talk about non-religious beliefs if they wanted to, and so it was hoped that the image, with the inclusion of a range of responses, would illustrate the breadth of potential responses. Again, this reflects the difficulty of religion and belief literacy. I as a researcher sought to try different a method of communicating what I was trying to achieve that was beyond words (although the

[7] Thank you to Paul Molineaux (flickr.com/paulmolineaux) for taking the photograph for the postcard.

picture also contains words) in the hope that the picture would communicate what I was trying to ask more effectively than using just the words 'I find meaning when…'. It was also hoped that by including pictures on the postcard image that it would encourage students to also draw as well as write their response to the question.

The range of examples given in the image are drawn from research findings by Ammerman who explored discourse used to describe the 'spiritual' in everyday life. Ammerman's theme of communal experience is for example represented in the postcard by 'worship with others', the extra-theistic as 'nature' and 'ethical spirituality' as 'doing charity work' (Ammerman 2014b). The photograph of the image was taken in a space where students were present (the Global Space), and as we were creating the image, two students added 'baking' and 'doing charity work' as their responses to the question. I also asked a student to write 'helping others' so that the handwriting would look different, and their mis-spelling of 'helping other' was kept in the image.

The option given to students to draw as well as write their response was decided in response to the challenge here that students may not be familiar with talking about their faith, they may not yet have articulated their beliefs, and they may find them difficult to put into words (Woodhead 2013). As seen in the literature review, students may also not be familiar with talking about religion and belief within the research context, with religion rarely talked about within education (Dinham 2017), and this is particularly the case on campus, with religion having a low profile within the research institution. The methods of data collection therefore needed to encourage that which has not yet been articulated to be articulated as part of the process, as Woodhead argues, researching lived religion involves considering how to uncover "unknown unknowns" (Woodhead 2013, p. 13). Here, I drew upon the use of pictures as used in health research when researching difficult to talk about subjects in the postcards. It was hoped that offering the option to draw (as well as write) responses would provide opportunities to capture that which can be difficult put into words. I drew here on the work of Guillemin (2004) and Guillemin and Drew (2010) who used drawings to explore individual's experience and understanding of illness such as women's experiences of menopause, heart disease, and postnatal depression. Guillemin and Drew argue that drawing is particularly useful when researching that which is difficult to put into words as it offers participants a "different way in" (2010, p. 178) and that visual methodologies offer a different way to respond as they "enable expression when words - as a starting point- often may not be possible" (2010, p. 179). In these menopause and heart disease studies, drawings were used at the end of individual interviews once rapport had been built. Participants were asked to draw their "understanding of menopause" (Gulllemin and Drew, p. 179) and "how they visualised

their heart disease" (Guillemin 2004, p. 276) and then asked to describe their drawings. The drawings themselves, together with participants' interpretations of their pictures were used in the analysis. The aim that participants could participant anonymously (even in front of peers) in the postcards research, meant that individuals' interpretations of their drawings could not be gathered in this study, so it was decided that rather than compromising the anonymity of the postcard method, the content of the postcards would be explored through the card sort exercise (see section 3.4.3).

The Postcard Project Information Sheet (see Appendix 4.1) provided further information about the project and was both attached to the postcard box and given to students where appropriate. The postcards were numbered so that they could be traced should a student wish to withdraw from the study, and a record kept of where and when postcards were completed (by number). The Postcard Project Information Sheet stated the aim of the project was "to explore what gives students' meaning in their lives, and in particular their everyday practices" to explain the breadth of the study. It included examples similar to those found on the postcard image such as 'meeting with friends and family, worship with others, being in nature, prayer, sports, religion, doing charity work, and mindfulness' and didn't include in this description about the project the words such as 'religious, spiritual, or non-religious' in order not to limit the categories here.

During the first week of using the postcards (and later where the opportunity arose), students were engaged in informal conversations about the project where possible and where appropriate I explained the aim of the project, and my difficulty with finding the rights words to talk about religion and belief in a way that would be inclusive of all beliefs, including non-religious beliefs. Students were asked for their opinions on what words to use, and to write an alternative question on the postcard if they were unsure of the term 'meaning'. Field notes were taken of these informal discussions with students. Whilst students were completing the postcards, I observed that some students completed them quickly, others took their time completing them: one student for example took about 20 minutes in front of a group of his peers. Some students talked about what they had drawn and/or written with their peers, others kept them hidden from peers, and some folded their postcards before posting them in the box. I was asked several questions by students such as: 'What are you studying?', 'What do you hope to find out?' and several students asked about what it was like to do a PhD, and how to gain funding. One student asked if I believed in God. A few students also asked 'what do you mean by meaning?' and in this case I explained what I was trying to do, and the difficulty I was having with how to ask, and asked them if they didn't like the question to write that on the postcard with any

alternatives they thought would be better. One student said that they did not have meaning in life, so I invited them to write me feedback on the postcard about the project instead. Only four students gave feedback on the question 'I find meaning when…' on the postcard, with the first student saying that they don't know the meaning of life yet, (Figure 6: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p94)) and the second student that they preferred the term 'motivation' (see Figure 7: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p123)). This student was very interested in the research and went on to take part in both the feedforward interview and the photo interviews. Two postcards responded that it is not necessary to have a meaning in life, or that there is not a meaning to life -see Figure 8: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p231) and Figure 9: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p240).

Some students commented on the postcard method: three said that they liked it, one said that they liked the option to draw, and one said that they liked that to answer the question, they had to stop and think about what they appreciate in their life. One student gave useful feedback on how to make the Information Sheet easier to read. Some students commented on the question that I asked such as: "it is quite deep"; "it is a question I often ask myself"; and "it is good because it allows you to reply in the way you want to".

I had not expected students to engage with the postcard research as much as they did and this may be due to a number of reasons: it was quick and easy to do, and in Welcome Week it appeared to act as an icebreaker for some students who discussed their thoughts with each other. Other students covered the postcards with their arms suggesting that the anonymity and privacy was appealing to some, as was found in King and Hemming's study (2012) using e-journals. It may also be that the question struck a chord with students as found by Astin and Astin (2010) (as discussed in section 3.4.1). Overall, this new 'postcard method' worked well in this context to engage the students, providing an opportunity for anonymous contributions and contributions beyond words, and has produced engaging artefacts that convey the 'feel' of the students' contributions.

Sampling for the postcard method

The postcards were used in a range of places across the university: at all three campuses, and in public, secular, spaces as well as in the chaplaincy spaces (see Table 2 below). To achieve this, I first engaged staff across the university with the project, such as staff from: Global Space, the Chaplaincy, Student Support Services, and the University Students' Union, who were all very helpful in providing

opportunities to access students[8]. Students who had left their contact details to take part in further research were contacted and invited to take part in the photo interviews. Due to wishing to keep the anonymity of the postcards the tear-off slips were detached from the postcards, and I did not keep a written record of which students subsequently attended the photo interviews[9].

[8] Several staff also asked to keep copies of the postcards.

[9] The student who completed postcard 123 (Figure 7: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p123)) was memorable in that we had a lengthy discussion when completing the postcard and that he went on to take part in the in both the feedforward interview and the photo interviews.

Date	Place	Numbers of postcards completed	Number of students who left contacts for further research	Notes
Monday 25 September 2017 Welcome Week	Campus 3 café	45	9	One person completed two postcards
Tuesday 26 September 2017	Campus 2 café	62	3	One student used two, one student posted a blank card
Wednesday September 2017	Campus 1 (Students' Union and university social spaces)	28	1	One student took one home
Thursday 28 September 2017	Campus 1 (Students' Union and University social spaces)	29	2	One postcard posted blank and folded and another kept by student
Monday 2nd October 2017	Sociology of religion lecture	15	Five on postcards and one extra on paper	One student only filled in contact details (and did not draw a picture)
Tuesday 3rd October 2017	Sociology of religion lecture			
Global Space - box taken in on 25 October and collected on 13 November	*Global Space*	*10*	0	*Five postcards went missing*
24 October 2017 - 4 January 2018	*Chaplaincy space at Campus 2*	*13*	5	
15 November - 14 December 2017	*Student Support Services desk*	*2*	0	
21 November 2017	Sociology lecture (second years)	18	1	
23 November 2017	Politics lecture (second years)	4	None	
Christian Union Meeting February 2018	Campus 1	18	3	I was invited to talk about the research and students invited to take part
6 February 18	Campus 2 Chaplaincy/Global Space Lunch	5	Nine left contact details (not all filled in postcards)	
Tuesday 6 March 18	Campus 3 Library Wellbeing Week event and Wellbeing evening event at Campus 1	16	Five left contact details	I took displays of completed postcards to these events
Wednesday 7 March 2018	Wellbeing Week Event Campus 1	11 plus two students just left contact details on the cards	10	I took displays of completed postcards to these events
Thursday 8 March 2018	Wellbeing Week Event Campus 1 and Campus 2	0	0	I took displays of completed postcards to these events
16 March 2018	Outside Prayer Room prior and after Friday prayers	4	0 (but many students took information postcards - see PEI sampling)	A member of the Islamic Society suggested this, and encouraged students to take part. I took displays of completed postcards to this event
14 May 2018	Global event in Campus 2 library	26	One on postcard and six left details on paper	I took displays of completed postcards to this event

Table 2: Postcard sampling: dates, places, and notes
Note: Dates and places listed in italics above are where the box, information sheet, and coloured pens were left in a space without me being there. On collection of the boxes from Chaplaincy and the Global Space, chocolates and a thank you card for taking part in the research were left in their place.

From March 2018, once a number of postcards had been collected, they were displayed whenever using the postcards with students, both in a frame (as illustrated below), and in two photo albums (see Figure 5: Displaying the postcards). This was done to engage students with the research (it was hoped both with completing the postcards and to encourage students to take part in the photo interviews), and students appeared genuinely interested to look at the postcards that other students had completed.

3.4.2. Photo-elicitation interviews

Participant generated photo-elicitation interviews was chosen as the advantages of photo-elicitation fit particularly well with the aims and challenges of exploring everyday lived religion. Participant-generated photo-elicitation is a visual research method that involves the participants taking photographs as part of the research process, which are then discussed in an interview with the researcher (Rose, 2016). This qualitative approach, that is in line with interpretivism, would allow the students to talk in more depth about their life being lived, from their own point of view, than had been provided by the postcards.

Students were invited to take between five and twelve photographs (or more if they would like to) on their mobile phone, over a fortnight that captured their everyday beliefs and practices, how these relate to their student life, and what, if anything, these bring to their student experience. The research drew upon diary research literature when deciding on the two-week period that students were asked to take the photographs. Hyers (2018) advises that the goal of the study and the length of the project need to be balanced with the likelihood of participant attrition, so it was hoped that this period would be sufficient to capture students' specific meaning-making activities, what they do on a daily basis, and give students the flexibility to fit the research within their busy student lives. Students were invited to take pictures of themselves, and to manipulate the photograph if they wished (such as changing the colours or using filters and effects) to allow students creativity in their communication. These photographs were then discussed in a follow up interview. At the end of the interview students were also invited to take part in a card-sort exercise (see section 3.4.3).

Photo-elicitation interviews are a method recommended by Woodhead (2013) to explore lived religion and have been used in this way by Ammerman to explore everyday religion with religious and non-religious people in Boston and Atlanta (Ammerman 2014a). Woodhead (2013) recommends an awareness of, and a sensitivity to, the relationship between researcher and participants when researching lived religion (Woodhead 2013) and this may be particularly important in the HE

context, where students may feel that their voices are not heard. The challenge, argues Woodhead, is to "capture the unarticulated" using instruments that are more open in which participants can determine the agenda (2013, p12):

> "…methodological innovation and sensitivity to power issues may give rise to the design and application of methods which tell us more not just about 'known unknown's, but even uncover 'unknown unknowns' – themes and topics which have previously fallen below the radar of enquiry" (Woodhead 2013, p13).

Photo interviews were chosen because placing the participant in the role of the 'expert' (as they discuss images in the interview) allows the participant to lead the interview as they describe their photographs (Rose 2012). Keenan (2021) argues that whilst traditional research methods put the control of the boundaries of research in the hands of the researcher, alternative methods such as photo-elicitation interviews give control to the participant and can therefore access the unexpected, as the participant is both creator and interpreter of the image. Following his use of the photo-elicitation method to explore the everyday experiences of higher education students who identified as either bisexual or trans, Keenan reflects that:

> "…the co-existence of the roles of creator of the image (presenting everyday experience) and interpreter of the image (reflexively narrating and interpreting the image), allowed for unexpected flows to emerge" (Keenan 2021, p. 99).

Drawing upon the work of Harper (2002) and Samuels (2004) Keenan suggests that "photo-elicitation has the power to break the frame of both the researcher and the participant, opening up the unexpected and challenging borders of relevance" (Keenan 2021, p. 90). Photo elicitation interviews were therefore chosen because of their potential to capture the unexpected and not yet articulated by allowing the participant to direct the research in both the creation and interpretation of the photographs.

Photo-elicitation interviews are also a method that allow the participants to capture their experience in their own time rather than in the researcher's time and space (Woodhead 2013). Photo-elicitation interviews have also been found to be helpful in cases such as this project, where a method needs to encourage that which may not yet have been put into words. Rose, for example describes the advantage of photo-elicitation as a method is that it is an active process, and one which has been found to prompt "talk about things in different ways", and the previously unsaid (Rose 2012, p. 305), and, argue Dunlop and Richter (2010) "photographic images can operate on a subconscious level to elicit responses about meaning, identity, and

spirituality” (Dunlop and Richter 2010, p. 209). Visual methodologies have been found to be particularly useful for research with young people where they may not fully have developed and articulated their thoughts and ideas, argue Guillemin and Drew:

> …photographs act as a kind of communicative bridge for conceptualising and articulating aspects of their personal circumstances that they may not previously have considered in any depth; or they may not have the maturity of cognition or expression with which to formulate discussion and explanation of complex experiences and ideas (Guillemin and Drew 2010, p. 178).

Photo-elicitation interviews were also chosen because they have been found to be particularly useful when researching everyday experiences. The process of taking images of everyday experience, and then discussing these images, involves a reflective process that has been found to be “particularly helpful to uncover everyday taken for granted things in their research participants’ lives” (Rose 2012, p. 306). It provides, argues Rose, “a distance from what they are usually immersed in and allows them to articulate thoughts and feelings that usually remain implicit” (2012, p. 306). They were also chosen because they have been found to facilitate discussion about the emotional, the affective, that is not usually uncovered in interviews: things are talked about in these sorts of [photo-elicitation] interviews that don’t get discussed in talk-only interviews” (Rose, 2012, p. 305). Rose here gives the example photo-elicitation research by Croghan and Hunter in 2008 that enabled discussion about race, ethnicity, and religion that had not been discussed previously. In addition, participants have reported the method to be “easy and fun” (Rose 2012, p. 307).

As faith and belief, what gives meaning, may be difficult to put into words, the research also drew upon multi modal approaches as outlined by Pink (2011). Pink argues that within phenomenological anthropology the senses are seen as interconnected, that we talk about the five senses as a way of communicating and describing them verbally, but they are experienced as overlapping and interconnected. The use of visual images, in this case photographs within the photo interviews, then may “evoke other sensory experiences” (Pink 2011, p. 266) and it was with this in mind that they were chosen as a method of data collection, and where appropriate in the interviews I prompted the sensory such as ‘can you tell me about any sounds or smells here?’ It also drew upon McGuire’s (2016) work that argued that we need to be attuned to participants’ sensory experiences, to be able to ‘sense’ religion. As a researcher, McGuire says, we need to be open to cultivate experiencing (as well as thinking) when doing research so that we as researchers are receptive to capturing sensory religious practice which she suggests, is “a core part of religious practice”, such as visual images, sounds, and smells, and this can be both an

individual and a communal sensory experience. This involves, as a researcher, not just thinking about experience, but experiencing experience by observing ourselves as researchers, and to remember experiencing (as well as thinking) when doing our research (McGuire 2016).

Students were given the option of including selfies because, firstly, they are commonly used in the "online everyday lives of most digitally connected people" (Iqani and Schroeder 2016, p. 405). Selfies have also been seen as a way that individuals can control the way that they express themselves, that they allow students to show their everyday behaviours themselves, illustrating, "not only "see this, here, now," but also "see me showing you me."" (Frosh 2015, p. 1610). Selfies have also been used by marginalized groups as a way of raising awareness about their rights, such as, as cited by Izani and Schoreder, the hijab selfie, where young Muslim women take selfies of themselves wearing their own choice of head covering as a response to Islamophobia (Iqani and Schroeder 2016, p. 407). In this way, then, it was felt that offering the option to take photographs of themselves, would perhaps offer students additional agency, an opportunity to include themselves in sharing their voice.

Reproduction of the photographs

Within visual research, it is important to consider the placement of images in dissemination of the research. Rose (2001) highlights the importance of considering how images are reproduced when writing about them so the reader knows what is being discussed. Similarly, Allen (2015) argues that the value of visual data viewed together with the interpretation is that the viewer of the images can judge whether their own interpretation of what can be seen corresponds to the interpretation of the researcher, rather than relying solely on the words of the researcher. There is also an ethical case for images to be viewed together with the research interpretation to ensure that the participant voice is not lost, in this case, for those students that chose to give permission to share their images for this research. Allen gives the example of a case where, due to altering the photograph to preserve anonymity, the meaning generated by the researcher conflicted with the narrative of the participant who took the photograph, resulting in a loss of voice for this participant. To preserve the visual integrity of the data, and to ensure that the participants' voice is not lost, the students' photographs (where students chose to give permission to do this) have been included in the appendix. Developing on the work of McGuire (2016), that as researchers we need to be receptive to capturing the 'sense' of religion, the inclusion of the photographs in this thesis also provides a 'sense' of the photograph to communicate to the viewer aspects of the students' meaning-story that may be difficult to put into words. As discussed in section 3.10, the photographs have been

included in the appendix in order to retain the 'wetness' of the students' visual contributions. The photographs are aspects of the students' meaning-stories that in themselves, as artefacts, have not been retold. Selected photographs have therefore been included in the appendix to allow the reader to experience the students' meaning-stories as they were presented.

Photograph instructions: the challenge of what words to use

Rather than starting from the position of whether the everyday experience of religion or belief can be categorised as either 'religion' or 'social' the research aimed to explore from the individuals starting point: asking in a way that starts with the individual, how they describe and talk about faith and belief, in a way that does not exclude those beliefs that may not include the transcendent, and that regards non-religious beliefs (and other forms of belief) as just as important as other kinds of beliefs. It therefore aimed to avoid externally determined categories in favour of letting respondents describe what is meaningful to them, using their own categories to provide the space to hear the words, the language, that students use without being constrained by social or academic categories. This posed a particular challenge in how to phrase the instructions for students about what to take for the photographs.

Reflections on language: the challenge of language as a research opportunity

The instructions needed to ask about faith and belief in a way that was: inclusive, to include a range of beliefs and practices (including non-religious beliefs); and non-judgemental, that would not, for example, delegitimise non-religious beliefs as has been found for example in the work of Smith and Denton (Day 2013); nor be so vague that they would not be understood by the students. It also needed to be relatable and engaging for students, whilst at the same time robust and defensible from an academic position. I was aware on the one hand of Beckford's (2018) call for robust, 'careful', and 'methodical' studies of the social and cultural construction of religion (and the need to defend this thesis!), as well as his call to include that which does not include the sacred as equally worthy of research and analysis (Beckford 2018). I was also aware that, as argued by McGuire, individuals' experience of lived religion, and therefore the way that they talk about their beliefs and practices, would be unlikely to fit into neat categories that academics may use (McGuire 2008). The current terms that we do use such as 'meaning' and 'belief' are, argues Day, also contested terms (Day 2013b), and Day here cites the work of Robbins (2006) that has been discussed in the literature review (section 2.7). However current terms and categories to describe religion and belief are, from a practical research point of view, what are currently used and understood (socially and academically) so, as McGuire argues, rather than disregarding these conceptual tools, it is prudent to understand how they have been socially and historically constructed and acknowledge their

limitations (McGuire 2008). I also found it difficult not to use the binary descriptions of 'religious' and 'non-religious' beliefs when explaining the breadth of the study. Although I also included that they could also be both of these, I still couldn't find the words to describe the breadth of the study in a way that would be understood by participants without using those terms, and this reflects again, the difficulty in practice of current religious literacy. In order to deal with this difficulty within the research, of how to ask about religion and belief in this inclusive, encompassing way, I decided to include this as part of the research, to also explore how students talk about their meaning-making, and how we can ask about this in a way that is fitting and inclusive of the changing landscape of belief as it is today. This challenge therefore became an opportunity, and I decided that to learn from this as part of the research I would be open with students about what I was trying to achieve, to explain this in different ways, as well as explaining the difficulty of language here and how to ask about this in an inclusive way, and to ask for their views on this.

The 'Photo-elicitation interview information sheet' therefore first described the research context and the aim of the research, and then explained the difficulty of finding the right words to include a breadth of beliefs and practices (see Appendix 4.5). The 'Photo-elicitation interview photo guidelines' gave different suggestions about how 'everyday beliefs and practices' could be understood and invited students to use their own understanding of these terms when taking the photographs (see Appendix 4.6). I was, here being "intentionally vague" (Williams and Whitehouse 2015, p. 311) in order to give space for students' own interpretations. A limitation of this approach is that by giving students different options for how 'everyday beliefs and practices' could be understood in the photography guidelines, I may be eliciting different answers depending on the different ways that students interpreted the instructions: as Day advises, "what people tell us about what they believe will be determined largely by how we ask them" (Day 2009, p. 99). However, it is also strength, as it allowed students to lead the conversations and talk about faith and belief in a way that made sense to them. A possible limitation of photo-elicitation as a method is that the participants will take photographs that they think the researcher will want to see, rather than of their actual experience (Rose 2012), so included in the instructions here was "you do not have to take photos that are interesting for others to look at".

Two feedforward interviews were also conducted in October 2017 with students to gain the student view on the method within which students were asked for their feedback on the project methodology, including visual ethics, language use, and feedback on the information sheet, photography guidelines, and consent form. This was prior to the ethics application for the photo interviews and after the postcard

method had begun. The students were both male students from within Social Sciences at the university and one described their religious identity as "I wouldn't say I was like religious I don't know I think about it all the time, I don't know what really I am religious wise, spiritual I am more" and the other as, "I am not really religious". These interviews reaffirmed the need to keep the breadth of the definitions open when describing the study to students, with one of the students explaining:

> "…it is very open I think if you were to do it in a more narrow sense that people would find it even more difficult I think the fact that you kept it open people can sort of answer it in their own terms" (Feedback Interview 1).

Students were also shown the written communications that I had created to explain the photo-elicitation research to students and in response to their feedback the information sheet was shortened, and the photo instructions shortened and renamed as 'What do you need to do?'

The interview

The room was set up ready prior to the student's arrival, and food and water offered to students to provide comfort during the interview. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to send the photographs to me by email with a signed consent form. The interview was based around discussion of the photographs, and therefore the interview and themes discussed were guided by each participant. In the interview, students were asked to discuss the images in order of preference, and to describe any photographs that they would have liked to have taken but didn't (Williams 2010). This was to also capture aspects that students may not have had the time or opportunity to take photographs of, including photographs of other people (as they had been asked in the photo guidelines not to take photographs of other people as the focus of their pictures due to ethical requirements). In addition, prompts and guiding questions were used where appropriate, and these were drawn from both previous research in this area and relate to the research aims of this project. Following Day (2011), students were invited to challenge the language used in the interview and following Ammerman (2014a), students were invited to use terms such as religious, spiritual, meaning, in their own way, and as can be seen in Chapter 6 students *did* use their own definitions of terms. I also explained to students that I was also trying to find the right language to talk about religion and belief with students in a way that makes sense to students (and that includes non-religious belief) and that I would be very happy to hear any comments or advice that they may have for me on the language I am using, and to let me know if anything was not clear or did not make sense.

Students were given A4 sized copies of the photographs that they had sent, and following Ammerman, (2014a) students chose the order in which they would like to talk about the photographs. When students were discussing their photographs, where appropriate, I also asked students about their everyday beliefs and practices, sensory experiences, and their experience of university provision for religion and belief. Students were also asked which of the ways of describing the research on the information sheet made sense to them and asked their opinion on which language to use to talk about faith and belief (including non-religious belief) with students. These guiding questions were drawn from both previous research in this area and relate to the research aims of this project (see Appendix 4.8). At the end of the interview, students were invited to take part in the card sort method (section 3.4.3) which typically took ten-to-fifteen minutes. At the end of the interview, students were given a £15 Tesco voucher and a Debrief Sheet (see Appendix 4.9). Following Drescher (2016), students were emailed individually after the interview to thank them for taking part and to invite them to get in touch if they had any questions about the research, or if there was anything they would like to add.

Sampling for the photo-elicitation interviews

Sampling for this study was from the post-1992 university. The research design aimed to encourage a range of students with a variety of beliefs to take part so used a variety of sampling methods such as engaging with the Students' Union of the university to access faith groups but also opportunistic sampling within both secular and faith spaces to elicit the views of a range of students. Students who had left their contact details on the tear of slip on the postcards (see section 3.4.1) were contacted to invite them to take part in the photo-elicitation interviews. A range of student societies were contacted through email and through Facebook to invite them to participate in the study. However, there was very little response from the student groups. In response, additional ethical clearance was gained to offer a thank you voucher in recognition of the time taken to participate in the study on 6 March 2018. I also created a new postcard which had the 'I find meaning image' on one side and, on the other an invitation to students to take part in the research (see Figure 10: Postcard inviting students to take part in the photo-elicitation interviews.

I continued to work with staff across the university (Faith Manager, Chaplains, Global Space, and Wellbeing) to explore further opportunities to engage students, and as a result of this took these new postcards to a number of events and left these postcards in Global Space, Chaplaincy, and Student Support Services. They were also used prior and after Friday prayers following a suggestion by a member of the Islamic Society. I also invited students to take part in the research in a poster displayed in one of the

student café’s on campus (elsewhere across campus, poster space is limited hence the use of the postcards).

Demographic questionnaire

Initially, although a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix 4.4) had been created to ensure that the sample contained a range of different religious identities, it was not given to participants due to concern that it would affect the power balance between researcher and participants that I was keen to reduce. This is an issue that has been discussed by Scott-Baumann, found in the Islam on Campus research: to gain a balance of participants demographics needed to be asked first, but by doing so this limits the agency of the participant. In a context, particularly for Muslim students of securitisation because of Prevent, by asking participants for their demographics, it limits their choice to withhold information about their identity (Scott-Baumann 2018). In addition, the first four participants had described different religious identities in the interview, so there did not seem to be a need to use the questionnaire. However, many students took the second postcard (inviting students to interview) after Friday prayers, and by March 2018 four out of the ten students I had interviewed were Muslim students. Whilst I did not refuse anyone who was interested in taking part, from March 2018 onwards, I targeted secular spaces to invite students to take part and took the pragmatic decision to ask students to complete the short demographic questionnaire prior to interview. The sampling strategy was therefore a convenience sample: all the students that came forward for interview were included in the study, alongside tailored advertising of the research to encourage a range of students to take part.

The questionnaire was voluntary and asked students about their ethnicity, gender, and whether they were an UK, EU, or International student. The questionnaire also asked students: ‘Do you have a religion or belief?’ with the options given - yes, no, prefer not to say, and ‘How would you describe your religious identity?’ as an open question. Self-definition of religious identity has been recommended in research with ‘non-religious’ participants as a “practical way forward” (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2013, p. 177):

> “Given the enormous range of contestation concerning terminologies in relation to both ‘religion’ and non-religion’ that, pragmatically speaking, an emphasis on the self - definition of research participants is perhaps the least worst way to proceed in conceptualizing and conducting research with the ‘non-religious’” (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2013, p. 179).

Self-definition has also been recommended by Vikrama (2017), who conducted research with Muslim students on campus, as this approach allows for, and gives voice to, differences within members of the same community (Vikrama 2017, p. 95). Self-identification of religious identity was therefore included in order to capture the complexity and range of beliefs of participants, and fitting with the aim of starting at the student's starting point.

Students from the Chaplaincy, Global Space, and Wellbeing events were particularly engaged with the research, so the sample achieved the aim of including a breadth of religious identities (see Table 3). The questionnaire guided the sampling strategy in that it allowed me to ensure a range of students and religious identities were included in the study. To make this a manageable project in size, the scope of data collection was guided by pragmatism, that after 17 interviews, it was felt that there was a suitable range of students with different backgrounds and different religious identities to provide insight into the research aims.

Interview number	Pseudonym	Date interviewed	Which campus	What part of world?	Are you…	Ethnicity 1	Religion or belief?	How would you describe your religious identity?	Level of study
1	Amjad	12 Feb 18	Campus 2		Male			Muslim	Postgraduate
2	Penny	22 Feb 18	Campus 1		Female			Pagan	Undergraduate
3	Paris	22 Feb 18	Campus 1		Male		”	I am not really religious	Undergraduate
4	Courtney	23Feb 18	Campus 1		Female			Christian	Undergraduate
5	Willow	19 March 18	Campus 3	UK	Female	White	No	Atheist with a strong faith in myself	Undergraduate
6	Taariq	20 March 18	Campus 1	Outside EU	Male	Other Asian background	Yes	Moslem (his spelling)	Postgraduate
7	Kate	20 March 18	Campus 1	UK	Female	White	No	Atheist/Agnostic I don't particularly believe but I'm mostly open minded to a degree	Undergraduate
8	Gamila	26 March 18	Campus 1	UK	Female	Arab	Yes	Islam	Undergraduate
9	Madi	27 March 18	Campus 1	Outside EU	Male	Asian/Asian British-Indian	Yes	Islam	Postgraduate
10	Brooke	29 March 18	Campus 1	Wrote USA	Female	White	No	Agnostic	Undergraduate
11	Trudy	16 April 18	Campus 2	Outside European Union	Female	Black/Black British - African	Yes	Christianity	Postgraduate
12	Imogen	11 May 18	Campus 1	UK	Female	White	No	Left blank	Undergraduate
13	Anthony	10 May 18	Campus 1	UK	Male	Asian/Asian British-Indian	Yes	Muslim	Postgraduate
14	Maya	1June 18	Campus 2	Outside EU	Female	Other Asian Background	Yes	Buddhist	Undergraduate
15	Oliver	14 June 18	Campus 2	UK	Male	Other Ethnic background - Turkish (he added Turkish)	Yes-belief	Left this blank	Undergraduate
16	Ana	18 June 18	Campus 1	EU	Female	White	No	Agnostic	Undergraduate
17	Natalie	26 June 18	Campus 1	UK	Female	White	Yes	I believe in a higher being.	Postgraduate

Note - interviews 1-4 did not complete a demographics form: the description of religious identity is taken from the interview.

Table 3: Photo-elicitation interview participants

3.4.3. Card sort method

Within this study, the card sort method was created to gain further feedback on the themes and pictures arising from the postcards and took place at the end of the interview. The postcard method had not offered an opportunity for students to interpret their drawings nor to describe which, if any, of the themes on the postcard were more important than others, therefore the content of the postcards is limited to the drawings and text themselves rather than the participants' interpretations of them. It had been decided that rather than compromising the anonymity of the postcard method, the content of the postcards would be explored through the card sort exercise.

This method built upon the Connectors Study 'configuring matters' method (Varvantakis 2018). 16 flash cards (see Figure 11: Card Sort 16 flash cards) were created that illustrated a combination of the most common themes arising from an initial thematic analysis of the first 200 postcards (6 images and 10 text), and areas of particular interest to the study (see section 3.5 for more details of the analysis).

- Music was a theme in both the pictures and text, so only the music image was included.
- Animals was also a theme in the pictures and text, so only text was included.
- 'Overcoming challenges' was included as a theme, as even though it wasn't one of the most common themes, it was an area of particular interest due to the nature of the challenges of university.
- 'Prayer', 'Faith' and 'Religion' had been grouped together when coding the postcards, and these were separated in the card sort to explore these in more detail.

A card sort has also been used as a method to explore religion and spirituality by Wulff (2019). Wulff used Q-methodology to devise the Faith Q-Sort (FQS) as a tool to assess religiosity as an alternative approach to surveys that can be analysed quantitatively. It consists of 101 statements (often on cards) that relate to religiosity, spirituality, and non-religiosity that are ranked by the participant in front of a researcher and which can then be discussed further in an interview. The advantage of this method is that it can be analysed individually or nomothetically to capture patterns within a sample. The FQS has subsequently been used in a study of the non-religious in Finland (Kontala 2016) and in a global mixed methods study that explored patterns of religion and spirituality (Nynäs, Kontala and Lassander 2021). Nynäs, Kontala and Lassander argue that the advantage of providing items that the participant is asked to sort is that it "allows for individual expression of nuances and complexity" (2021, p555) and "its potential to explore new and emerging subjectivities" (2021, p563). They argue that the unique advantage of this method is

that it allows exploration of the complexities of religious variety, fluidity and change, capturing both variations and shared patterns, including secular worldviews and ambiguous and conflicting realities. The use of the card sort in this study would therefore allow the research to capture the complexity and individual nature of the students' meaning-stories. It is important to ensure that the card-sort is manageable for the participants, to allow time for them to reflect on their choices, therefore 16 cards were chosen that derived from the thematic analysis of the first 200 postcards and areas of particular interest to the study.

The aim of the card sort exercise was explained to students and students were asked to choose the cards that have meaning, or are important to them, and to place them in an order that would illustrate which were more important than others. Students were also given blank cards and asked to write their own cards if there was anything that was not there that they would like to include and that they were free to disregard any existing cards. In a difference to Varvantakis (2018) method, this study also included pictures, and asked students to place the cards in a way that made sense to them (rather than the researcher directing the layout of the cards). With the permission of each student, a photograph was taken of their card sort order, and the discussion fully transcribed and analysed as part of the interview.

3.5. Data analysis

Meaning-stories

When reviewing the findings, it was decided that the term 'meaning-making' was not broad enough as an overall descriptive term to reflect the whole of the students' contributions because, as will be illustrated in these next Chapters (4-6), they include more than 'making' meaning. As discussed in section 3.2, the research approach explored students' experience from their starting point: asking in a way that starts with the individual, how they describe and communicate about their meaning-stories, including those forms of meaning-making that may not include the transcendent, and regarding non-religious beliefs (and other forms of meaning-making) as just as important as other kinds of meaning-making. The instructions in the photo interviews were therefore broad, and the students' contributions included where they find meaning, regular practices of meaning-making, what they gain from meaning-making, and aspects of their identity. Maya, for example, describes that spending time alone (which brings her meaning) is part of who she is: "it is my big part of me". The students also described regular practices, such as Willow's regular practice of watching the sunrise and sunset on campus, including why they do these practices and what they gain from it. The students' meaning-stories also provide illustrations of the three types of belief identified by Day (2013b) and evidence of both formative and

transformative spirituality as described by Collins -Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006) (see Chapter 5).

A term was therefore needed that would reflect the breadth of the students' contributions. Giving broad instructions for the photo-elicitation interviews has had the advantage that it allowed students to lead the conversations and talk about their experience in a way that made sense to them, and we see in some of the students' responses students using their own words to reflect the breadth of their contributions, as Anthony described it, "you just let me talk about my thing":

> "I feel that the way you have done the interview in the sense that **you have just let me talk about my thing**… that is the best way because it allows the person to really get into the role and get into the interview and actually feel comfortable about what they are talking about" (Anthony).

Ana similarly uses the phrase 'my thing' when speaking about yoga and meditation with her Christian friend:

> "We found ourselves on the same page but different things like she prays and that is what eases her and relieves her stress and this is **my thing**" (Ana).

Anthony's and Ana's use of the words 'my thing' and, as below, Maya's use of the words 'my big picture of me' felt like they were trying to describe what I was trying to capture, a breadth of experience that is difficult to put into words, a story of themselves and their practices. It was particularly interesting therefore to see the students trying to explain this and the words they chose to use. Maya uses the description 'my big picture of me' when talking about a photograph of her bed:

> "I believe that spending time alone is also very important if you erm feel tired if you spend time alone you can also release your mind… I can enjoy myself alone so it is **my big picture of me** yeah" (Maya).

It was decided that the term '*meaning-storie*s' was a good fit as an overall descriptive term of the students' contributions because it illustrates that they are from the students' view, their starting point, they are *their* stories, and that these may include more than 'making' meaning: that this may include practices, experiences, and be part of their identity, who they are. This would also reflect that the students' contributions were therefore *their* stories, as they were told, that I was aiming to understand rather than direct the telling of their stories. The term 'meaning-stories' is

also used interchangeably with the students' terms, 'thing' and 'their thing' (derived from the words of Ana and Anthony) to convey the students' use of words.

Plummer (1995) argues that story telling is one of the ways we have to understand human meaning. We are, says Plummer, constantly telling stories as a way of making sense of ourselves and the world around us. These stories are linked to the context in which they are told and are in constant flux, always changing: "the meaning of stories shift and sway in the contexts to which they are linked" (Plummer 1995, p. 22). We should therefore, as Beckford (2018) suggests, explore religion in context, and consider the importance of the surroundings in terms of what is told. Storytelling, says Plummer, is a "joint action" and includes those that tell and perform stories, those that coax and coerce the telling of stories (such as the role of the researcher), and those that consume stories. It was felt that using the term 'stories' rather than 'making' then in this thesis would also acknowledge that the students' contributions may be read and understood in different ways by different readers. It would also reflect that the students may have different meaning-stories that they tell in different contexts and at different times, as has been argued is the case with religious identity, that this may change in different contexts and at different times because the 'self' is affected by relationship and context (Day and Lee 2014, p. 347). By taking an individual focus in this study, important aspects of intersectionality (as the teller sees it) will be told as they tell their meaning-stories. The photo-elicitation method chosen would allow students to talk about aspects of their intersectionality that were important to them, as the method allows the participant to lead the conversations as they describe their photographs in the interview.

The use of 'stories' is not new. As discussed in the literature review Collins-Mayo et al use 'stories' in the interpretation of their findings to argue that Generation Y are an 'unstoried' generation without Christianity and Christian community: that the only story of value is the Christian story (2010, p.105). This research, however, aimed to hear and capture the students' stories, however they choose to tell them, and whatever they chose to include, without delegitimising their stories. Ammerman uses the term 'sacred stories' to explore spiritual practices in everyday life and to capture narratives of everyday religion. Ammerman argues for the importance of listening for stories that people tell about their everyday lives as stories are both personal and public, they are "the mechanism, through which the world is socially constructed": stories are how people make sense of, and give order to, their world (Ammerman 2014a, p. 9).

The students' contributions in this research, as will be discussed in chapters 4-6, included not only why and what they do as expressed in their meaning-stories, but

also stories of practices, and stories of self and identity. The telling of their stories allows us to engage with their understandings of themselves and their agency, and allows us to reflect on the effect of structure and context. As Plummer describes:

> For critical humanists, our 'human being' is most emphatically not a free-floating universal individual: rather 'it' is always stuffed full of the culture and the historical moment, always in process and changing. Human beings 'nest' themselves in webs of contexts, relationships (Plummer 2015, p.21).

Agency has been described as "human endeavour" and structure as "wider social influences" and the problem, argues Day, for sociologists, is the relationship between the two (Day 2020, p. 7). The research approach aimed to encourage agency in the participant by allowing students to interpret the photo-elicitation instructions in way that made sense to them, and we see that students did this in the breadth of their contributions. The research also encouraged participants to have the agency to talk about what they wanted to, to use their own words and definitions in the interview, and to question my definitions and language used, and we see that students did this, for example in the use of 'my thing' by Anthony. The students also negotiated their own way through taking part in the research, creating and sharing their photographs on their own terms, ranging from the inclusion of selfies, to self-censored selfies, to withholding photographs altogether (choosing for example to share their photographs only on their phone or on paper) (Lawther, 2021). However, this agency may be limited by structure. Ammerman reflects that in the interview setting the participant may be thinking about what the researcher wants to hear when telling their story, but that building trust with the participant gave agency, and using photo elicitation interviews in particular puts the participants "in the driver's seat, *they* make decisions about what is important (or not)" (Ammerman 2014a, p. 16.) As discussed in section 3.4.2, photo elicitation interviews were chosen in this research for this reason. To address the possibility that participants may take photographs that they think the researcher will want to see the instructions stated that "you do not have to take photos that are interesting for others to look at. How people talk about religion may also be shaped by their context, as discussed by Bender (2003), who argues that the structures we participate in may affect our communication and response (Bender 2003). In this case then, we see that there are certain aspects of their meaning-stories that students talk about with myself, the researcher, in the interview that they would not share in conversations with their peers (see Chapter 6) indicating that the telling of their stories to peers may be affected by wider social influences that may not be present in the context of the interview. It appears then that the students did have some agency in the telling of their stories, but that there may be different tellings of their meaning-stories depending on the context.

It is also recognised that this is my telling of their stories within this thesis, and that my interpretations of their stories are further interpreted to place them within current theory and literature. As discussed in section 3.2, the interpretative approach involves the researcher's interpretations and then subsequent further interpretations in terms of the concepts, theories, and literature of a discipline" (Bryman 2004, p.15). The advantage of the inclusion of the photographs in the telling of their stories is that these are artefacts that are part of their story that, in themselves, have not been retold. Selected photographs are therefore included in the appendix to allow the reader to experience the participants' meaning-stories as they were presented in both word and picture.

The term 'meaning' was chosen alongside 'stories' because of its breadth. As discussed in the literature review, it is a term that is not without its limitations. The idea, for example, that individuals have both an individual and a universal need to search for meaning can be traced back to Weber, Berger, and Luckmann (Day, 2013a, p. 8), but this assumption has rarely been challenged within sociology of religion (Day, 2020, p. 17) and is associated with issues of discipline and power (Robbins 2006. The term 'meaning' and its limitations were also reflected upon in the design of the postcard and had been chosen for the postcard because it is a non-theistic term and therefore fits with the aim to include non-religious beliefs. It is also a term in everyday use, and was believed that it would be engaging and relatable. It *was* a word that students had engaged with during this study both in the postcard method, and importantly, it was the most commonly preferred term when students were asked their advice about how to talk about faith and belief because of its breadth and inclusivity (see section 6.1). It was also felt that the term reflected the interconnection of the students' stories with their wellbeing, with 'meaning' also used in university wellbeing conversations (Matthewman et al., 2018; Burns et al., 2020).

Meaning-stories, their 'thing', and regular practices

This thesis uses the term 'meaning-stories' when describing the students' contributions from this point onwards to reflect the breadth of what has been captured in this research. '*Meaning-stories' is therefore used in this thesis to describe the breadth of the students' contributions.* The term 'meaning-stories' was derived from the findings and analysis in this study, enabling a description of the breadth of stories that were told without the constraints of existing definitions and categories. As discussed above, and in more depth in chapters 4-6, these contributions included where they find meaning, regular practices of meaning-making, what they gain from their meaning-making, and stories of self and identity. The term 'meaning-making' continues to be used where appropriate when discussing what can be learnt from the

students' contributions, particularly in relation to the aims of this study and existing theory and literature.

I also wanted to reflect the students' use of language rather than solely imposing academic terms (although these are needed to sort and describe their contributions) because it is through understanding how students are using words that we can learn about their lived experience. The naming of the themes therefore, where possible, was drawn from the students' own words. Ana, for example spoke about the self:

> "…my belief it is kind of how I find my**self** how I am able to develop my**self**" (Ana)

Willow, for example, spoke about connection and feeling part of something bigger when describing why being part of a community is important to her:

> "That **connection** even if you don't have anyone you know with you feeling **part of something bigger than yourself** or that you are not alone in where you live and the things you are doing really is quite important to me" (Willow).

The term 'meaning-stories' is also used interchangeably with the students' terms, 'thing' and 'their thing', in the following chapters to also convey the students' use of words.

The students described practices that support their meaning-stories that they do at least once a week, and these have been called regular practices in the analysis. These were activities that the students said that they do at least once a week (rather than always every day) and it felt important to include all of these activities. Whilst the term 'everyday' practices has more commonly been used in literature in this area: McGuire, for example uses the term "everyday practice" (2008, p. 80), and Ammerman uses the term "practices of everyday life" (2014a, p. 15), it was decided that the term 'regular practices' would be used to reflect the students' contributions more accurately. The term 'everyday practices' was therefore used in the research aims as it reflects the terms used in the literature that this research draws upon, and *the term 'regular practices' is used when referring specifically to the students' contributions in this thesis that students said that they do at least once a week.* There were other activities that students spoke about that related to their meaning-stories that students did not explicitly say that they do at least once a week, such as meeting with friends. '*Meaning-story practices' has been used as a more general term to describe these practices related to the students' meaning-stories that may or may not take place at least once a week.*

Data analysis strategy

The data collected and analysed was:

- 306 postcards containing pictures and text
- Photo-elicitation interview (PEI) data. This consisted of:
    - photographs;
    - discussions during the PEI interviews that were fully transcribed; and
    - the card sort discussions that took place at the end of the interview that were also fully transcribed.

The data analysis strategy included both analysis of the individual data types (such as the postcards) and analysis of the data types together, drawing upon multi-modal ethnography to make sense of the data in combination. Varvantakis and Nolas (2019) cite Kohrs (2017) to argue that multi-modal ethnography is an emerging field of scholarship and as such there are not established codes and conventions to draw upon to inform how to analyse across different types of media. Whilst categorical approaches to data analysis are useful to understand aspects of the data, Varvantakis and Nolas argue that this approach alone is not sufficient to make sense across data types (such as in this case pictures, text, photographs, and interview transcripts), and that to make connections between the data a more sensory approach is needed. Varvantakis and Nolas (2019) recommend that because such analysis can be a very idiosyncratic and personal process, sometimes led by the data itself, it is important to be explicit about the analytic process in order to maintain rigour, and they suggest the use of metaphors to describe this very individual process. In practice, this sense making between the data involved looking back and forth between the different data types, the analytic process most closely resembling the metaphor of 'meandering' (2019, p. 369). As Ingold suggests (2010), sense making can be gained by meandering between data types, habiting them, and journeying in-between them, a process that he refers to as 'mind-walking'. An initial analysis of the first 200 postcards, for example, informed the development of the flash cards for the card sort exercise, and this 'meandering' helped to develop themes arising across the data sets, such as gaining a better understanding of the pictures on the postcards using students' interpretations of the cards (with the same pictures) chosen in the card sort data. Where possible I tried to keep the 'feel' of the students' media contributions in the analysis such as using the postcards themselves rather than text descriptions of them (see section 5.1). The analysis was also 'alert' to similarities and differences between the data collected from each of the research methods as recommended by Dicks et al (2006).

There is debate within qualitative research about the appropriate use of numerical data. Quantitizing refers to “the process of assigning numerical (nominal or ordinal) values to data conceived as not numerical” (Sandelowski et al., 2009, p. 209-210). It has been argued that the association of qualitative research with words and quantitative research with numbers, and the binary opposition of these two positions ignores both the usefulness of quantitizing to understand and convey emerging patterns in qualitative data (Sandelowski 2001) and the qualitative, subjective decisions made within quantitative research (Sandelowski et al., 2010; Maxwell 2010). Quantitizing can be a useful and defensible way of simplifying complex qualitative data when it is used critically and reflexively (Sandelowski et al., 2009) and can be valuable when used as a complementary process within qualitative research (Maxwell 2010). Quantitizing in qualitative research can be used “to facilitate pattern recognition or otherwise to extract meaning from qualitative data, account for all data, document analytic moves, and verify interpretations” (Sandelowski et al., 2009, p. 210). However, researchers using this approach need to consider the purpose of its use and acknowledge the subjective judgements involved in the process (Sandelowski et al., 2009), and have an awareness of the dangers of making claims of causality or generality (Maxwell, 2010). Within this thesis, quantifying was used in the early stages of analysis to understand initial patterns, such as common themes in the postcard text and pictures, and the subjective nature of this process has been acknowledged. This quantifying did not mean less popular responses were ignored or treated as any less important. It has also been used to illustrate the extent of patterns where appropriate, such as the number of students who spoke about what they do as told in their meaning-story supports their wellbeing (section 5.3). It has not been used to make claims of causality or generality.

In order to explain the analysis process, I will first describe the analysis conducted by individual data type, followed by instances of differences between the data types collected. I will then describe the analysis of the postcards and photo-elicitation interviews together. It must be remembered that whilst the main stages of data analysis are written here in linear form in order to best describe them, the analysis itself was very much a meandering process, moving back and forth between the data types in order to make sense of the data.

Analysis conducted by individual data type

Postcards

Each postcard was numbered[10], scanned, and saved as a PDF document. A table was also created in Word that contained by row: each postcard by number, the text on the postcard and a description of any pictures on the postcard.

[10] The postcards within this thesis are referred to by their number (such as p34, p96).

200 postcards

Text and pictures: The collection of postcards was ongoing from September 2017 to July 2018, so in January 2018 thematic analysis was used to analyse the first 200 postcards to find the most common themes from the words used, and the most common pictures that were drawn. Thematic analysis involves, firstly, familiarisation with the data and the creation of initial codes which are then grouped into potential themes. These themes are then reviewed, refined, and named (Braun and Clark 2006, p. 87).

Emerging themes: The most common pictures were: heart; stick people/person; nature; smiley face; animals; musical symbols; picture of the world. The most common themes from the text were: family; friends; helping others; goals; being active; animals; music; and faith/prayer/religion. These informed the creation of the 16 flash cards (see Figure 11: Card Sort 16 flash cards) that were used in the card sort method.

All 306 postcards

Following the initial analysis of 200 postcards, all 306 postcards were then analysed. Text and pictures: Initial patterns were identified through a count of the most common pictures that illustrated something other than what was conveyed in the text to explore whether students were using pictures to describe something that may be difficult to put into words. Some pictures, for example, were illustrations relating directly to the text written next to them. Postcard 91, for example, included a picture of a stave and musical notes with the words 'When I can become inspired and connect through music'. Postcard 97 included a picture of stick people next to 'family and friends' and a picture of a book next to 'teaching'. These examples (p91 and 97) are both examples of where the picture(s) illustrate the text. Postcard 51 is an example of where the pictures are different to the text, with the word 'FAMILY' being written across the postcard, and many hearts on the postcard itself (see Figure 50: Hearts with family/friends/loved ones). I was aware that this process did involve some interpretation of both the text, and the pictures and how they related to the text, in this sorting and have included a photograph of the postcards so that readers can see my interpretations about what was included in this analysis. Initially I had written a description of each image in order to analyse it, but during this process it was felt that a text only description of the image didn't provide the 'feel' of what they were trying to convey, the 'wetness' (Marks 2002, p. x) so the postcards were grouped by theme and photographed (see section 5.1). Throughout this thesis I have included examples of the postcards in order to convey the 'feel' of the students' contributions and have set up an Instagram page for the project to illustrate some of the postcards: I Find Meaning When…(@findmeaningproject).

Text only: The postcard text was explored for initial patterns by using a count of whether they contained words associated with institutional religion or the spiritual (such as 'God', 'spiritual', 'pray') or only non-religious words, or whether they contained both. In keeping with the method of using the students' interpretations (rather than my own) I was looking here at the words themselves.
Emerging themes: The majority of the postcards contained non-religious words, and those that did contain religious words were more likely to include *doing* words such as 'praying', 'worshiping', than a religious affiliation.

Text only: A thematic analysis (using the process outlined above as recommended by Braun and Clark (2006) of the most common themes found from the text on the postcards was then conducted using NVivo 12. A pragmatic decision was taken to include the Word table of the content of the postcards in NVivo rather than upload each individual PDF. A node 'unsure of meaning' was also created in Nvivo for postcards that were difficult to read or interpret content such as Postcard 127 that contained 'PUBG' which could be the name of a Steam community (Player unknown's battlegrounds) or could be a misspelling of something else. Rather than use my own interpretations in this case, these postcards were not coded. It was decided that including only the text on the postcards here was sufficient within the scope of this study, given that pictures that were different to the text had already been identified in earlier analysis.

Many of the postcards contained more than one theme, and the most common themes arising from the postcard data were: 'Connecting with others' (including: family and friends, 'being or connecting with others', helping others, partner, creating feelings in others, seeing others happy/kind around me, showing love/kindness to others, and relationships); 'Faith prayer religion'; 'Goals' (including future goals); 'When I feel, (for example, happiness); 'Learning'; 'Being active'; 'Nature outdoors; 'Self' (for example "be true to myself" or developing self or own qualities); 'Travel explore'; 'Animals'; 'Music'; 'Quiet time'; 'Being creative'; 'Eating drinking'; 'Reading writing'; 'Overcoming challenge'.

Photo-elicitation interviews

Each interview was given a number and pseudonym. The student names referred to within this thesis are therefore pseudonyms rather than their real names. I transcribed the interviews myself to became much more familiar with the data as recommended by Braun and Clark (2006). The photographs were saved but the students descriptions of them were analysed in order to include their interpretation

(rather than mine) so the photographs in themselves were not analysed. The interview transcripts were uploaded to Nvivo for analysis.

Seven photo-elicitation interviews

A thematic analysis, again using the process outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), was used to analyse seven of the photo-elicitation interview transcripts to generate initial codes and themes that could be reviewed before applying to the rest of the PEI data. Coding of the PEI data took place in several stages following repeated reading of the interviews and revision of the themes (again, following Braun and Clarke 2006). Themes found arising from the analysis of the postcards (above), and the heart and s[11] in the card sort also informed the development of the themes. Annotations were used in NVivo to facilitate the analysis process, and a record kept in a Word document of the research decisions made. Feedback was gained on this stage of analysis from the supervisory team (September 2018). Feedback was also gained from those within the field through conference papers at the BSA Annual Conference 2018, and the SocRel Annual Conference 2018 (Lawther 2018a; Lawther 2018b).

The two main threads of the students' descriptions of their meaning-stories were firstly, *what* they do and secondly, *why* they do it, what they gain from what they have expressed in their meaning-stories. Many of the students described that they have regular activities that they do at least once a week that support their meaning-stories, and these were coded as 'regular practices' and are included in this thesis as part of students' descriptions of *what* they do. It was decided to use the term 'regular practices' rather than 'everyday practices' as this more accurately described the students' contributions. It was decided to focus on these two areas to address the first research aim, to 'explore the breadth of meaning-making in HE' which would therefore include both *what* students do, and *why* they do it, *as described by the students.*

Emerging themes were as follows:

What students do as part of their meaning-stories, their 'thing': Self; Connections; Being in nature; and Religion/faith/spirituality.

Why students do their 'thing', as described by the students: Self; Connections; Connection with Religion/faith/spirituality; and Bigger than me. Within each of these emerging overall themes there were smaller sub-themes that also aligned with the themes found in the postcard analysis. What students do as part of their meaning-stories within the themes of Self, for example, included being active, travel, and being with animals. The data also included students' descriptions of regular practices for

[11] The nature pictures in the card sort are the 'earth' picture and the 'beach' picture– see Figure 11: Card Sort 16 flash cards.

many of the students, and for some students, sensory descriptions when telling their meaning-stories. This informed the coding for the analysis of the PEI's and postcards together where these sub themes were also further refined.

All photo interview transcripts

The photo interviews were read closely several times, each reading 'listening' specifically for language used by the students to describe their meaning-making, in which the scripts were read specifically for each of the following themes that would give insight into the second research aim of exploring how religion and belief is currently communicated:

- Where students expressed difficulty in explaining their meaning-stories
- Where students gave individual interpretations and use of words to describe their meaning-stories (such as faith and religion)
- Instances where terms such as 'faith' and religion' were used to describe different things, or whether there was a consistent interpretation of these words
- Instances where students delegitimised their meaning-stories, their practices, and themselves

These themes were coded in NVivo along with the following themes:

- Students' advice about how to talk about religion/belief/meaning-making
- Where students spoke about the effect of what is and is not communicated about Islam
- Whether students described sharing aspects of their meaning-stories with others (or not)

Emerging themes are described in Chapter 6 and feedback was gained from the Director of Studies on this analysis and from those within the field following a conference paper at the "Religion and Secularism on Campus: The Changing Dimensions of the University Experience" conference (Lawther 2018c).

Card sort

Photographs of the card sort were taken with the students' permission and discussions about the card sort order were fully transcribed and analysed in Nvivo as part of the interview. Cards added by the participants were as follows: Madi added the card 'Information' which he described refers to "when you go into the prayer then you get that information about what religion tells" about how to live life such as helping others, overcoming challenges, and relationships with family. This 'Information' card was still in the box when Brooke was interviewed, and she chose it, referring to it as, "knowledge to me is like super-valuable". Oliver added the cards

‘Nature’, ‘Peace’, ‘Travelling’ and ‘Positive relationship with yourself’ and Natalie added the cards ‘Travel’ ‘Overcoming obstacles’, ‘Decision making’, and ‘Staying true to who I am - being unique’.

The first analysis of the card-sort was to explore students’ discussions surrounding the choice of the heart and nature cards in their card sort exercise using thematic analysis. The emerging themes here were: Self; Connections; Bigger than me; Religion/faith/spirituality. The card sort discussions were then all analysed when the postcards and photo-elicitation interviews were analysed together.

Differences between individual data types

The photo-elicitation transcripts were explored to find instances where there were differences between students’ descriptions of their card sort choices and their photographs. There were only two differences between the card sort and the students’ descriptions of their photographs. Willow chose ‘family’ in the card sort yet did not choose photos of family in her photo-elicitation interview, nor include it in her description of photos that she would have liked to have taken but didn’t. She did, however, talk about her family in the interview: how they influenced her love of nature and music and encouraged her love of wildlife. Madi used the words ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ interchangeably during the interview but only chose ‘religion’ in the card sort (and did not choose the ‘faith’ card). This suggests that the use of the two data collection methods in combination had captured the breadth of students’ meaning-stories.

Analysis of the postcards and photo-elicitation interviews together

The two main threads of the students’ meaning-stories as they were told (*what* they do and *why* they do it) were further explored in this analysis of both the photo-elicitation interviews and the postcard text together. The overall themes that had been identified in the seven photo-elicitation interviews (see above) were applied to the remaining scripts and to the postcard text data in Nvivo. The postcards, given the nature of the question, contained more of *what* students do although this was also found in the photo interviews. The photo interviews, given the breadth of the instructions and students’ own interpretations of them, contained more of what they gained from these sources of meaning, *why* students say do their meaning-making. A node in Nvivo was also created that captures students’ regular practices, and another that captured students’ sensory descriptions of their meaning-stories. The sub-themes such as Doing, Feeling, Developing were further refined at this stage.

The overall themes that emerged from the analysis of *what* students do as told in their meaning-stories were themes of: Self, Connections, Religion/faith/spirituality

and Being in nature. Within the theme of 'Self' were the sub-themes of 'Developing self', 'Doing self', and 'Feeling self'. Within the theme of 'Connections' were the subthemes of 'Family, partner, relationships, and friends', and 'Being with others'. Within the theme of 'Religion/faith/spirituality' were the sub-themes of 'Prayer', 'Religious teachings', and 'Wear symbols of beliefs'. Whilst the themes have been separated in this way in order to explain them, they are very much interconnected, with nature in particular linking to all three themes. The mind-map Figure 12: *What* students do as part of their meaning-stories, their 'thing' illustrates these themes and the occurrence of regular practice examples associated with these themes.

The overall themes that emerged from the analysis of *Why* students do their 'thing', as told in their meaning-stories were themes of: 'Self', 'Connections', 'Connect with religion/faith/spirituality' and 'Bigger than me'. The theme 'Connect with Religion Faith Spirituality' was linked to the themes of 'Connections' and 'Bigger than me'. Within the theme of 'Self' were the sub-themes of 'Develop self', 'Getting to know self', 'I feel', 'Supports wellbeing', and 'Comfort and peace'. Within the theme of 'Connections' were the sub-themes: 'Help relationships with others', and 'Opportunities to meet others'. Within the theme 'Bigger than me' were the sub-themes: 'Bigger perspective', 'Guide to life', and 'Next life reward'. The mind-map Figure 13: *Why* students do their 'thing', their meaning-stories illustrates these themes.

Summary of analysis

Data: 200 postcards	Data: 306 postcards	Data: card-sort
• Thematic analysis of the first 200 postcards: text and images which led to the development of cards for the card sort exercise	• Text and pictures: The data was explored for the most common pictures that illustrated something other than that conveyed in the text • Text only: Initial patterns were identified through a count of whether the postcards contained words only about religion or belief or only non-religious words, or whether they contained both. • Text only: A thematic analysis of the most common themes found from the text on the postcards	Thematic analysis of students' discussions surrounding the choice of the heart and nature cards in their card sort exercise

Informed the themes for …

Data: Seven photo-elicitation interviews
A thematic analysis of seven of the photo-elicitation interview transcripts

Informed the themes for…

Data: All PEI data and all postcard data
A thematic analysis of the key threads of *what* students do (including regular practices) and *why* they do it, what they gain from their meaning-making, *as described by the students* to inform Research Aim 1

Data: All PEI data
The photo-elicitation transcripts were explored to find instances of differences between students' descriptions of their card sort choices and their photographs

Data: All PEI data
An analysis exploring how religion and belief is communicated to inform Research Aim 2

3.6. Reflections on methodology

The two main threads of the students' expressions of their meaning-stories, their 'thing', of *what* they do and *why* they do it, may in part be due to some of the prompts used in the interviews such as asking students why the regular practices they described were important to them, and in the card sort exercise, asking students to explain why they had chosen their cards. Similarly, the theme of 'self' may in part be due to the self-reflection required to take the photographs. However due to the nature of photo-elicitation interviews the students led the discussions within the interview and were free to direct the conversation as they chose, and this is illustrated by the existence of other themes such as 'Connection' and 'Bigger than me'.

Within the students' meaning-stories, there appeared to be some activities that were meaningful in themselves, such as 'being in nature' and in other cases the activity was described as meaningful because, for example, being in nature provides a connection with God "I feel that I can really connect with God through nature" (Anthony) or some activities that may be both. It was decided that for this thesis, the data would not be analysed in this way as it would require a value judgement by the researcher about which activities were meaningful in themselves and which may be meaningful because they were tied to a belief system and it was felt that this would be in opposition to the aim of hearing the students' views without value judgements.

3.7. Validity of method

Validity in qualitative research, the accuracy of the findings, can be supported using several strategies such as the use of member-checking of the findings, using rich descriptions of the findings, and including instances of differences from the themes (Creswell 2003, p. 196). These strategies have been used to ensure validity in this study. During the interview, the student's views were summarised and repeated back to the student for their confirmation of understanding. Peer feedback on the analysis and findings was gained during supervision team meetings and from peers within the discipline at conferences. Consistent themes have been found from the postcard, photo interview, and card sort method, and rich descriptions are given throughout the findings to convey the experiences of the students accurately. Instances of differences between the photograph descriptions and the card sort have been recorded (see section 3.5) and reflections on the methodology included. Reliability has been supported by the writing of ongoing project reports that have been reviewed by the Doctoral School committee and a reflexive research diary kept throughout as recommended by Henn et al (2006) that has documented the process of the research, including research and analysis decisions that have been made and why. Due to the

qualitative nature of the research and small sample size, the findings do not claim to be representative of the student population as a whole.

3.8. Researcher positionality

The reflexive research diary included reflections on my own positionality within the research. Reflexivity is, says Berger (2013), "self-appraisal", considering one's own effect on the research process, and is essential in qualitative research (2013, p2). Positions of the researcher (such as gender, age, beliefs), says Berger, can affect the research process in the following three major ways: gaining access to participants, the researcher-participant relationship, and the lens through which meaning is made from the data (Berger 2013). Similarly, Barker argues that sociologists of religion need to use the tools of "reflexive awareness, open debate, and constructive critique" during the research process (1995, p309). This transparency and self-reflexivity of the researcher's values and goals, says Woodhead (2018), rephrasing Barker's words, will support the "meta-value of social science" which "should always be to arrive at the most accurate and balanced account of what is being studied" (Woodhead 2018, p. 65). I therefore made notes as part of the research diary about my positionality, the effect that I may have on the research process, to enable this self-appraisal during the research process.

Gaining access to students was helped in part by my position as a recent member of staff at the university, in which I had worked for many years in a role in which I researched the student experience. I drew upon existing contacts (such as in the Global Space) to gain access to events. I also approached and made new contacts in my capacity as a student which also enabled access to events (such as the Wellbeing events). When speaking to the students directly at the events when introducing the postcards and inviting students to take part in the photo interviews, I think my position as both a student, but also a mature student, helped in this process as I was similar yet also different to the students. Dessing argues that this position of "same yet different" is helpful in gaining access to students in this field of study, with the shared feature helping to reduce inequalities and the difference helping to "minimise the danger of overrapport" (Dessing 2013, p. 45). I also drew upon my identity as a fellow student when speaking with students (both when introducing the postcards and in the photo interviews), being open with the students about the difficulties that I was having within the research about language and how to talk about religion and belief in an inclusive way and asking their advice.

As part of this process, I reflected on my identity as a recent member of staff at the university, as a mother, as someone with no affiliation to a particular faith, and as a student. I noticed in the first few interviews I asked students 'What can we do better

to support you here?’ rather than ‘What can the university do to support you here?’ and reflected that in doing this I was still identifying as a member of staff rather than a student, and consciously changed this in the subsequent interviews to ‘What can the university do to support you here?’ The students that I interviewed were a similar age to my oldest two children, who were both at university at the time, so there were occasions where I was aware that I had maternalistic feelings towards the student, particularly those that talked about their own difficulties with mental health and wellbeing whilst at university. I found it helpful at this stage to read the chapter by Morgans (2017) who also talked about these difficulties when researching first year, female, Christian, higher education students whilst a PhD student and ordinand in the Church of England, and her reflections on the importance of remaining a researcher rather than offering advice or guidance. Morgans writes that she finds the approach of a ‘friendly stranger’ as described by Letherby (2003) useful, and this is an approach that I adopted in the interviews. Letherby explains that the advantages of the ‘friendly stranger’ approach is that the researcher does not exercise social control over the relationship (in a way that may happen in a relationship of friends) and that the participant may reveal feelings that they may not in a friendship because the relationship only exists for the length of the interview (Letherby 2003). There was one instance where a student continued to talk after the end of the interview about her personal difficulties for almost an hour, and in this case I turned off the electronic recording device and did not include this in the interview.

A concern that I had prior to the interviews was what I would do if the participants asked me if I affiliated to a particular faith, and so asked the advice of colleagues at the Oral History Conference during a session by Koleva (2017) about what they do in practice. Whilst it was discussed that there was no one right way to respond to this, it was helpful to reflect with colleagues on the difficulties. During this discussion, one colleague reflected their view that if the interviewer is asked by the participant ‘Do you believe’? and says ‘yes’, but then doesn’t talk about this, it places the interviewer in a position of power. However, as raised by a different colleague, there is a tightrope of being not familiar enough, or being too familiar, as he found in his own research, that because he interacted too much with LGBTQ participants he didn’t produce material that was useful from a sociological point of view because of the shared understanding between himself and the participants. On reflection I decided to be honest and say that I did not affiliate to a particular faith, and to explain my interest from an academic perspective, both my background in studying the sociology of religion (for my degree) and through my work at the university supporting the student experience. Only one student asked if I believed in God during the research, and this was a student that was completing a postcard rather than a student in the interviews. Students may not have asked my views perhaps because the interviews

were very much led by the students themselves and focused on their own individual experience rather than their affiliation as they led the interviews by describing their photographs. A contrasting view put forward by Day (2013a) is that the interview setting can be a more equal one. Day reflects on the reciprocal nature of the interview as a social performance that is affected by its context. Day's first meeting with her participants was in a classroom setting in which she asked to take temporary control of the class. In this setting, Day describes that her authority was delegitimised as "the classroom was their space, and the relationships within it theirs" (2013a, p. 75). Day contrasts this experience in the classroom, in which the context of the classroom had delegitimised Day's authority "by making it dependent on institutional norms and power" with the interview room, which Day describes as a more equal meeting in which Day positioned the participant as expert and herself as learner (Day 2013a, p. 96). Reflecting upon this experience, Day suggests that "social realities are not created through linguistic utterances alone, but through the symbolic power already present, if unacknowledged, within specific social relations" (Day 2013a, p. 97). Day's experience led me to reflect more broadly about power within the interview setting, and my aim to empower the participant. By asking the students for their advice about what language to use when talking about religion and belief at university, I was also placing the participant as expert and myself as learner. Photo-elicitation interviews, as discussed in section 3.4.2, also place the participant in the role of expert and allow them to set the agenda for the interview as they talk through their photographs as both creator and interpreter (Keenan 2021), resulting in the interviews being a more equal meeting between participant and researcher. This is reflected in the choice that the students made to create share their photographs on their own terms, ranging from the inclusion of selfies, to self-censored selfies, to withholding photographs altogether (choosing for example to share their photographs only on their phone or on paper) (Lawther, 2021).

On considering my own values about higher education, when I read Guest's (2017) work that reflects on higher education and religious identity, I more closely associated my values with Jevoni, that of the "transformative potential of education" (2013, p211), that perhaps while idealistic, prefers to see education as "a source of enrichment and human flourishing, both at the level of the individual and in its capacity to edify the group" (2017, p. 207). I similarly share the dismay that Guest describes that Jevoni felt at the instrumentalization of education, at the commercialisation of higher education following the Browne Report (2010), with a focus on universities in terms of their economic outputs. I was conscious of this lens whilst analysing the research, that because I was keen to capture the experience of the whole student, and, given my years of working in higher education to improve the

student experience, I have also focused on the practical implications and changes that could be made as a result of this work.

3.9. Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the appropriate College Ethical Review Committee. This included approval to offer a £15 thank you voucher in recognition of the time taken to participate in the study. It was hoped that this would enable a greater range of students the option take part, for example those that are short of time and money such as low income and single parent students. The ethical clearance application drew upon: the British Sociological Association (BSA) Statement of Ethical Practice (BSA, 2017) and the International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) Code of Research Ethics and Guidelines (Papademas and the IVSA 2009); recent literature on visual methods (Wiles et al,. 2012; Clark 2012; Allen 2015; Rose 2016; Filep et al., 2017); and discussion with the students in the feedforward interviews. This was primarily to decide whether to give students the option of using identifiable photographs in the dissemination of the research: the dilemma of, on the one hand being able to give students that may wish to be seen this option, whilst at the same time ensuring their protection within the research. This has been discussed in further detail in a book chapter arising from this thesis (Lawther 2021) in which I argue that the strength of the photo-elicitation method is that it allows for flexibility and choice in student participation, particularly control over privacy as participants have the option to self-censor their photographs and/or use objects and spaces as visual illustrations of aspects of their meaning-stories, offering a safe space for students to participate in the study on their own terms and in their own way. It was decided that students would be given a choice about whether they would like their photographs to be used in dissemination of the research and that even if permission to use their photographs was given, identifying features would not be shown. Participants were also asked not to take photographs of others as the focus of their pictures (see Photo-elicitation interview photo guidelines Appendix 4.6). The consent form gave students the choice to consent to their photographs being used for analysis only (with the content described in dissemination) or to give consent for their (anonymised) photographs to be included in both analysis and dissemination, and the choice to give consent for anonymised audio-clips of the interview to be used in dissemination (see Photo-elicitation interview consent form Appendix 4.7).

3.10. Strengths and limitations

Reflections on use of language

The words that I have used when writing up this research evolved and became broader in scope as the thesis has progressed as I gained a greater understanding of the students' contributions. The term 'meaning-stories' was used because it better

reflected the breadth of the students' contributions, that they may include practices, experiences, be part of their identity, and that students may have different meaning-stories that they tell in different contexts and at different times. The term 'thing' has also been used interchangeably with 'meaning-stories' in order to also convey the students' use of words. When writing this thesis, the term 'meaning-stories' occasionally felt clumsy as a term, and their 'thing' felt a better fit in some sentences. 'Meaning-making' continued to be a useful term to make reference to the literature and the aims of the study, although, as discussed in section 3.5, didn't always reflect the breadth of the students' contributions. Whilst the term 'meaning' was the favoured term chosen by students because of its inclusivity and so is used in this thesis, the limitations of this term (as discussed in sections 2.7, 3.4, and 3.5) still exist, and some students also preferred other words, had different interpretations of terms, and recommended using a combination of different words in discussion when talking about religion, belief, and meaning-making. This thesis has therefore not solved the issue of what words to use, rather it has found terms to use that are appropriate within this study (although with limitations), in this context, and at this time.

A larger sample to explore intersectionality and experience

The sampling strategy (section 3.4) in this research worked well as it did encourage a breadth of students from different backgrounds and with different experiences of meaning-making to take part even in this relatively small sample size. Engaging staff across the university (Faith Manager, Chaplains, Global Space, and Wellbeing) with the project facilitated this, and I believe it was key to encouraging a range of students to take part as it provided opportunities to promote the research in both faith-related and secular spaces. If I were to repeat the research again, I would ask all students interested in taking part in the photo interviews to complete the demographic questionnaire and monitor the sample to ensure that I included a diverse range of students. I would also offer a thank you voucher to all students who take part in the photo interviews as I feel that this worked well to encourage students to participate that may not otherwise have taken part.

Expanding the use of drawing as method

A strength of this work has also been the use of creative methods to provide opportunities for students to contribute in ways that are beyond words through the creation of the new postcard method (giving students a choice to draw as well as write) and photo-elicitation interviews. This is particularly important in this case where students may find it difficult to describe their meaning-stories in words (and we see this is the case with students saying explicitly that they do not know how to describe their meaning-making), and to prompt sensory experiences and to uncover

everyday practices. The postcards worked well to enable students to contribute drawings. However the students' own interpretations of these drawings couldn't be included because the postcards were completed anonymously. There is potential here for further use of drawings to explore students' meaning-stories in which the students describe their own interpretations of their drawings. The method used by Guillemin (2004) and Guillemin and Drew (2010), who used drawings to effectively explore participants understanding of their illness condition, would be particularly appropriate here. Guillemin argues that drawing not only produces a product (the picture) but also involves a process of meaning making that can be used to gain an understanding of the participants view. Key to the method is that participants are asked to describe their drawing: why they chose to draw it and aspects of the image such as colour, size, place on the page to provide the participants interpretation (rather than the researchers) that would be particularly appropriate in the exploration of students' meaning-making using an interpretative approach such as in this study. Guillemin recommends that this method is best used alongside other methods and works particularly well in combination with an interview that helps to build an initial rapport, and enables discussion of the drawing (which takes place at the end of the interview) to also draw upon themes raised in the interview.

Further sharing of the students' non-verbal contributions

There is also further potential to explore the dissemination of non-verbal contributions to this study. If we consider religious literacy as also including non-verbal communications about belief, then the visual artefacts that students have contributed (the drawings on the postcards and the photographs) are also communications in themselves, and there is potential to use these in dissemination to convey a sense of the students' contributions that is beyond words. As discussed in the analysis (section 3.5) I was aware that a text only description of the pictures on their postcards did not provide the 'feel' of what the students had conveyed in their drawings and I had used photographs of the postcards to capture this, so I was also interested in exploring how this could also be conveyed in dissemination. I attended the Connectors Study event (Making connections: an introduction to multimodal ethnography, 2017) in which a variety of artefacts (such as photographs, and an illustration of the research process) from their study that explored childrens' everyday practices of participation in social action were displayed. The Connectors Study drew upon multimodal ethnography that has explored how to keep the 'wetness' of the multimedia contributions from participants when presenting their research findings. They take the idea of 'wetness' from Marks (2002) who discusses, with reference to artists' media, the difficulties of communicating sensory experiences (such as feelings, sounds) in words, because in doing so these experiences "have to be translated" (Marks 2002, p. ix). In this translation, Marks suggests, the "task is to make the dry words retain a

trace of wetness in the encounter" (Marks 2002, p. x) and argues that a successful translation of the sensory into words is one in which (in this case, the reader) "reconstitute in your own body the experience I had" (Marks 2002, p. ix), so a shared passing over of a sensory experience. In attending this exhibition, I had felt how it would be to experience their findings as a visitor in a way that is beyond language. As a result of attending this event, during the following presentations of this work (such as Lawther 2018c; Lawther 2019) I trialled sharing the photographs (as A4 size) and an album of the postcards whilst presenting so that participations could gain a 'feel' for the students' contributions beyond my descriptions in the presentation. Within this thesis, the visual materials have been included in the appendix in order to retain the 'wetness' of the students' visual contributions.

3.11. Chapter summary

This chapter has described the methodology that was developed to explore the breadth of meaning-making in HE, and how meaning-making is currently communicated. It has reflected upon methodologies that can be used to explore the breadth of meaning-making thus contributing to the third research aim to explore methodologies to research religion and belief.

The next three chapters outline the findings of the research. These chapters present the data before the discussion due to the complexity of the data. Chapters 4 and 5 contribute towards the first research aim, to explore a breadth of meaning-making in HE, with Chapter 4 focusing upon students' descriptions of their meaning-stories, *what* they do (including regular practices) as part of their 'thing' and Chapter 5 focusing upon the students' descriptions about *why* they do their 'thing'. Chapter 5 also provides an illustration of where perhaps students may be conveying aspects of their meaning-stories that may be difficult to put into words in their use of pictures on the postcards. Chapter 6 focuses upon the analysis that explores how the students communicated about their meaning-stories to inform the second research aim, which is 'to explore how religion and belief is currently communicated'. In Chapters 4 and 5 the student quotes have been edited so that words such as 'um' or like' have not been included for ease of reading. In Chapter 6, these have not been edited to illustrate where students may have had difficulty communicating about their meaning-stories in the interview.

Chapter 4. *What* do students do as part of their ‘thing’?

This chapter speaks to the aim of exploring *what* students do as part of their meaning-stories, their ‘thing’. It reflects first upon the textual data from the 306 postcards. It then builds upon this by exploring the students’ meaning-stories in more depth, identified from the analysis of both the photo-elicitation interview data and the postcard text data about *what* students do as part of their meaning-stories as described by the students. It explores the overall themes identified of, ‘Self’,’ ‘Connections’, ‘Religion/faith/spirituality’ and ‘Being in nature’, and these themes are discussed in this order. The discussion section in this chapter draws upon these findings to discuss the complexity and individuality of the students’ meaning-stories, including being in nature as a consistent thread throughout their stories, the implications of which are further developed in the conclusions. It discusses the prevalence of regular practices that is unique to this research and that students are making (often private) spaces on campus to do these practices and using technology to enable private practice in public spaces, adding new insights to existing research. This leads to the recommendation that the space for religion and belief on campus can be better captured and understood. It argues that the individuality of the student experience is not currently captured in religion and belief sector monitoring and reporting, and recommends that the monitoring processes to report upon religion and belief in HE are further developed to capture a breadth of experiences such as is illustrated in this study.

All visual materials referred to in this chapter are illustrated in Appendix 2.

4.1. Exploring themes from the postcard data

This next section explores themes from the postcard data.

Exploring the words used on the postcards: words relating to religion or belief, non-religious words or both?

There were 306 postcards completed by students suggesting that asking about meaning is a question that was engaging these students. A count of the postcards by case to explore whether they contained words only associated with institutional religion or the spiritual (such as ‘God’, ‘spiritual’, ‘pray’) or only non-religious words, or whether they contained both, was conducted as an initial exploration of patterns in words used to communicate on the postcards. It was found that eight postcards contained text only about religion or belief (see Figure 14: Religion or belief text only (p473)), and Figure 15: Religion or belief text only (p96)). There were 39 postcards that contained text about religion or belief *as well as* non-religious text such as Figure

16: Religion or belief text as well as non-religious text (p48) and Figure 17: Religion or belief text as well as non-religious text (p42).

Of interest here is that within these 47 postcards that included faith or belief (either on its own or with other text) only four directly named a religious affiliation and these were: Atheist (p42), Judaism (p48), Paganism (p47) and Islam (p474), and only three mentioned a place of worship: Church (p86 and p224) and Mosque (p475). Whilst 15 of the postcards used the word 'God', other postcards used words such as 'faith' (5 postcards), and one postcard used 'Creator' (see Figure 14: Religion or belief text only (p473)) and another, 'what I believe in' (see Figure 18: 'What I believe in' (p426)). Nineteen of the postcards that included faith and belief text included *doing* religion and described praying, worshiping, or reading/studying the Bible.

The remaining 255 postcards contained non-religious text only (such as Figure 19: Non-religious text only (p97)). However, it cannot be assumed that these were solely students that do not affiliate to a particular religion. There were two spaces that the postcards were collected that were more likely to include those students that affiliate to a religion: a Christian Union (CU) meeting and outside the Muslim Prayer Rooms prior to Friday prayers[12]. Of the postcards collected in these spaces all four of the postcards collected outside the Muslim Prayer Rooms contained text about religion or belief, whereas only five out of the 10 postcards collected at the CU meeting did the same (for example using words such as God, prayer, faith, Bible, Jesus and 'what I believe in' see Figure 18). Four postcards completed at the CU meeting contained only non-religious text (such as Figure 20: Non-religious text only (p416)).

Reflections on language: sorting postcards into binary categories

I was aware that by looking at the postcards in this way, of sorting them into the binary categories of religious and non-religious words, I was perhaps not capturing the diversity between these categories. However, this was a useful starting point to look at the actual words used, to try and understand how meaning-making is currently communicated, and I feel it was useful in that it highlighted that *doing* words were more commonly used than words related to affiliation. It may be perhaps that doing words were more commonly used because of the choice of the word 'when' in the question, that it prompted students to think about what they do. I was also aware that looking only at the actual words may not be capturing the *writers* meaning, which may have a religious meaning even if the words were not religious in themselves. One postcard (see Figure 21: 'When I'm walking the right path' (p413)) for example contained the phrase 'when I'm walking the right path'. In this case, the

[12] The Chaplaincy space is open to all students, so postcards collected using the Chaplaincy box and at the Chaplaincy Lunch are likely to include a range of students.

words were individually in themselves non-religious however this phrase may or may not have a religious meaning. This postcard was not coded and instead is used here as an illustration of the difficulty with exploring how language is used, that there may here be flexibility of the boundary between religion and non-religion. The postcard was written by a student in a CU meeting so it is likely that this has a Christian meaning, but given the complexity of religious identities revealed within this research (particularly through the PEI's) I was reluctant to assign a religious meaning where perhaps there wasn't one. This also may have been a deliberate choice of words *because* it can be interpreted in different ways, that the student may have chosen to use non-religious words because (even though they were in a CU meeting) they were in the public and secular space of the university whilst writing the postcard. It is also of interest that in the context where some students are keeping their faith hidden from their peers, in a lockbox (Guest 2017), that words that can be interpreted in different ways have been chosen here.

Exploring the most common themes found from the text on the postcards

A thematic analysis was then conducted of the most common themes found from the text on the postcards which found that for many students meaning is found from a range of sources, with the most common text related to connecting to others. This included: family and friends, being or connecting with others, helping others, partner, creating feelings in others, seeing others happy/kind around me, showing love/kindness to others, and relationships. The word cloud (see Figure 22: Word cloud created in Nvivo illustrates the frequency of words used in the postcard data[13] and highlights the prominence of words associated with 'connecting to others'. The next most common themes identified were: 'faith/prayer/religion', 'goals', 'when I feel' (for example, happiness), 'learning', 'being active', 'nature/outdoors', 'self' (for example 'be true to myself' or 'developing own qualities'), 'travel/explore', 'animals', 'music', 'quiet time', 'being creating', 'eating/drinking', 'reading/writing' and 'overcoming challenge'. As discussed in Chapter 3 these themes were further developed and refined in the subsequent analysis and are discussed further in the following section.

4.2. Exploring the students' meaning-stories, their 'thing', in more depth

This section discusses in more detail the themes identified from the analysis of *what* students do as part of their meaning-stories as described by the students. This analysis included both the photo-elicitation interview data and the postcard text data, and the overall themes identified were: 'Self', 'Connections',

[13] When creating the word cloud stemmed words were grouped together such as 'pray' and 'praying'.

'Religion/faith/spirituality' and 'Being in nature', and these themes are discussed in this order.

Regular practices

A key feature of the students' stories is that all of the student interviewed, apart from Paris, described practices that support their 'thing' that they do *at least once a week*, and these have been called *regular practices* within this thesis. As will be seen in the examples, most students have more than one regular practice and spoke about more than one thing that they gained from these practices. There were other activities that students spoke about that related to their meaning-stories that students did not explicitly say that they do at least once a week, such as meeting with friends, and these have also been discussed but are not termed 'regular practices'. As discussed in section 3.5, 'Meaning-story practices' has been used as a more general term to describe these practices related to the students' meaning-stories that may or may not take place at least once a week.

Sensory experiences

Five of the students (Penny, Willow, Anthony, Oliver, and Ana) described very sensory experiences when talking about their practices (either those that they do regularly, or less often). All of these five students described being in nature as one of their practices, and these are discussed further in section 4.3.4.

4.3. Discussion of themes: 'Self',' Connections', 'Religion/faith/spirituality' and 'Being in nature'

The overall themes identified from the analysis of what students do as part of their meaning-stories as told by the students are now described, followed by the sub-themes within them, as seen on the mind map (see Figure 12: *What* students do as part of their meaning-stories, their 'thing').

4.3.1. Self

Developing self

Students often described what they do as part of their meaning-stories, 'their thing', as related to the self. This was sometimes described in general terms such as 'using my full potential' (see Figure 23: Developing self (p35)). Other students here spoke about getting to know oneself such as Ana who described getting to know herself as a kind of belief:

> "…what is my kind of belief … I really started to get to know myself which is crazy how much that is important to [me]. I feel more important than getting to know other people is, to firstly, really get to know yourself and where you

stand and what is your kind of view on things, and I feel like I have managed to get to know myself" (Ana).

Oliver added the card 'Positive relationship with yourself' to the card sort saying that:

> "I would say having a positive relationship with yourself brings meaning to me because it is about… when you explore and you find yourself you want to be kind, and feelings of love and giving yourself rewards… all add up to creating, a positive relationship" (Oliver).

Within this theme of developing self, students also talked about looking after oneself, learning, and developing qualities of the self (such as independence and confidence), as providing sources of meaning. Paris, for example brought a picture of an alarm clock (see Figure 24: Alarm clock - Paris) and described it as:

> "…it is almost like, I don't know, a religious symbol or something isn't it, the way it just sits on the windowsill just on its own. It is small but powerful" (Paris).

Its importance to him was that it represented that he had never missed a lecture at university, whilst he says, "back in college I used to be late all the time, so I think that's quite an achievement" (Paris).

Whilst students often wrote 'goals' on the postcards, in the interviews the students were more likely to talk about how they overcame challenges. This difference may be because the postcard question 'I find meaning when…' may encourage reflection on past as well as current experience, and the broader approach of the photo interviews may encourage reflection on current life as it is being lived, and provides an opportunity for more detailed explanation. It could be for example, that what is meant by 'goals' in the postcards is the process of overcoming challenge to achieve goals. Penny, for example, chose the 'overcoming challenges' card first in the card sort because:

> "I have put overcoming challenges first because just getting to uni is a challenge, and the whole process… whether it is big ones like academic due dates, or small ones like what food am I eating this week, I have got to plan all these things, so that is [a] quite all-encompassing aspect of university - not negative, it is just a challenge" (Penny).

Imogen brought a photograph of her bed and a photograph of her room to illustrate how she deals with these challenges such as deadlines by regularly writing lists: "the list can seem silly at times because I will write out literally everything that I will need to do". For Imogen, "being organised is very important", and she says that this helps her to achieve what gives her meaning which is (among other things) "…working hard and getting the reward for working hard and being organised and tidy" (Imogen). Maya describes her regular practice of setting her "own disciplines" every day:

> "I think it is also important to have your own disciplines… For me, it is a simple thing. I try and do set goals each day to try and drink 2 litres of water, and then don't sit down after 30 minutes of eating… it is just like small discipline. So I try and set goals every day, then I think instead of trying to achieve a big goal, try and achieve a small goal every day is better"

Doing self

Students described in the postcards and in the photo interviews activities that they *do* that are part of their meaning-stories including being creative, reading and writing, being active, travelling, eating and drinking, being with animals, and listening to and playing music including, for Courtney, listening to faith music. Penny brought a picture of a card that she had made to illustrate her daily practice of crafting (see Figure 25: Crafting – Penny):

> "[I] spend like a least two hours a day crafting, … it is really rewarding for me because I get to work out anything I have done in the day, you know when your mind is thinking about something when you are doing something else".

This, for Penny, is a very sensory experience. She incorporates wood shavings into her craft because she "adore[s] forests" and loves the smell of sawdust and wood shavings, and uses texture to "just notice how vibrant everything is and notice how the textures around me it makes me feel more here, more alive, more present".Ana, as with Penny, describes that it is the doing of the activity (in Ana's case, reading), that brings meaning relating to the self. Ana brought a photograph of a book (see Figure 26: Book - Ana) to illustrate that:

> "…just losing my mind in a book is something, again, that kind of brings peace because for example whenever I am studying… it helps you with the worries that I have at the moment they all kind of go away as you ease into the world of the book" (Ana).

Similarly, Imogen describes how the doing of making food brings her meaning relating to the self, in that it makes her feel better as a person. She brought four pictures containing food: two were pictures of meals made by herself to illustrate that being healthy is important as "it makes me feel better as a person" (Figure 27: Food – Imogen). She also brought a picture of the first roast dinner she had cooked, a Christmas dinner with her university friends, to illustrate that "it was such a fun evening" and that she "really, really, really, enjoy[s] cooking". The fourth picture of food was eating sushi with her friend which also illustrated for her the importance of catching up with friends. Imogen also described a daily tea drinking practice, drinking a particular kind of tea that her auntie introduced her to, in a nice mug, because "a cup of tea will always cheer me up".

Many of the students talked about listening to music as part of their meaning-stories, and it was the card chosen most often in the card sort. Willow, for example, enjoys going to musical events, Brooke plays the guitar and listens to music, and Maya plays the piano and enjoys listening to music. Penny describes in detail her regular practice of listening to music, describing her "day musically" in which she listens to different types of music during the day such as music on the bus "to gently wake myself up", "music for ten minutes before a lecture just to get myself… in a determined mindset for when I go in" and then later in the day "back to music and then that enables me to process my day" (see Figure 28: Music - Penny). Courtney brought a photograph (see Figure 29: Worship playlist - Courtney) to illustrate that as part of her daily routine she listens to a worship playlist: "when I am doing my daily Bible study, but also just sometimes in the morning as well, or when I am walking to university" and that she uses the playlist "for more like when I want to have a more intimate time with God and um yeah I don't know how to describe it".

Feeling self

Students described having positive feelings in themselves as a source of meaning, primarily in the postcards, but also in the interviews, such as feeling: hope, love, peace, fun, happiness, and enjoyment, feeling part of something bigger than one's self, and connection, (see Figure 30: Feeling self (p403)). It is having the feeling itself that appears to bring meaning (such as 'being happy' see Figure 31: Feeling self (p112)), and as will be seen in Chapter 5, there are also activities that students do as part of their 'thing' that they describe create positive feelings.

Self - Quiet time

Students in both the postcards and the interviews described the importance of quiet time alone and this included mindfulness and meditation, time to relax and reflect, having 'own time' and 'time alone' (see Figure 32: Self – quiet time (p376).

Space for quiet time

In the interviews, students spoke about what they do in their quiet time and where they do it. Kate and Ana (see Figure 33: Yoga - Ana) both brought photographs to illustrate doing yoga, and both described how yoga and mindfulness helps with their mental health and stress. Four students in the interviews (Paris, Brooke, Imogen, and Maya) chose to bring photographs of their bedroom to illustrate the importance of time alone. Paris, for example, chose a photograph of his campus bedroom door:

> "That is the bedroom door to my room… that is important because I like having a personal space to myself" (Paris).

Imogen, Brooke, and Maya all brought photographs of their bed. Maya, when talking about her photograph, said that:

> "I believe that spending time alone is also very important… if you spend time alone you can also release your mind…I can enjoy myself alone so it is my big picture of me, yeah" (Maya).

Imogen brought a photo of her bed and a photo of herself asleep on her bed that a friend had sent her using Snapchat. She described that being able to come in after a long day and flop in her bed makes her happy, contented, and relaxed. Around her bed are photographs of her family, friends, places that she has been to, and occasions such as her friend's birthday. She describes that looking at them triggers memories "that really mean something to me, it just makes me remember all the happy times". Courtney also brought a photograph of her bedroom, of her wall above her bed that she had decorated with pictures and photographs that she describes as her 'prayer wall' that she uses to pray, and describes her daily Bible study practice as 'quiet time'.

Oliver was the only student that described regularly using chaplaincy space for what he described as 'quiet time' (we see below students also described using chaplaincy space for prayer). Oliver brought a photograph (see Figure 34: Quiet room - Oliver) to describe his regular practice of spending time in the Quiet Room. He used it to illustrate that it he goes to this room "quite regularly, not every day but regularly, depends on how I am feeling", and goes particularly when he feels stressed. Once in the room he describes that:

> "…if I am feeling stressed, I would close the door, put the do not disturb sign on the front of the door…. I find it very, very, peaceful being here. I shut the blinds sometimes… because I want my own kind of space".

4.3.2. Connections

Family, partner, relationships, and friends

Within students' descriptions of *what* they do as part of their meaning-stories, their 'thing', the most common theme from the postcards were those related to being or connecting with others and in particular closely related others such as friends and family (see Figure 35: Connections – family, partner, relationships, and friends (p1)). This was reflected in the photo interviews, with students talking about who they connected with, the nature of these relationships, and the experience of being connected with others. Of those students that said who they connected with, family and friends were most common both in the postcards and interviews. In the photo interviews some of the students also described who they meant when they used 'family', and that this wasn't necessarily their immediate family:

> "…and then I would say family because although I am estranged, I do have family in the sense of my partner's family" (Penny).

> "For me personally my family is just mostly my mum" (Kate).

Students described both friends from university and friends from home as important to them, and on the whole, were selective about their friendships, speaking here about the importance of the quality of these close relationships. Oliver, for example, volunteered this description of what he would describe as a friend:

> "You need some kind, some type, of selection, ones that you can trust, feel that they accept you for who you are, feel that they are willing to help, you know, listen to you, willing to support you, that is what friends are" (Oliver).

Ana is also selective about her friendships and describes that that she has learnt to only choose friends that have "the right energy" and that this forms part of her beliefs:

> "I believe that every person [has], not an aura, but a kind of energy, and every person has a different energy vibe that they send out… So that is also a part of my belief… so finding people with the right energy is important for me. I find that I only am willing to spend my time with people that, kind of, our energies are like corresponding and not clashing" (Ana).

Whilst students in the interviews talked about being with their friends and what they do together (such as Imogen eating sushi with her friend), none of the students explicitly described this as something that they do regularly (although it may be that this is a regular practice).

Being with others

Many of the students, particularly in the postcards, described the experience of being with others as part of their meaning-stories, and this was sometimes being with loved ones, "spending times with ones I love" (p88), sometimes with those that are similar such as "I find meaning in my life when I speak to people who are on the same wavelength as me and who I can connect to holistically" (p120) and sometimes with those that are different such as postcard 45 (see Figure 36: Connections – being with others (p45)). Willow described going to community events, university events, music events and volunteering to meet others and to feel "connection" and "part of something bigger":

> "I try and go to lots of different events to meet new people and even if I don't just to experience it and feel like I am part of something is quite important" (Willow).

Helping others

Helping others was a strong theme here with students describing more generally having a positive effect on others, such as "helping others", "showing kindness" (Figure 37: Connections – helping others (p89), "making other people happy" (Figure 38: Connections – helping others (p20)) and Figure 39: Connections – helping others (p25) and more specific examples such as volunteering and charity work (see Figure 40: Connections – helping others (p106).

Practice examples

Eight of the students spoke about activities that they do to help others such as Taariq and Anthony who have volunteered through the University, Brooke who hosts charity dinners with her friends, and Ana who gives blood and buys dog food for homeless people in the city. Kate described that she tries "to do the right thing in my day-to-day life" such as helping others, and being a vegan, which helps animals. Maya, Natalie, and Courtney all have regular practices of volunteering. Maya, for example, regularly volunteers at the University such as in "a program teaching the adults how to use computers and laptops" and as a Sports Marshal because she says "I want to do volunteering even like only two or three hours a week yeah…so I think it is better to start from now so it will become like a practice for me". Natalie regularly

volunteers at the local guiding group where she is currently the leader of the [name of the guiding unit] and Courtney regularly volunteers in a charity shop attached to her local Church.

4.3.3. Religion Faith Spirituality

Students often described *what* they do as part of their meaning-stories, 'their thing', as related to their religion, faith, or spirituality. This included those students that affiliated to a religion and those that did not, and students here also spoke about their practices related to this, and where they do these. This name of this theme drew upon words that students used of 'religion', 'faith' and 'spirituality', but as seen below (and in Chapter 6) students had their own interpretations of these words, so they may not refer to a particular affiliation.

In the photo interviews it was not always possible to predict the students' religion or belief by looking only at their photographs, illustrating the individuality of the students' meaning-stories. Courtney chose only faith related pictures, Taariq brought no faith related pictures (including those that he showed me on his phone), and the remainder of students chose to bring (or show) a mixture of faith related and non-faith related photographs. Gamila, for example, brought nine photographs that illustrated: the Quran and favourite saying, a prayer mat, her phone with religious teachings, the local park, a picture of an animation, herself wearing a scarf, her family at a local nature reserve, and a flag of her home country. Anthony, a Muslim student, also included a photograph of a Church to illustrate that the connectedness of Christian teachings with his faith is what brings meaning (see Figure 41: Church – Anthony). Anthony explains:

> "Predominantly the world is religious, and we all have that sort of connection to God, no matter what religion we come from. So feeling that connection between two completely different religions …and seeing the deeper meanings that we all have, love they neighbour as thyself, God is love, those are Christian teachings but they are exactly the same teachings that we have" (Anthony).

Students that had declared a religious affiliation spoke about their religion being part of their meaning-stories although they did not always use the term 'religion' preferring sometimes to use 'faith' (Courtney and Trudy) or 'spirituality' (Penny) (see Chapter 6 for further discussion of terms used). Some of the students that had not declared a religious affiliation described their own beliefs such as Oliver who said that his belief has "many aspects" including a belief in reincarnation, "the power of God"

and “being a good person”. Ana, as well as believing that everyone has an “energy vibe”, described her “kind of belief” is to “get to know myself” and that:

> “…because I am not a religious person, obviously, and the things that I, that my beliefs, and um [pause] are is finding peace” (Ana).

Natalie spoke about a belief in a higher being and guardian angels, and Kate that “I kind of believe in like spirits, but I am not sure how far I believe into it”. As will be discussed further in Chapter 6, students also used their own definitions and descriptions here such as Willow who described faith as “faith in myself” and Penny who spoke about what faith meant to her:

> “… faith, faith that everything is going to be alright but faith in religion as well and in people around me” (Penny).

Prayer

All five of the Muslim students described that they use the Prayer Room on campus (although Anthony only found out about this in his third year) and pray at home, and Amjad and Taariq and Anthony all mention attending the local Mosque (although for Anthony this is rarely, he primarily prays at home with his family).

A number of students describe praying ‘on the go’ and often use technology to allow them to do this discreetly such as Courtney, Trudy, and Gamila who use a phone app. Trudy and Courtney also describe praying at home, with Courtney here describing that she regularly prays ‘on the spot’ and with others. Courtney, Trudy and Gamila, all describe prayer in this way as a regular practice. Courtney uses her phone to help her remember what she would like to pray for, and sometimes prays “on the spot…it is not really that [I] need to go into a separate room and pray out loud…it is just that like in my head…like a conversation between me and God”. Courtney also regularly prays with others: when meeting with friends from Church, at Christian Union Society meetings and when volunteering at the charity shop she prays for what people need to be donated, “we believe that if we pray for it then it will appear”. In addition to praying five times a day, Gamila described that she reads the Quran daily, morning and evening (and if she is tired, she will listen on headphones). She uses an app on the bus or when walking for Athekar, (which she describes as “reminders”) and if she has time before she arrives at university she will read the Quran. She is also trying to memorise the Quran and meets with her Muslim friend “every single weekend” and together they “try to memorise at least half a page every week”.

Oliver also prays on campus, but this is his own type of prayer and can take the form of visualisation prompted for example by a sculpture on campus (see Figure 42: Sculpture - Oliver) that helps him to visualise his goals and gives him a "sense of energy":

> "I would say not really pray, pray as in it is hard to explain in my mind, kind of visualisation of my goals, where I want to be, visualisation of looking up in the sky. I find just looking up and pray like that just for a minute just to feel the connection and then carry on" (Oliver).

Oliver describes that prayer can also take the form of crossing his fingers:

> "I would say prayer comes into it again, keeping your fingers crossed, keeping in mind, you know, what you want to achieve what you want God to do for you" (Oliver).

Religious teachings

Maya, Trudy, Courtney, and Anthony all describe regular practices of engaging with religious teachings. Maya uses her room on campus to read or listen to religious teachings from the monks about once a week and "especially if I have like challenging time, a difficult time, then I listen to it and then it encourages me a lot". Courtney brought the photograph of her Bible and her journal (see Figure 43: Bible and journal - Courtney) to illustrate her daily practice of reading the Bible and highlighting passages and writing extra notes:

> "I try and have what I call like quiet time which is like spending time with God and with the Bible just kind of like just trying to listen to his voice and what he is trying to say to me… So I try and do this daily… so like I would read a passage and then [write down] any things that stood out to me".

Trudy, Courtney and Anthony also both use technology to support this practice, with Trudy and Courtney both using an app on their phone and Anthony who uses his headphones and iPhone. Courtney also brought a photograph of an app on her phone that she uses that contains audio, video, different plans that focus on different aspects of the Bible such as "Father's love", and a "Bible streak with Snapchat" which she explains is:

> "On Snapchat you message someone and then in your constantly like messaging you kind of start a streak…so it isn't like you should read the Bible

> every day but it just kind of like encourages, hopefully will encourage people to make it a habit”.

In addition to praying five times a day, Anthony spends “a good hour, hour and a half every other day” on the academic study of Islam in order to “develop a holistic experience of my own religion and my own personal view of what my religion shows me”. He also sometimes listens to the Quran on headphones when on the bus or when studying on campus, or reads the Quran on his smartphone on campus as this allows him to be discreet.

> “I must note that I am reading the Quran in my head I don’t read it out loud… I think people would find that a little bit strange, that someone is reading the Quran on university grounds just straight out of their phone”.

Wearing symbols

Penny, Oliver, and Gamila also talked about things that they wear that act as symbols. Penny wears a pentacle on a necklace as a symbol of her Paganism and Oliver wears a necklace with a Chinese symbol for courage as a reminder of bravery, strength, and God’s protection. Gamila took a picture of herself wearing a scarf as a symbol of Islam:

> “A scarf, it is a symbol of Islam right, so that makes me like a better person. Whenever I am doing, I will remember, oh I am wearing scarf, I am an image of Islam, so I will just try to be as good as I can” (Gamila).

It is of note that there was varied engagement with the Chaplaincy and faith societies by the students. All five of the Muslim students use the Prayer Room on campus (although Anthony only found out about this in his third year) and pray at home, and Amjad and Taariq and Anthony all mention attending the local Mosque (although for, Anthony this is rarely, he primarily prays at home with his family). Taariq and Gamila both mention that they are members of the Islamic society, but Gamila is not actively involved with it. Madi is aware of the Islamic society but not involved. Courtney and Trudy also describe praying at home, and Maya reads or listens to religious teachings in her room on campus. As a member of the Christian Union, Courtney is the only other student involved in a religious society on campus. Whilst Trudy is not a member of a Christian society she does meet on campus with friends to “do a Bible discussion so to help people learn about the Bible but I mean we don’t necessarily need any facilities I know some people are like societies and stuff we just go to the [campus cafe space] some Wednesdays”. Maya would join if there was a Buddhist society (and she was a member in her home country when studying). Amjad, Gamila, Madi, Maya,

Oliver and Ana all attend the lunches organised by the Global Space and Chaplaincy, and as seen above Oliver also uses the Quiet Room within Chaplaincy regularly.

4.3.4. Being in nature

As well as being a theme found in both the postcard text and pictures, students often spoke about being in nature in the photo interviews as something that they *do* as part of their 'thing'. This chapter focuses on what students said that they *do* as part of their meaning-stories, so this section focuses on what students say that they do in nature, how often and where they do this, and who they choose to be in nature with. As students describe what they do in the quotes below, they also describe why they do this, and this is discussed further in Chapter 5 (particularly in relation to 'Self' and wellbeing). Eight students chose nature pictures: Penny, Willow, Anthony, Oliver, Ana, Paris, Gamila, and Kate. Brooke also talked about finding walking in green spaces relaxing, and Taariq and Maya both brought pictures of snow: Taariq of his family in the local park in the snow, and Maya of herself in the snow. Penny, Willow, and Anthony described regular practices in nature, and Kate, Gamila, Oliver, Ana, and Natalie all describe that they spend time in nature when they are stressed or feeling anxious. Five of the students described very sensory experiences when talking about their nature practices (either those that they do regularly, or less often).

Some of the students said that spending time in nature was something that they usually did alone, such as Ana who brought a photograph of the canal (see Figure 44: Canal - Ana) to illustrate that:

> "As much as I enjoy hanging out with my friends, I really do appreciate my time and my walks, and just clear my mind of all the things that accumulate" (Ana).

Other students spoke about being in nature with close friends and family. Gamila and Taariq, for example, brought photographs of their families at a local nature reserve and in the park next to the campus respectively. Willow described the experience of being with friends in nature as providing connection when describing a photograph that she would have liked to have taken:

> "It would be in summer and we would all be lying in a park or in a wood, just somewhere very secluded and peaceful, all of us talking and bonding and catching up… very green and sunny, probably lots of birds singing, I imagine combining everything I love - nature, my friends, just having a good time, being connected to everyone" (Willow).

Both Ana and Oliver spoke about a mindfulness walk that they had enjoyed with the university Chaplain. Two of the university campuses have green spaces and one campus has a park next to it. Oliver has several outdoor spaces on his campus that he visits such as the rocket sculpture that helps his visualisation, globe sculpture, and the fountain (see Figure 45: Fountain - Oliver) that he visits when he is stressed that he originally came across on his mindfulness walk:

> "So [name of Chaplain] took me on a walk around the different points of location around the campus, and one of the ones we came across on the walk was indeed the fountain which, you know, I fell in love with immediately. I find it very peaceful and somewhere if I need some me time…" (Oliver).

Kate and Gamila (see Figure 46: Park - Gamila) also brought pictures of the local park that they often visit in order to spend time in nature, and whilst Imogen didn't bring a photograph, she said that she likes going to the local park to "just chill with friends".

Penny describes that her regular practices of being in nature link to her Paganism, to something bigger than herself (a world outside of herself), and support her wellbeing and mental health. Penny has a regular practice of arriving early on campus "to go and spend fifteen minutes in the forest usually and then if I have a break like a large four-hour break or something I will go. The first thing I will do when I come out of lectures is just go to a forest for like an hour". She also uses crystals first thing in the morning:

> "So, I might if I am feeling a bit unnerved, I might hold a rose quartz for ten minutes and just concentrate on the fact that a rose quartz is a love stone and that includes self-love you know? Or I might pick up a jade and just focus on the fact it is a natural element, and remind myself that even though we are in a city and there are man-made things everywhere there are still these natural things".

Willow's regular practice of watching the sunrise and sunset on campus also helps her wellbeing and gives her a feeling of being part of something bigger than herself, and again this is discussed further in the next chapter. Willow showed me a picture on her phone of a sunset, describing that she regularly watches the sun rise and sun set:

> "Daily or every other day, yeah, if there is a sunset then I will usually go out and see it and it is the same at home as well… you can just see the sun rise above all the buildings, and the sky will be bright pink. It is really beautiful".

As well as this, she also enjoys star gazing when she can. Willow describes this in a very sensory way, focusing on the colours of the sunset when describing why it is special to her:

> "I think is just the beauty, it is not man-made, it's completely natural, and it's different every time. You never see a sunset exactly the same as another one. Sometimes there won't really be one at all, other times the entire sky will be pink and purple and orange and you can't really ever recreate that, and it only lasts for a really short amount of time as well, you have just got to really take in. I just think it is really special".

Some students also ventured further away from campus to spend time in nature**.** Gamila, for example, brought a picture of her family at a local park that she visits with her family. Paris brought a photograph of a nearby nature reserve (see Figure 47: Nature reserve - Paris) where he likes to go "walking there sometimes at weekends" because it:

> "…gives sort of meaning, because I think it is important, because it is nice to do something on your own every now and then, to get out of [the city], take a nice walk by the river you know… it is quiet (Paris).

Oliver also brought photographs of the countryside (including a selfie) to illustrate that he likes to explore the local countryside either on his own or with small groups of people that he feels he can trust and "that this is their kind of thing" (see Figure 48: Countryside – Oliver). We see in Anthony's description below that being in nature is also liked to his religion as he feels "God's presence" in nature and this is discussed further in the next chapter. Anthony brought a picture (see Figure 49: Nature - Anthony) that illustrates:

> "I would say this picture, this signifies nature, so me and my girlfriend we go for walks very often, so maybe once or twice a week".

Whilst they visit different parks the two that really "connect" with him are a more local park and the park that is next to the campus. They also enjoy visiting one of the other university campuses that is in the countryside if they have time "just to feel not only part of nature but also part of the university". Being in nature is a very sensory experience for Anthony, and Anthony describes that he feels "God's presence" in nature, and he likes taking his girlfriend because "I like sharing God with the people I love".

4.4. Discussion

This discussion section draws upon these findings to discuss the complexity and individuality of the students' meaning-stories, the prevalence of regular practices that is unique to this research, and how students are making (often private) spaces on campus to do this, and the importance of nature as a consistent thread throughout their stories. It considers these findings about what students *do* as part of their meaning-stories in relation to existing studies that have used both similar and different words to ask about students' meaning-making to argue that although we might ask in different ways, that is perhaps a 'thing', that individuals are communicating that has commonalities between individuals. It recommends that the monitoring process to report upon religion and belief, including the capturing of space on campus for religion and belief, is further developed to understand the real (rather than imagined) experience of students.

Complexity and individuality of the students' meaning-stories

The number of students that chose to take part in the postcard research, and that only four students questioned the question 'I find meaning when…' on the postcard (section 3.4.1), indicates that meaning-making is something that students are engaging with or can relate to. Whilst the term 'meaning' does have limitations (as discussed in sections 2.7, 3.4.1, and 3.5), it does seem to be a term that students recognised and engaged with. This may be due to the openness of the method, that the framing of the photo-elicitation instructions in particular, invited a breadth of contributions with the advantage of this approach that it is from the students starting point, and captures meaning-making from their view, their lens, whatever that may be. It has highlighted the individual and idiosyncratic nature of the participants' meaning-stories, that it may be difficult, for example, to predict from the students' contributions if they are affiliated to a particular faith. The approach of starting from the students' starting point has highlighted that the complexity and individuality of the students' meaning-stories is not sufficiently captured in current academic categories, nor is captured solely in the students' descriptions of their religious self-identity. This reflects the difficulties that McGuire suggests, that whilst intellectuals may be keen to categorise "religious ways of thinking, perceiving and acting" in order to understand it (McGuire 2008, p. 16), religion as it is lived is much harder to categorise because "it is not necessarily logically coherent", to an individual it just matters that it makes sense in that person's life, that it "works" (McGuire 2008, p. 15). Meaning, for example, may also come from secular activities for those affiliated to a religion, such as Gamila, who also brought photographs that illustrated spending time in nature. It may come from experiencing faiths outside one's own affiliation such as for Anthony, who brought a photograph of a Church to illustrate that the

connectedness of Christian teachings with his faith is what brings meaning. Anthony's practices also include praying five times a day, the academic study of Islam, and regularly spending time in nature. It may also be drawn from a range of 'religious' sources, such as Oliver who finds meaning from drawing upon different religions as well as being in nature.

Cheruvallil-Contractor et al (2013) also found this blurring within their participants, that for some of their participants who identified as having a 'spiritual' identity or 'belief' they "neither fully identify with the categories of 'religion' or 'non-religion'" (p181). They refer here to Heelas and Woodhead et al (2005) who suggest that the increasing salience of the 'spiritual' category is indicative of the changing nature of religion (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2013, p. 181). This research illustrates therefore, that not only are the academic categories that we use to describe religion not sufficient to capture experience as it is lived today as discussed by McGuire (2008), but further highlights the importance of starting from the students' starting point to capture this complexity. Cheruvallil-Contractor et al (2013, p. 183), when discussing methodological issues with researching the non-religious, highlight the fluidity and fuzziness between the categories of religion, non-religion and in-between, and describe the method of asking students to self-identify their religious identity as pragmatically "the least worst way" (2013, p. 179) of exploring non-religious identities. As found by Cheruvallil-Contractor et al (2013) the self-definition of the students in this study of their religious identity also didn't always fit into already existing categories such as 'non-religious', 'spiritual' or 'religious'. In this research, when asked on the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix 4.4) as an open question, 'How would you describe your religious identity?', for example, some of the students provided an individual definition such as Willow who wrote 'Atheist with a strong faith in myself', and Natalie who wrote 'I believe in a higher being'. A comparison of the students' answers in the demographic questionnaire with their photo interviews highlighted further complexity. Ana stated in her questionnaire that she was 'Agnostic' and in the interview spoke about her belief that everyone has an "energy vibe" and her belief is to "find peace" and get to know herself. Kate described herself in the questionnaire as 'Atheist/Agnostic I don't particularly believe but I'm mostly open minded to a degree' and spoke in the interview about how she "kind of believe[s] in like spirits". Oliver, who perhaps gave the most complex description of his meaning-story in the photo interviews, didn't answer the question 'How would you describe your religious identity?' (answering only "yes – belief" to the question 'Do you have a religion or belief') perhaps indicating that this was too complex to describe in a questionnaire format, or in a short number of words. This suggests the importance of using a combination of methods and perspectives when researching identity as discussed by Day and Lee (2014) who argue that offering a 'tick box'

choice to ask about religious identity is not sufficient because there is not one static 'self', that self is affected by relationship and context, is changing, and is "is always in a process of becoming in relation with others" (Day and Lee 2014, p. 347). This research has therefore also highlighted the importance of using a combination of methods to understand students' responses to the question of religious self-identity, that self-identity is more complex and individualised than the students' descriptions in the demographic questionnaire alone.

This individuality of the students experience that is illustrated in these findings is also not captured in sector monitoring of religion and belief on campus. The language of current policy and practice recommendations about religion and belief on campus uses primarily the terms 'religion' and 'belief' primarily with reference to affiliation, and this is perhaps because of its legacy of responding to the requirements of the Equality Act (2010). However, this does not sufficiently reflect the individual nature of the students' meaning-stories illustrated in this study. The Advance HE (2020) report, for example begins with a reference to the Equality Act, explaining that the collection of this sector data will support the addressing of inequalities. 'Religion' is not defined, rather it appears it is presumed that this is affiliation, with only 'spirituality' defined as "belief in the spiritual dimension of all life, which can be experienced directly and without the assistance of conventional religion" (Advance HE 2020, p. 6). The Advance HE report (2018b), again begins with reference to the legal requirements of the Equality Act (2010), and refers to the definition of 'religion or belief' that has been developed through the courts in response to the Equality Act (2020). As discussed in the literature review, the focus of data collection and reporting in HE is focused on the capturing of those affiliated to a religion (or not), and much of the current research in understanding the student experience here has tended to focus upon students that affiliate to a religion, rather than using the lens of lived religion to capture individual experience rather than affiliation. This is a limited understanding of student's experience as illustrated in the diversity of experiences and practices captured in this study, and it is recommended that monitoring processes to report upon religion and belief in HE are further developed to capture a breadth of experiences such as is illustrated in this study.

Insight into the prevalence of regular practices on campus

Research within HE has focused on practices associated with a religious affiliation such as (Guest et al 2013; Aune 2019), so little is known about the individual nature of these practices on campus or the practices of those that do not affiliate to a particular religion. What is unique about this research is that it has captured the *doing* of the students' regular practices on campus that students do as part of their 'thing' in detail and that these include non-religious practices. It has indicated that there are

similar practices amongst those that affiliate to a religion, and those that do not. Imogen, for example, (who answered ‘No’ to the question ‘Do you have a religion or belief?’ and left blank the question ‘How would you describe your religious identity?’ in the demographic questionnaire) described the importance of dealing with challenges by writing, and then following lists of everything that she needs to do in the day, which is perhaps similar to Maya’s (who described her religious identity as ‘Buddhist’) “own disciplines” that she sets herself every day. Oliver, (who answered ‘yes- belief’ in his questionnaire, but described complex beliefs in his photo interview), has his own version of prayer and wears a necklace as a symbol (a Chinese symbol for courage as a reminder of bravery, strength and God’s protection) whilst Gamila spoke about praying on campus (using a phone app) and describes that she wears a scarf as a symbol of Islam. As discussed in section 3.2 it is beyond the boundaries of this study to test the effectiveness of their meaning-story practices (such as evaluating whether an activity does provide meaning to the student) so it cannot be said that these similar practices have the same meaning or effect for the student, but it is an area worthy of further exploration. The scale of this research didn’t allow for an exploration of whether the importance of meaning-making changed according to time and place, as was found by Day (2013), when exploring the salience of participants beliefs, how strongly held their beliefs were, who found that “their varying salience changed according to the sources of belief and the time and place in which they were experienced” (Day 2013, p. 283). It also did not measure whether the doing of these regular practices has a reinforcing effect as found by Day (2013) who argues that “‘performative beliefs’…are brought into being through rituals or social acts and then repeated to reinforce their salience and function” (Day 2013, p. 287). However, if a measure of salience is taken as the prevalence of the doing of meaning-story practices, the translation of meaning-making into practice, the findings suggest that meaning-story practices are a strong feature in the students’ lives. This is illustrated in the postcards that used religion and belief text, in which students were more likely to describe ‘doing’ such as praying, worshiping, than their affiliation or their place of worship, as well as the prevalence and regularity of the doing of practices highlighted in the photo interviews: that all but one of the students are doing regular practices that support their ‘thing’ and are fitting this in as part of their daily student life.

Space for regular practices on campus: private practice in public spaces

Whilst research in this area has primarily focused on the use of designated space to practice religion and belief, this study has found that students are also using other spaces such as their bedroom, secular campus spaces, on the bus, and being in nature for their regular practices, and that technology is supporting students to do private practices that support their ‘thing’ in public spaces. Aune, Guest and Law (2019, p. 102) for example explored the use of chaplaincy space and found that it

was primarily used for participating in a religious service, as well as "talking one-to-one with a Chaplain; using the space for socialising; using the space for a religious society meeting; participating in a group activity organised by the Chaplaincy; or using the space for prayer and spiritual reflection" (Aune, Guest and Law 2019, p. 102). Prior to this research, the Equality Challenge Unit (2011), in a survey of almost 4,000 students, reported that 17.4% of students said that they use the worship space provided by their university, with Muslim students most likely to use this space (ECU 2011, p. 61). We see in this research that chaplaincy space *is* used by students, *including* those students that do not affiliate to a particular religion such as by Oliver who uses the Quiet Room, and Ana who attends the community lunch held within the Chaplaincy. We also see Trudy describing that the Christian Society that she belongs to uses secular space on campus for their meetings. However, students primarily talked about their regular practices occurring in spaces that fit around their university life, such as Courtney, Imogen, Brooke, and Maya who use their bedroom for 'quiet time', Maya who listens to religious teachings in her room on campus, and Penny who regularly spends time in the 'forest' on campus before lectures. Being in nature was a key theme in the students' stories of what they do as part of their 'thing', with eight students bringing nature photographs, three students describing regular practices in nature and five students describing that they spend time in nature when they are stressed or feeling anxious. These spaces were also often local outdoor spaces, such as green spaces on campus, and a park next to campus, and were primarily private practices, or those that were shared with one other, such as Anthony who shares his time in nature with his girlfriend, and Ana and Oliver who described a campus mindfulness walk with the Chaplain, highlighting the importance of understanding how these spaces are used by students and what they bring to the student experience.

Technology appears to be enabling private practice in public spaces (both on campus and travelling to and from campus), allowing students for example to pray 'on the go' and to do this discreetly, such as Anthony who listens to the Quran on headphones whilst studying and on the bus, and Gamila who uses an app on the bus on the way to university for Athekar. Students therefore appear to be finding their own (often private) spaces on campus for their regular practices that support their 'thing' and to often be doing this discreetly reflecting again, that students are keeping this hidden from their peers (and this will be explored further in Chapter 6). This echoes research by Rinker et al (2016) with Christian and Muslim students in the US that found that technology enabled the students to integrate religion into their daily life and facilitated individual practice in private spaces. When aiming to understand faith and belief on campus then, asking only about religiously affiliated practices and spaces is only part of the picture. Exploring these more private practices that can be both in

private and public spaces (using technology to maintain privacy), will add to what is currently known about the student experience, and therefore can be used to inform how to accommodate and support students with this aspect of their lives.

Being in nature

Nature appeared to be a consistent thread throughout the students' stories, both when students described *what* they do as part of their meaning-story, and *why* they do it, with eight of the students choosing to bring nature photographs. Dunlop and Ward, in their study in which they asked young Polish people to take photographs of what was sacred to them, argue that their taking of photographs of "scenes of nature" (2012, p. 443) illustrated that these young people were also open to pursuing their spirituality through nature in addition to their beliefs in Catholicism and "an openness to other forms of Christianity" (2012, p. 449). We see this in this study with students finding connection with God (and in the case of Oliver, his spirituality as he describes it) through nature, and some cases a very sensory experience of God. When speaking about why they do their 'thing', students *also* describe being in nature relating to the themes of 'Self', and 'Bigger than me': being in nature appears to particularly support looking after the self, and to provide a sense of connection on a wider scale to feel part of something bigger and offering a bigger perspective. The number of students who recounted practices of spending time in nature as part of their meaning-story (with three of these eight students describing regular practices of spending time in nature, and five students describing spending time in nature when they are stressed or feeling anxious), suggests the importance being in nature brings in students' everyday lives. The postcards that contained nature pictures that were different to text alongside them may also be an indication that perhaps what students gain from being in nature is sometimes difficult to put into words, and this becomes more likely when we consider that for some students (in this case five of the students) described very sensory experiences when talking about their nature practices.

Commonalities of themes even when using different words to ask

As discussed in the methods chapter, this research considered the words used in similar studies when devising how to ask about students' meaning-making in the photo interview instructions, such as the use of 'importance' by Ammerman (2014a), 'significance' by Dunlop (2008),'What do you believe in' as asked by Day (2009) and Dunlop and Ward (2012) and 'what was sacred to them' (Dunlop and Ward 2012). The photo instructions in this research used a combination of words both in explaining the context of the study, using the words 'religious', 'belief' and 'meaning' when explaining the context of the study and in the photo-elicitation instructions, such as explaining that every day beliefs and practices may be 'what is most important to you in your life, it may be what gives you meaning in your life, or your own understanding

of everyday beliefs and practices' (see Appendix 4.6). It is of note, then, that even though these similar studies have approached exploring this area using different words and ways of asking, that there are similar themes found in this research to this other work that has used similar (and different) ways of asking to explore this area.

Dunlop's 2008 research with young people aged 17-25 who were "born under the USSR" (Dunlop 2008, p. 17) for example also found the themes of connectedness, family, nature, feelings (fun, love, and peace), music, travel, and learning. In the Significance 'Week of my Life' Photograph Project which asked about "things that are significant to you" (2008, p. 31) students prioritised parents and family, friends, boyfriend, or love interest and spoke of additional themes such as studies, music, mobile phone, computer, sleep, and time. In the Hope Study where students were "asked to choose images that represented to them what they hope for" (Dunlop 2008, p. 60) the most frequently discussed topics were: travel, family, romantic relationships, friends, and a better world. Dunlop and Ward's photo-elicitation exploration of the sacred with Young Polish migrants (2012) also found themes of connectedness and nature in particular. When participants were asked to "take photographs of what was sacred to them" they provided photographs of churches, family, friends, home, and nature. They concluded that increasingly the young people were open to "other forms of Christianity and a pursuit of spirituality through nature" and that, for these young people, "relationships form a key to understanding what is sacred—in terms of not only the religion handed down through the generations but also the central importance of family and friends for establishing a sense of home in a new place" (Dunlop and Ward 2012, p. 449). In a difference to this research, photographs of places of worship (such as Churches) were taken, whereas in this research students primarily chose to take pictures of private spaces and objects such as: "my prayer wall in my dorm", "the mat for when you pray" and "an app that has the Bible", and this may be due to the context that this research took place, that students on campus may be more likely to keep all, or aspects of, their meaning-stories hidden from their peers.

Many of the themes found by Ammerman (2014a) were also similar to the findings in this study such as the importance of prayer, quiet time, family and community and caring (including caring for the earth) and practices similar to that found in this research such as studying scripture, quiet time, and music. Research by Drescher (2016) of the 'religiously unaffiliated' in America with a wider age range also found similar themes to that found in this research. From her sample of 103 participants in six focus groups aged between 18 and 65+ Drescher identified that their 10 most spiritually meaningful practices were: enjoying time with family, enjoying time with friends, enjoying time with pets or other animals, preparing and /or sharing

food/meals, praying, enjoying nature, listening to/playing music, enjoying/creating art and physical activity, and yoga. Day's research highlighted in particular the importance of people and relationships, that people 'believe in belonging', a reflection of, as Day argues, the relocation of belief to the social (Day 2011) and this is explored further in Chapter 5. In a difference to this research, both Ammerman (2014a) and Day's (2013) participants spoke about work and health, neither of which featured strongly in this research, perhaps due to the age of the participants and that a more pressing concern for students is studying and university life, rather than work.

The recurrence of these themes within the examples above, and from this research, suggests a similarity of, to use the students' words, 'their thing', that although we might ask in different ways, that there is a 'thing', that individuals are communicating that has many commonalities between individuals. There were also differences between these research findings and similar research in this area, and these differences are discussed further in the next chapter.

4.5. Chapter summary

This chapter has highlighted that the complexity and individuality of meaning-stories may not fit into current academic categories as well as providing insight into the prevalence of regular practices on campus, and how students are making (often private) spaces on campus to do this. It has argued for the importance of nature as a consistent thread throughout their stories, and recommends that the space for religion and belief on campus is better captured and understood. It has recommended that monitoring process to report upon religion and belief, including the capturing of space on campus for religion and belief, is further developed to understand the real (rather than imagined) experience of students. The next chapter builds upon this by focusing upon students' descriptions about *why* students do their 'thing', their meaning-stories, as described by the students, and discusses findings from Chapters 4 and 5 in relation to existing research in this area.

Chapter 5. *Why* do students do their 'thing'?

This chapter focuses upon students' descriptions about *why* they do their 'thing', as expressed in their meaning-stories. It begins by using the postcard data to explore students' attempts to wrestle with and express aspects of their meaning-story. It then explores the students' meaning-stories in more depth, using the analysis of both the photo-elicitation interview data and the postcard text data about *why* students do their 'thing' as told in their meaning-stories. It explores the role of the students' meaning-stories, their 'thing', in their university experience and recognises the contextualised and multi-faced nature of their meaning-stories. The key themes identified were: 'Self', 'Connections', 'Connect with religion/faith/spirituality' and 'Bigger than me', and these themes are discussed in this order. The discussion section in this chapter draws together the findings from both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 (both *what* students do and *why* they say that they do it) to discuss the findings in relation to existing research in this area. I argue that the students' meaning-stories provide illustrations of the three types of belief identified by Day (2013b) and evidence of both formative and transformative spirituality as described by Collins -Mayo et al. (2010) and Savage et al (2006). However, the findings illustrate that these students are drawing on transformative spirituality more than was captured in the work of Savage et al. (2006) and Collins Mayo et al (2006), with the students drawing on a range of traditional religious teachings and practices such as Buddhism, Islam and 'own belief'. This chapter argues that the examples of connectedness within the students' meaning-stories challenge the theory of individualisation as they emphasise connection and relatedness, and that the theme 'Bigger than me' and the importance of being in nature suggest the need for a more capacious notion of connectedness as argued by Vasquez (2016). Unique to this study is that many of the students' regular practices on campus support the students' wellbeing whilst at university, and I argue that although this thesis provides data that illustrates that some students are drawing upon their religion, faith, and spirituality to support their wellbeing, this is notably absent in discussions about supporting wellbeing in higher education.

All visual materials referred to in this chapter are illustrated in Appendix 3.

5.1. Exploring the postcard pictures: understanding contributions beyond words

This section describes the findings from an exploration of the most common pictures on the postcards that illustrated something *other* than what was conveyed in the text. This was to explore whether students were using pictures to describe something that may be *difficult to put into words*. The most common pictures in this case were heart and nature pictures, so the card sort was used to better understand what students

may have been trying to communicate when drawing heart and nature pictures on the postcards and why they chose to use these pictures, fitting with the interpretivist aim of using the students' interpretations as much as possible. Whilst conducting this analysis it was felt that a text only description of the pictures didn't provide the 'feel' of what they were trying to convey in their postcards, the 'wetness' (Marks 2002, p. x), so the postcards were grouped by theme and photographed as illustrated in the appendix.

Hearts

Initial patterns were identified through a count of the most common pictures that illustrated something other than what was conveyed in the text. The most common picture that was different to the text alongside it was a heart. There were 16 postcards that had a heart next to family/friends/partner/loved ones as illustrated in Figure 50: Hearts with family/friends/loved ones. There were five postcards where a heart was placed alongside family/friends/partner/loved ones *as well as* an additional heart next to different text (see Figure 51: Hearts with family/friends and other text) such as 'chocolate' as in the bottom right postcard (p388), or where the heart is between friends and family and something else such as the bottom left postcard where it is also alongside 'new chances to start fresh' (p81).

In addition to the postcards in Figure 51, there were six postcards with hearts that also contained the word 'I' (see Figure 52: Heart with 'I' (first five postcards) and heart next to other text (remaining three postcards)) such as 'When I see the people around me happy' (p166 top right), including one where the heart appears to stand for 'love': 'I am being creative or when I feel [heart picture]' (centre top row p118). There were two postcards with hearts that also contained 'God': 'I find meaning in my friends and family and most importantly my relationship with God' (bottom right p414) and 'Through the word of God' (centre row right p210). This latter postcard also includes the text: 'Things don't go the way I always want them to [heart picture]' (p210). There is also one postcard that has a heart next to 'My Dogs' (bottom row left postcard p375).

Nature

There were 13 postcards that included pictures other than hearts that were more than just illustrations of the text and these were primarily illustrations of nature such as: sunshine, rainbow, shooting star, trees, earth, and flower, as illustrated in Figure 53: Pictures that are different to the text that were not hearts. There were also crosses (like kisses), stars (that could also perhaps be nature), a mat, and musical notes (within these 13 postcards). There were five postcards that contained pictures only (see Figure 54: Picture only postcards) and again, nature appears to be a theme here (the bottom postcard is very faint so it was difficult to see what it is).

Using the card sort to understand the heart and nature pictures

The card sort was used to better understand what students may have been trying to communicate when drawing heart and nature pictures on the postcards, fitting with the interpretivist aim of using students' interpretations as much as possible. As outlined in section 3.4.3, students were asked to choose which (if any) of the 16 flash cards have meaning, or are important to them, and to place them in an order that would illustrate which were more important than others. Students were also given blank cards and asked to write their own cards if there was anything that was not there that they would like to include.

Themes arising from both the heart and nature pictures

This first analysis of the card sort that explored discussions surrounding the choice of the heart and nature cards[14] in the card sort exercise using thematic analysis found themes of: 'Self'; 'Connections'; 'Bigger than me'; and 'Religion/faith/spirituality'. These themes were often interlinked and overlapping reflecting the complexity of their discussions. Students talked about the self when discussing the heart and nature pictures, including their feelings and developing themselves as a person, such as Penny (when choosing the heart shape) and Oliver who said of the beach picture:

> "…being around birds, having the sunshine, being on a beach, brings a lot of calmness and brightness into your life" (Oliver).

As was found in the postcard text, connecting with others was also a theme here with students describing closely relational connections such as that with family and friends when choosing the heart picture, such as Amjad who said of the heart picture:

> "Love and like I said in terms of love… for me it is family" (Amjad).

Illustrating the connectedness of these themes, Oliver here speaks about both the self and connectedness when talking about the heart picture:

> "My next bit is love… of inside loving yourself [pause], loving for who you are, respecting other people, [pause] showing your affection by helping people, showing care, showing respect, that is how I see love. Caring for your family, your family cares for you, they love you, that is what love is" (Oliver).

[14] The nature pictures in the card sort are the 'earth' picture and the 'beach' picture in the card sort – see Figure 11: Card Sort 16 flash cards.

Students that chose the nature pictures also talked about others outside themselves, relationality on a larger scale, such as looking after the earth and being part of humanity and this was coded under the theme 'Bigger than me' as illustrated here:

> "I kind of saw it as a planet, in terms of with nature, and like for me like trying to kind of look after the planet is quite big for me" (Kate).

> "…it is still very important to remember that we are all just on earth floating around on a block in the sky" (Penny).

There was also one student, Oliver, that referred to a next life when choosing the nature pictures:

> "The world, what life has to offer, endless opportunities. Believe in your next life. If you have been a good person in this life, your next life, what you going to encounter, who knows?" (Oliver).

Some of the students also referred to religion, faith or God when talking about the heart and nature pictures and these were either Christian or Muslim students. Students here described a close relationship and connection with God and that their faith encouraged them to help others and to look outside of themselves linking here to the themes of 'Connection' and 'Bigger than me'. Courtney explains why she chose the heart picture:

> "For the heart one [pause], for me to show Christian faith, like loving others and just love is such an important theme… because I believe that it is love [that] should drive me to help others… I want them to know the love of the Father and like how he brings deeper meaning to life and stuff" (Courtney).

Trudy here describes that she chose the heart picture to illustrate that a Christian understanding of love has helped her to "define love according to God's standard" as well as being able to look beyond herself:

> "I guess even understanding a deeper meaning of what it is to love by looking not even just beyond me… I find that from my faith and just the way my friends have been able to show that to me because they are trying to emulate what they have also learnt about Jesus" (Trudy).

Gamila chose the earth picture to illustrate that she helps others "for the sake of God":

> “The earth, I am not just a random person…cos in my religion it says if you help one person it is like you help the whole creation” (Gamila).

These initial themes of ’Self’; ‘Connections’; ‘Bigger than me’; and ‘Religion/faith/spirituality’ were used to inform the analysis of the postcard and photo-elicitation data (section 3.5).

5.2. Exploring *why* students do their ‘thing’ in more depth

This section discusses in more detail the themes identified from the analysis of *why* students do their thing’ as described by the students. This analysis included both the photo-elicitation interview data and the postcard text data, and the overall themes identified were: ‘Self’, ‘Connections’, ‘Connect with Religion Faith Spirituality’ and ‘Bigger than me’, and these themes are discussed in this order, together with the sub-themes within them. Although separated in this way in order to explain them, it must be remembered that *what* students do and *why* they do it was very much interlinked and overlapping in the students’ telling of their meaning-stories making this, at times, difficult to code.

Reflections on language: the word ‘function’

Initially when writing this chapter, I had used the word ‘function’ to describe why students said that they do their ‘thing’. However, on reflection, I felt that this in itself may be making a value judgement about the students’ contributions. The students had led the discussions in the photo interviews, and where I had used prompts I had asked students open questions such as those that began with ‘Can you tell me about…’ or where I wanted to prompt further, ‘Why is this important to you’ so I hadn’t directly asked using the word ‘function’. In the card sort I had asked students to put the cards “in an order that would make sense to you here in terms of what's most important and least” (see Appendix 4.8) and students had naturally talked about why they had chosen them. It was felt then that using ‘function’ to describe why students said that they do their ‘thing’ may not be accurately describing the students contributions (to the student they may have a function, or they may have a purpose, or both, or neither, or something else) and so in this chapter I have used the phrase ‘why students said they did their ‘thing’, their ‘meaning-stories’, in order to stay true to the students’ contributions.

5.3. Discussion of the themes: 'Self', 'Connections', 'Connect with religion/faith/spirituality' and 'Bigger than me'

The overall themes identified from the analysis of *why* students do their meaning-stories, their 'thing', as described by the students are now discussed followed by the sub-themes within them as illustrated on the mind map (see Figure 13: *Why* students do their 'thing', their meaning-stories).

5.3.1. Self

In the previous chapter we saw that *what* gives students' meaning can be related to the theme of 'Self' such as for Paris, who said that developing confidence and independence is a source of meaning, and for Penny, overcoming challenges brings meaning. In this theme, we see that students' stories of *why* they do their 'thing' is also in relation to the self: developing the self, providing positive feelings, and looking after the self. As can be seen in the examples below, different students had different sources of meaning (the *what*) under each of these themes that illustrate *why* students do their 'thing'. This therefore illustrates that students may have different practices that relate to the same reason why they do their 'thing'. Within the theme 'getting to know self' for example, Willow finds being outside helps her to "feel more me" and Trudy describes a similar experience when reading Christian verse, that it helps her to "see" herself.

Develop self

Students talked about 'their thing' as helping to develop themselves as a person. Amjad, for example says that following Islam has developed his good character, Gamila that reading the Quran has made her a better person, "who God wants me to be", and Madi, that religion "tells you how to behave". Courtney describes that her experience with YWAM (Youth With a Mission) has "grown" her as a Christian. It is through overcoming challenge that Willow and Ana have developed themselves as people:

> "If something happens to me, that isn't exactly ideal I try and look for the meaning in that and how I can learn from it and be better afterwards" (Willow).

> "…overcoming challenges is, as I said before, that is what I kind of find is my belief. It is kind of how I find myself, how I am able to develop myself" (Ana).

Similarly, for the person who wrote the postcard number 184, it is living out their goals that helps them to develop as a person (see Figure 55: Self – develop self (p184)).

Qualities of self

Students described different sources within their meaning-stories that helped them to develop qualities of the self. Through voluntary work for example, Taariq and Maya developed patience, and Natalie, adaptability and reliability. Prayer helps Madi to overcome challenge and achieve his goals, and Oliver's own type of prayer, his visualisation, as well as touching his 'courage' necklace, help him to overcome challenge and achieve his goals. For Maya, it is religious teachings that help her to overcome difficult situations. Students also spoke about their 'thing' as helping their confidence: with Imogen gaining this from exercise and eating well, Oliver from travelling and exploring, Penny from her daily practice of crafting and Ana from growing plants from seed (see Figure 56: Basil - Ana):

> "This is just the baby basil. It is now big and growing... I have proven to myself that I can do something like this that it won't die" (Ana).

Getting to know self

Some of the students described that doing 'their thing' helped them to get to know their own self better. Willow, for example, says "being outside just makes me feel more me" and Trudy that her practice of reading Christian verse is "a lot about seeing myself… I am trying to see what words to put it in and I guess it helps me to be more honest with myself as to where I am at, if that makes sense" (Trudy). Natalie gains a "sense of being" from being in the Church in which she volunteers as a Girl Guide Leader. For Oliver, having 'me time' in nature helps him "build the relationship" with himself and this brings happiness. He also brought a photograph of the path to the Chaplaincy where he enjoys quiet time (see Figure 57: Chaplaincy path - Oliver) which represents:

> "Being able to have time with yourself, to form a relationship with yourself, and this journey emphasises… that it is encouraging you to go, to discover more about yourself to, you know, to make yourself feel at ease with yourself" (Oliver).

I feel

The students often described that what they do as part of their meaning-story, their 'thing,' created positive feelings, in particular, happiness, fun, enjoyment, inspiration and pride. Happiness came from a range of sources such as for Kate, her pet dogs, music for Gamila, achieving balance in life from following the Quran for Madi and from "my religion" for Anthony. Brooke and Imogen find happiness from connecting with others with Brooke finding happiness from her relationship with her grandparents and Imogen from "hanging out with friends". For Imogen and Oliver being on their own (in

her bedroom and in the countryside respectively) also brings happiness. For Ana, happiness comes from a range of sources: friends, animals, music, travelling and the beach. Similarly, fun and enjoyment came from a range of sources such as spending time with friends, time alone and in nature, reading, music, being active, volunteering, and helping others. For Ana, for example, giving blood "feels good" and the "right thing to do". Volunteering also brought a sense of pride for Imogen who brought a picture of a charity event that she was involved with:

> "That is a very, very, very proud moment and this picture, it gives me a lot of 'triumphantness' if that is a word. I feel very proud that I was a part of such an amazing thing" (Imogen).

Pride and a sense of achievement was also gained through being active for Penny, Willow, and Paris, from crafting (for Penny), and in the postcards, for example, through cooking (Figure 58: Self – I feel (p384)).

Gamila, Kate, and Oliver described feeling motivated by their practices. Kate finds that doing yoga inspires her to do her university work, Gamila gains motivation to "be a better person" from reading and memorising the Quran, and Oliver gains a "sense of motivation" when he visits the fountain on campus and this, he describes feels like "being filled up with energy". For the student who completed postcard number 224 Figure 59: Self – I feel (p224)) a feeling of being inspired was gained from the Bible. Oliver also talks about feelings of growth, love, passion, and what life has to offer when talking about a photograph of tulips (Figure 60: Tulips - Oliver):

> "…just the flower [pause]… that feeling of growth I would say… the red attracts a lot of the feeling of love, the feeling of passion, the feeling of [pause] what life has to offer. I would say that is what this brings meaning to me" (Oliver).

Supports wellbeing

A strong (and unexpected) feature of many of the interviews was that students described that what they do as part of their meaning-story helps them to look after themself, that it helps their wellbeing. All of the students mentioned either how what they do as part of their meaning-story helps them to relax and find peace, or to deal with stress and their mental health to differing degrees: 14 students talked about their 'thing' as source of peace and relaxation; 14 students talked about their 'thing' as providing comfort/support; five said that their 'thing' provided encouragement; and 12 students talked directly about their 'thing' as helping stress, worry, mental health. What was common among their stories was that many of the students had more than one source of meaning-making that supported their wellbeing, and some

(such as Ana, Penny, and Oliver) had regular practices associated with this. When talking about wellbeing, and stress in particular, it was often spoken about in terms of their whole life, including their university life.

Mental health

We have seen in the examples in the previous chapter how spending quiet time helped Ana and Kate's mental health (through the doing of yoga and mindfulness) and helped Oliver manage stress (through spending time in the Quiet Room in the Chaplaincy). We have also seen in the examples in the previous chapter how being in nature helped the students to look after their wellbeing. For Ana, for example, being in nature helps clear her mind, walking in nature is a sensory activity that she does particularly when stressed as it helps her anxiety and mental health:

> "The only way I know how to help myself and help my mental state… the only thing that did the trick for me, and help for me, was to get out and go for a walk" (Ana).

For Penny, her regular practices of being in nature (such as spending time in the forest on campus) are a very sensory experience, and help her to relax, and her mental health. She enjoys her regular practice of spending time in the forest because it enables her to "reconnect with the spirituality a little bit and get away from the kerfuffle of goals and aims you know?", she feels this practice is "really important for me to ground myself so I don't get anxious and so that it helps my mental health".

Willow's regular practice of watching the sunrise and sunset on campus helps her to feel "that there is not a worry in the world". For Oliver, being in nature is also a very sensory experience and helps him deal with anxiety: hearing the water from the fountain splashing brings motivation, "a sense of energy", and "the smell of fresh air brings a lot of calmness". As with his visits to the Quiet Room, his walks on campus to spend time in nature (such as visiting the fountain and globe sculpture (see Figure 61: Globe sculpture - Oliver) are often triggered by stress because they bring him peace. "Just looking at this" (the globe sculpture), says Oliver, "brings again the tranquillity feeling". Gamila's time spent in nature is also triggered by stress, "whenever I feel stressed, depressed, I go [for a] walk", and she often goes to the park near the campus. Spending time in nature she says, "really soothes" her, as well as bringing her closer to God and acting as a reminder of her connection with others on a larger scale. Anthony finds "peace of mind" through being in nature, and for him, this is very interconnected with feeling God's presence in nature, and this is explored further in the theme 'Connect with Religion Faith Spirituality' below.

Comfort and peace

The students also described that activities associated with the religion, faith, and spirituality (such as listening to or reading religious teachings, prayer) supported their wellbeing. For Madi, faith brings peace, "it has given the peace from inside" and his religion is a source of support in difficult times:

> "Faith, religion, really help at lot. When you read the Quran then it is always encourage [sic] you to do the good thing in your life… Religion make you strong, how to face the world in proper way" (Madi).

Similarly, for Amjad, his faith is "the aspect that kind of fixes the jigsaw" and this helps to prevent depression:

> "Stress does happen quite naturally, but at the same time what calms it down and doesn't allow it to go to depression if that makes sense, is that the fact that the belief that ultimately good or bad comes from God" (Amjad).

For Maya, religion is a "comfort" and encourages her to keep going, and will always be there (even, she says, when her family and friends can't be) as something that she can "rely on". Penny similarly finds her Paganism a "comfort", and describes it as "a bit like family, it is a bit of a safety blanket to think to myself, you know, that we are all just humans trying to interact with each other and figure out the world together and that is really comforting". Courtney finds her belief in God "brings comfort" and says that her practice of studying the Bible helps her to "relax and process stuff". She gains encouragement through Bible verses, and from the Christian Union and her Church community:

> "I have like a small group from Church which is like a group that meet at someone's house and we have like teaching or fellowship or stuff like that… it also like a support kind of thing" (Courtney).

Trudy also finds encouragement from reading Bible verses as well as prayer, and gives an example of how this can help encourage her to study when she is finding it difficult. Praying for her family helps Trudy worry less about them, and in times of need she will call one of her friends "who also has kind of like the same beliefs" and "they would pray and really encourage me and just remind me [pause] you know about specific verses that I can kind of hold on to". Anthony finds reading or listening to the Quran brings "peace of mind", and as seen in Chapter 4, he sometimes does this while studying, and while on campus. Similarly, Gamila finds reading or listening to the Quran relaxing, "whenever I feel depressed whenever I feel like lost, just

feeling bad, I just open the book, or even if I couldn't read, I just listen to it" because it allows her to connect with God. Prayer also brings this connection with God: "so you can go and just pray between like talking with your God, like talking with the creator of this world, so if I am stressed, I won't feel like any more stress". For Ana, who describes herself as an Agnostic, she describes that finding peace *is* her belief:

> "I am not a religious person obviously… my beliefs [pause] are, is finding peace, which has been very hard at times because I am an anxious person and a lot of things can provoke anxiety for me" (Ana).

The students also described that their relationships with their family, partners, and friends supported their wellbeing, and again this ranged from providing comfort, support, and encouragement to supporting their anxiety and mental health. Penny, for example describes that her partner's family "are really, really, a comfort to me, that if anything happens I can call them and that is nice just to have a safety blanket". For Ana, having a few good friends with the right "energy vibe" reduces her anxiety:

> "…that you will have help from your friends, and we will be able to support and help each other is good to have in mind" (Ana).

Kate, Gamila and Brooke in particular described that their close relationships acted as a 'support' system. Gamila describes her family as her "main support…in life" and that she "can't live without them", Brooke describes her close friends as her "support network" and Kate that her mum and her boyfriend are "the two most supportive people in her life" that have encouraged her to "keep going" when she has felt "like I want to drop out" of university. Students also described that their close relationships provided practical support for their wellbeing such as taking care of them when they are sick (such as Natalie's boyfriend and Brooke's grandparents) and "a shoulder there to cry on for each other" (Imogen).

Some of the students also described that music helped their relaxation and mental health, and this was particularly the case for Willow, Brooke, and Penny. Brooke described in the card sort that both playing and listening to music is "really important [pause] if I don't listen to anything for like a day, I think I would probably go crazy". Willow chose music as one of her three most important cards in the card sort (alongside 'family' and 'overcoming challenges') as her "main go-to to de stress":

> "Even if I have got nothing else, if I have got family and even if I am going through something challenging, if I can overcome that, if I have got music as

almost like a support system as well, then I'll be alright with just the top three" (Willow).

Music helps Gamila feel calm and relaxed, and Oliver uses the sense of peace and tranquillity that listening to classical music brings as a study technique: "great technique relaxes your mind, very helpful". Ana uses music to help her relax and finds it a useful "back-up" if she has difficulty sleeping. Music, for Penny, is also very much related to her feelings and self-expression. For Penny, music can be used to "check in with yourself" and as well as using different music throughout the day to support what she is doing it also helps her to manage difficult emotions. For the student who completed postcard number 83, (see Figure 62: Self – supporting wellbeing (p83)) listening to music helps them to relax, as well as concentrate on their work.

Paris, Imogen, and Maya also described spending time in their room as supporting their wellbeing: Paris finds cleaning helps when stressed, Imogen sets up her room with candles and fairy lights to create a relaxed atmosphere, and Maya finds doing things alone in her room (such as drawing, painting, reading) relaxing. Kate and Ana also describe that reading helps their wellbeing: for Kate, reading is relaxing and has improved her mental health, and Ana finds losing her mind in a book "brings peace" because she can forget her worries. For Penny, Kate, and Ana their pets also support their wellbeing. Penny, for example, describes her dog as a "companion" that helps with her academic life because she helps her to relax.

5.3.2. Connections

Students here described that their 'thing', what they do as part of their meaning-story, supports close relationships (such as with family and close friends): how to behave in these relationships, how to choose friendships, and providing opportunities to meet others. This section therefore describes close connections with others, rather than connections on a wider scale discussed in the theme 'Bigger than Me' below.

Help relationships with others

Amjad and Madi both explained that their Muslim faith teaches them how to behave with other people including their family and friends. "Religion", says Amjad, "is the thing that creates that bond with the family… it moulds people into this is how you behave with your parents, this is how you show respect, and that gives that love, does that make sense?" "Religion", says Madi, "gives you the information, it gives you the direction how you behave with the family" and gives guidance on what type of friends to choose. Similarly, Trudy describes how striving to be "like Jesus" has helped her personal relationships in that she is more reflective in how she behaves towards others. She defines love:

> "…according to God's standard… it is very different from popular beliefs of what love is [pause] cos you might hear or see someone say I love them but they might be shouting or stuff like that, and just really getting the meaning [pause] in like, not self-seeking, you are not boastful, you are not prideful, you are patient, you are being kind" (Trudy).

This helps her relationships because she is more likely to put others before herself, and ask how they really are, and thinks about how to engage with different types of people.

Maya brought a picture of herself with work colleagues in a different country to illustrate that being a nurse in a different country has helped her learn to understand and appreciate diverse nationalities (including their religion and their culture) which has helped her to make friends at university. Volunteering, another source of meaning for Maya, has also helped her to make friends at university, and reading religious teachings has encouraged her to keep trying to make friends even if her attempts to initiate making new friends do not always succeed.

Penny's Paganism also affects how she behaves with others, and her choice of friends:

> "I feel like Paganism really drives the way I interact with my friends. It means that I make more of an effort than some people might... I am not going to judge them because you don't judge a leaf for being purple do you, so we are not going to judge humans for having feelings either" (Penny).

Paganism has helped to give her more confidence to approach people, and a sense of belonging with other spiritual people that she has met at university, and she wears a Pagan symbol as a necklace which, she says, is "me inviting people to ask questions". Her faith has also helped her to "trust the general public a bit more", and this is faith not only in her religion, but also "faith in people around me and faith everything will be alright". Penny also looks at chakras (and their colour) as well as people's clothing in order to understand more about them, "it might mean that if I meet someone for the first time I might look at their clothing to see if it tells me anything about them and so it might help me to read people a bit better". In a similar way, Ana's belief that people have an aura, an "energy vibe" helps her to choose fewer but "really good friends" to find "the right people to surround myself" because being around the "wrong people is as damaging to me as [pause] stress and anxiety and all the bad

things, like if I don't have the right people around me I feel, I feel terrible". Her 'thing' here helps her to discern which are better relationships for her mental health.

Opportunities to meet others

Students also described that their activities associated with their meaning-story provided opportunities to meet others. Amjad, for example describes that going to the Mosque enables him to meet people "who come from different races, different ethnic backgrounds, who I have never met in my life and suddenly speaking to them, you know, having that bond [pause], I think that for me is quite priceless in a sense and is something that I do cherish". For Courtney, Discipleship Training School and the Christian Union have helped her to become "more relational and kind of more like interested in people", and as well as providing an opportunity to meet people she describes her faith as a "way to reach out to people". For Taariq too, the university society that he belongs to (the Muslim society) provides an opportunity to make other friends "not just classmates", and attending the local Mosque allows him to meet others from the local community.

5.3.3. Connect with Religion Faith Spirituality

Some of the students' described that their meaning-story supports their connection with God, faith, religion, and spirituality (however they described it), and this was often related to *doing* such as praying, studying religious texts, being in nature and through helping others. For Oliver, for example, doing mindfulness exercises supports his spirituality and a connection with God:

> "Just to clear your head, closing your eyes, kind of focusing on your inner self, those kind of exercises to get into the present moment, and to allow the spirituality to come in so that you have, you know, you feel more of a connection between God and yourself" (Oliver).

This was the most difficult category to code because when the following four students, Gamila, Courtney, Anthony, and Trudy, described that their 'thing' helped them to 'Connect with Religion Faith Spirituality' they also described that this sometimes then also supports connections on a wider scale and provides a sense of something bigger than themselves. This theme is therefore very much linked to the themes of 'Connections' and 'Bigger than me' as illustrated on the mind map (see Figure 13: *Why* students do their 'thing', their meaning-stories) and is described here by these students to illustrate this. Gamila, for example, said that she connects to God when reading the Quran and through prayer, that "prayer is to stay connected":

> "I love my God through this book… it is actually that relationship I really want to make everybody feel it whatever religion it is, I really want to feel like connect, this is the word that I can describe - connect" (Gamila).

Helping others also helps Gamila to connect with God and acts as a reminder of her connection with others on a larger scale (part of creation), as she describes when she chooses the world picture in the card sort:

> "The earth, I am not just a random person, I know that I can… help at least one person… like cos in my religion it says if you help one person it is like you help the whole creation…" (Gamila).

Spending time in nature as illustrated earlier helps Gamila's wellbeing, but also supports her relationship with God, as she connects with God through nature. When talking about her walks in the park next to the campus she says:

> "Just discovering the green trees, everything beautiful, and that really soothes me and makes my relationship with God even stronger like to see his beauty through his creation" (Gamila).

Gamila also describes that seeing the beauty in the world also acts as a reminder of the next life which is discussed further in the theme 'next life reward' below. Courtney also finds connection with God through prayer and describes that prayer, for her, is "actually like a conversation between me and God". This conversation acts as "relationship building" with God but also provides her with a different perspective to her own:

> "I want to hear also what He thinks about the thing… because He has got a different perspective to me" (Courtney).

Similarly, listening to worship music for Courtney also provides a connection with God and although she finds it hard to find the words to explain what it provides, she describes that she uses worship music:

> "…for more like when I want to have a more intimate time with God and [pause] yeah I don't know how to describe it" (Courtney).

Bible journaling similarly brings a connection with God, but also a connection with others including those on a larger scale, such as others throughout history:

> "[Bible study practice] is just getting to God even more… it is kind of connecting to other people who have the same faith but back then, and the kind of things they went through and kind of seeing that sometimes they are only human….like David kind of in the Bible. I like Daniel and stuff… they also have this amazing relationship with the Lord which can be really encouraging" (Courtney).

Anthony also has several practices that support a connection with God, and these also sometimes provide connections on a wider scale and a sense of something bigger than himself. He describes that being in nature (such as during his regular walks with his partner in nature as described in Chapter 4) provides a connection with God that he feels in his body as a very sensory experience:

> "I feel that I can really connect with God through nature, when you just hear the wind rustling or you hear the birds singing then you understand that yes there is God's presence there [pause]… I love the way the water flows, and that likens to my spiritual flow, so I feel that that kind of energy rushing through me whenever I am praying for example. In my belief, the sensory is belief, because although there are five senses, the five senses are then being translated into the belief. So, when I hear the water, I can hear the white noise, and then that white noise is translated to God" (Anthony).

Anthony also describes that being in nature provides a feeling of connecting with others on a wider scale: "I feel that feeling of one with nature not only for myself but one with nature with everybody else". His practice of visiting a Christian Church gives him the "same kind of sensory feeling" that he experiences in nature. This, together with learning more about different religions (and Christianity in particular) at university brings a sense of connectedness with others:

> "I am seeing so many links between the religions and what I am really enjoying about it, about my project, and about my religion, is how interconnected we are" (Anthony).

His practice of listening to recitations on his phone whilst studying provides a connection with God, "I feel like I can connect to God while doing the secular work in front of me", and that being able to have the Quran on his phone has helped this connection as he can now have that connection with God whenever he chooses:

> "It is only now while the technology is developing where you can hold something that big [the Quran] in your pocket and it is just nice to know that I

> have got God with me all the time whenever I have got it, whenever I want it, whenever I need it" (Anthony).

For Anthony, overcoming academic challenges has also helped his connection with God because now he can feel God supporting him through these challenges. He describes that he chose the 'overcoming challenges' card in the card sort because:

> "I felt [pause] overcoming challenges from my youth and where I felt I lost connection with God, and then at the same time overcoming challenges academically, so I feel like God is giving me support academically and without his support then I wouldn't get the kind of, I wouldn't be able to overcome the challenges" (Anthony).

As seen in Chapter 4 Trudy prays 'on the go', because of her "understanding God is omnipresent and He is everywhere kind of thing, so just kind of in the moment I know God is with me, so I can pray like, wherever". Her close relationship with God enables her to look outside of herself, and this can help her (close) relationships with others:

> "I am able to sometimes look outside of me and that is because that is what Jesus would do, he talked about putting other people first" (Trudy).

5.3.4. Bigger than me

Throughout the students' stories there was an overall theme of, using the students' words, something 'bigger' than themself. Here students described their 'thing' helped them to feel part of something bigger, providing a bigger perspective (such as part of humanity or nature), and acting as a guide to their life (including for some their religious life). Again, whilst the theme of 'Bigger than me' has been separated here in order to describe it, often students' described several different things that they gained from the same aspect of their meaning-story so there is also crossover between themes.

Whilst on the demographic questionnaire Kate had ticked 'no' to the question 'Do you have a religion or belief?' and when asked 'How would you describe your religious identity?' had written ''Atheist/Agnostic I don't particularly believe but I'm mostly open minded to a degree'', in the interview Kate described that she does "kind of believe in like spirits" because of her interest in the interconnectedness of everything:

> "I kind of believe in like spirits… I just thought that was a really cool idea with like everything connecting just because I do always like wonder about how

> vast everything is [pause]… The whole universe is like crazy, so I think like it kind of gives a bit of like significance to like our lives" (Kate).

Kate has a tattoo that symbolises this interconnectedness:

> "It is basically a mathematical pattern that repeats itself in like all aspects of nature from the solar system to like leaves and in honeycomb and like just… and even in human DNA and I just thought that was really interesting so I got that tattooed because… I thought it was a really cool idea as a concept, the fact that everything in like the world just connects in that way, like from nature, to humans, to animals, to like space" (Kate).

This is one of four tattoos that Kate has, each of which reflecting an aspect of where she finds meaning as discussed in our interview: a tattoo to represent her mum, one to represent her dog who passed away, and an animal because "I like animals and also because… that was the first time that I had ever seen a [name of the animal]…close near me because of my boyfriend".

Willow described a number of activities as part of her meaning-story that give her a feeling of being part of something bigger than herself such as going to community events, university events, music events, and volunteering. Describing a photograph of herself at a local community event, Willow says that going to community events is important because:

> "That connection even if you don't have anyone, you know, with you, feeling part of something bigger than yourself or that you are not alone in where you live and the things you are doing really is quite important to me" (Willow).

Similarly, describing a photograph of herself at a volunteering event at the university, Willow says that, "I volunteered… again to feel like I was part of something bigger than myself". When asked to describe why she has a daily practice of viewing the sunrise (see Chapter 4) Willow described that this also gives a bigger perspective and sense of connectedness on a wider scale:

> "I think it's part of the feeling connected to the wider environment kind of thing. It is just like when you look at stars, like I am very small, but I am part of something very big if that makes sense. It is the same kind of feeling I get with sunsets" (Willow).

Bigger perspective

As already seen for Gamila, Anthony, and Courtney above, their activities associated with their meaning-story that provide a close relationship with God also provide a bigger perspective. For Courtney, this bigger perspective can also come from her Christian friends:

> "When you are going through hard times, they are there to pray for you and encourage you, and see the bigger picture when you are not, when you can't see it" (Courtney).

Penny described a variety of activities linked to her Paganism that provide a bigger perspective, a reminder that she is part of nature (and as seen previously this also helps with her wellbeing). For Penny, this wider perspective can come from being with animals, playing with her pentacle, from litter picking, holding a jade stone in the morning, from looking at a leaf, and from her Paganism:

> "If I pass a tree, I do this often, I will look at the leaves and really just look at it for a minute and just look at the leaf formation or the way the wind is moving it and just acknowledge that it is a living being just like me… and that, you know, the world is outside of myself" (Penny).

Oliver's visits to the globe and rocket sculpture on campus (see Chapter 4), have been included in this theme because as well as providing a "tranquillity feeling" they also bring meaning because they represent for him what the world has to offer on a wider scale and the possibilities for his future:

> "It [the globe sculpture] reminds me of course of the planet, our planet, and how we have got the sun… having this globe represents a continent and what the world has to offer" (Oliver).

Guide to life (including religious life)

Some of the students described that what gives them meaning guides their life, and for some this was linked with this-life and next-life rewards. Amjad, Anthony, Gamila, and Madi all described how their faith (Islam) guides their life. Amjad illustrated this in the card sort exercise, placing his chosen cards in a pyramid with 'religion' at the top (see Figure 63: Amjad's card sort). Whilst he said that what is important to him (the cards chosen), are "all intertwined", it all "stems from religion", and when holding the 'faith' card he said, "it all comes from here - faith".

Anthony also placed the 'religion' card "right at the top" of his card sort "because to me religion is all encompassing…it has given me a backbone, a way of life". Gamila explained when doing the card sort how her religion guides her life (see Figure 64: Gamila's card sort) and says of the religion card:

> "I see my religion, it is not just a religion, it is a way of life. It is a way, how I dress, how we sleep, how we walk, how I talk to others, everything. Islam is not just a religion, it is for me, it is even a way of life, everything" (Gamila).

Describing why she chose the faith card, she describes that faith is what she believes and what she does (studying), and that God will give her a better life in this life:

> "And then my faith… [I] believe through my studies like I am going to be the person who I want to be, I am going to achieve what I want… I do have faith in God. He is going to give me better life, he is going to give me better friends, family, life, everything" (Gamila).

As seen previously, for Madi, religion is a source of support in difficult times because it "encourages you to do the good thing in your life". It also, says Madi, acts as a guide for his whole life: "Islam is not just a religion it is for me it is even a way of life, everything". Courtney describes that God is "kind of the lens I see everything through". Trudy explains that her practice of studying the Bible is "something that I help guide my life… because I have been able to study it [the Bible] and really, really, see okay, the life of Jesus is the life I would like to emulate". Maya also describes that Buddhism guides her life, saying that it inspires her to "live religiously in my life". In the postcards, the student who completed postcard number 211 attributed praying as helping them to "make sense" of their life (Figure 65: Bigger than me – Guide to life (p211)).

Whilst Natalie and Willow do not affiliate to a particular religion, they both describe how their 'thing' guides their life. Natalie believes "my great granny is my guardian angel" and that her guardian angel "has got a plan for me". "It is", says Natalie, "all about trusting that the plan's going to work. That is probably why I believe in a guardian angel because I trust in the plan". Willow's passion for wildlife, she says, is her "everything", and not only influenced her choice of course and career aspirations but was the reason that she chose the university because its countryside campus allowed her to continue her practice of spending time in nature.

Next life reward

Of note within the findings is that it was not only students that affiliated to a particular faith that talked about a reward in the next life, and not all of those

affiliated to a faith spoke about a next life reward (although they may still believe in this, just not have mentioned it in the photo interviews). Amjad and Gamila spoke about going to paradise as a next life reward: "If you work hard in this life" said Amjad, "you will go to paradise". As seen above, Gamila believes that if you are good in this life God will give you a good life, and as illustrated here, the next life:

> "Life is a test so we have to pass that test to go to paradise so I am trying to be as good as I can" (Gamila).

Similarly, Anthony described that what he does in this life, such as "taking care of my family", "being this student" will bring rewards in both this world and the next life:

> "I mean rewarding, not just in this world, it is getting accounted for in terms of my rewards in the next life" (Anthony).

Oliver also believes that if he is good in this life, he will be rewarded in the next life, "…if you have been a good person in this life, your next life, what you going to encounter who knows"? Natalie believes in a higher being (that is separate to her belief in a guardian angel) that will also ensure a good after life:

> "I believe that there is a higher being somewhere… so you will have a good after life, but I don't know whether that is heaven or hell, I just believe in a higher kind of something… but I don't know what that something is" (Natalie).

The remaining students, whilst they may have talked about the benefits of their 'thing' to their life (such as wellbeing, connections) did not mention specifically a reward for this life or the next.

5.4. Exploring how their 'thing' supports university life

In addition to how their 'thing' supports their life as a whole, students also spoke about how aspects of their meaning-stories support their university life. This was sometimes raised by students themselves, and sometimes in response to a prompt that asked students what (if anything) their meaning-making brings to their university experience in the photo interviews. This section includes where students specifically have spoken about their meaning-stories and their university life that *hasn't* already been included in the sections above. It provides an insight into how aspects of the students' meaning-stories contribute towards their university life, the detail of which is perhaps not yet fully understood and contributes to positive conversations about the value of meaning-making to students' university experience.

Motivation to study

As seen in section 5.3 (within the theme 'Self: I feel') students gained motivation from their 'thing' and this included motivation to study. Kate finds that yoga inspires her to do her university work, and this was also the case with reading, "the more I read, the more like motivated I am to kind of write essays" and that she also finds that "when I read, my grades improve". Oliver described how his visits to outdoor spaces on campus motivates him, and this includes motivation in his life as a student. Ana brought a picture of the university library to illustrate her love of "studying around people" and that she finds this "the most motivating thing… to study around people that are studying". Amjad describes that "as a student my religion is driving me", and this leads to rewards in this life and the next. "Being a student", he explains, will "lead to a great future", it will enable him to financially take care of his family and become a role model, and is rewarding "not just in this world, it is getting accounted for in terms of my rewards in the next life, if that makes sense". For Gamila, the coursework she produces and the message that she hopes it will portray to others are "just for the sake of God".

Confidence

Anthony describes that God has given him "confidence in studying". He compares his experience now with his experience when studying his A levels when he didn't have a connection with God and his grades had suffered:

> "Now that I have God on my side, and I believe whole heartedly in God and that God is supporting me, I feel that that is shown through all my work now because I got a first-class honours for my undergraduate" (Anthony).

Penny and Trudy both revealed that their 'thing' gives them the confidence to seek support from teaching staff, when previously they haven't had this confidence. For Penny, it is the grounding that Paganism brings that enables this:

> "…because of that grounding in nature, and you know the reverence for this being that is everywhere more or less, I feel like this actually helps be more confident and therefore I can approach my lecturers" (Penny).

Trudy describes that when previously she was "so overcome" by her undergraduate work, now the perspective that faith brings her of looking outside of herself, helps her to be honest with herself, and seek help with her academic work when she needs it. For Penny and Amjad, aspects of their meaning-story also help them to manage academic failure and success. Prior to taking up crafting, Penny found that she became very stressed if she "made a mistake" in her academic work, whereas crafting

now gives her the confidence to “experiment with word structure or experiment with planning in different ways, and then it is okay if I get it wrong and it is also equally okay to acknowledge I did a good piece of work [and] that’s really important”. Amjad describes that his religion “saves you from arrogance, from not belittling other people, and also not feeling jealous of people who are, let’s say, higher able, they have got more ability”. When he finishes his assignments early, he helps fellow students who are stressed with their work, “because it is one of the things that are part of the character of a Muslim”.

Doing work

The practice of crafting also helps Penny with her work, in that it enables her to visualise essay structure, argument, and the presentation of her work:

> “In art everything is about the visual, so it is about how you feel a texture, how you experience it, but with essays it is more about how you hear it, how the sentence is put together, how much breath you use and things like that. It really helps me to look at how I have presented my arguments or presented my essay which is helpful” (Penny).

Brooke brought a picture of herself playing her guitar, which she does when she has “hit a wall” with her academic work: “I will like sit down, play guitar for a bit then kind of like go back to it”. She also brought a picture that illustrates her ritual in writing an essay (see Figure 66: Essay ritual - Brooke):

> “…and then for when I read about rituals, I am very visual so even when writing an essay, I will write everything out first and then organise that way and then go type it” (Brooke).

Interestingly the word ‘ritual’ wasn’t used in the instructions, but it may be that this was her interpretation of ‘practices’.

Going to the “weekly event in the local Mosque every Friday evening” helps Madi with time management, because, he says “I have to allocate my time”, and this helps him to “maintain commitment” and is where he “can rest my brain for a while”. He believes that his prayers to God help him to complete his coursework on time:

> “It always happens with me because during the deadline I feel oh I can’t do [names subject] and I pray and ask God, please God help me now, I complete, so it happens every time” (Madi).

Exams

Gamila finds that prayer helps with assignment and exam stress and this stops her feeling stressed because she feels that God is with her. Similarly, Anthony prays prior to an exam so that he feels that God is with him:

> “When I go to my exams I often pray a Duhr before I start my so I feel like God is with me when I am doing the paper” (Anthony).

Oliver’s own way of praying and knowing that God is with him has also, he says, helped him academically, including helping to predict the exam paper:

> “I would just say keeping my fingers crossed before just a little. I pray, obviously not aloud, in my mind… in my head I think, you know, please give this to me and it has always come true so far, the question I predicted it came up in the paper. The result, I said please give me my first in my mind before the tutor sent it on the email attachment, and I did get the first… by just keeping my fingers crossed and just being in my mind, having this spirituality, knowing that God is going to help me… so it has helped me academically” (Oliver).

Oliver also attributes the mindfulness walks on campus as helping him “a lot in my academic performance”.

Going to (and choice of) university

As seen in the theme ‘Bigger than me: Guide to life’ (section 5.3), Willow’s ‘thing’ influenced her choice of university. For Gamila and Courtney, it was God that had influenced when they went to university. Gamila had initially tried to attend several other different universities and different courses and describes that God had chosen a “different way for her”, which was the course that she was currently studying. Similarly, Courtney describes that “God said university was for me next [pause] and like I really just rely on God to tell me when to go”. For Imogen, her choice of university came from a “gut feeling” that she had when visiting the University:

> “When it came to looking around uni’s, I don’t know why but I just had an inkling and a gut feeling that I knew that I really, really, really, wanted to come here [pause] and so did my mum as well actually” (Imogen).

5.5. Discussion of findings

The discussion section in this chapter draws together the findings from both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 (both *what* students do and *why* they say that they do it) in relation to existing research in this area to contribute towards the aim of exploring a breadth of meaning-making in HE. It has captured, as Guest calls for, "subtleties of meaning-making among the student population" (Guest 2017, p. 218). It argues that students are drawing on broader sources of meaning-making than was found in the work of Savage et al (2006), and that this supports their university life, including their wellbeing in a way that is perhaps not fully understood and discussed within higher education. The findings in this research are also, in part, akin to descriptions by Savage et al (2006) and Collins-Mayo (2010) of formative spirituality. However, in a difference to previous research we also see examples from the students' stories of transformative spirituality, the prominence of faith, religion, and spirituality as a source of meaning-making, and the regular doing of practices associated with this in students' daily life. It argues that this work challenges the theory of individualisation in that it provides evidence of relationality in students' meaning-stories and suggests that there is further work to be done to explore the broader aspect of relationality on a wider scale and an extended notion of connectedness. The discussion also reflects upon the association between the students' meaning-stories and doing activities with supporting wellbeing, the research methodology, and shifting identities in emerging adulthood.

Self: drawing on broader sources of meaning-making

In addition to developing the self, students also spoke about their meaning-stories, their 'thing', creating positive feelings, and this has also been seen in the work of Savage et al (2006) in their work with 15-25 year olds[15] whom they refer to as 'Generation Y'[16]. They highlighted the importance of happiness to young people, arguing that their research uncovered a world view that is shared amongst young people, a Happy midi-narrative, that sees the goal of life as to find happiness for themselves, their friends and their families" (Savage et al 2006, p. 35-36). Whilst Savage et al suggest that when young people face obstacles to their happiness it is family, friends and the popular arts that help with resolving the difficulties to return to this 'happy ideal' (Savage et al., 2006, p. 39), this research suggests that students are drawing on a broader range of meaning-making than family, friends and the popular arts, in order to support the self.

[15] 40% of this sample defined themselves as Christian and 60% defined themselves as non-Christian (Savage et al., 2006, p. 34) in towns across England (p177).

[16] Generation Y refers to those born from 1982 onwards and can also be known as the Millennial Generation (Savage et al., 2006, p. 7).

Dunlop (2008) found that students valued fun, success, peace (both personal peace and the hope of peace in the world), and love. In Dunlop's study there were instances of respondents talking about the importance of love (choosing a heart picture and using photographs that they had created to represent love) including romantic love, love of close friends and family as well as the broader value of love, "love for everything" (Dunlop 2008, p. 71) mirroring the descriptions of students in this study of the heart picture representing 'Self', 'Connections' and 'Bigger than me'. In a difference to Dunlop's research the heart picture here was also chosen to represent connection with one's religion, faith, spirituality. Dunlop's work also highlighted the importance of self-expression, of young people feeling able to express themselves such as through music or photography (2008, p. 67). The students in this study, also spoke about their 'thing', their meaning-story, being used to manage their emotions, particularly difficult emotions such as anger, stress, and anxiety. We see for example Penny using music to manage anger, and Willow using music to manage stress. We see in this research that students describe that their 'thing' helps them to look after themself, that it helps their wellbeing, with many students having regular practices to support this. It is also worth noting here that this research has also identified that students' 'thing' contributes to qualities of the self that particularly support students during their time at university, such as their motivation to study, confidence, study strategies and stress associated with assignments and exams.

The findings in this research are also, in part, akin to descriptions by Savage et al (2006) and Collins-Mayo (2010) of formative spirituality, a worldview that they found to be shared by the students in their sample. Formative spirituality:

> "…focuses on an individual's sense of raised awareness of relationality (with, for example, self and others, and possibly God, the universe, etc.), which may include mystery sensing (awe, wonder, dread), meaning-making and value sensing (delight and despair, right and wrong, existential meaning) (Savage et al., 2006, p. 12).

In this worldview of young people, as discussed in section 2.5, the Happy midi narrative sees that happiness will come from "me being myself and connecting to others and the universe without harming them" (Savage et al., 2006, p. 39). It is thus a this-worldly, "imminent faith", where the meaningful ideal, happiness, is "achieved through individual resourcefulness (making use of the popular arts and culture), family and friends" rather than through religious fulfilment (Collins-Mayo et al., 2010, p. 19). This idea of imminent faith, says Collins-Mayo et al, was implicit in their initial research (Savage et al., 2006) and is more explicit in their later research (Collins-Mayo et al., 2010). Whilst this worldview is described as connection to others

and the universe it appears to largely refer to connectedness on a small scale, this midi-narrative "is communal on a small scale (me, my friends and my family)" (Savage et al., 2006, p. 38).

More complex than solely formative spirituality: examples also of transformative spirituality

Much of the findings in this research illustrate meaning-stories that takes place in the everyday, aligning with what Savage describes of young people's formative worldview that "this world and all life in it, is meaningful *as it is*" (Savage et al., 2006, p.37), echoing the work of Woodhead that the 'turn to life', whatever form it takes, "tends to be this-worldly and "holistic" (Woodhead 2001a, p. 112), and Day's finding that, for young people, morals, transcendence, and meaning are to be found in the everyday, the mundane, and the social (Day, 2010a). However, we do also see in this study examples of transformative spirituality amongst the students. This, describes Savage et al (2006), is a narrower definition of spirituality than formative spirituality and is more akin to substantive, theological approaches to religion:

> Transformative spirituality involves the individual in deliberate practices (whether overtly 'religious' or not) which aim to foster mindfulness of the Other (howsoever conceived - e.g., God, Self, Universe) and help maintain a sense of connectedness (2006, p. 12).

This mindfulness of the Other "has significance for the individual in so far as it permeates daily life, guides his or her decisions and provides a continued appreciation of the Other" (2006, p. 12). This, says Savage et al, includes those that may describe themselves to be 'spiritual seekers', who may participate in traditional religions, or those that participate in practices such as yoga and Paganism (that would, they describe, have been termed the 'holistic milieu' by Heelas and Woodhead et al). Whilst Savage et al found that amongst young people in their sample there was an "almost total lack of interest in transformative spirituality" (2006, p. 141) and Dunlop found "a few instances" of transformative spirituality, with the young people in her sample rarely speaking about their spiritual experiences or about prayer (Dunlop 2008, p. 84), there *was* evidence of transformative spirituality in this research. Students in this study *did* participate in traditional religious practices, practices such as yoga and Paganism, and for some their 'thing' acted to guide their life and provide rewards in the next life. For many of these students this was in addition to a focus on this life: there was a complex combination of *what* and *why* students do their 'thing'. We see therefore examples of both an anthropocentric orientation amongst the students, that is, those whose orientation is to other people and everyday places, and a more theocentric orientation, those that "believe in a God with whom they have an

adherent, emotional, reciprocal relationship" (Day 2011, p. 203). We see instances in this study of students having more than one aspect of their meaning-stories that supports this connection to God, and for whom connection with God can also support connections on a wider scale to provide a sense of something bigger than oneself. Gamila, for example, describes that "prayer is to stay connected" with her God and that she also connects with God through nature. Anthony, a Muslim student, finds that being in nature and visiting a Christian Church supports a connection with God and provides a sense of connectedness with others.

The most noticeable difference between this research and similar research in this area is the prominence of faith, religion and spirituality as an aspect of their meaning-stories, and the regular *doing* of practices associated with this in students' daily life. The second most common theme found in the text on the postcards was 'faith prayer and religion' and when students described the heart picture in this research (unlike in Dunlop's 2008 research using heart pictures) it was also chosen to represent connection with one's religion/faith/spirituality. In the photo interviews many students spoke about regular practices related to this theme such as prayer, including Oliver who described his own form of prayer. We do see in earlier work of Collins-Mayo (2008) the practice of prayer, in which it was found in a survey of young people that prayer was common: 60% of the sample for example answered that they prayed at least once a month and 18% that they never prayed. However, these participants were connected to Christian youth work and Collins-Mayo suggests that these findings may be because the participants had regular opportunities for prayer as part of their daily life (such as school and youth club) (Collins-Mayo, 2008, p34). In contrast, this later work by Savage et al (2006) found that there was an "almost total lack of interest in transformative spirituality" (Savage et al., 2006, p. 141). This was with a broader sample of young people with 40% of this sample identifying themselves as Christian and 60% as non-Christian in towns across England. Similarly, Dunlop (2008) found that the young people in her sample rarely talked about prayer, God, or spiritual experiences.

Savage et al also found little evidence of the relevance of traditional religious concepts and stories, and where these were present they were "mainly framed according to traditional Christian ideas" and drawn upon in times of need when "the immanent faith structure was under threat" such as in the case of a dying relative (Savage et al., 2006, p. 52). However, in this research, we see students drawing on a range of traditional religious teachings and practices: Maya, for example, drawing upon Buddhist religious teachings, Gamila's reading of the Quran and prayer (as well as helping others and spending time in nature) helps her to connect with God, and Courtney's worship music, Bible journaling and prayer provide a connection with God

and others on a larger scale such as with others throughout history. The importance of religious concepts was not limited to only those affiliated to a particular religion, with Oliver who has created his 'own belief', which includes "many aspects" such as a belief in reincarnation, "the power of God" and "being a good person". We see here also practices that 'foster mindfulness of the Other' amongst those that do not affiliate to a particular religion such as Ana who compares her practice of yoga and meditation to her religious friend's practice of prayer. The findings therefore suggest that these students are drawing on transformative spirituality more than was captured in the work of Savage et al. (2006) and Collins Mayo et al. (2006). Whilst their definition of the term 'transformative spirituality' was broader (and included, for example the "aim to foster mindfulness of the other (howsoever conceived - e.g., God, Self, Universe) and help maintain a sense of connectedness" (2006, p. 12) so would include the range of traditional religious teachings and practices found in this study, the findings further suggest that their interpretation of the term is limited. As discussed in the literature review, the interpretations of 'transformative spirituality' by Collins-Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006) are limited, as they assume that transformative spirituality will be one in which the possibility of the Christian God is acknowledged and ultimately encountered. We see in the findings of this study students drawing on a range of traditional religious teachings and practices such as Buddhism, Islam and Oliver's 'own belief', indicating that the term 'transformative spirituality' is useful when dissociated from their latter theological interpretations and considered (as discussed below) in the context of a broader sample.

We also see students' meaning-stories acting as a guide to their life, and again, students speak here about a range of sources that act as a guide to their life, (rather than drawing as Savage et al (2006) found, primarily on Christian sources), with Amjad, Anthony, Gamila and Madi describing that their faith (Islam) guides their life, Courtney and Trudy that Christianity and the Bible respectively guide their life, and Maya that Buddhism inspires her to "live religiously". Natalie and Willow, who do not affiliate to a particular religion also describe that their 'guardian angel' and 'passion for wildlife' have guided their life respectively. Students here may have a focus on life itself, but they also describe external forces guiding their life, particularly (but not exclusively) for those that affiliate to a particular religion. Again, illustrating the complexity and variation within the students' meaning-stories, it was not only students that affiliated to a particular faith that talked about a reward in the next life, and not all of those affiliated to faith spoke about a next life reward. Amjad, Gamila, and Anthony all spoke about a reward in the next life, whilst Taariq and Madi (also Muslim students) didn't mention rewards in the next life. Natalie believes in a higher being that will also ensure a good after life, and Oliver chose the earth picture in the card sort to illustrate that if he is good in this life, he will be rewarded in the next life.

This study reveals therefore that there is not solely a 'turn to life', but that students also describe that aspects of their meaning-stories will provide for a state after life.

The differences found between this research and the work of Savage et al (2006) and Collins-Mayo et al (2010) may be due to the sample, that, as discussed in the previous chapter this research focused on one institution with a small number of students and that many in the sample are likely to be born after 1996, belonging to 'Generation Z' (Percy 2019) rather than Generation Y as explored by Savage et al (2006), which is a generation currently underexplored in this area. The differences may also arise because, although small, the sample included a breadth of religious identities including those that affiliate to a faith other than Christianity. Collins-Mayo et al's work, which was much larger in scale and did include those students that do not affiliate to a faith, didn't include students that affiliate to faiths other than Christianity, perhaps because their sample was gained through Christian youth work contacts (Mayo et al., 2010, p 29). Savage et al (2006) include two caveats about their sample: firstly that their "interviewees were 'socially included' young people" that "attended a youth club, college or university" (2006, p. 35); and secondly that because the data was primarily gathered through group interviews it is "*social* data" and therefore there may be aspects of an individual's worldview that may not be shared in this context by the young people (2006, p. 36). The differences with the sample in this research may be because the students are sharing aspects of their meaning-stories that they may not have shared in a group situation, and this becomes more likely to be the case when Stevenson's (2013) and Guest's (2017; 2019) findings are considered, that some students keep their religious identity hidden whilst at university (Guest 2019). This research then particularly complements and adds to the work by Savage et al (2006) and Collins Mayo et al (2010) in that it also explores meaning-making of students that affiliate to a faith other than Christianity, and that because of the individual nature of the photo-elicitation interviews it may include aspects of their meaning-stories that they would not share with their peers. The differences and complexity found even within this small sample size suggests the need for further research in this area that also includes the voices of these students in this context. There is further potential to repeat the approach used in this research with young people that are not university students to further explore whether the differences found in this research from the findings of Savage et al (2006) and Collins-Mayo et al (2010) are due to the context of the university campus, due to the broader sample that includes non-religious students, the use of individual rather than social data, or because of differences between Generation Y and Generation Z, to provide further insight into the meaning-making experiences of young people.

The complexity of the meaning-stories within this sample may be a reflection of the breadth of the method, one which aimed to capture the range and diversity of students meaning-making and in doing so needed to address the challenges of finding the right words about how to talk about religion and belief, and how to capture meaning-making beyond words. This suggests that beginning at the students' starting point in which they self-identify their religious identity, and which enabled the students to "just let me talk about my thing", as Anthony describes, and offering ways to contribute beyond words within the methodology *has* been successful in capturing the complexity of meaning-making. This complexity of individual meaning-making was, if we draw upon McGuire's (2008) experience of researching lived religion, unlikely to ever fit neatly into categories that academics may use. The complexity of the meaning-stories captured here from the individual students' starting point highlights the blurring of categories used to describe the worldview of young people such as 'formative' and transformative' in the individual lives and experiences of the students. The research findings here then suggest the importance, of providing space in methodologies that explore meaning-making for students to talk about their experience in their own way, so that, as Beckford (2003) argues, social scientists do not impose their own definition of religion, as well as the importance of offering alternatives to verbal communication to capture a breadth of meaning-stories.

Self in relation to close connected others

The theme of 'Self' includes the development of self, feelings, and supporting one's own wellbeing, so it could be argued that it is indicative of a 'subjective turn', that is:

> …a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic) (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 2).

It may be that in this context rather than solely focusing on the meaning *of* life that the participants are also engaged with how to find meaning *in* their life, and this includes for example from their relationships (connecting with others), being in nature and having quiet time. Heelas, in 'Spiritualities of Life' (2008) develops the subjectivization thesis (discussed in Heelas and Woodhead 2005) to argue for "a spirituality 'of' and 'for' what it is to live out of life" (Heelas 2008, p. 17). Heelas describes a spirituality 'of' to indicate that "it is experienced and understood to emanate from the depths of subjective life, if not life itself" and a spirituality 'for' "because of its (apparent) ability to make a positive difference to subjective life and the life around us: as well as elsewhere" (2008, p. 17). Are what we are seeing here that many of the students are also, as argued by Heelas "looking at *spirituality* within

life"? (Heelas, 2008, p. 1). However, when students' spoke about 'Self' in this study it was also often in relation to both closely connected others ('Connection') and connections on a wider scale ('Bigger than me') and 'Connection with Religion Faith Spirituality' so for these students, their meaning-stories were more relational: self in relation to close connected others *and* connection on a wider scale (including here connection with faith, religion, and spirituality). This difference may be due to the sample in Heelas and Woodhead's study being primarily older in age than in this study, with just over 1% of their sample aged between 20 and 30, and they acknowledge that young people may be a different case in that they have "ample relationality" and that their "subjective life is rich and full" (2005, p. 110).

The meaning-stories of the students in this research that spoke about self in relation to others and connectedness were more akin to the findings by Day (2013a). As discussed in the literature review, Day's research found that young people, in particular, expressed their identity in relation to others, to belonging and being connected to one another. They had narratives of connectiveness and belonging, with narratives that spoke of "belonging to connected selves" rather than individuality "with a common theme of belonging to adherent, reciprocal, emotional, legitimate relationships" (Day 2013a, p204). Her work, argues Day, therefore challenges dominant theories within social sciences of individualism. Day here gives the example of one of her informants, Tom, who describes that he has his 'own religion'. Previously, says Day, narratives about the 'self' have been interpreted as individualism, giving the example of Bellah et al's (1986) interpretation of their participant Sheila Larson as 'Sheilaism'. It would, however, be incorrect to interpret Tom's narrative in this way, Day argues, because it illustrates that he is not "individualistic, but reflexive in a highly socialized way", arguing that "people who believe in their inner voices or capability of working out meaning, destiny, and morality are not individualistic, but reflexive in a highly socialized way" (2013a, p. 205). Similarly, the data in this study provides stories of connectedness from the students.

We see in this study examples of the three varieties of belief as described by Day (2013b), propositional belief, performative belief, and felt (emotional, embodied) belief), all of which are inter-linked and inter-dependent. Propositional belief, as defined by Day, refers to 'belief that': "a statement that can be held as true but not provable" (2020, p. 196) such as a belief that God exists or a "belief in the doctrine of ever-lasting life" (Day, 2013b, p. 286). Trudy, for example, believes that "God is omnipresent", and has a daily practice of reading the Bible and highlighting passages, and regularly prays with her Christian friends (often using her phone). Courtney finds her belief in God "brings comfort" and says that her practice of studying the Bible

helps her to "relax and process stuff". She gains encouragement through Bible verses, and from the Christian Union and her Church community. Day (2013b) suggests that where propositional beliefs are embedded in social relationships they are more likely to be sustained suggesting that perhaps Trudy's and Courtney's beliefs are more likely to be sustained because they are embedded in their social relationships (see also section 5.5). It may be that what we are seeing, as seen in research by Day, is that some of the young people here are drawing on propositional beliefs (that is, a belief 'that', such as a belief that God exists) to support them during a difficult time. Propositional beliefs, argues Day, can change according to place and need (particularly when they are not embedded in social relationships where they are more likely to be sustained) and can provide comfort. This aspect of their meaning-stories appears to be coming to the fore in the context of the university (in a way that perhaps it hasn't in research with young people in other contexts) because of an increased need to find strategies to support wellbeing during their time at university. We see, for example, aspects of the student's meaning-stories impacting their ability to cope with the stress of exams and assignments. Day refers to 'felt' belief as emotional and embodied, such as a belief in the importance of family and argues that "felt beliefs do not act independently from propositional beliefs. Together they fuel transformations that become performative through repeated practice" (Day 2013b, p. 287). In a similar way that Day describes her participant Joe 'believing' in his family "in the sense that he had faith in them" (2013b, p. 285), Penny describes the importance of her partner's family that act as a "comfort" and "safety blanket" that can be described as a form of 'felt' belief alongside her propositional Pagan beliefs. Penny describes that she has faith not only in her religion, but also "faith in people around me". Performative belief, describes Day, "is not pre-formed but a lived, embodied performance, brought into being through action and where the object of worship is not an entity such as a god or 'society', but the experience of belonging" (Day 2013a, p.194). These 'actions' that can support this experience of belonging can include "not only the ones conventionally measured in social science (church attendance, tithing, prayer, and so on) but other social actions and activities: sharing a 'belief narrative', for example, or filling out a census form, or political activities" (Day 2013a, p. 194). In this study, for example, we see Ana sharing aspects of her meaning-story with her close Christian friend, speaking about how meditation and prayer respectively provide the same "comfort", that they are on the "same page". Belief can, says Day, also be performed through "telling", in the telling of a narrative about somebody, a sense of belonging can be maintained with that person even beyond death: the performative social supernatural (Day 2013a, p. 107). We see Natalie sharing with her Christian friend her belief that her great granny is her guardian angel, and it may be that in the telling of this story about her great granny (both to her friend and in the research interview) that this also helps her to remain

connected to her. This example of Natalie's guardian angel therefore acts as an example of relationality and belonging beyond death. Her belief in her guardian angel serves to support her love life which she feels had not been going well. Natalie believes that her guardian angel (rather than her own agency) is managing her relationship with her current partner as she feels she hasn't been able to choose a suitable partner herself, an example of what Day terms 'matchmaker agency' (2013a, p. 119). This type of agency Day only found in women in her study, the main purpose of which was to "be to secure an ideal romantic partner and comfort them when their relationships fail", and often took the form of a deceased relative (Day 2013a, p. 119). These instances of belief as performative and relational (such as the performative social supernatural) cannot, argues Day, be explained solely by Tylor's individualistic framework and is more than individuals own search for meaning as put forward by Weber. As in Day's study, the participants in this study also described differing degrees of control over what happens in their lives. We have seen for example, that Natalie believes that her guardian angel directs aspects of her life, and that Amjad and Gamila believe that God has the power to reward them in this life and the next, all of which (as was also found by Day) being benign in direction (Day 2013a, p. 115). Day found that whilst many individuals may accord different degrees of power to different agents (such as the supernatural, the supra-human), the "agent who communicates the plan, who nudges the informant in the right direction, is almost invariably human" (Day 2013a, p. 128), and that common amongst her informants was an "acceptance that it is not the individual who determines his or her fate, but an individual acting within a net of social relations" (Day 2013a, p. 116). We also see in this study many examples of individuals speaking about the importance of their close connected others such as Kate whose mum and boyfriend were the two people whose support helped her to stay at university when she wanted to "drop-out", and Gamila whose family is her "main support" whom she "can't live without". The quality of relationships with close connected others as found in this study adds further evidence of the importance of relationality for the students. The students here also talked about the importance of the quality of relationships with close connected others. As seen in the last chapter, for example, Oliver describes needing "some kind of selection" to find friends that he can trust and that friends "accept you for who you are…they are willing to help you" and that for Ana, belief that people have an aura, an "energy vibe" helps her to choose fewer but "really good friends" that can support her. In relocating belief to the social, to being connected to belonging, Day describes the activity of 'doing belief' as "an active, reflective orientation towards belief arising from human, emotional interaction and personal reflection" (2013a, p. 193). We see the students' *doing* meaning-story practices both as solitary activities such as praying (Anthony), spending time in the forest (Penny) and watching the sunset (Willow) *and* with others such as volunteering (Maya, Natalie and Courtney), praying with others

(Courtney, Gamila, Trudy) and being in nature (Anthony and his partner). This illustrates the doing of meaning-story activities is also connected to others, adding further evidence of the importance of relationality for the students rather than individualism, that they are 'doing' self with others.

A more capacious understanding of connectedness

The complexity of the students' meaning-stories reflect the need to take a critical approach to the definition of religion as recommended by Beckford (2018) and Day's view (2020) that the secular/sacred and religious/non-religious binary and boundaries are not sufficient to describe the lived, everyday beliefs and practices of non-religious people (Day 2020). Day (2013a) argues that the benefit of her work is that by situating belief within sociality it can be understood in terms of relationality rather than binary categories. Within the findings of this thesis we also see evidence of connectedness on a wider scale which adds a further dimension to Day's notion of relationality. As well as students' 'thing' supporting connections with close others, students also spoke about connectedness to others on a wider scale, of extended relationality, in the theme 'Bigger than Me'. We see here, for example that Kate has a tattoo that symbolises this interconnectedness, "that everything in like the world just connects in that way from nature to humans to animals to space", its visibility and permanence on her body an illustration of its importance to her and a visual symbol of connection on a wider scale. Willow (who describes herself as an 'Atheist with a strong faith in myself') recounted activities as part of her meaning-story that she does that provide a feeling of being part of something bigger than herself such as going to community events, university events, music events, and volunteering. For Penny, this wider perspective comes from a variety of sources, such as from being with animals, from litter picking, holding a jade stone in the morning, from looking at a leaf, and from her Pagan beliefs. This aspect is in some way similar to Woodhead's variant of the turn to life that sees an emphasis on "self, relationship, nature, cosmos" (2001a, p. 112). The theme of 'Self' in this research has echoes of Gerrard Manley Hopkins idea of 'selfing' as cited by Woodhead as one aspect of the 'turn to life', with spirituality here "understood in terms of living out one's own life in all its fullness", naturally fulfilling one's true self (2001a, p. 112). Students here for example described that their 'thing' helps them to develop as a person, to develop their own qualities, to see and get to know their own self. Woodhead goes on to suggest the opposing pole of 'selfing' in the 'turn to life' (using Watts) as 'cosmic life', in which "the life force, and my (small) self is ultimately only an aspect of this higher Self" (Woodhead 2001a, p. 112). The findings in this study are akin to Woodhead's variant of the 'turn to life' that places "more emphasis on nature and/or on human relationship" (2001a, p. 112). The main themes of 'Self', 'Connections', 'Connection with Religion Faith Spirituality', and 'Bigger than me' echo this earlier variant of the

‘turn to life’ of “self, relationship, nature, cosmos” (2001a, p. 112) if we take ‘relationship’ as connectedness with others and with faith religion or spirituality, and consider the importance of ‘being in nature’ in students meaning-stories as highlighted in the previous chapter. Students often spoke about themselves in relation to others (both in *what* they do and *why* they do their ‘thing’), both on a smaller scale (‘Connection’) and broader scale (‘Bigger than me’) and ‘Connection with Religion Faith Spirituality’. We see then in this study the students very much describing themselves in relation to connectedness with others on both a small and large scale, rather than a turn outwards to the ‘cosmic life’ that sees a life force that animates all things (Woodhead 2001a).

Vasquez (2016) challenges Day to become more ‘capacious’ in her notion of relationality beyond relationships with humans to recognise “the agentic powers of non-humans including things, landscapes, and supernatural beings” (Vasquez 2016, p. 110). He gives the example of ‘doing belief’ requiring a spatial setting (such as a temple) and the dependence of performative belief on technology and the media. In order to understand belief, Vasquez argues, we “must develop a holistic understanding of the variegated material infrastructure that afford that efficacy and produces and sustains belief” (2016, p. 110). Vasquez asks “What are the implications of expanded notions of relationality and agency for the study of belief?” (2016 p. 111) and suggests that Day’s work is “the first firm step in developing nuanced comparative materialist genealogies of belief” (2016, p. 111). Day (2016) reflects in her response that there may be other actants than humans such as music, and as found in her later ethnography, a church building which was a significant actant in the lives of the women that she studied. Within this ethnography of the religious lives of older laywomen, Day reflects upon the agency of the urn that is used by the women in the after service ritual of tea and coffee service as an “other-than-human actant” (2017, p128), drawing upon the work of Gell (1998) and Latour (2015), who “drew anthropological attention to how objects participate in the networks of human relations in which they are a part” (Day 2017, p126). We see in this thesis the importance of being in nature to providing a sense of relationality, both in terms of connectedness to others that they spend time in nature with *and* connection on a wider scale, as seen in the theme ‘Bigger than me’. Willow, for example, describes that looking at the stars and sunsets provide a bigger perspective and a sense of connectedness on a wider scale, and Penny describes her regular practices of being in nature provide connection to something bigger than herself. This study therefore provides examples of an expanded notion of relationality to include the importance of nature in providing a sense of connectedness, but also to continue to extend relationality to belonging on a wider scale. We see within Day’s (2013a) work her informant Melanie describing that deities gave a sense of “one’s place in a

bigger plan" and "being part of the 'planet'" and another informant, John, similarly describing the feeling of "being part of something bigger" when talking about his relationship with God (Day 2013a, p. 125). Similarly, in this thesis, we see Kate's belief in spirits providing a feeling of the interconnectedness of everything. In later work by Harding and Day (2021) we also see this theme of connection on a wider scale, with Harding and Day summarising that the data from their study suggests that:

> "…the ethical beliefs of YouTube vegans are not just anchored in relationships with other vegan content creators, but also in "making a connection" to animals and to the notion of shared humanity in the face of catastrophic climate change." (Harding and Day 2021, p. 12)

The prevalence of the theme 'Bigger than me' in this study, best reflected in Kate's tattoo that symbolises interconnectedness to the solar system, to leaves, to animals, to DNA, suggests that this sense of relationality and interconnectedness on a wider scale is worthy of continued further exploration. This thesis therefore not only provides evidence of relationality in students' meaning-stories but also suggests that there is further work to be done to explore the broader aspect of relationality on a wider scale found in this study in the theme 'Bigger than me', to continue to explore a more capacious notion of connectedness.

Meaning-stories supporting wellbeing and university life

The students' stories here illustrated the complexity of sources that students are using to support their wellbeing, in a way that hasn't been illustrated to this extent in previous accounts of students' meaning-making on campus. Students spoke about how aspects of their meaning-stories, and *doing* activities associated with their meaning-stories (such as listening to or reading religious teachings, prayer) supported their wellbeing. This was the case for students that both affiliated to a religion (such as Amjad whose faith gives him 'inner peace', and Maya for whom religion is a 'comfort') and those that don't affiliate to a particular religion such as Ana who describes herself as Agnostic, and says that finding inner peace *is* her belief. It was also the case that students who cited their religion or spirituality as an aspect of their meaning-stories also had other aspects of their meaning-stories that supported their wellbeing: Anthony and Gamila for example find that being in nature and their faith (Islam) support their wellbeing (with the two being very much interconnected) and Penny describes that family and Paganism both act as a "safety blanket". This theme of wellbeing hadn't arisen in Dunlop's (2008) research (in which young people were asked to rate photographs in order that described what was significant to them) and this seems to be a particularly strong theme in this research. This is perhaps a

reflection of the increasing number of young people in HE experiencing mental illness, as well as students reporting lower overall wellbeing than other young adults (Thorley 2017). Hughes and Spanner for example report that the number of students declaring a pre-existing mental illness to their university more than doubled between 2014-15 and 2019 (Hughes and Spanner 2019, p. 6). This figure however may be lower than students actual experience of mental health and wellbeing, with the Unite Students and Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) report (2019) finding that although 17% of students in their research considered themselves to have a mental health condition, just 53% of students had disclosed this to the university and 52% of these (452) students felt that this was something that they needed to deal with themselves (2019, p. 22-23).

Inclusion of religion and spirituality in wellbeing discussions

This thesis provides illustrative examples of students drawing upon their religion, faith and spirituality to support their wellbeing: religious teachings, for example, help Maya to overcome stress and Amjad's faith helps to prevent depression. However the role of religion, faith, and spirituality to support wellbeing is notably absent in discussions in HE. Student Minds, for example, have collected ideas from students and university staff about activities to help wellbeing and whist many of the themes found in this research are listed (such as spending time with others and alone, listening to music, doing something creative), aside from the inclusion of meditation and mindfulness, religion, faith, or spirituality is not included (Student Minds, 2020). Similarly, the '5 Ways to Wellbeing' developed by the New Economics Foundation, that is recommended by universities such as the University of Sheffield (2020) and Newcastle University (2020), the NHS (2019) and the mental health charity Mind (2021), refers to "being in a state known as mindfulness" improving mental states (Aked et al., 2008, p. 8) but has no reference to religion, faith, or spirituality. On campus, this may reflect the reluctance of institutions to use religious language outside of communications that are specifically chaplaincy related, and this may be a reflection of the institutions approach to religion and belief. Scott-Baumann (2018), for example, spoke about how, in one university, marketing for students uses the term 'Prayer Room', whilst in all other communications the same room is referred to as a 'Quiet Room'. This research has therefore found that students are drawing on broader sources of meaning-making than has been found in previous research, and that these aspects of their meaning-stories support their university life, including wellbeing, in a way that is perhaps not currently fully understood and discussed within HE. Whatever the reason that students are drawing upon a range of sources to support their wellbeing, it is important that these sources and their role are understood by universities in order to improve provision (such as providing or directing students to nearby outdoor space) where possible. It is also important that

the contribution that religion and spirituality appears to make to students wellbeing as part of their 'thing', their 'meaning-story, is explored further, and talked about with students, staff and institutions, particularly because it appears to be a topic that is rarely addressed and would contribute towards positive conversations about religion and belief on campus.

Supporting flourishing through meaning-story practices

By reframing the conversation about religion and belief with students to explain the difficulties with having the right words to be inclusive of the diversity of religion and belief, and asking students to use their own words, it appears that there is perhaps something bigger that has been captured here that is difficult to put into words: Anthony uses the words "my thing" and Maya, "it is my big picture of me". The students' descriptions of their meaning-stories and why they do their 'thing' appears to be more than a worldview, as defined by Savage et al (2006) as a "shared framework of beliefs, knowledge and understanding through which young people experience the world" (Savage et al., 2006, p. 8), more than dealing with concerns and questions and dealing with obstacles. It moves beyond the work of Collins-Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006) who suggest that human flourishing is gained through the Christian story, through "knowing the narrative of which one is a part" (Collins-Mayo et al., 2010, p. 105) to illustrate the breadth of the students' meaning-stories. Although students do talk about their meaning-stories supporting their wellbeing and mental health, their descriptions also seem to include something more than this. This idea of 'my thing' and 'my big picture of me', and students' stories of *why* they do their 'thing', is perhaps more akin to the term 'human flourishing' that we see used in the Chaplains' descriptions of what they aim to promote within students in the work of Aune et al (2019), of not only sustaining but enabling students to flourish. Dinham (2020) suggests that the perception of the purpose of universities for self-development is diminishing with a shift in focus towards employment, but we see here that perhaps students are pursuing self-development, their own flourishing, regardless of what institutions or policies may consider the purpose of universities. We see then on the one hand that universities may be reviewing their provision for the "beliefs and identities of students", with a view to increase student satisfaction due to external pressures as suggested by Dinham (2017, p. 93) and on the other, from this research, students doing regular meaning-story practices themselves, often discreetly, that support their experience, their' thing', through (often private and not shared) activities such prayer and being in nature. Guest argues that to understand religion at university we also need to consider how much universities can shape the identities of students (2017, p. 217) and this thesis suggests a useful addition to this debate is to explore the *student* view of the purpose of universities, and the extent to which they are pursuing meaning-

story practices on campus themselves that enhance their own flourishing (and in doing so perhaps also the flourishing of the university community and society?) that may be very different to current political agendas that may steer perceptions of the aim of universities.

University as a time to explore identity in emerging adulthood

The complexity and breadth of the students' meaning-stories we see in this sample may also be a reflection of university being a time when students reflect on their religion and belief and may be likely to engage with, change, and experiment with them. Research in the US by McNamara Barry and Abo-Zena concludes that emerging adults have more opportunities to engage with meaning-making due to the onset of adulthood now being shifted to around age 30 which provides a responsibility free decade in which to explore "flourishing or floundering" (2014, p. 267). They argue that attending a university can be a turning point for an emerging adult's engagement with meaning-making as they strive to make sense of their experience. Guest identifies university as a time in which students may face new challenges such as domestic and social changes, and in so doing encounter a variety of new perspectives alongside "the quest for individual autonomy commonly associated with emerging adulthood" (Guest 2019, p. 58). This research illustrates that students' meaning-stories, their 'thing', allows them to deal with the challenges of university and to thrive, supporting their confidence and motivation to study, and enabling them to cope with the stress of exams and assignments.

As discussed in the literature review, in the 2013 Christianity and the University Experience (CUE) Project, there was a self-reported change in religious perspective for almost a quarter of their sample with 11.4% becoming less religious during this time and 11.0% becoming more religious (Guest et al., 2013, p. 89). This CUE sample included a higher percentage of Christian students than 18–24-year-olds measured by the British Social Attitudes Survey (2010) and a range of students faiths other than Christianity (although small numbers) and those that identify as 'not religious but spiritual and 'not religious or spiritual' (about a third of the sample for each of these latter two categories). In Guest's (2019) work that explored the experience of those students within this sample that identified as 'Christian' (which included a range of diversity within this such as 'atheist' and 'cultural Christians') Guest found evidence that whilst students may experiment with autonomy within Christianity such as trying out different Churches, there was little evidence of the syncretism (incorporation of non-Christian sources) that was found by Collins-Mayo (2010) (Guest 2019, p. 61-62) and that we see in this study. This is perhaps because the sample in this study contains a greater proportion of participants that describe a religious identity other than Christianity.

Research with young people in UK HE, particularly with Christian students, has found that students were engaging with religious activities. Guest et al (2013) found that of the 51.4% of Christian students in their survey sample, although less than a third attended Church on a weekly basis during term time, Christian students did report praying frequently, reading the Bible frequently and that they were involved in organised Christian activities at university, particularly among the 'active affirmers' in their fivefold typology of Christian students. Research by Aune, Guest and Law (2019) also provides some insight into students' activities. They found that a "…collective act of Christian worship takes place in 80.8% of universities on a weekly basis" and Muslim Friday prayers "happen in three-quarters of the universities" (p. 32). In addition, "an average university, according to the 'lead' Chaplain's reporting, has 6.4 religious student societies, which represent 4.5 different religions" which includes here for example humanist (33.3%), inter-faith (18.2%) and Pagan (13.1%) societies (2019, p. 32). This thesis illustrates that students are engaging with meaning-making activities that support them to cope with the challenges of university and to thrive. It appears to be the *doing* of these regular practices that are supporting students with the challenges of university life, and that whilst these may be associated with religious societies and activities (such as Madi attending the Mosque), these *also* include private practices and those not traditionally associated with religious activities on campus (such as Oliver's own form of prayer prior to exams).

5.6. Chapter summary

This chapter has built upon the findings in Chapter 4 to explore *why* students do their 'thing' as expressed in their meaning-stories, and how this supports university life, and can contribute to positive conversations about the value of meaning-making to students' university experience. It has discussed the findings about both *wha*t students do and *why* they do it in relation to existing research in this area, contributing towards the first research aim to 'explore a breadth of meaning-making in HE'. It has argued that the examples of connectedness within the students' meaning-stories challenge the theory of individualisation as they emphasise connection and relatedness, and that the theme 'Bigger than me' and the importance of being in nature suggest the need for a more capacious notion of connectedness as argued by Vasquez (2016). Unique to this study is that many of the students' regular practices on campus support the students' wellbeing whilst at university, and it has argued that although this thesis provides data that illustrates that some students are drawing upon their religion, faith, and spirituality to support their wellbeing, this is notably absent in discussions about supporting wellbeing in higher education. The next chapter explores how the meaning-stories of the students is currently communicated, particularly the words that students use to talk about these,

contributing to the second research aim, to 'explore how religion and belief is currently communicated'.

Chapter 6. Communication about their 'thing'

The previous two chapters illustrate the breadth of meaning-making found in this study both in what students do as part of their meaning-stories and why students say that they do it, that contributes to the first research aim of exploring a breadth of meaning-making in HE, and has captured, as Guest calls for, "subtleties of meaning-making among the student population" (Guest 2017, p. 218). This chapter further explores how the meaning-stories of the students is communicated, particularly the words that students use to talk about their meaning-stories. It contributes therefore to the second research aim: 'to explore how religion and belief is currently communicated' to contribute to the current debate that we haven't got the right words to talk about religion and belief as it is lived and experienced today (Orsi 1997; Woodhead 2012; Davie 2013). The view taken within this thesis is that to learn how to talk about religion and belief as it is lived today the starting point needs to be to find out how it is *already* being talked about rather than beginning with already existing categories that may no longer be reflective of individuals' experience, thus providing within this study an example of religious literacy in practice. It has also aimed to explore beyond verbal communication, to explore how meaning-making may be communicated beyond words.

This chapter begins with identifying how students have expressed difficulty in explaining their meaning-stories, and explores how students are taking ownership of language, using their own definitions and interpretations of words such as 'religion', and 'faith' alongside a recognition that others may use different words and interpretations. It illustrates how, at the same time, there were instances where students used delegitimising language to describe their meaning-stories, their practices, and themselves, and that those that did this were more likely not to affiliate to a particular religion, but that this was not only limited to these students who do not affiliate to a religion. Developing this further, it finds that students are primarily communicating about aspects of their meaning-stories only with close friends and those in their religious community, and the impact of media communications about Islam on students' communication and their experience. Section 6.2 provides two illustrative examples of communication from the starting point of the student, to illustrate the complexity and the 'feel' of the students' stories. The discussion section in this chapter draws together the findings about how their meaning-stories are being communicated to discuss how an understanding about how religion is talked about today can be gained from the individual's starting point rather than beginning with academic categories. I argue that students may be keeping aspects of their meaning-stories hidden due to the context of the university campus, and that this can be explained using Guest's notion of 'concealment' (2019). I suggest

that this also may be due to a lack of shared language as predicted by Berger et al (1974).

6.1. Discussion of themes

It is hard to explain

During the analysis, I was particularly interested to note when students expressed difficulty in explaining their meaning-stories, as this may give clues as to whether, as Woodhead (2012) argues, we have the language to talk about religion and belief as it is lived today. It was of note that many of the students, primarily those that are affiliated to a religion, described that aspects of their meaning-stories are hard to explain and this was particularly the case when students described what they gain from doing their 'thing'. In order to illustrate this difficulty of communicating about their meaning-stories within the interview, in this chapter where students have used words such as 'um' or 'like' they have been included in the students quotes in order to illustrate where perhaps students are struggling to find words. Trudy finds it difficult to put into words how her Christianity helps her not to be discouraged, saying, "I am trying to see what words to put it in…" Similarly, Anthony finds it hard to explain that religion has given him a way of life, a "backbone", saying "I don't know how to say it". Courtney describes that she doesn't "really know how to explain" what she gains from her study Bible practice, "it is just getting to God even more and also it is kind of connecting to other people who have the same faith". Interestingly, she also talked about the limitations of reading the Bible in English and gave the example of the word 'love' to explain:

> "Hebrew has like so many more words for our English words and they have different meanings for each kind of word in context for like Love has five different meanings for different contexts… with context you can understand the different types of love" (Courtney).

Courtney also finds it difficult to describe her relationship with God using the words "I don't know" several times, such as that her relationship with God is "just kind of I don't know just very special", and doesn't know how to describe how she uses worship music to have a more intimate time with God, saying that she uses worship music "for more when I want to have a more intimate time with God and um yeah I don't know how to describe it". Maya finds it hard to describe why helping others (through volunteering) is very important in her life, saying "I am not quite sure how to explain it". Oliver explains that he finds it hard to describe his own type of prayer:

> “I would say I would say not really pray pray as in it is hard to explain in my mind kind of just kind of visualisation at times I would say yeah visualisation of kind of my goals where I want to be” (Oliver).

The other areas where some of the students found it difficult to put into words what they meant were when they were trying to explain to me the best way to ask about faith and belief with students (reflecting my own difficulties with this). Gamila found it hard to explain why she thinks that asking about purpose is the way that we should use to ask students about faith, beliefs, and meaning:

> “I do prefer purpose definitely… like I don’t know how to explain what if you have a purpose to do something you definitely want to have a reason like a feedback or… I don’t know something behind it I don’t know how to describe it sorry” (Gamila).

Taking ownership

The individualised nature of the meaning-stories (as seen in Chapters 4 and 5) was reflected in the language used by the students, with students taking ownership of language and using their own definitions and interpretations of words such as ‘religion’, and ‘faith’. These individual interpretations and use of such words were across a range of religious identities, and alongside this there was also a recognition that others may use different words and interpretations to describe their meaning-stories. Some students explicitly stated that they were using their own interpretations of words. Willow, for example, who describes her religious identity as ‘Atheist with a strong faith in myself’ chose the ‘faith’ card in the card sort, and says of faith that, “I try and give it my own definition really, I know it is different for everyone… having faith in myself and what I am doing is why I included it there”. Similarly, Penny, a Pagan, has her own definition of faith which she describes as “faith that everything is going to be alright but faith in religion as well and in people around me”. Penny also often refers to her “spirituality”. For Oliver, there are different ways of interpreting faith:

> “Faith can be interpreted different ways, having faith in yourself, believing in yourself is one way I see it, and another way is having, believing in your faith, believing in what you see in your mind um, having, you know, what your beliefs are” (Oliver).

Other students explained that they saw words such as ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ having different meanings, so there seemed to be somewhat boundaries between these

words, rather than these words being used interchangeably (as was also seen). Trudy and Courtney both differentiated between religion and faith:

> "…for me faith and religion is two different things… religion I think is just a set of practices people do, so some people might go to church but they don't believe in God. So for me religion is just doing the act, but to me faith is you know, the belief in um, I want to say like the belief in God" (Trudy).

> "I think it for some people religion is different to belief and faith because um sometimes religion can be rituals and you have to do this because God is going to come down on you, or um you are a bad person if you don't um, but faith and belief is like God's done so much for us so we want to help others and we want to honour him and um do stuff because, not because we have to" (Courtney).

We see Maya too distinguishing between 'religion' and 'faith and belief', but here she is speaking about how others may say that they are religious but not be practicing the teachings. For herself, she often referred to "my religion" and used 'religion' and 'belief' interchangeably, such as using the term "my religion belief" and referring to her friend's "religion and belief".

> "It doesn't mean if you have a religion you are like you are practicing all those teachings even though you have the religion, if they don't pay attention then it is not that meaningful. I mean so in students life faith and belief, I think this is appropriate to us, about how faith and belief helps in daily lives or in what time, what kind of situations, do they pay attention on religion and faith" (Maya).

Anthony also distinguished between words, saying that he feels more comfortable expressing himself better with the words 'belief' and 'practice' because he can separate these as different things, whereas 'meaning' encompasses both of these:

> "I feel like I can express myself better with the words belief and practice because I can split belief and practice. I would say that belief is the spiritual, and the practice is the physical of the spiritual, so that is how I can do it. Meaning is all of it, so I can't split it" (Anthony).

Anthony here gives examples of practices such as reading the Quran, listening to his father in the Prayer Room, and being a good human being (such as through his volunteering).

For other students, words such as ‘faith’, ‘belief’, and ‘religion’ were used interchangeably, although this wasn’t always consistently, and sometimes also involved their own interpretations of these words. Both Gamila and Madi sometimes use the words ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ together, such as “faith religion” (Madi and Gamila) and “my faith my religion” (Madi), as if they are interchangeable. However, in the card sort Madi chooses ‘religion’ as the top card for the card sort but doesn’t choose the ‘faith’ card. Whilst Gamila uses ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ interchangeably (and does choose both these cards in the card sort) she would prefer for the word ‘purpose’ to be used when asking about faith and belief. Oliver has his ‘own belief’ that is derived from “many aspects” including different religions so for him the word ‘religion’ is interpreted in the plural, it does not refer to just one religion. He also uses the terms ‘faith’, ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, describing as he chooses the ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ cards in the card sort how they are different but also interlinking:

> “…religion but then I am interpreting it is not just one religion… having the spirituality creates, you know, connection with God, creates, you know, having someone as your saviour I would say… now faith can be interpreted different ways…” (Oliver).

The students also acknowledged that their definitions and their use of words may differ from others, and this was also later reflected in their advice about how to talk about faith and belief on campus, with the consideration that not all share the same beliefs and so may need to be asked about them in different ways:

> “‘Everyone has their own different ways of seeing things” (Oliver).

Delegitimising their meaning-stories, their practices and themselves

Although the students had an awareness and consideration that others may have different beliefs to their own, what was interesting was that at the same time there were instances where students delegitimised their own meaning-stories, their practices, and themselves, and that those that did this were more likely not to affiliate to a particular religion, but it wasn’t only limited to these students who don’t affiliate to a religion. I was interested to explore this in particular following the work of Day (2013b) in which she describes a trend to delegitimise beliefs that are not affiliated to a religion, citing the work of Smith and Denton. Smith and Denton, following research with U.S. teens for example state that:

> Many say they simply have no religious beliefs. Others can articulate little more than what seem to be the most paltry, trivial, or tangential beliefs. And

> others express beliefs that are, from the official perspectives of their own religious traditions at least, positively erroneous (Smith and Denton 2005, p. 262).

Six of the students delegitimised their own meaning-stories. Kate, for example brought a photograph of the park near the university to illustrate that she likes to "connect with nature" and a photograph of a vegan cookie to explain her love of animals and friends, both of which she referred to as 'lame':

> "It is just nice to connect with nature as lame as that probably sounds" (Kate).

> "Again probably going to sound really lame… this one it is like a giant vegan cookie from when I went to the vegan fest… I just like I really love animals and like my friends" (Kate).

Imogen, when asked if there were any other photographs that she would have taken that would illustrate where she finds meaning in her life described that, although it sounds silly, she would bring a photograph of her cat:

> "My cat, as silly as it sounds, I absolutely adore my cat so she would be included there somewhere" (Imogen).

Ana describes that getting to know herself is her "kind of belief" and says that it is "crazy" how important this is to her. She delegitimises her picture of a basil plant that illustrates her growing basil from seed saying "it is such a small thing" which would "seem like nothing" to others but to her it proves to herself she can do something. She describes that when giving blood that it "sounds very selfish" but that she does it for herself as well as to help other people.

Natalie talks about her belief in Guardian Angels with her friend who goes to church, telling me that they talk about what the Guardian Angels would say to each other referring to this as "silly things":

> "She mentions church and I am like, it is really nice that you go, that you have something you believe in, and she is like yeah and then we talk about I believe in Guardian Angels… we talk about things like that… you know like little silly things" (Natalie).

Both Anthony and Trudy used delegitimising words to describe their beliefs on love. Trudy, a Christian, says that her views on love are "very different from popular beliefs

of what love is", and that reading Christian verse has helped her to define "love according to God's standard", but qualifies this by saying "I don't know maybe I am the one that is weird". Anthony describes as "an odd one considering I am a Muslim" his choice of a photograph of a church to illustrate that the connectedness of Christian teachings with his faith, particularly the "deeper meanings" that they share on love, is what brings meaning. He also describes as "really odd" that their daily prayer practice is as a private family congregation and that when they do go to the Mosque they "tend to be quiet at the back" as they are "happy with the solitude" and "comfortable with our own private congregation". Imogen delegitimised her daily tea drinking practice, saying that "it sounds really silly to some people" but that her practice of drinking tea in a nice mug "as petty as it sounds" is important to her and "a big thing in my life". She also describes that her list making practice "can seem silly at times".

Brooke and Trudy delegitimised themselves, by saying that they weren't typical of other people, so wouldn't be like others in my research. Brooke, when starting to show me her photographs that illustrate the importance of time alone says that "I might be the outlier of your study to be honest" and Trudy that she "might not be the best… cos I kind of have like a different uni experience" and here she describes that her opinions on how to talk about religion and belief at university may not be as relevant because she feels comfortable speaking to other people about her faith (although as we see above she also says that her beliefs about love may be 'weird').

Communication about their 'thing' with others?

Following the finding by Stevenson (2013) and Guest (2017), that some students may choose to keep their religious identity hidden from others, including their peers, whilst at university, I was also keen to explore the extent to which students were sharing aspects of their meaning-stories with others. Many of the students that affiliated to a religion told me that they only usually spoke to others of the same faith (or in the case of Anthony, his girlfriend and friends that are "extremely close"). Gamila and Trudy both described regular activities where they did this, with Gamila meeting her friend weekly to memorise the Quran, and Trudy calling or texting her Christian friend to pray and meeting with her Christian friends for Bible discussion. Courtney described how she would feel comfortable speaking about her faith in church or with the Christian Union but not in lectures:

> "Um I suppose it is definitely easier to talk about it in Church because I know they are obviously not gonna like be so against… because they might lash out or it might spark a debate, not that you should shy away from debates but sometimes it can get out of hand or sometimes it is just a bit scary to share your faith and risk rejection really" (Courtney).

Maya explains how she would only talk to "friends with the same religion" about her religion because she didn't want to "offend" friends that have their own religion. Whilst she would like to talk about her religion with others on campus, because "it is good to share the religion… it is good to talk and discuss about things", she does not know any other Buddhist students on campus because there is no Buddhist society. If there was such a society she says that she would join (as she did when studying previously in her own country) so that she can "share my belief with other friends as well". Madi and Amjad said that they would also talk about their faith if they were asked directly because, as Madi says, he feels it is his "duty" to counter "misconceptions" about Islam. Amjad says he would only talk about his faith if "someone else asks me about why I do certain things or something like that" and as we see below, he is very aware of the negative perceptions some others may have about Islam. Anthony describes that he would talk about his faith with others (outside of his close friends and girlfriend) only if he was asked and if he felt he could help someone else through faith but that "those conversations are very very rare".

The two students that were exceptions to this, that were happy to talk to others on campus about their faith, were Penny and Trudy. As seen earlier, Trudy feels comfortable talking to others about Christianity and actively aims to "engage with other people" about faith, and that she doesn't need to belong to a society to feel comfortable about talking about her faith:

> "I could speak to other people about like I have had conversations with my colleagues… they have asked me about my faith and what I believe, and we didn't necessarily need um there are some societies for that like the CU" (Trudy).

However, as seen above she also says that her beliefs about love may be "weird" so it seems that perhaps there are also aspects of her meaning-story that she may not feel comfortable to share with others. Whilst Penny describes that she will openly talk about Paganism with fellow students and academics she is less likely to tell others the spiritual reason behind her regular practice of walking in the forest:

> "This is more something that I do by myself because when I do tell people 'I spend time in a forest in my free time'… um people don't agree with me… they might think what is there to do in a forest whereas I view it quite differently so I just kind of mention 'oh I am going to the forest anyone want to join me' and maybe someone will walk with me if they want or they will just say not today thanks" (Penny).

There were two students, Ana and Natalie who each had a Christian friend and said that they only spoke about their meaning-making with their Christian friend. As seen above, Natalie describes that she talks about Guardian Angels with her friend who goes to Church, but also uses delegitimising language to refer to this as "silly". Ana also used delegitimising language about her meaning-story during her interview and says that she speaks only with her Christian friend about this. Ana describes her Christian friend as "very religious" and says that she speaks with this friend about her yoga and meditation and how this helps her anxiety and brings "comfort", in a similar way that prayer helps her friend to "destress" and brings comfort:

> "We found ourselves on the same page but different things like she prays and that is what eases her and relieves her stress and this is my thing… we were very like it was quite interesting how we found ourselves on the same page but completely different things" (Ana).

It is of note here that Ana also uses "my thing" to describe an aspect of her meaning-story (and as we have seen Anthony also uses 'my thing') suggesting again, the difficulty of finding the right words to describe her meaning-stories. The finding that students were not usually speaking to others about aspects of their meaning-stories raises the possibility that they may also not be fully sharing their meaning-stories with me, the researcher. However, that students are also explaining to me that they don't talk about this with their friends suggests that this research *has* captured aspects of their meaning-stories that they may not share with some of their peers.

Student advice on how to talk about faith and belief

The students were asked for their advice on how to talk about faith and belief with students on campus. In addition to their answers, some of the students gave the (unprompted) view that religion and belief is something that *should* be talked about more at university, including as Ana suggests, non-religious beliefs. Both Trudy and Penny felt that religion and belief should be talked about beyond the Chaplaincy, because whilst the Chaplaincy can cater for, says Trudy "purpose questions", which she describes as "when people would say I believe in something but I don't know what", many students don't visit the Chaplaincy. University is, says Penny, the "perfect space to talk about religion, to get to know other people, get to know their views and to construct a world view". However as seen above, not all students feel comfortable talking to other students about their meaning-making.

Overall, there was no consensus on the best words to use to ask about religion and belief on campus and students liked the combination of different ways of asking in the

methodology for this project. Asking about 'meaning' was the most commonly preferred term because of its breadth and inclusivity, followed by asking about 'importance' and 'purpose' but there were also those that didn't like these terms, and those that suggested other terms. As discussed above, the students recognised that others may have different views and gave recommendations for inclusive words in their advice: "it depends", says Maya, "on the individual". Courtney, for example suggested using the words "faith and belief" for "people with faith" (as we see above she defines religion in a different way to faith), and for "non-Christians or non-religious people" she suggests "what gives you meaning or what do you do that makes you feel like everything is right with the world". Madi was similarly considerate of other students' views, suggesting that some people, if they don't have a faith may not "feel comfortable with the word faith" so suggested starting a conversation with "do you believe in the God" and if they say yes, "then you can ask about belief otherwise you have to ask what is the meaning of life". Natalie similarly suggests asking about religion and meaning but advises to ask about meaning first:

> "You could say to students what gives your life meaning and is religion part of that or is your faith part of that" (Natalie).

For Willow, "meaning works quite well", and for Imogen, the term 'meaning' was very closely linked to happiness and "what is important to you that makes you that person and makes you want to have meaning in your life" and so was "a very appropriate term to use as it kind of covers happiness, importance". However, as seen above, Anthony finds that the word 'meaning' is too broad, so prefers the separation of the words 'beliefs' and 'practices', and Trudy preferred the term 'meaning' but then translated that for herself to think about where she finds purpose in life, her faith, and recommended a combination of ways of asking that includes 'purpose', 'meaning' and 'what is important'. As seen above, Gamila preferred the term 'purpose' as a way to ask about faith and belief although she finds it hard to explain why. Paris also preferred the word 'purpose' as well as 'what is important':

> "Words like purpose or what is important that just makes a bit more sense to me personally anyway" (Paris).

Penny, however found asking about 'importance' confusing, and preferred the term 'meaning' and the combination of ways of asking:

> "For me it was the combination of capture your everyday beliefs and practices and what gives you meaning in your life. I found the what is most important in

> your life a bit confusing because for example I am a huge Greenpeace supporter but that is a bit separate from my faith" (Penny).

When asked for their advice on how to talk about faith and belief, students said they liked the combination of ways that they were asked in this project, and that it was in conversation and recommended continuing to do this. Amjad, for example, explained that he was used to talking about his faith with others because as a Muslim he has needed to negotiate prayer arrangements throughout his education, but advises for a "Christian or a non-believer" he recommends that it should be a "conversation", with "more use of open questions". Similarly, Madi, as we see above, advises that this should be a conversation that takes into consideration words that others may feel comfortable using. As we see with Trudy and Natalie above, Oliver also advises a combination of ways of asking, saying "I would say ask using lots of different ways definitely ask a mixture". Keeping the "broadness" of the language, says Oliver, "definitely um opens up more kind of perspective", as he explains "what gives meaning to me is different to what gives meaning to someone else".

The findings here suggest then that there is no one right word to use when communicating with students here, whilst 'meaning' was a preferred term because of its inclusivity, students also suggested using words such as 'faith' 'purpose, 'religion' and 'importance'. It is therefore recommended that a combination of words and ways of communicating are used with students, together with an understanding that individuals will have their own interpretations of terms about their religion, their beliefs, their meaning-making, and that conversations with students continue over time.

Effect of what is and is not communicated about Islam

This section describes the experience of three of the Muslim students, Anthony, Amjad and Gamila who spoke about how what is or is not communicated about Islam in the media impacts on their student experience. It is therefore slightly different to the other sections in this chapter in that it focuses only on the experience of these three students, but it was felt that it was important to include it in this chapter because it also affects how they talk about Islam on campus, and because of the strength of feeling from these students. Gamila brought a photograph that was made up of a collection of images and headlines taken from the media that illustrate:

> "…what I hear in the news is actually making me depressed making me sad… you start hearing about Islam and terrorists and that Muslims they hate different religions but no this is actually like I can't take it, I can't be silent, I can't, it is completely wrong" (Gamila).

As we see above, Madi and Amjad would also talk about their faith only if they were asked directly and both are aware of the negative perceptions others may have about Islam. Amjad explains why he will only talk about his faith (Islam) on campus if someone asks:

> "I mean there are negative connotations that a lot of people do have with Islam because of the media so is especially bad" (Amjad).

Madi also tells me about his experience of how talking to other students who "…don't know religion. If they say Islam people think about the terrorism". Gamila and Anthony also talk about what *is not* talked about in the media, and for Anthony this is the positive character of Muslims: he describes how he helps his fellow students when they are stressed because that is "part of the character of a Muslim…although you may not see it on the news". Gamila tells me that she sometimes doesn't feel safe to go out by herself in certain areas because of the fear of hate crime and that this too is not talked about on the media:

> "There is loads of hate happening here and the media they don't talk about it but because we are a Muslim community we talk to each other we talk like we tell us what is happening to each other" (Gamila).

Whilst Gamila does feel safer on campus, she also spoke about her experience of hearing "other students talking about Islam in a bad way" and how this affects her, that it "inspires" her "to talk more about Islam to show them how Islam is, how open we are, it is not the image that shows in the media". Gamila repeatedly says throughout the interview "I can't be silent" and is using her coursework to produce an artefact that will communicate a positive message that draws upon her religious beliefs. Whilst this thesis can't go into detail about this artefact in order to keep the anonymity of Gamila, it is linked to the theme 'Bigger than me' discussed in section 5.3. She tells me that she is planning for this to be "indirect", so not explicitly linked to Islam, but that it is "for the sake of God" and will illustrate positive values:

> "It is going to positive, it is going to have a good message, have a good impact for others" (Gamila).

The way that Islam is communicated in the media therefore directly affects these students' experience, that Madi and Amjad will only talk about their faith with others (that are not part of their faith community) if asked, and all are keen to counter the media's portrayal of Islam.

6.2. Communication from the starting point of the student

The aim of this research has been to start from the starting point of the student, and to make sense of the students' contributions thematic analysis has been used. However, this categorical method of analysis by itself loses a sense of each student as a whole and the complex and individual nature of their meaning-stories from the starting point of the student. This section aims to communicate that complexity, including what has been captured in the research process that is beyond words, to communicate the 'wetness' of their contributions (Marks 2002; Nolas 2018). Whilst there is not scope within this thesis to illustrate this for all of the students, two students have been chosen as illustrative examples of what has been found within this research from the starting point of the individual student (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). It was difficult to know which students to choose here, as they all had complex meaning-stories: Penny was chosen as an example of a student that affiliated to a religion (Paganism) and Oliver as an example of a student that does not affiliate to a religion: he describes that he has his 'his 'own belief' that is derived from "many aspects" including different religions. They were also chosen because they had both given permission for their photographs to be used (which was not the case for all students). The following examples illustrate: the student's self-described religious identity, their chosen card sort layout, what the student says that they *do* as part of their meaning-story, their 'thing' (including regular practices), how they describe *why* they do their 'thing', and how they communicate about their meaning-story. The text in bold refers to the themes identified in the previous chapters (such as 'Self' and 'Connections'). The photographs are a selection of those shared by the student to also incorporate what they shared that was beyond words, to communicate the 'wetness' of their contributions. Alongside the photographs are quotes from the students about why they chose their photographs, and it was felt that this was important to illustrate directly the students' words.

Penny: Self-identifies as 'Pagan'

Card sort reads from the bottom row to the top row, and from right to left (beginning with 'overcoming challenges' and ending with the face picture that she describes as 'being happy')

What **does Penny describe that she does as part of her meaning-story?**

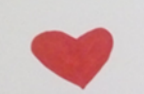
"So this is a picture of a card front… thank you cards are my favourite to make because gratitude is important"

Developing self
'Overcoming challenges' as first in the card sort

Doing self
Daily practice of crafting which is a sensory experience

Listening to music daily helps Penny to "process her day"

"Music is the first way that I ever started to express myself and my likes and dislikes"



Penny chose the heart image in the card sort to illustrate:
"I have got a heart because amidst all this it is important to remember that you know you have a heart and you feel things and it is good to acknowledge that and good to take care of yourself"

Connections
Family, partner, relationships and friends
[Picture of girlfriend and dog][17]

"This is a picture of my girlfriend and my dog, my two loves"

[Picture of a pentacle symbol on a necklace]

"I wear the symbol always…because it is a large part of my belief system"

Religion faith spirituality
Uses her own definition of faith:

"Faith that everything is going to be alright but faith in religion as well and in people around me"

"The forest… if I have 10 minutes before a lecture I will go out to the foresty patch of

If Penny passes a tree she "might say thank you to it" and acknowledge that "it is

Being in nature
Regular sensory experience of arriving early on campus "to

[17] This picture was not included in order to preserve Penny's anonymity.

<table>
<tr><td>a living being just like me in my view and that you know the world is outside of myself”</td><td>go and spend 15 minutes in the forest”</td><td>[campus name] and just walk there”.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">How does Penny describe why she does aspects of her meaning-story?</td></tr>
<tr><td>“So here we have the recycling symbol because recycling is just a large part of my life and I am a real advocate for being environmentally friendly so that is in my everyday practices and throughout my belief systems as I am Pagan”
 </td><td>Qualities of self
Crafting brings confidence

I feel
Penny gains pride and a sense of achievement through being active and from crafting

Penny describes the following activities as supporting her wellbeing:
• Paganism
• Music
• Spending time in nature
• Being in own space
• Reading and
• Pets</td><td>Connect with Faith Religion Spirituality

“this was actually a forest school session where we made a little squirrel gym” which she gives as an example of how she lives her Paganism: “[it] is like a physical way I can make sure that I am doing that and leading by example”</td></tr>
<tr><td>
Penny says of the earth picture:
“It is still very important to remember that we are all just on earth floating around on a block in the sky”</td><td>Meaning-story practices provide a bigger perspective:
being with animals, from litter picking, holding a jade stone in the morning, from looking at a leaf, and from her Pagan beliefs</td><td>Penny has a regular practice of using crystals first thing in the morning “to remind myself that even though we are in a city and there are man-made things everywhere there are still these natural things”</td></tr>
<tr><td>Penny describes her meaning-making supports her university experience by:
giving her confidence to seek support from teaching staff;
helping her to manage academic failure and success; and helping her essay structure, argument and</td><td colspan="2">

“These two really to show…that in university you read for your degree and that is really important…. books can be a) used for information but b) can also further your knowledge of yourself and your interests</td></tr>
</table>

presentation of work (through crafting)	and introduce you to new ideas and I think it is really liberating"
How does Penny communicate about her meaning-story?	
• Penny has her own definition of faith • She also uses the term 'spirituality' • Penny chooses 'religion' card in card sort and refers to religion as a "safety blanket" • Will openly talk about Paganism with fellow students and academics but is less likely to tell others the spiritual reason behind her regular practice of walking in the forest • Feels that religion and belief should be talked about beyond Chaplaincy • Penny found the word 'importance' confusing when I asked about her meaning-making using this term, and preferred the term 'meaning' and the combination of ways of asking that I used in the photo-elicitation instructions	

Figure 1: Penny

Oliver: describes that he has his 'own belief' that is derived from "many aspects" including different religions

Oliver says of the order of the card sort that there is "not really an order for me"

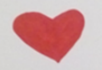
***What* does Oliver describe that he does as part of his meaning-story?**

The Quiet Room "is somewhere I go a lot…one of my favourite places"

Developing self
Oliver added the card 'Positive relationship with yourself' to the card sort saying that:
"having a positive relationship with yourself brings meaning… because it is about…when you explore and you find yourself you want to be kind, and feelings of love and giving yourself rewards… a positive relationship brings more calmness, definitely"

Quiet time
Oliver regularly uses Chaplaincy space for quiet time, particularly when he is feeling stressed.

In the Quiet Room Oliver likes reading other people's entries in the book that shares their experiences, and struggles and this makes him feel "it is completely a normal thing"

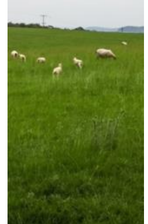


Oliver speaks about both the self and connectedness when talking about the heart image:
"…the feeling of inside loving yourself, loving for who you are,

Connections
Family, partner, relationships and friends
Oliver is selective about his friendships, seeing a friend as someone "that they accept you for who you are, feel that they

<table>
<tr><td>respecting other people, showing your affection by helping people, showing care, showing respect, that is how I see love. Caring for your family, your family cares for you, they love you, that is what love is”.</td><td>are willing to help you… listen to you, willing to support you, that is what friends are”.</td><td> This picture of the path leading to the Chaplaincy door illustrates that he sees the Chaplaincy as “ a kind of safety net in my mind…a place where you are in peace with yourself… this is kind of one of my homes I would say”</td></tr>
<tr><td>Oliver describes that he has his own form of prayer that can take the form of crossing his fingers, or visualisation prompted for example by a sculpture on campus </td><td>Religion faith spirituality
Oliver describes that his belief has “many aspects” including a belief in reincarnation, “the power of God” and “being a good person”.

He regularly attends lunches organised by the Chaplaincy and the Global Space on campus.</td><td>Oliver wears a necklace with a Chinese symbol for courage as a reminder of bravery, strength and God’s protection.</td></tr>
<tr><td> The Chaplain “took me for a walk around the campus and we came across… the fountain which… I fell in love with immediately. I find it very peaceful and somewhere if I need some me time”</td><td>Being in nature
Oliver spends time in nature when he is stressed or feeling anxious and described sensory experiences when speaking about this.

He describes a mindfulness walk with the Chaplain, and often walks both on campus and in the local countryside</td><td> Green spaces bring to Oliver a “sense of peace”, “wellbeing… but also spiritual in the sense of what life has to offer”.</td></tr>
</table>

How does Oliver describe *why* he does aspects of his meaning-story?

Oliver brought a picture of a T-shirt that he photographed on campus that he said acted as a reminder:
"that you should love yourself and… the spiritual bit that God loves you…He is forgiving you… and another thing, everyone deserves to be happy… this is a reminder, the T-shirt, that happiness, the symbol of love, the symbol of erm being in a world erm full of opportunities"

Qualities of self
Oliver's own type of prayer, his visualisation, and touching his 'courage' necklace, helps him to overcome challenge and achieve his goals. Travelling and exploring also increases Oliver's confidence

Getting to know self
Having 'me time' in nature helps Oliver "build the relationship" with himself and this brings happiness.

I feel
Oliver gains a "sense of motivation" when he visits the fountain on campus and this, he describes feels like "being filled up with energy".

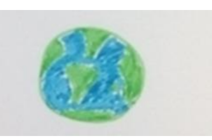
Supports wellbeing
Oliver has several practices that support his wellbeing such as being in nature, his visits to the Quiet Room, and walks on and off campus. He also describes that music and his spirituality support his wellbeing.

After having "me-time" in nature Oliver is "able to carry on"

Connect with Faith Religion Spirituality
Doing mindfulness exercises supports Oliver's spirituality and a connection with God

Bigger perspective
Oliver's visits to the globe and rocket sculpture on campus because they represent for him what the world has to offer on a wider scale and the possibilities for his future

Next life reward
Oliver chose the 'earth' card in the card sort and spoke about his belief that if he is good in this life, he will be rewarded in the next life: "…if you have been a good person in this life, your next life, what you going to encounter who knows"?



Oliver describes that his meaning-making supports his university experience by:

- Increasing his motivation
- Helping his academic performance, including helping to predict the exam paper

How does Oliver communicate about his meaning-story?

- Oliver explains that he finds it hard to describe his own type of prayer
- Uses his own, different ways of interpreting the word 'faith' and uses the term 'spirituality'
- The word 'religion' is interpreted in the plural

- Acknowledges that others will use different definitions of words and will have different beliefs: "Everyone has their own different ways of seeing things"
- Oliver advises using a combination of ways of asking about meaning-making, as "what gives meaning to me is different to what gives meaning to someone else"

Figure 2: Oliver

6.3. Discussion

Understanding communication from the individual's starting point

This chapter has explored how the students communicate their meaning-stories and found that the individualised and complex nature of their meaning-stories, their 'thing, found in this research is also reflected in how the students communicate about this. Starting from the students' starting point, we see that students are taking ownership of how they talk about their meaning-stories, sometimes using their own definitions and interpretations of words such as 'religion' and 'belief' and sometimes using these words interchangeably, and that there is a recognition of difference and individuality in how others communicate about their meaning-making. Whilst within academia then there has been debate about what words to use to talk about religion as it is lived today, such as: the difficulties for researchers due to the need to categorise the beliefs of participants to facilitate research (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2013); that we need a "new vocabulary" to reflect religion and belief as it is lived today (Orsi 1997, p. 11), what is seen here on an individual lived level is that the students are taking control of expressing their meaning-stories in their own way.

The challenges that I have found throughout this project and thesis with language use that are discussed throughout reflect that religion and belief literacy (here meaning how to communicate about religion and belief) has been unable to keep up with the changing nature, breadth, and complexity of meaning-making as it is lived and experienced today. Whilst academic categories are useful in order to explain and describe the findings, the difficulty found in this thesis serves to illustrate further that not only do we not have the words to talk about religion and belief as it is lived today in our institutions and policy-making, terms used within academia have also not kept up with these changes. On the one hand, within sociology of religion there needs to be agreed analytic and descriptive categories to explain and describe current trends, however this is in conflict with the individual and often differing interpretation of words that we see used by individuals in this study. This individual use of words reflects the individual and idiosyncratic nature of religious identity as described by Woodhead (2012) and the complexity of everyday experience and practice as described by McGuire (2008). This difficulty is not new to academia, with McGuire (2008) arguing that individual experiences may not fit neatly into academic

categories. As discussed in the literature review, for example, Beckford (2018) argues that we need to understand the range of meanings that 'religion' carries because it is a term used within both social and cultural life. We see in this study that 'religion' was interpreted very individually by some of the students, whereas in an academic usage it may be interpreted by the reader in a much broader sense and in different ways by different readers (such as a substantive and functional definition of religion). Whilst we see debates within the sociology of religion about what is regarded as 'religion' or not, these are categories that some individuals may not associate with. Trudy and Courtney, for example (who self-identified using the terms 'Christianity' and 'Christian' respectively) choose not to use the term 'religion', preferring instead to use 'faith' for Trudy, and 'faith and belief' for Courtney so perhaps wouldn't place themselves in a category named 'religious'. As discussed by Day (2020), the theological legacy of the sociology of religion means that 'belief' has not always clearly been analytically separated as distinct from religion, when belief could mean, for example, a belief in angels rather than a belief in God. The question here then, is who decides on these categories? Would something be regarded as 'religious' because it fits into an academic description of being 'religious', even if an individual would not use this term 'religious' to describe themselves? We also see here students both using their own terms and acknowledging differences in uses of words by others, reflecting what Woodhead describes as a "live and let live" approach of "no-religion" (Woodhead, 2017, p. 257) and we see here this approach amongst the students in this study with a range of self-identified religious identities including those that may be regarded as having a 'religion'. These findings suggest that there is a need for a shift away from academia's focus of trying to fit communication about meaning-making into already existing categories, to studies such as this that explore how meaning-stories are being communicated from the starting point of the individual. Whilst this may present its own challenges, it would add to current understandings of meaning-making in that it would provide a further understanding about how it is being communicated on an individual level from which to inform debates about what terms and categories to use within academia. This may capture other not yet thought about terms and categories, and new interpretations of existing ones.

Communication (or not) about their meaning-stories

Although this research has found that meaning-making *is* a strong feature in the students' lives, particularly the *doing* of meaning-story practices (including on campus space), it appears that most students are not talking about their meaning-stories with others except with those of the same faith (or in the case of Ana and Natalie who speak about aspects of their meaning-stories only with a Christian friend) or in the case of Madi, Amjad and Anthony if they are asked directly. In the case of Penny and Trudy who do share their meaning-stories with others we see even here that Penny

does not talk about her regular practice of walking in the forest and that Trudy delegitimises her beliefs on love. Whilst Day argues that because belief is relocated in the social that "it is difficult to sustain the argument that belief has become more private" (Day 2010a, p. 102) it appears that at least for these students there *are* aspects of their meaning-stories that remain private on campus and are not shared except with a few others. This may be because this study has captured more than just beliefs in that it has also captured practices, which as we see with Penny, are less likely to be shared than her Pagan beliefs. The finding that students are not sharing all aspects of meaning-stories with many others, particularly the *doing* of their meaning-stories, adds further weight to the argument discussed in Chapter 5, that this research has uncovered further complexity of meaning-making (such as transformative religion) than was found in Collins-Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al's (2006) work because of its use of individual rather than social data.

It may also be that the students in this study are less likely to share aspects of their meaning-stories with others because of the context of the university campus, and that this sample of students is not reflective of young people as a whole. Whilst there is as yet no studies looking at the extent to which students share their broader meaning-stories (as described in this study) on campus with each other, research with Christian and Muslim students on campus has found that students can feel stereotyped and 'othered' because of their religion (Stevenson 2014), they may have experienced, or be fearful of, a hate incident because of their religious identity (NUS 2012; NUS 2018) and whilst on the one hand they may feel highly visible on campus, they may also choose to keep their religious identity hidden from others, including their peers, whilst at university as found by Stevenson (2013) and Guest (2017). Aune, Guest and Law (2019) found that students who had used the chaplaincy service "almost never use theological language" to describe the contribution of chaplaincy to mission, citing previous work by Guest (2013 and 2015), that suggests that students may "feel uncomfortable doing or experiencing evangelism" (Aune, Guest, and Law 2019, p. 45). We see in this research those students that affiliate to a religion expressing similar concerns, such as by Courtney who doesn't speak about her faith in lectures due to a fear that others may "lash out" and Maya who doesn't want to "offend" friends that have their own religion by speaking about her own. It is the Muslim students in this study, however, that are most conscious of how they are perceived by others and this has also been reflected in other studies on campus. The recent 'Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: perceptions and challenges' report finds that Muslim students describe pressures of a *political* nature that they face in their everyday lives (Guest et al., 2020, p57), and we see this illustrated in this study by Gamila's photograph of the media's negative portrayal of Islam. Guest et al's work (2020) found that Muslim students' awareness of the media's portrayal of

Islam and the resulting stereotypes and suspicion of Muslims associated with this reinforced "Muslim students' sense that they are only partially welcomed within university contexts" (2020, p. 54) and that the Muslim students in their study were "especially aware of their minority status and of the vulnerabilities that come with it" (2020, p56). We also see this illustrated here when Gamila and Anthony speak about what *is not* talked about in the media, with no positive portrayal of Muslims or mention of the hate crime the Muslim community is experiencing. It appears then that in this study, as was the case in Guest et al's (2020) study, that there are additional pressures upon Muslim students that may affect whether, and how, students are likely to speak about their meaning-making on campus, and this needs to be considered when making recommendations about how to talk about religion and belief on campus with students. Given the findings within studies of students that affiliate to a religion on campus, it seems likely that for the students in this study that the context of the university campus may be one explanation why students in this research are not sharing aspects of their meaning-stories with many others. We see the students here also talking about the perception of others, with Penny for example, unlikely to share the spiritual reason behind regular walks in the forest because others may not agree with her, and we can infer this also from the delegitimising language, with Imogen describing her meaning-story practices as 'silly', and Kate that where she finds meaning may sound 'lame', and that Brooke and Trudy suggest that they are not like other people. It appears then that the context of the university campus may be one explanation why the students may not share aspects of their meaning-stories with each other.

Guest (2019), focusing on the experience of Christian students among the Christianity and the University Experience (CUE) project data, suggests one reason for a "tendency towards 'hiddenness'" on campus is that it is a strategy to manage the competing demands of the student experience, that religion is put aside in a 'lockbox' whilst other student demands take priority (and this he calls *reservation*). However, within this study students appear very much to be continuing their meaning-story practices so it appears that perhaps the reason is closer to Guest's explanation of *concealment*, "the urge to subdue or hide Christian identity from public view" due to the context of "heightened social visibility" on campus (Guest 2019, p. 65) and for the reasons given above this seems the most likely explanation. In this case, students are not putting their meaning-making in a 'lockbox', they are very much doing meaning-story practices on campus but these are primarily private, and students are using technology, private spaces on campus such as their bedroom, or outdoor spaces such as being in nature in order to do this.

Why aren't students sharing their 'thing'–no shared language?

It may also be the case that students aren't sharing aspects of their 'thing', their meaning-stories, with many others because they have no shared language, no shared meaning system as predicted by Berger et al (1974). As Dunlop (2008, p. 20) summarises, Berger et al predicted that increasingly belief would become private and individual, but with no shared meaning system such beliefs would be isolating. We see here within this research that meaning-making by the students is so complex and individual that there is no shared use of terms, with students describing that aspects of their meaning-stories are hard to explain, and that there is no consensus about how to talk about meaning-making, even amongst those that are affiliated to the same religion. We have also seen (Chapter 5) that perhaps there are some aspects of the students' meaning-stories that are difficult to put into words as reflected in the use of the 'heart' and 'nature' pictures on the postcards, and we see Courtney for example finding the English translation of the word 'love' limiting. Again, supporting Berger et al's (1974) prediction, we also see that for Ana and Natalie they share aspects of their meaning-stories only with a Christian friend, suggesting that for these students there is some kind of shared understanding gained from their friend being affiliated to a particular religion with their own beliefs, with Ana describing that she talks about yoga with her Christian friend because they are "on the same page", and that Natalie shares what she calls "silly things", her belief in Guardian Angels" with her Christian friend. This delegitimising of their own beliefs, and awareness that they may be 'different' to others that we see in this research may also be an indication that the private and individual nature of aspects of their meaning-stories has led to isolation in that they feel that there is not a shared language, shared communication, from which to talk about aspects of their meaning-stories on campus. These findings then suggest that there is more to be understood here, that the experience of the meaning-stories of students with a range of religious identities (not just those that affiliate to a particular religion) and whether (and if so how) they communicate to others about aspects of their meaning-stories needs to be further explored, both for those on and off campus.

6.4. Chapter summary

This chapter has built upon the understanding gained in Chapters 4 and 5, to discuss how students' meaning-stories are communicated (or not) on campus. It has captured religious literacy in practice, including how students are taking ownership of language by using their own definitions, that they are sometimes using delegitimising language to describe their meaning-stories, their practices, and themselves, and that there are aspects of their meaning stories that are not shared with others. The chapter has argued that this may be due to the university context and due to a lack of shared language as predicted by Berger et al (1974). The findings from this chapter inform

recommendations discussed in Chapter 7 about how to communicate about religion and belief on campus in an inclusive way and promote positive conversations about religion and belief on campus as called for by Stevenson (2017), and the importance of expanding the understanding of religious literacy to include how to *communicate about* religion, belief and meaning-stories in an inclusive way.

Chapter 7. Conclusions

This thesis has explored the student experience of religion and belief in higher education through the telling of students' meaning-stories. The conclusions discuss they key contributions of this thesis which are: providing an understanding of the students meaning stories, their 'thing', including arguing for the need to extend the notion of connectedness; capturing the their 'thing' on campus, including the unique finding of the students' regular practices and how this contributes positively towards university life; capturing religious literacy in practice on campus and the need for increased literacy about how to *communicate about* religion and belief, and the development of a unique methodology to research religion and belief on campus.

This research aimed to contribute towards understanding the gap identified by Dinham between understanding students' *actual* experience of religion and belief on campus and that "imagined by policymakers, professions and publics" (2020, p92). I have argued that in order to do this the research approach needed to explore the individual nature of religion and belief to include a diverse range of students and to capture their everyday practices. This thesis also aimed to contribute towards the current debate that we haven't got the words to talk about religion and belief as it is lived and experienced today (Orsi 1997; Woodhead 2012; Davie 2013) and I have argued that exploring how this is *already* being talked about on campus (rather than beginning with already existing academic categories) will offer insight into this aspect of religious literacy, how to *communicate about* religion and belief. The research has taken a critical approach to the definition of religion as recommended by Beckford (2018) and drawn upon lived religion in its method. The approach used in this study enabled the participants to tell their own stories without being constrained by social or academic categories resulting in the students telling their own individual meaning-stories: Anthony, for example, reflected that the method in this study *had* allowed him to just talk about his 'thing'. The research has highlighted the individual and idiosyncratic nature of the participants' meaning-stories, that it may be difficult, for example, to predict from the students' contributions if they are affiliated to a particular faith. Meaning, for example, may also come from secular activities for those affiliated to a religion, such as Gamila, who also brought photographs that illustrated spending time in nature. It may come from experiencing faiths outside one's own affiliation such as for Anthony, who brought a photograph of a Church to illustrate that the connectedness of Christian teachings with his faith is what brings meaning. It may also be drawn from a range of 'religious' sources, such as Oliver who finds meaning from drawing upon different religions as well as being in nature.

The term 'meaning-stories' is derived from the findings and analysis in this study: 'meaning' was the most commonly preferred term when students were asked their

advice about how to talk about faith and belief because of its breadth and inclusivity, and reflects the interconnection of the students' stories with their wellbeing, with 'meaning' also used in university wellbeing conversations. The term 'stories' acknowledges that the students' contributions may be read and understood in different ways by different readers, and that students may have different meaning-stories that they tell in different contexts and at different times. 'Meaning-stories' is used in this thesis to describe the breadth of the students' contributions, enabling a description of the breadth of stories that were told without the constraints of existing definitions and categories. These contributions included where they find meaning, regular practices as part of their meaning-stories, what they gain from their meaning-stories, and stories of self and identity. The students' difficulty with finding words to describe the breadth of their experience reflects the difficulty of religious literacy and the need to broaden definitions and categories, with the students using terms such as 'my thing' and 'my big picture of me'. This study also acknowledges that whilst the students did have some agency in the telling of their meaning-stories, these are also affected by context. The students telling of their stories to their peers, for example, appear to be affected by wider social influences that were perhaps not present in the context of the interview allowing the students to share aspects of their meaning-stories that they do not share with their peers. The stories of three of the Muslim students, Anthony, Amjad and Gamila, for example, included how the portrayal of Islam in the media affected their student experience and how they talk about their faith on campus, with Madi and Amjad only speaking about their faith with others (that are not part of their faith community) if asked, and all keen to counter the media's portrayal of Islam. This finding reflects work by Scott-Baumann et al (2020) that found that the Muslim religious identity is politicized on campus in a way that other religious identities are not, and that this can particularly affect the experience of female Muslim students who face additional stereotypes. This example illustrates how, by taking an individual focus in this study, important aspects of intersectionality (as the teller sees it) have been told as they tell their meaning-stories.

Understanding their 'thing': widening definitions and categories

The students' meaning-stories, their 'thing', included where they find meaning, what they gain from their meaning-stories, and stories of self and identity. A unique finding from this research is that many of the students described that they have regular practices that they do at least once a week that support their university life. I argued in chapters 5 and 6 that there is evidence within the students' meaning-stories of the three types of belief identified by Day (2013b) and evidence of both formative and transformative spirituality as described by Collins -Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006). My findings illustrate that these students are drawing on transformative spirituality more than was captured in the work of Savage et al. (2006) and Collins

Mayo et al (2006), with the students drawing on a range of traditional religious teachings and practices such as Buddhism, Islam and 'own belief'. I argue that these findings indicate that the term 'transformative spirituality' is useful only when dissociated from their latter theological interpretations. Transformative spirituality is defined as that which "involves the individual in deliberate practices (whether overtly 'religious' or not) which aim to foster mindfulness of the Other (howsoever conceived – e.g., God, Self, Universe) and help maintain a sense of connectedness" (Savage et al. 2006, p. 12). I have argued that on the one hand, Collins -Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006) present useful sociological research of the worldview of young people, however their theological interpretation of findings in which they claim that the young people are 'unstoried', they are lacking the stories of God, is to be questioned as it delegitmises the worldview of the young people without basis in their findings. Day, with reference to the work of Christian scholars such as Smith and Savage, reflects that a Christian commitment may affect the challenge of refraining from delegitimising the beliefs of others, that it may "undermine the way scholars are able to privilege the social, and, particularly, family relationships" (2013a, p. 92). In a difference to previous work by Smith and Denton (2005) and the work of Collins - Mayo et al (2010) and Savage et al (2006) who delegitmised the worldview of young people, this study did not delegitmise the contributions of the participants or privilege any form of meaning-making over another. I have argued that this work has therefore extended the knowledge base about the experiences of meaning-making of young people, providing individual (rather than social) data in a new context with a broader (although small) sample, and with students belonging to 'Generation Y'.

This thesis provides evidence of relationality in the students' meaning-stories which connects to Day's challenge of individualism. The meaning-stories illustrate examples of connectedness and belonging rather than, as Day (2013a) describes, an individualistic framework as put forward by Tylor or solely individuals own search for meaning as argued by Weber. Whilst students do speak of 'self' they also speak of connectedness with close connected others and connectedness on a wider scale. Within the student's stories we see examples of Day's (2013b) three varieties of belief, and examples that suggest that some of the students are drawing upon propositional beliefs as a strategy to support their wellbeing at university. The students' emphasis on both the importance of, and the quality of, relationships with close connected others adds further evidence to the importance of relationality to the students. Further evidence of connectedness is found in Natalie, for example, whose belief that her guardian angel is her great granny illustrates relationality and belonging beyond death, the performative social supernatural (Day 2013a). This thesis provides examples of *actions* that support the experience of belonging, such as Ana's sharing of aspects of her meaning-story with her close Christian friend, and

examples of regular meaning-story practices that students do with others that provide further evidence of the importance of relationality, that they are 'doing self' with others. However, within the findings of this thesis we also see evidence of connectedness on a wider scale which adds a further dimension to Day's notion of relationality. This thesis provides data that indicates the importance of being in nature to providing a sense of relationality, both in terms of connectedness to others that they spend time in nature with and connection on a wider scale. These findings led me to conclude that the data provides examples of an expanded notion of relationality to include the importance of nature in providing a sense of connectedness. Vasquez argues for the extension of relationality to "non-humans including things, landscapes, and supernatural beings" (2016, p110) and this is explored in Day's (2016) ethnography in which a church building was a significant actant in the lives of the women that she studied. As well as students' 'thing' supporting connections with close others, students also spoke about connectedness to others on a wider scale, of extended relationality, in the theme 'Bigger than Me'. This is best reflected in Kate's tattoo that symbolises interconnectedness with the solar system, to leaves, to animals, and to DNA. The data strongly suggests that there is further work to be done to explore the broader aspect of relationality on a wider scale found in this study in the theme 'Bigger than me', to continue to explore a more capacious notion of connectedness as argued by Vasquez (2016).

Their 'thing' on campus

This research has added to the work of others that have explored religion and belief in higher education (HE) (such as Guest et al., 2013; Aune et al., 2019; Perfect et al., 2019; Guest et al., 2020; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020), by using a lived religion approach that has enabled individualised experiences and regular practices to be captured. It extends research within HE to include students with a range of religious identities including those that choose not to affiliate to a religion, and as discussed in the literature review, this was also an identified gap in both youth research and education research. My method produced in-depth qualitative data that illustrates individual experiences and regular meaning-story practices on campus. Although small in scale, it contributes towards an understanding of the subtleties of meaning-making as called for by Guest (2017) and towards understanding the gap between the real (rather than imagined) religion and belief landscape in higher education as identified by Dinham (2020) providing a snapshot of the *real* experience of students. The differences and complexity found even within this small sample size suggests the need for continued research in this area that includes a breadth of student voices in this context. The implication of this research is the need to widen discussions about religion and belief on campus. This research has illustrated that solely focusing on the

experience of those students that affiliate to a particular religion is not fully capturing the range and diversity of meaning-making on campus.

This thesis has provided an insight into how aspects of students' meaning-stories contribute towards their university life, such as wellbeing, motivation, confidence, managing studying and exams, and even for some, when and where to go to university. The thesis provides data that will contribute towards addressing the gap identified by Stevenson (2017) that there is an absence of positive conversations about religion on campus. Although this study is small in scale, it has illustrated that students are drawing on a range of sources of meaning, and that this supports their university life, the extent and detail of which is perhaps not yet fully understood and discussed within higher education and is worthy of further investigation. In doing so, this will enable positive conversations about the experiences of students on campus as well as within academia and at an institutional and policy level in order to fully understand, and provide for, the student experience, to move beyond, as Stevenson (2017) calls for, the legal and deficit discussions about religion and belief on campus. Given the positive benefits associated with the students' 'thing', as told through their 'meaning-stories', to the students themselves and their university experience, it is recommended that universities and policy makers consider the range of students' meaning-stories and practices in their policy and practice to support students.

A key finding from this research is that many of the students described that they have regular practices that they do at least once a week that support their university experience, such as prayer and being in nature, that they often do not share with others. Unique to this research is that it has captured the prevalence and nature of these students' regular practices that support their meaning-stories and that students are finding their own (sometimes private) spaces on campus for this, such as their bedroom or discreetly 'on the go', making their own space for meaning-making on campus. We see that in some cases it is technology that is supporting students to do this discreetly, enabling private practice in public spaces. The data provides examples of different practices that relate to the same reason why they do their 'thing', such as daily crafting and weekly visits to the Mosque enabling academic study for Penny and Amjad respectively, illustrating the importance of *doing* regular practices. These practices are often in nature, reflecting previous research that has found that interacting with nature provides a range of health benefits including psychological wellbeing (as found in the review by Keniger et al., 2013) and mental health and wellbeing benefits (such as the review by Lovell et al., 2018). I have argued in this thesis that being in nature supports wellbeing and provides a sense of connection on a wider scale to feel part of something bigger and offering a bigger perspective. An implication from this research is a need for universities to provide sufficient outdoor

space alongside effective awareness raising of this, and the benefits that it can bring to the student experience. It also illustrates the students' flexibility in findings spaces and the fluidity of their meaning-stories, their ability to draw upon and practice aspects of their meaning-stories in different contexts.

Also unique to this study is that many of these regular practices on campus support the students' wellbeing. This is an area of increasing importance to higher education institutions, with the development of The University Mental Health Charter by Student Minds (Hughes and Spanner 2019) and Universities UK's (2020) development of a strategic framework for universities to support wellbeing and mental health, and the impact of Covid on students' mental health (Mind 2020). I argue in chapter 5, that although this thesis provides data that illustrates that some students are drawing upon their religion, faith, and spirituality to support their wellbeing, this is notably absent in discussions about supporting wellbeing in higher education aside from references to 'mindfulness' (Student Minds 2020; Mind 2021). An implication from this research is that it is crucial therefore that research and conversations about the positive contributions that religion, faith, and spirituality (including practices) can make to the students' experience and wellbeing continues, both within our institutions but also at sector level, and that policy makers explore this link further to make policy and practice recommendations in this area.

The students in this study have shared a broad range of meaning-story practices ranging from, for example, prayer, volunteering, and spending time in nature and revealed that these contribute to their student experience positively in different ways such as supporting their wellbeing, confidence, and motivation to study. Whilst in our institutions, services such as chaplaincy, wellbeing, and volunteering are often separate, for students these appear to be interconnected, so it is recommended that universities also co-ordinate and communicate these services together to students where possible. This could also be an opportunity to explore and have conversations with students about their meaning-stories. A more radical approach would be to, not just link the services together, but reframe the services that support students' meaning-stories, (as the students describe, their 'thing'), to link with the idea of supporting the whole of the student to flourish. This would most effectively be done with further collaboration from students about how to approach this, and what language to use that would convey and co-ordinate those services and support the practices that appear to support the whole student. A practical example of this, and a possible output from this research, could be to host an exhibition of the student postcards in which the concept behind the research is introduced, including the aim for the inclusion of a breadth of meaning-stories and the difficulties with knowing what terms to use to invite this breadth, and the positive impact on the students'

university experience. The exhibition would be a way of sharing students' contributions, starting positive conversations, and could also include anonymised examples of the students' regular practices, and these could be in the form of photographs or stories. This would serve to illustrate the diversity of meaning-stories and commonalities between the students (such as being in nature, prayer, connection with others), and students could be invited to contribute their own postcards, pictures, and stories to the exhibition. In the same exhibition, students could be informed about services within the university that support these aspects of meaning-stories such as chaplaincy, wellbeing services, opportunities to connect with others (such as through the Global Space) and green spaces both on campus and nearby. As we have seen in this research, many of the students described regular practices that they have kept private from many of their peers, as well as the examples of Ana who talks about yoga with her Christian friend because they are "on the same page", and Natalie who shares what she calls "silly things", her belief in Guardian Angels" with her Christian friend. There is scope here then for universities to support students that wish to connect with each other through their meaning-story practices in shared spaces and events whilst also accommodating for the individuality and differences of practice: a shared space, for example, for both prayer and mindfulness; and a 'nature walk' could include those that want to spend time in nature, those that want quiet time, and those that want to be with God.

Religious literacy on campus

The focus of data collection and reporting about religion and belief in HE is primarily focused on the capturing of those affiliated to a religion (or not), and much of the current research in understanding the student experience here has tended to focus upon students that affiliate to a religion, rather than using the lens of lived religion to capture individual experience rather than affiliation. Dinham (2020) recognised this as a challenge and expanded his use of the term "religious literacy" to "religion and belief literacy" to include a range of beliefs (including non-religion, world views, and values) in order to support "a better quality of conversation about religions and beliefs" (2020, p. 5). This study, by drawing upon a lived religion approach, has captured a range of experience, and the data indicates that 'religion and belief literacy' may not be a sufficiently inclusive term. The students used their own interpretations of terms such as 'religion' and 'belief' and favoured the term 'meaning' as the most inclusive term to include a range of religions, beliefs, and practices. In recounting their meaning-stories they struggled to find words to describe the breadth of their meaning-stories, using terms such as 'my thing' and 'my big part of me'. The implication from this study is that there is scope to develop the definition of 'religion and belief literacy' further to explore, for example, the preference of the students to use the term 'meaning' because of their desire to be inclusive. Whilst the term

‘meaning’ was the most favoured term by students in this study, it is also not without its limitations, so it is suggested that further work to develop the use of terms in university policy and practice is developed with students, and with an understanding of how they use words and definitions. Furthermore, previous research that has highlighted the need for increased religious literacy (Woolf Institute 2015; Dinham and Francis 2015; Modood and Calhoun 2015; Dinham 2017; Guest et al., 2020) has primarily used ‘religious literacy’ in the sense of *knowledge and understanding about* religion. The findings in this thesis strongly suggest that there is a need for an additional aspect of religious literacy that is, the need for increased literacy in the sense of how to *communicate about* religion, belief, and meaning-making in an inclusive way. This reflects the importance of shared understanding about different uses and interpretations of words such as ‘religion’ and ‘belief’ in order to facilitate inclusive communications, and the need to consider and understand communications about meaning-making that may be beyond words.

The strength of this work has been its engagement with the difficulty of religious literacy *in practice* including an exploration of non-verbal communications about religion and belief on campus, and its approach of encouraging the telling of meaning-stories through a variety of different methods. The difficulties with finding inclusive language led to the development of existing approaches in this area and this study is original in its approach to pose the problem of what language to use to the participants and eliciting their views. Researcher self-reflection on language use has also enabled an open and transparent discussion of the limitations of language used throughout this thesis that reflects one of the difficulties that initially inspired this project, that we haven’t got the language to “talk about religion in the way it is actually being lived” (Woodhead 2012). Unique to research about students’ religion and belief in higher education, it encouraged agency in the participants by inviting them to interpret the research instructions in a way that made sense to them, invited the students to use their own words and definitions in the interview, and to question my definitions and language used. It drew upon work by others who have also used non-religious words to explore this area such as Dunlop (2008), Day (2013a), and Ammerman (2014) to apply this in a higher education context. This project built upon this work, by explaining the difficulty of finding the right words in the ‘Photo-elicitation interview photo guidelines’ and giving different suggestions about how ‘everyday beliefs and practices’ could be understood, as well as inviting students to use their own understanding of these terms when taking the photographs, and asking for their advice on how to talk about religion and belief. This approach, combined with the use of participant-generated photo-elicitation interviews, in which students led the interviews, was successful in that it encouraged students to use their own ways of communicating. As Anthony says, the approach enabled him to “…just let me talk

about my thing” so offers a method that is successful in capturing the individual nature of, and communications used, to describe, meaning-stories. In the examples of Penny and Oliver in chapter 6, it has provided illustrative examples of the complexity of the students’ meaning-stories, their ‘thing’, that convey a sense of the ‘wetness’ of their contributions (Marks 2002: Nolas 2018) and communications beyond words.

This unique approach towards understanding religious literacy on campus taken in this thesis led to the finding that the individualised and complex nature of the students’ meanings-stories is reflected in how the students communicate about them. The data illustrates that the students are taking ownership of their own definitions of words, that students used their own definitions of terms such as ‘religion’ and ‘belief’, and that perhaps there are also some aspects of their meaning-stories that are difficult to put into words as reflected in the use of the ‘heart’ and ‘nature’ pictures on the postcards, which is consistent with Orsi’s view that a “new vocabulary” is needed to reflect religion and belief as it is lived today (1997, p.11). The findings illustrate that there is no shared use of terms, with students describing that their meaning-story is hard to explain, and in some cases the students using delegitimising language about their own (rather than others) meaning-stories. This is reflective of the struggle and exploratory nature of the telling of meaning stories, with the students perhaps engaging with, and vocalising, their meaning-stories in this way for the first time, illustrating the emergent nature of this for the students and of this approach. The data also provides evidence of students both using their own terms and acknowledging differences in uses of words by others. This is in contrast to the findings of Day in which she found that “anthropocentrics and theocentrics denigrate each others forms of believing and belonging” (2013a, p168). Day suggests that this serves as a way of strengthening one’s own identity and confirming and sustaining boundaries, acting as a “statement of self” (2013a, p168). The findings in this research are more reflective of what Woodhead describes as a “live and let live” approach of “no-religion” (Woodhead, 2017, p. 257) and we see here this approach amongst the students in this study with a range of self-identified religious identities including those that affiliate to a particular religion.

The finding that the students are not talking about their meaning-stories with many of their peers is consistent with findings by Stevenson (2013) and Guest (2017; 2019), who also found that some students may choose to keep their religious identity hidden from others, including their peers, whilst at university. I have argued that this may be due to the context of the university campus, that the reason for students keeping this hidden could be explained by Guest’s (2019) explanation of *concealment*, due to the students’ concern about the perception of others that has also been found in work by

Guest (2019) and is particularly the case for Muslim students on campus (Guest et al., 2020). However, I have also argued that the findings indicate that there may be an additional reason. The students meaning-stories are complex and individual, there was no consensus about how to talk about meaning-stories even amongst those that are affiliated to the same religion, and these may be stories that have not previously been told. The students described that their meaning-stories were hard to explain, and some aspects of their meaning-stories appeared difficult to put into words as reflected in the use of the 'heart' and 'nature' pictures suggesting that it may also be because there is no shared language as predicted by Berger et al (1974). The implication from this research then is that there is a gap between how language is actually being used by the students to describe their meaning-stories and meaning-story practices and how it is talked about on campus with students, within our institutions, by policy makers, and by academics when researching this area. This is perhaps contributing towards students not sharing their meaning-stories with each other because there is a lack of shared language for this. There is potential for the use of anonymised online spaces to enable the sharing of stories that would bypass the difficulty of being known in the telling, through the use of blogs hosted by chaplaincies for example, that could share anonymised students' stories.

This study has therefore identified a need to communicate the breadth and individual nature of meaning-making to students, within institutions, and with policy makers. The main recommendations from this thesis are:

- Research in this area includes a broad sample of students with a range of self-identified religious identities (to also include, for example, those students that are not affiliated to a religion). and that the problem of the difficulties of inclusive language is posed to students and their advice on this sought.
- Religion, belief, and meaning-stories should be talked about on campus, using a combination of different ways and using different language, and that this should be in conversation with students. Using a combination of words such as 'meaning', 'religion', 'belief' is therefore recommended, as well as allowing students to contribute to conversations using their own terms and in a way that allows the recognition and sharing of different understandings of words used.
- Students are given the opportunity to contribute to such conversations in different ways, that the student experience of meaning-stories beyond words (including sensory experiences) is also elicited and shared, such as through pictures and photographs. Given that students may also not wish to share their meaning-stories with their peers, yet at the same time it appears that students would like to share where they find meaning (illustrated by the number of postcards contributed by students in this study), it is important that

a safe space is created in which students can contribute, and that there is an option to contribute anonymously.

- Universities should be aware that students may find it difficult to share their meaning-stories and practices with others because of the fear of (and sometimes the experience of) negative reactions to this, and that this may be particularly the case for Muslim students. As Guest et al (2020) recommends, these negative narratives about Islam and Muslims need to be critically and responsibly challenged to facilitate "positive interfaith and intercultural relationships" (Guest et al., 2020, p. 57).
- Conversations continue over time, that students' contributions (including those beyond words) about their meaning-stories are disseminated and shared with students and at an institutional and sector level to facilitate further conversations and understanding. The sharing of experiences may help to legitimise the range of meaning-story practices in the eyes of the students, and to begin to create a shared language and understanding through these conversations, with the aim of prompting further conversations and contributions.

Going forwards, there is further potential for this approach of sharing non-verbal communications to be used towards addressing the difficulty of not having a shared language, to broaden communications within our institutions, policy making and within academia. The Connectors Study work on 'public creating methodologies', a term used to "describe the experimental aspects of the study which move being the purely ethnographic and which purposively seek to communicate the research to the public, and engage the public in our thinking" (Connectors Study 'Publics Creating Methodologies') could be drawn upon here, for example to create communications which share artefacts on campus through, for example, an exhibition. Within research and policy communications, for example, visual representations of experience rather than illustrative examples of student quotes could be used where student experiences are shared. Within academia, experimental ways being developed within multimodal ethnography to visually portray the lived experience of meaning-stories could be drawn upon using multi modal formats such as photo-stories and visual essays as discussed by Nolas and Varvantakis (2018).

Developing methodologies to research religion and belief on campus

This thesis has as its third aim, 'to explore methodologies to research religion and belief', aiming to contribute to debates within sociology of religion about how to research religion and belief in an inclusive way. The combination of methods used in this study is unique to research about religion and belief in HE: a new 'postcard method' that was devised for this study; participant–generated photo-elicitation

interviews; a ‘card sort’ method that built upon the Connectors Study ‘configuring matters’ method (Varvantakis 2018); and a ‘meandering’ approach to the analysis to gain a better understanding across these different types of data. These allow for multiple tellings based on different methods. The methodological challenge of finding a method that would allow for anonymous contributions and contributions beyond words led to the development of a new ‘postcard method’. The ‘postcard method’ contributes a new way of capturing data that is: tactile; allows collection of responses on a larger scale; offers anonymity; allows creative textual and visual contributions; and is engaging for participants. The postcards in themselves are artefacts that can be shared when disseminating the research to provide a ‘feel’ of the students’ contributions, both when presenting about the research (in a photograph album) and online on Instagram, and there is further potential for these to be used to initiate conversations about meaning-stories. The photographs that the students provided for the photo-elicitation interviews are also artefacts that are part of the students’ meaning-stories that, in themselves, have not been retold.

This thesis responds to the challenge outlined by Dinham (2020), that there is a need to account for the real and diverse experience of religion and belief, rather than the current focus of data collection and reporting in higher education which has primarily focused upon capturing those affiliated to a religion (or not). In order to achieve this it has drawn upon lived religion and the approach by Day (2013a) in which participants were not selected on the basis of their religious affiliation. The largest sector data set on religion and belief in higher education is captured by Advance HE who base the wording of the questions for the monitoring of religion and belief data on the UK Census question (2011) with the additional category of ‘Spiritual’ (Advance HE 2020). The critique of the way that the Census data is captured by Day and Lee (2014) is also applicable to the way that religion and belief data is captured in higher education. Day and Lee (2014) argue that the difficulty with Census data collected in this way is that when it is reported in isolation it does not reflect a complexity of identities that may be uncovered by qualitative research. This is also the case with sector religion and belief data: the complexities and individual nature of students’ meaning-stories that has been found in this research is not reflected in the sector data. Day and Lee (2014) argue for the need to be critical of census and large survey data and subsequent decisions made as a result, and this is also applicable here because the sector data draws upon the Census question. It is important therefore to also consider that this method of collecting sector religion and belief data may affect understanding about religion and belief on campus, resultant decisions made surrounding religion and belief on campus, as well as students’ self-identity (for example whether they see themselves as a ‘minority’ due to small numbers in the data). The data will, as Day and Lee (2014) argue of the Census data, only capture

self-identity in that particular context and time, when individuals may have more than one identity, this may change over time, and respondents may respond in a different way in a different context. If we are, as Dinham recommends, to understand the gap between understanding students' *actual* experience of religion and belief on campus and as Dinham that "imagined by policymakers, professions and publics" (2020, p. 92) the breadth and individuality of meaning-stories therefore needs to be captured in monitoring at sector level in order to inform policy and institutional practice. This means *also* valuing other forms of data collection, in addition to the monitoring of religion and belief data for equality purposes, of including the lived experiences of students that capture the breadth and individual nature of experience, as equally worthy. If we are to close the gap between the actual and lived experiences of religion and belief on campus, more also needs to be understood about students' meaning-story practices, including those that take place in private spaces on campus, and privately in public spaces such as in outdoor spaces on campus and in the students' campus bedrooms. This aspect of students' use of private spaces is absent from current research about religion and belief within HE that has focused upon public spaces provided by the university such as facilities for worship (ECU 2011). Exploring these more private meaning-story practices further, including how technology is supporting this, will add to what is currently known about religion and belief on campus, such as the current work on the student experience of chaplaincy (Aune et al., 2019; Perfect et al., 2019) and can be used to inform how to accommodate and support students with this aspect of their lives. It will also add to current understanding about how to support students' wellbeing at university. It is recommended that future studies aim to capture and understand the space that students may create for their own meaning-story practices that may be a shared or private space, or privately in a public space, and this requires asking the right questions, and, because students may not wish to share this with their peers, asking about this in a sensitive manner. This thesis argues that monitoring processes to capture and report upon religion and belief in HE need to be further developed to understand the breadth of experiences illustrated in this study. It provides qualitative data that has captured a complexity of identities, experiences and practices that can be used to aid understanding of students' actual experience: including what students do, their practices, and how this supports their university life. This study has also suggested possibilities for further creative ways to disseminate non-verbal communications about meaning-stories that can be used to further inform understanding, policy and practice, and facilitate further conversations.

This thesis has taken forward discussions about religion and belief on campus, religious literacy in higher education, and methodologies to research religion and belief. These are all areas that there is a continued need to research and develop

knowledge. There is potential for further outputs from this research as outlined in Table 4 below.

Output	Purpose
Department of Social Work, Care and Community 2020-21 Research Seminar Series Seminar title: Exploring the diversity of everyday beliefs and practices on campus: what do they bring to the student experience and how can we talk about these in an inclusive way?	This paper will share the findings from this research about how students *talk* about their meaning-stories, and the regular practices that students *do* that support their student experience (including their wellbeing) that are often private and not shared even with peers. It will suggest new ways of thinking and talking about religion and belief on campus in order to include the diversity of our students and their meaning-stories.
A paper within a sociology of religion journal such as 'Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion (RSSSR)'	Building on the above seminar, to submit a paper that draws out the use of innovative methods to uncover the lived experience of a breadth of students with a range of religious identities and experiences
A paper within a journal with a more educational focus, such as 'Widening Participation & Lifelong Learning'	Use the findings from this research that illustrate the positive contributions that meaning-making brings to the student experience, together with evidence from literature of the links between religious students and certain groups (such as ethnicity and international students) to explore how supporting meaning-making can contribute towards supporting the student experience, with possible implications for students within certain groups
A paper that focuses upon understanding the prevalence of regular meaning-story practices on campus, and how data collection methods need to be revisited to	Privately in public spaces: an article that argues the case for a change in how we collect data about religion and belief spaces on campus following the finding that students have regular meaning-story practices on

capture this in order to inform policy and practice.	campus that take place both in private spaces and privately in public spaces
A summary report of the findings and implications for practice and policy to Advance HE	Provide a summary report of the findings, to illustrate in particular the diversity of non-religious belief and practice, the importance of the focus on students' self-identification and the intersectionality with wellbeing (following particular interest from Advance HE on these areas after a presentation of this work)
A methodology paper focusing on the use of postcards as a method	Demonstrate how the use of postcards as a research method can be useful to explore sensitive topics and its potential for further development as a method in this area
Experimental output of the visual contributions of the project	I would like to experiment with a visual way of sharing the contributions of students within an academic journal such as using a visual essay or photo-story within the journal 'entanglements: experiments in multimodal ethnography'

Table 4: Directions for further research

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Chapter 3 Research Methodology

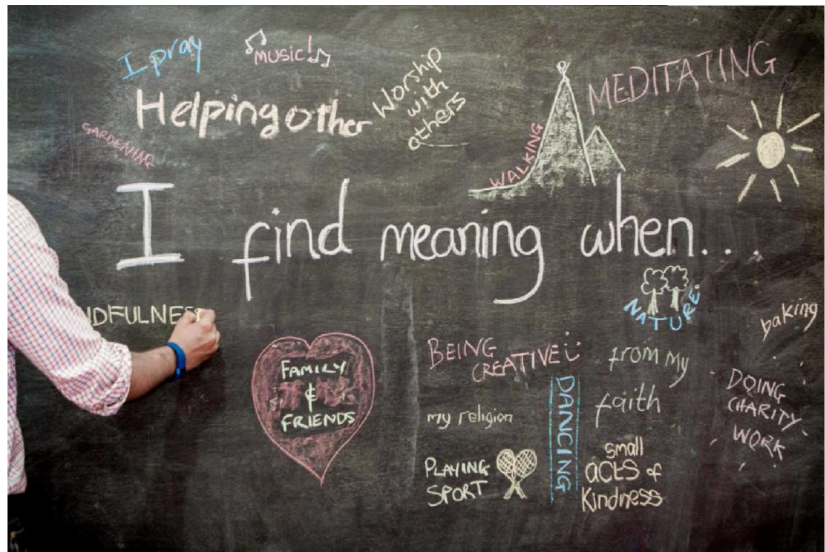


Figure 3: Front face of postcard

I find meaning when...

Please draw or write here.

Please note that by filling in this postcard you are agreeing to the terms as stated on the project information sheet.

Thank you for taking part in this project.

To find out more about taking part in further research for this project please give you email address here. Thank you.

This will be detached from the postcard.
To find out more please contact :

Figure 4: Rear side of postcard

Figure 5: Displaying the postcards

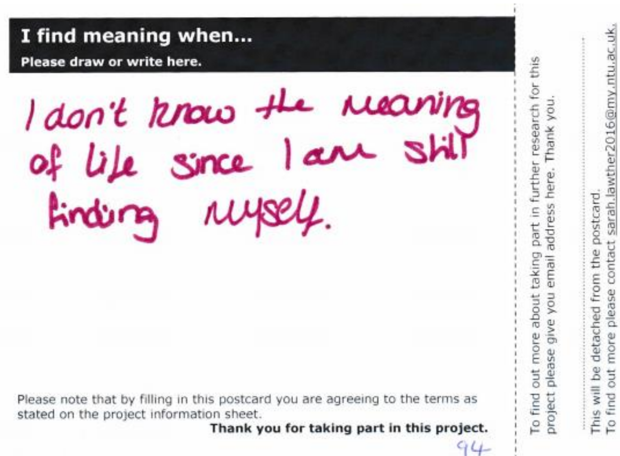


Figure 6: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p94)

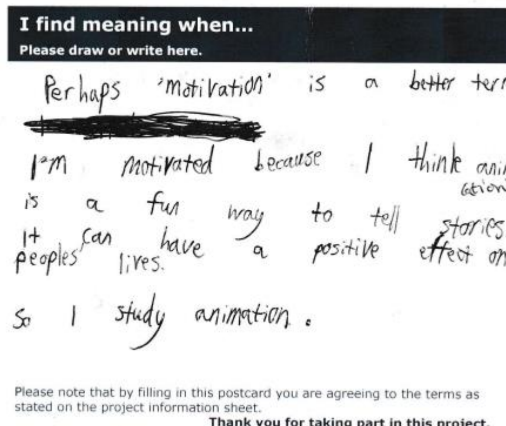


Figure 7: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p123)

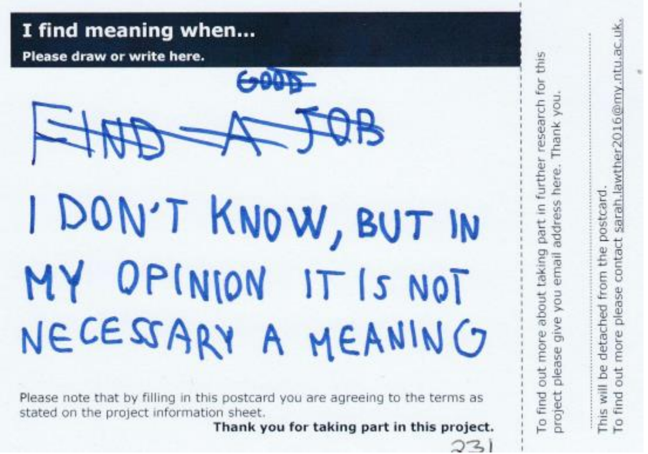
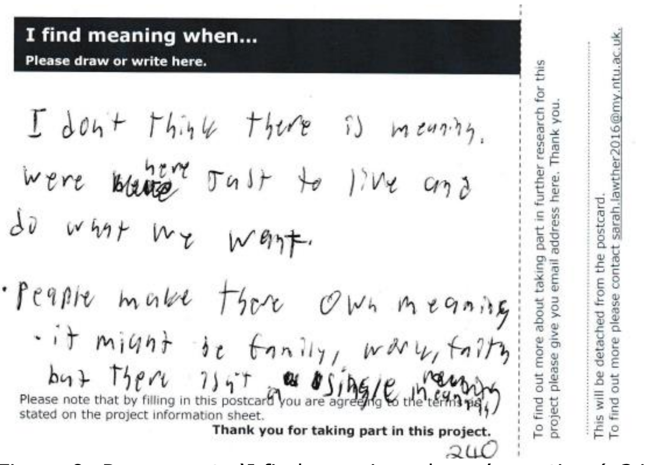


Figure 8: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p231)


I find meaning when...
Please draw or write here.

I don't think there is meaning.
were here just to live and
do what we want.
• People make there own meaning
- it might be family, work, faith
but there isn't a single meaning

Please note that by filling in this postcard you are agreeing to the terms stated on the project information sheet.
Thank you for taking part in this project.
240

To find out more about taking part in further research for this project please give you email address here. Thank you.

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Figure 9: Response to 'I find meaning when…' question (p240).

Want to get involved?

Would you like to take part in research that explores what gives students meaning in their lives, and how this relates to university life?

The research involves taking a few photographs on your phone and then talking about them at an interview, and the findings will be used to inform the support of students.

As a thank you for taking part, you will receive a £15 Tesco voucher.

If you would like to take part please do get in touch at sarah.lawther2016@my.ntu.ac.uk

If you would like to see some of the (over 250!) postcards that students have completed as part of this PhD project please visit the findmeaningproject Instagram page at https://www.instagram.com/findmeaningproject/?hl=en

Figure 10: Postcard inviting students to take part in the photo-elicitation interviews.

Figure 11: Card Sort 16 flash cards
The nature pictures in the card sort are the 'earth' picture (second row from the top) and the 'beach' picture (third row from the top).

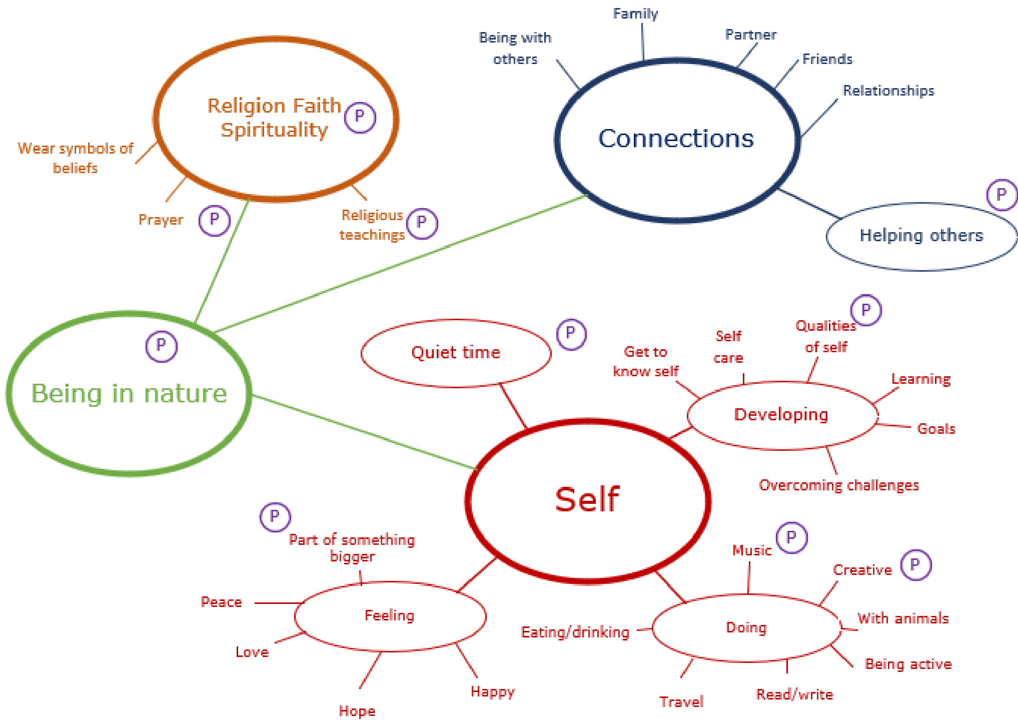


Figure 12: *What* students do as part of their meaning-stories, their 'thing'

The mind map above illustrates the themes that emerged from the analysis of *what* students do as part of their meaning-stories as described by the students. It illustrates the overall themes of: Self, Connections, Religion/faith/spirituality and Being in nature. A circle around a sub- theme (such as 'helping others') indicates that this was a more recurrent theme than those without a circle around them. Whilst the themes have been separated in this way in order to explain them, they are very much interconnected, with nature in particular linking to all three themes (as illustrated by the green lines). A Ⓟ indicates a regular practice example associated with the theme.

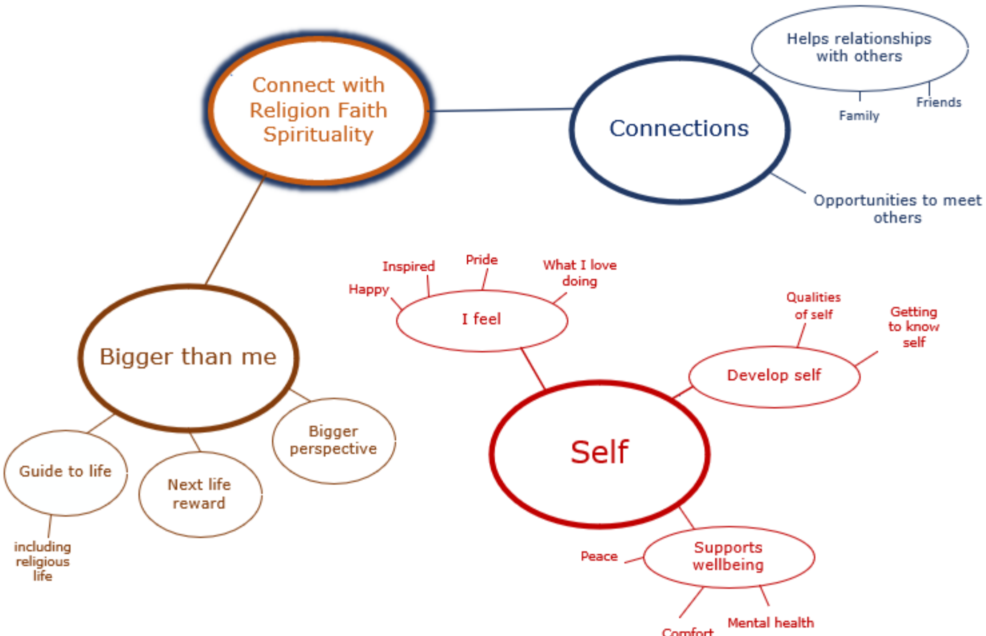


Figure 13: *Why* students do their 'thing', their meaning-stories

The mind map above illustrates the themes that emerged from the analysis of *Why* students do their 'thing', as described by the students. It illustrates the overall themes of: 'Self', 'Connections', 'Connect with religion/faith/spirituality' and 'Bigger than me'. The theme 'Connect with Religion Faith Spirituality' was linked to the themes of 'Connections' and 'Bigger than me' and this was illustrated on the mind map by the two coloured circles around it (with blue relating to the 'Connections' theme and brown relating to the 'Bigger than me' theme). A circle around a sub-theme indicates that this was a more recurrent theme than those without a circle around them.

Appendix 2: Chapter 4 What do students do as part of their 'thing'?

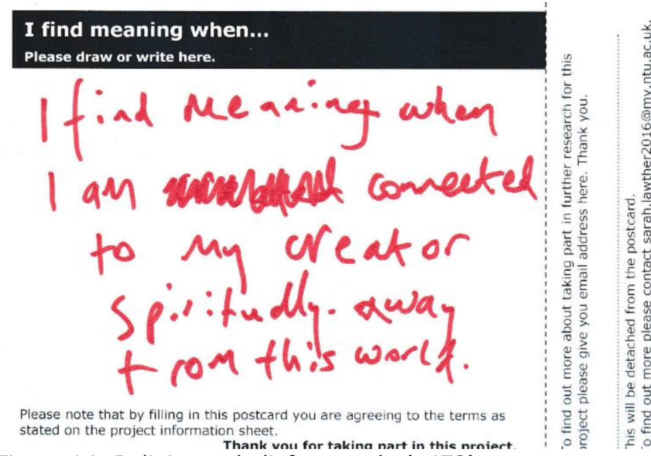


Figure 14: Religion or belief text only (p473)

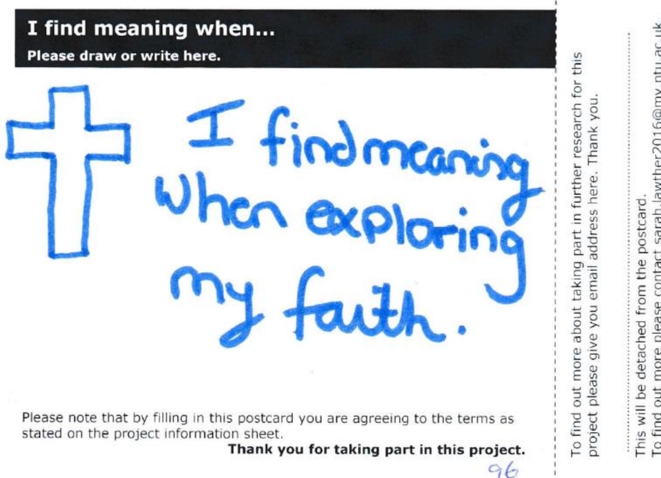


Figure 15: Religion or belief text only (p96)

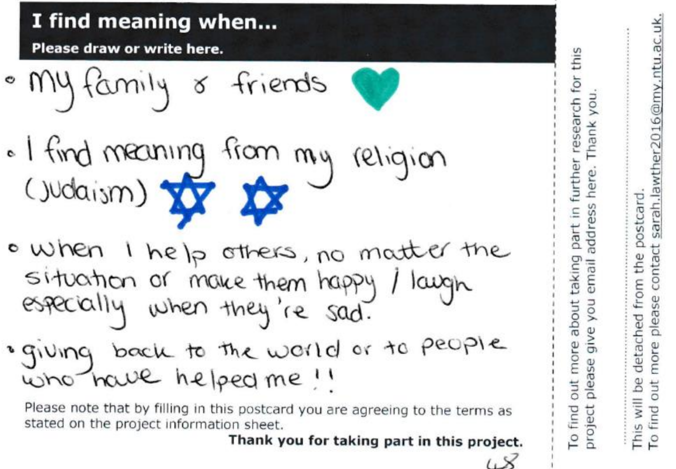


Figure 16: Religion or belief text as well as non-religious text (p48)

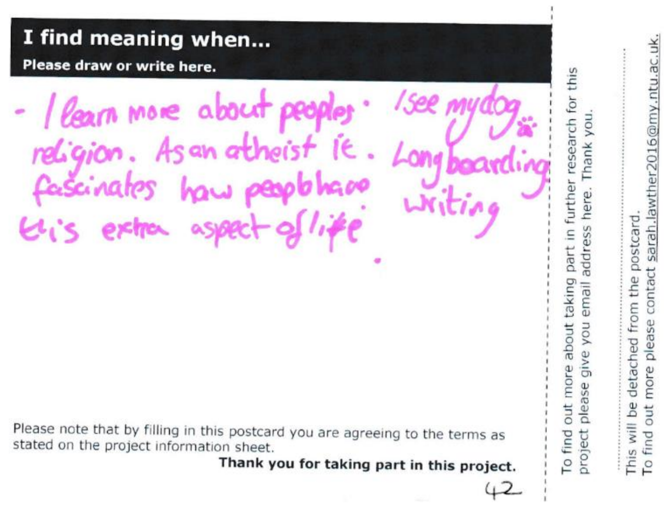


Figure 17: Religion or belief text as well as non-religious text (p42)

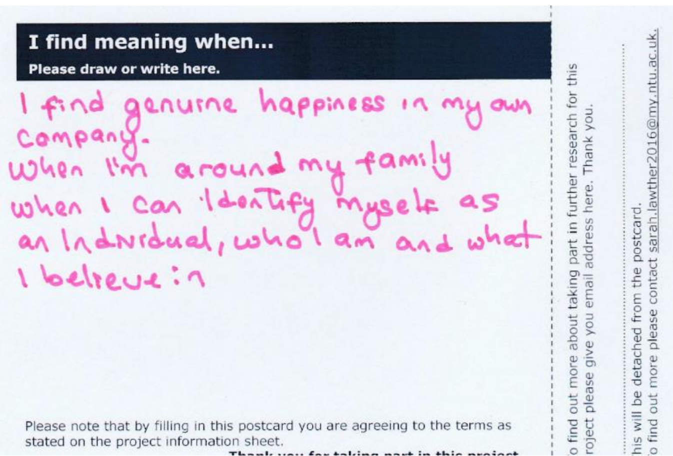


Figure 18: 'What I believe in' (p426)

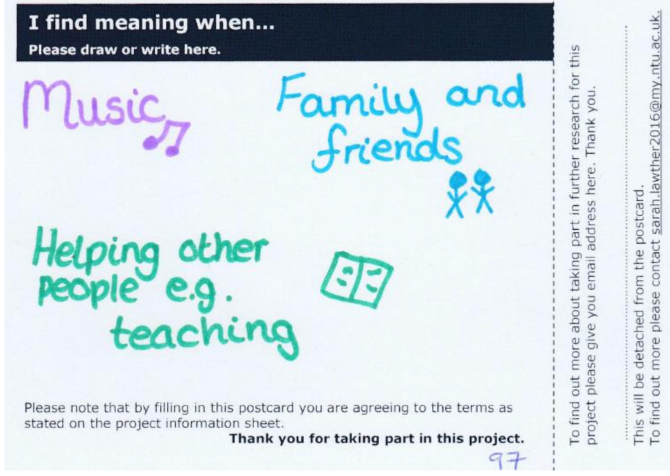


Figure 19: Non-religious text only (p97)

Figure 20: Non-religious text only (p416)

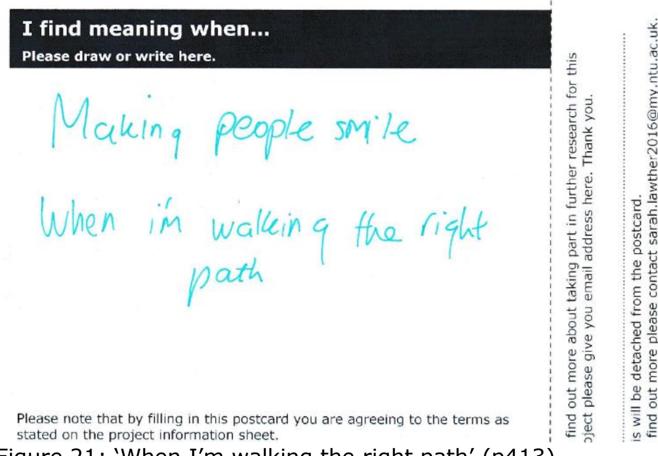


Figure 21: 'When I'm walking the right path' (p413)

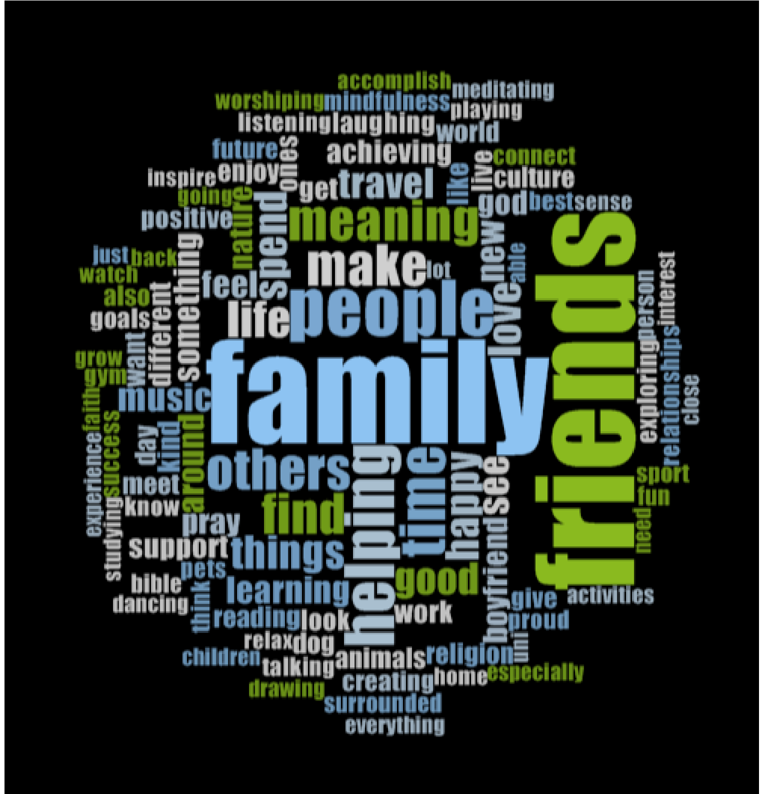


Figure 22: Word cloud

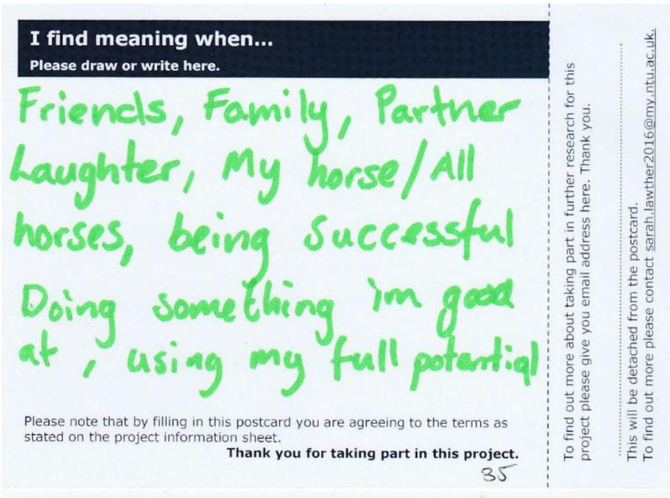


Figure 23: Developing self (p35)

Figure 24: Alarm clock - Paris

Figure 25: Crafting – Penny

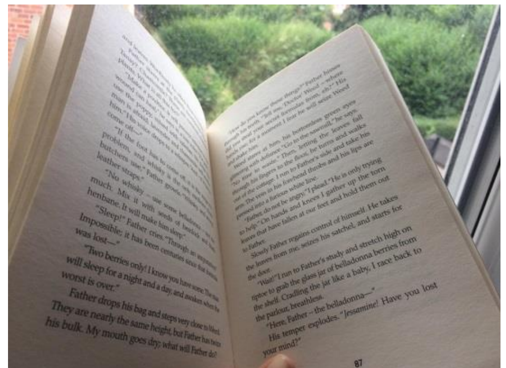


Figure 26: Book - Ana

Figure 27: Food – Imogen

Figure 28: Music - Penny

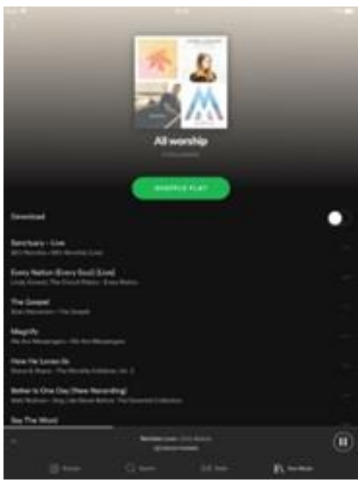
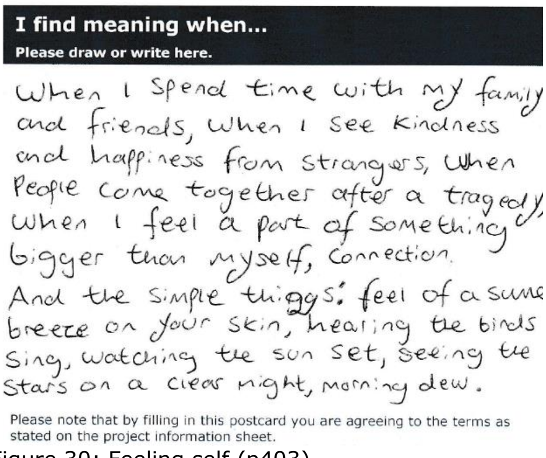


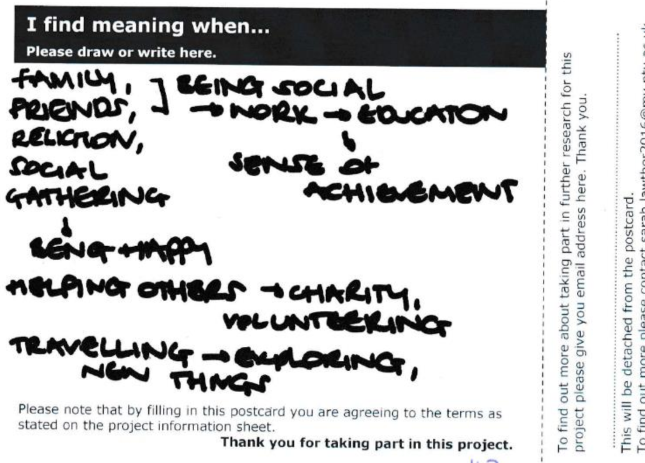
Figure 29: Worship playlist - Courtney


I find meaning when...
Please draw or write here.

When I spend time with my family and friends, when I see kindness and happiness from strangers, when people come together after a tragedy, when I feel a part of something bigger than myself, connection.
And the simple things: feel of a sume breeze on your skin, hearing the birds sing, watching the sun set, seeing the stars on a clear night, morning dew.

Please note that by filling in this postcard you are agreeing to the terms as stated on the project information sheet.

Figure 30: Feeling self (p403)


I find meaning when...
Please draw or write here.

FAMILY, FRIENDS,] BEING SOCIAL → WORK → EDUCATION → SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT
RELIGION,
SOCIAL GATHERING → BEING HAPPY
HELPING OTHERS → CHARITY, VOLUNTEERING
TRAVELLING → EXPLORING, NEW THINGS

Please note that by filling in this postcard you are agreeing to the terms as stated on the project information sheet.
Thank you for taking part in this project.

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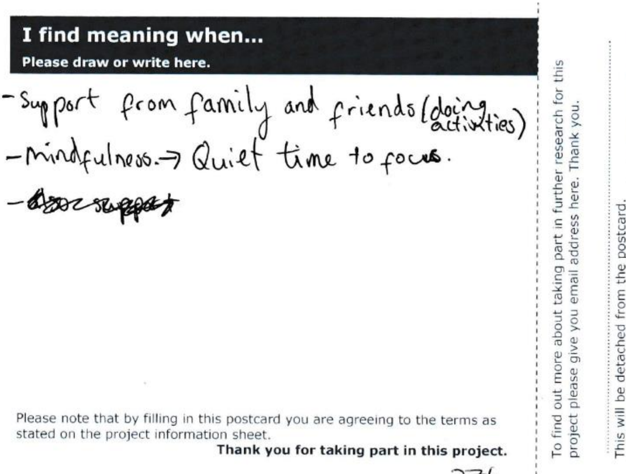
Figure 31: Feeling self (p112)



I find meaning when...

Please draw or write here.

- Support from family and friends (doing activities)
- Mindfulness → Quiet time to focus.
- ~~[illegible]~~

Please note that by filling in this postcard you are agreeing to the terms as stated on the project information sheet.

Thank you for taking part in this project.

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Figure 32: Self – quiet time (p376)

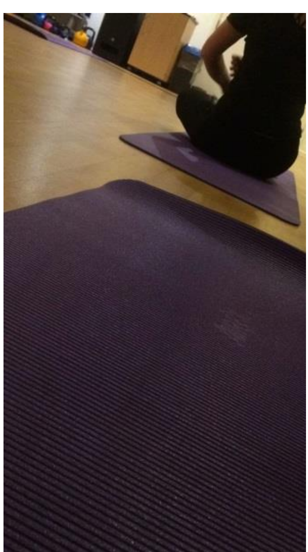


Figure 33: Yoga - Ana

Figure 34: Quiet room - Oliver

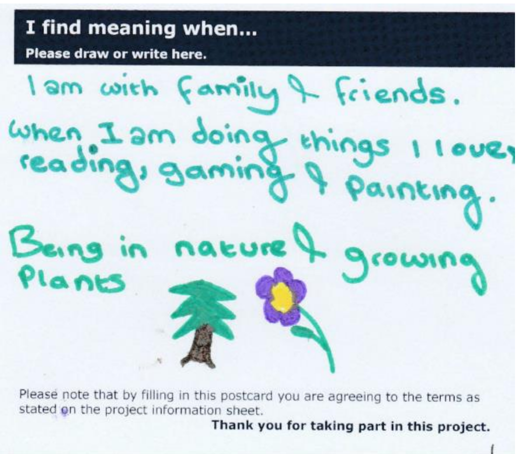


Figure 35: Connections – family, partner, relationships, and friends (p1)

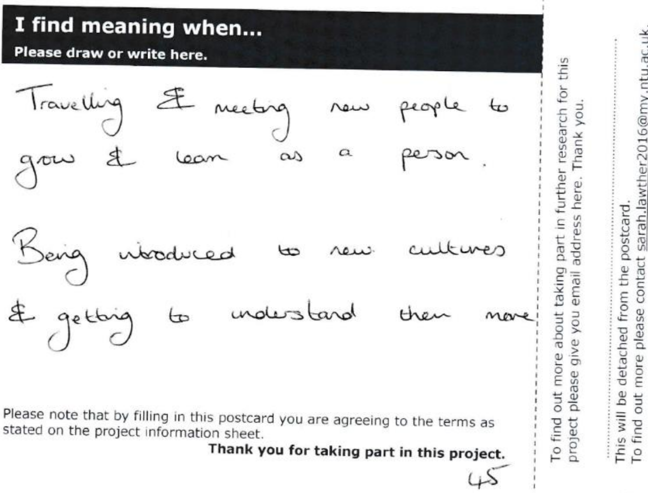


Figure 36: Connections – being with others (p45)

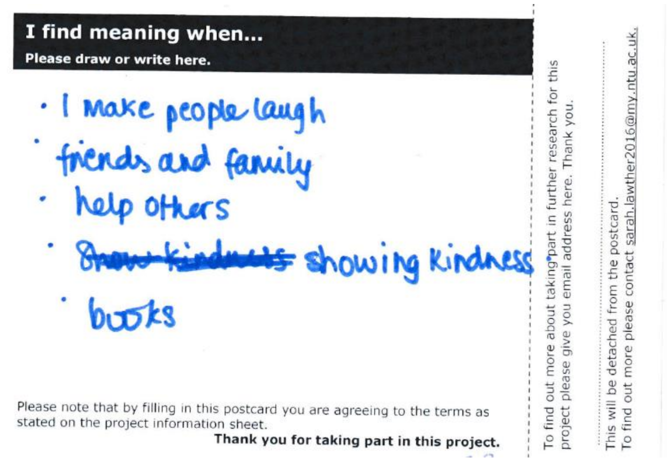


Figure 37: Connections – helping others (p89)

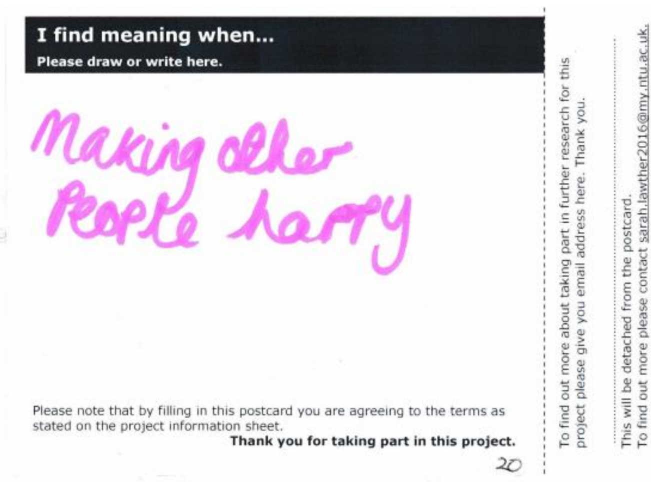


Figure 38: Connections – helping others (p20)

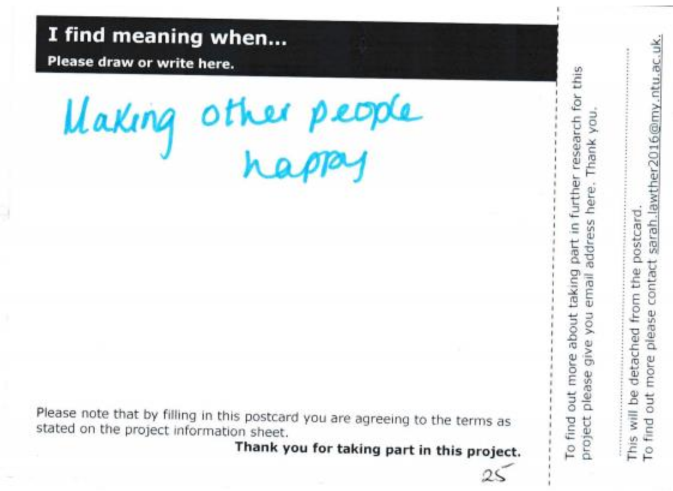


Figure 39: Connections – helping others (p25)

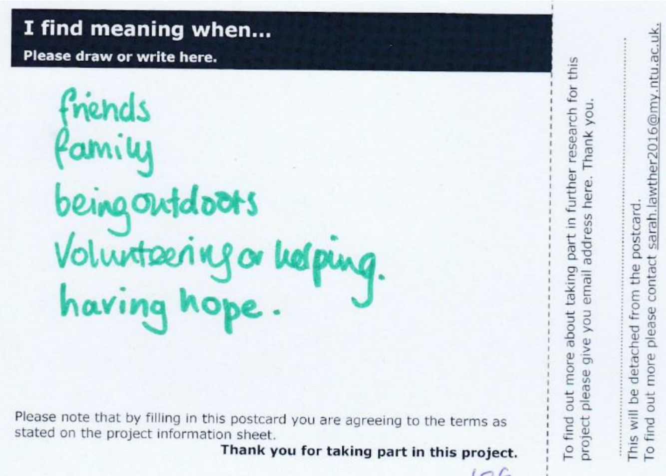


Figure 40: Connections – helping others (p106)

Figure 41: Church – Anthony

Figure 42: Sculpture - Oliver

Figure 43: Bible and journal - Courtney

Figure 44: Canal - Ana

Figure 45: Fountain - Oliver

Figure 46: Park - Gamila

Figure 47: Nature reserve - Paris

Figure 48: Countryside – Oliver

Figure 49: Nature - Anthony

Appendix 3: Chapter 5 Why do students do their 'thing'?

Figure 50: Hearts with family/friends/loved ones

Figure 51: Hearts with family/friends and other text

Figure 52: Heart with 'I' (first five postcards) and heart next to other text (remaining three postcards)

Figure 53: Pictures that are different to the text that were not hearts

Figure 54: Picture only postcards

Figure 55: Self – develop self (p184)

Figure 56: Basil - Ana

Figure 57: Chaplaincy path - Oliver

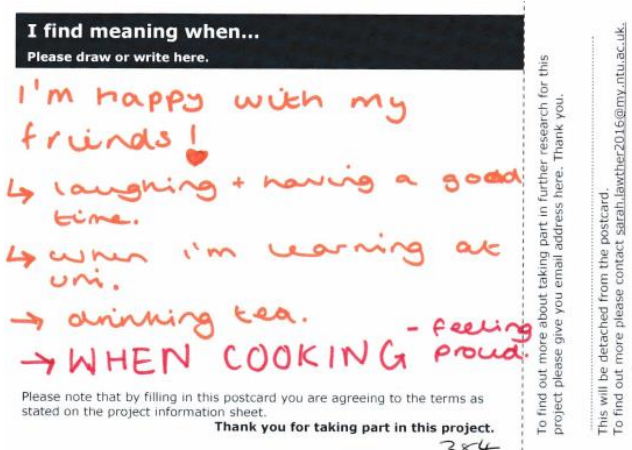


Figure 58: Self – I feel (p384)

I find meaning when...

Please draw or write here.

I find meaning in church through our ministries like music, dancing. The Bible is my inspiration for life/living.

Please note that by filling in this postcard you are agreeing to the terms as stated on the project information sheet.

Thank you for taking part in this project

o find out more about taking part in further research for this roject please give you email address here. Thank you.

his will be detached from the postcard.
o find out more please contact sarah.lawther2016@my.ntu.ac.uk.

Figure 59: Self – I feel (p224)

Figure 60: Tulips - Oliver

Figure 61: Globe sculpture - Oliver

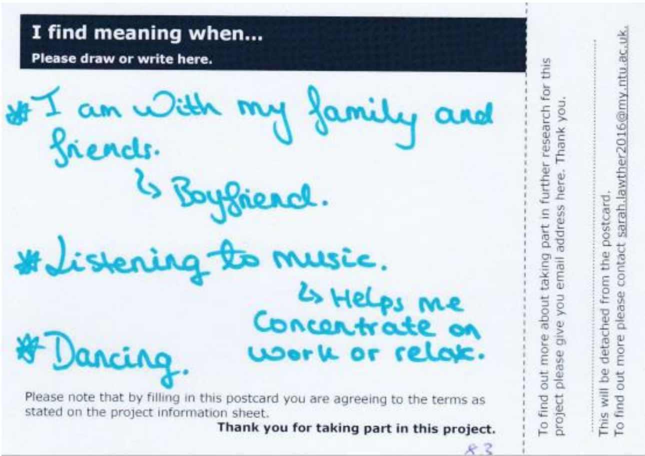


Figure 62: Self – supporting wellbeing (p83)

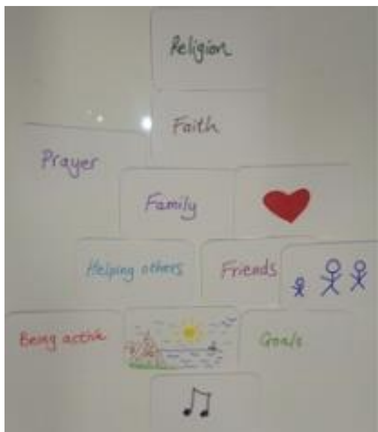


Figure 63: Amjad's card sort

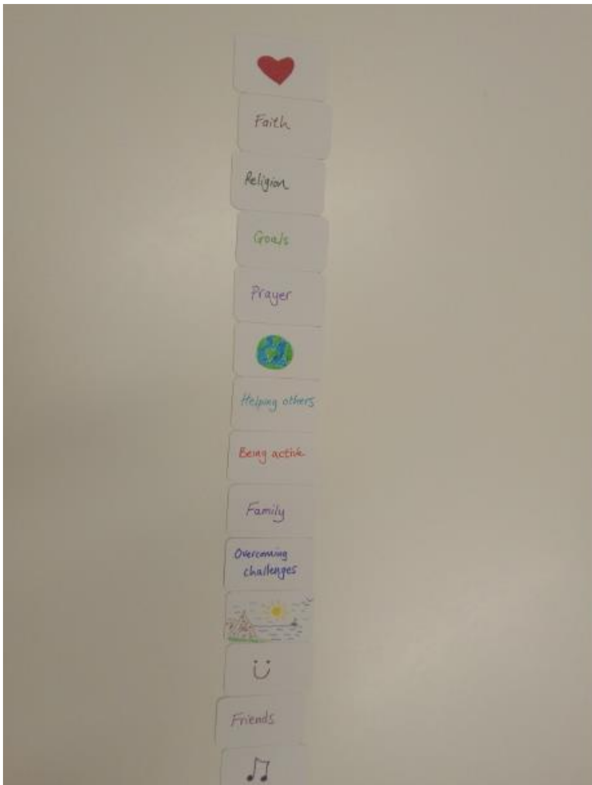


Figure 64: Gamila's card sort

I find meaning when...
Please draw or write here.

I pray. When I feel like I understand things that happen in my life & why, pray helps me make sense of my life & gives my life meaning. Having a relationship with God.

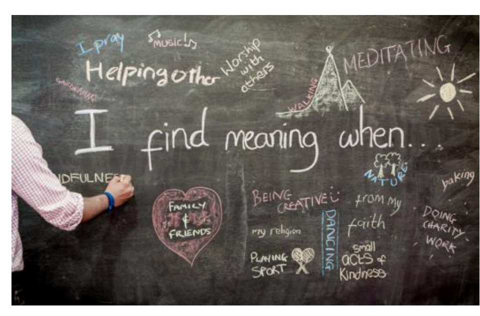
Please note that by filling in this postcard you are agreeing to the terms as stated on the project information sheet.
Thank you for taking part in this project.
211

Figure 65: Bigger than me – Guide to life (p211)

Figure 66: Essay ritual - Brooke

Appendix 4: Research Documentation

4.1 Postcard Project: Information Sheet



About the project
This project aims to explore what gives students' meaning in their lives, and in particular their everyday practices. This could be, for example, meeting with friends and family, worship with others, being in nature, prayer, sports, religion, doing charity work, and mindfulness. It aims to explore the student view in particular, in order to better understand how universities can support students.

What are we asking you to do?
Please complete the postcard in any way you like (such as using images or words).

About the postcards
The postcards have been created as a way of capturing students' everyday beliefs and practices and sources of meaning.

- Participation is voluntary
- You can complete them in any way you like (such as using images or words)
- You can complete more than one
- To keep the postcards anonymous please don't write your name on the postcards (other than the tear off strip if you choose to complete this) or include any identifying features of yourself or other people
- Please place completed postcards in the box provided.
- If you prefer, you can take a photo of the postcard and email it to [email address]

Post-graduate students - Please note that this research is looking primarily at the experience of undergraduate students. If you are a postgraduate student you are very welcome to take part, but please can you write 'postgraduate' on your postcard - thank you.

How will the postcards be used?
The postcards will help to provide a snapshot of students' views, that will be analysed and the findings used to inform further research. The postcards may be used in the following ways:

- to raise awareness of the project such as on the project Facebook page and displayed at awareness raising events;
- written up as part of a PhD thesis and in academic papers and presentations; and
- shared with staff members within the university to help identify ways that the student experience can be improved.

The postcards will be used and stored anonymously, and may be stored digitally. By completing the postcard, you are agreeing that the postcard can be used in this way.

Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw without giving a reason at this stage or later - up until 31 July 2018. If you would like to do so, please contact me at [email address] with the postcard number (at the bottom right of the postcard) so that your postcard can be traced.

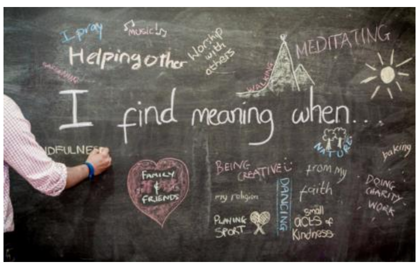
Would you like to take part in further research?
The postcards will help with the next stage of the research in which students' views and experiences will be explored in more depth. If you would like to take part in this research please complete the tear off slip on the postcard (this will be detached from the postcard).

If you would like to know more about the project, please do contact me at [email address]. I would be very happy to hear your comments and thoughts about the project!

Thank you very much for taking part in this project.

4.2 Feedforward Interviews: Information Sheet

About the project



The purpose of this interview is to gain your feedback on the methodology to be used for a PhD project, 'Exploring Lived Religion in Higher Education'.

The project aims to find out more about the beliefs of students (both religious and non-religious beliefs) in order to better understand how universities can support students.

I have chosen to use two different methods in this project:

- Using postcards to collect student views
- Photo-elicitation interviews (students take photographs which are then discussed at an interview)

It would be really helpful to gain your views on the project, and the methodology (such as the language used to describe religion and belief, and the design of the postcard), so that the research is designed with students in mind. Your feedback will be used to inform the research.

About the interview

The interview is likely to last up to an hour and will be recorded so that I can more accurately record your views. Due to the nature of the research, extracts from the interview may be used in the final thesis and /or publications. However, data will only be provided in a form that does not identify you as when transcribed into text form, all identifying features will be removed (such as your names).

Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw without giving a reason at this stage or later - up until 8 January 2018. If you choose to withdraw from the study before this date, none of the information you have provided will be used in the study or in publications emerging from the study. If you would like to withdraw from the research, please contact [email address].

Your thoughts and views on the project will be much appreciated.

If you have any questions at all, or if you would like to know more about the project, please contact me at [email address]

Sarah Lawther
Post-graduate Researcher
Doctoral School
[Name of University and contact details]

Supervisor: [Name of supervisor and contact details]

4.3 Feedforward Interview Consent Form

Researcher: Sarah Lawther

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview.

The purpose of this interview is to gain feedback on the methodology to be used for a PhD project, 'Exploring Lived Religion in Higher Education'. This project aims to find out more about the beliefs of students in order to better understand how universities can support students. Your thoughts and views on the project are much appreciated.

The interview is likely to last up to an hour and will be recorded so that I can more accurately record your views. When transcribed into text form all identifying features will be removed (such as your names). Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw without giving a reason at this stage or later - up until 8 January 2018. If you choose to withdraw from the study before this date, none of the information you have provided will be used in the study or in publications emerging from the study.

Please sign the form if you agree with the following:

- I am over 18 and I voluntarily agree to take part in the interview.
- I understand the interview will be audio-recorded.
- I give the investigators permission to use the results of my participation in the study, and its dissemination once recognisable data has been removed or changed.
- I understand that information about me recorded during the study will be kept on password secured devices.
- I understand that I can ask for further instructions or explanations at any time by contacting the researcher.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time-before, during, or after the data collection process (until 8 January 2018), without having to give a reason for withdrawing.
- I understand that during the course of the interview that I am not required to answer every question.

Print name ________________________________

Signed ___________________________________ Date _____________________

If you have any questions, or if you would like to withdraw from the research, please contact:

Sarah Lawther,
Post-graduate Researcher
Doctoral School
[Name of University and contact details]

Supervisor: [Name of supervisor and contact details]
.

4.4 Demographic Questions

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research.

This project would like, if possible, to include views from a range of different students so it would really help if you could fill in the questionnaire below. This information will then be used to ensure that a range of students are included in the research.

Please note that this is voluntary - so you do not have to complete this if you do not wish to.

Thank you.

1 What part of the world are you from?
UK
European Union (EU)
Outside European Union
Prefer not to say

2 Are you…?
Male
Female
Other
Prefer not to say

3 Please tick the category below that you feel is the most appropriate classification of yourself.
Arab
Asian/Asian British - Bangladeshi
Asian/Asian British - Indian
Asian/Asian British - Pakistan
Black/Black British - African
Black/Black British - Caribbean
Chinese/Other Ethnic - Chinese
Mixed - White & Asian
Mixed - White & Black African
Mixed - White & Black Caribbean
Other Asian background
Other Black background
Other Ethnic background
Other Mixed background
White
Prefer not to say

4 Do you have a religion or belief?
Yes
No
Prefer not to say

5 How would you describe your religious identity?

Thank you very much for taking part in this project.

4.5 Photo-elicitation Interview Information Sheet
Photo research information

About the project
This research began by exploring what gives students' meaning in their lives using postcards.

This stage of the research would like to explore in more depth your everyday beliefs and practices, and how this relates to university life in order to better understand how universities can support students.

What do we mean by everyday beliefs and practices?
The words 'religious', 'belief', 'meaning,' aren't always sufficient to describe the range of beliefs and practices that people have - they may, for example, be religious or non-religious beliefs (or both), and may be individual to each person. Your everyday beliefs and practices may be what is most important to you in your life, or what gives you meaning in your life, or you may wish to use your own understanding of everyday beliefs and practices.

Why is the research using photographs in the interviews?
Photo-elicitation interviews have been chosen as the method for this research, because it offers the opportunity to describe and explain ideas and thoughts that may not be easy to put into words. This is where participants take photographs before the interview, which are then discussed in the interview in the participant's order of preference. Previous research has also found that it is a method that participants find enjoyable to take part in.

What do you need to do?
1 Take between 5 and 12 photographs following the instructions in the 'What do you need to do' document.
2 Send these to me by email to [email address]. You can also send the signed (or signed and scanned) consent form - although I will bring copies of this to the interview so you can sign it at the interview if you prefer.
3 Come to an interview to talk about the photographs.
Please see the **'What do you need to do' document** for further details.

About the interview
I will book a room at your preferred campus for the interview, where we will talk about your photographs in order of preference, and any photographs that you would have like to have taken but didn't. I will also share with you (briefly using cards) the themes found in the postcard research, and ask for your views on these.

The interview will be audio recorded and is likely to take between 60 and 90 minutes (so we may not have time to look at all of the photographs). You can stop the interview at any time and do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Protecting your privacy
In the consent form you will be given a choice about whether you would like the photographs taken to be used in presentations and publications, or for the photographs to be described in written form and verbally (such as in a presentation) instead. If you agree to your photographs being used, we will make every effort to remove identifiable data from them.

Due to the nature of the research, extracts from the interview may be used in the final PhD thesis and /or publications. However, data will only be provided in a form that does not identify you. When your interview is transcribed into text form, all identifying features will be removed and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. Electronic data will be held on password protected devices.

How will your data be used?
The data and findings of the project will help to provide an understanding of students' everyday experiences and may be used in the following ways:

- written up as part of a PhD thesis and in academic papers, and presentations; and
- shared with staff members within the university to help identify ways that the student experience can be improved.

Additional options for involvement
This project aims to involve students as much as possible, and so the methodology has been designed to achieve this, such as the option to include selfies in the photos you take, and the choice for your voice to be used when sharing research with others (such as at conferences).

What if you decide to withdraw from the research?
Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw without giving a reason at this stage or later - up until 31 July 2018. Your acceptance of the thank you voucher for taking part in this research does not affect your right to withdraw - you are still free to do so. If you would like to withdraw, please contact me at [email address].

Who do I contact with questions?
If you have any questions at all about the project, or what you have to do, please do contact me at [email address] - I would be very happy to hear from you.

Thank you very much for taking part in this project.

Researcher: Sarah Lawther, [Name of University and contact details]

Supervisor: [Name of supervisor and contact details]

4.6 Photo-elicitation Interview Photo Guidelines
What do you need to do?

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the photo interviews for this project that aims to explore students' everyday beliefs and practices, including both religious and non religious beliefs and practices.

There are three things we would like you to do:

1 Take between 5 and 12 photographs following the instructions in the box below.

2 Send the following to me by email at (email address):

- Photographs that you have taken
- An electronically signed (or signed and scanned) consent form (or if you prefer youcan sign a copy at the interview - I will bring a copy with me).
- Let me know which 5 photographs that you would like me to print to bring to the interview to talk about first (and the rest we can look at on a screen in your order of your preference)
- Your preferred campus for the interview

3 Come to an interview to talk about the photographs.
I will then arrange to meet with you (I will book a room at your preferred campus) to talk about your photographs in order of preference, and to describe any photographs that you would have like to have taken but didn't. I will also share with you (briefly) the themes found in the postcard research, and ask for your views on these.

Photograph instructions
Please take photographs that:

<u>1 Capture your everyday beliefs and practices</u>. This may be, for example, what is most important to you in your life, it may be what gives you meaning in your life, or your own understanding of everyday beliefs and practices.

These can be photographs, for example, of places, objects, symbols, and can include photographs of yourself.

You can manipulate the photograph if you like (such as changing the s or using filters and effects) - you do not have to take photos that are interesting for others to look at.

<u>2 Capture how your everyday beliefs and practices relate to your student life, including, what if anything, this brings to your student experience.</u>

If you would like to, you can also include photographs that capture any opportunities or challenges whilst you are at university to connect with your everyday beliefs and practices.

We suggest taking between 5 and 12 photographs over a fortnight, but you may take more than this if you would like to.

When taking the photographs please…

- Do only take photographs that you are comfortable having on your phone.
- Do not photograph other people as the focus of your pictures.
- Do feel free to include photographs of yourself (and we will anonymise these if you give us permission to use them, or we will just describe them if you prefer).

If you have any questions at all, or if there is anything that you are not sure about, please do contact me at [email address].

Thank you very much for taking part in this project.
Researcher: Sarah Lawther, Doctoral School, [email address].

Supervisor: [name and contacts]

4.7 Photo-elicitation Interview Consent Form

Interview consent form

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this project.

In this interview today we will be talking about the photos that you have taken, in your order of preference. The interview is likely to last between 60 and 90 minutes. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to, and you are free to stop the interview at any time without explanation.

Please sign this consent form if you agree with the following statements:

- I have read and understood the information sheet and I voluntarily agree to take part in this research.
- I give permission for the researcher to record the interview.
- I understand that information about me recorded during the study will be kept on password secured devices.
- I understand that I can ask for further instructions or explanations at any time by contacting the researcher.
- I understand that I am not required to answer every question in the interview.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time-before, during, or after the data collection process (until the 31 July 2018), without giving a reason, and that my acceptance of the thank you voucher does not affect this.
- I give the investigators permission to use the results of my participation in the study, and its dissemination once recognisable data has been removed or changed.

Please also choose from one of the two options below:

1. I give consent for **the images and written and verbal descriptions of the photos** taken to be used in the dissemination of the research findings (dissemination means how the findings will be shared with others, such as in presentations, and publications). ☐

OR

2. I give consent for **written and verbal descriptions** of the photos taken to be used in the dissemination of the research findings. ☐

This project aims to involve students as much as possible, and where possible to give students an opportunity to participate in the dissemination of findings.

- If you would like audio-clips of your interview to be used when disseminating the research (such as at conferences) please tick here. If audio clips are used they will not be linked to your name or any identifying features. ☐
- Please tick here if you would be happy for me to contact you again for any other research purposes. ☐

____________________________ ____________________________ ____________

Participant Name Signature Date

Thank you very much for taking part in this project.

Researcher: [Name of University and contact details]

Supervisor: [Name of supervisor and contact details]

4.8 Photo-elicitation Interview Guiding Questions

The interview was based around discussion of the photographs in the student's order of preference, and therefore the themes discussed were guided by each participant.

The following guiding questions and prompts (below) were referred to during the interview. Please note that not all prompts were used, the interview was very much guided by the participant and prompts/themes were explored where it was felt appropriate. Where the questions/prompts have been drawn from previous research this is shown in italics with the author following in brackets.

Introduction

Before we start

- Thank you for coming
- Sign consent form
- Reminder all anonymised
- Will be informal -
- Is it ok to record? Will takes notes too (for my write up)
- Is there anything you would like know/have any questions before start?
- Reminder - you don't have to answer any questions that you don't feel comfortable with answering.

Introduction to research

As you know my PhD aims to find out more about students beliefs and practices in order to learn more about how to support students whilst they are at university.

Because I am hoping to also include non-religious as well as religious beliefs I have been experimenting with using non-religious language to ask about religion and belief such as the postcards which asked about meaning, and guidance for the photographs for this interview I said that your everyday beliefs and practices may be:
what is most important to you in your life, what gives you meaning in your life, or you may wish to use your own understanding of everyday beliefs and practices.

I am very aware I am being slightly vague because I am trying to be open, so:

Please do use these terms (religion/belief/meaning) in your own way (Ammerman, 2014, p18)

And *please do feel free to challenge me when I use these terms* (Day, 2013, p36)

And please do let me know if anything isn't clear or doesn't make sense - it will be very helpful for me to know.

My aim is to try and find the right language to talk about religion and belief with students - in a way that makes sense to students (and that includes non-religious belief) so I would be very happy to hear any comments or advice you may have for me on the language I am using.

How the interview will work

We will start by looking at photographs if that is okay, *in the order that you would like us to look at them* (Ammerman, 2014, p16).

I have some questions/prompts to ask you, but it is *fine if we don't stick to these and move on to related topics,* and things that you feel are important to talk about in this area (Day, 2013, p36).

Prompts for photographs

Theme	Prompts
Photographs	Can you tell me about this photo? Can you describe what is happening in this picture? Why is this important to you?
Senses	Can you tell me more about the sounds and smells that would experience here? (Pink, 2011) Can you tell me a little about the clothing/dress here?
Everyday beliefs and practices	Can you tell me about your everyday beliefs and practices/what gives you meaning in life/what is important to you in your life/your own interpretation? (whatever terms they are using)? Can you tell me about what you do? Are there activities/objects/places that are important to you here? Can you tell me more? (why important?) Where possible *explore the specific rather than generalisations* (Ammerman, 2014, p16)
Sharing with friends/family/others	*Is this on your own? With others?* (Drescher, 2016, p264) Do you share your everyday beliefs practices/what is important to you/meaning - with others? Your family? friends? Friends at university? Others/part of group at university or outside university? (Can you tell me more?)

Photos that weren't taken
Are there any photos that you would have liked to have taken but didn't? (Ammerman, 2014, p319).
Can you tell me about these?

Additional prompts/themes

Beliefs and practices and student life	Can you tell me about how (and if) your faith/belief/what gives you meaning relates to your student life? Can you tell me about what (if anything) your beliefs/practices/meaning/importance etc. however you would describe it - brings to your experience of being at university/being a student? Can you tell me about this? How do you incorporate these beliefs in your experience of being a student?/your student life? Can you tell me about times of stress/deadlines? Times of celebration? Success? Does it add to your experience of being a student? Can you tell me in what way?
University provision	What is working well to support you in this? What can the university do to support you here?

Exploring language
In my instructions I asked you to take pictures that capture your everyday beliefs and practices. And gave the examples that this may be:

- what is most important to you in your life,
- it may be what gives you meaning in your life,

- or your own understanding of everyday beliefs and practices.

What made most sense to you from my instructions (if any!)?

Have you any advice for me about how to talk about religion and belief with students in a way that would include all kinds of beliefs?

Card sort exercise
As you know, I asked students to draw or write on the back of this postcard [show postcard] and so far about 200 students have completed postcards. However I haven't got an understanding of why people find meaning from these things - or which are more important than others so I wondered if you could help me.

I have made these cards [show flash cards] that have on them some of the things that students drew or wrote - these are only some of the themes that students wrote - and I wondered what your thoughts are about the themes?

Would you mind having a look through and seeing if there's any that are important to you - and if you would put them in an order that would make sense to you here in terms of what's most important and least.

If there are any that aren't on there because there were many more things than that just add a couple of your own and feel free to disregard some if they are not important to you [prompts during layout of cards: can you tell me more about these? /why you chose this one?/ about the order you have made here?]

Final interview questions
Thank you!
Is there anything else that you would like to say or discuss that we haven't already?
Is there anything else that you would like to ask about my project?
Or any advice/feedback you would like to give me on it?

End of interview
Give debrief sheet and voucher

References

Ammerman, N., 2014. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding religion in everyday life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Day, A., 2013. *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (paperback version)

Drescher, Elizabeth, 2016. *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pink, S., 2011. Multimodality, multisensoriality and ethnographic knowing: social semiotics and the phenomenology of perception. *Qualitative Research* 11(3), 261–276.

4.9 Photo-elicitation Interview Debrief Sheet

Photo research debrief sheet

Thank you very much for taking part in this project.

We hope that the findings will help to better understand the student experience, and how universities can support students.

This document is a reminder that if you change your mind about taking part and wish to withdraw from the study you are free to do so (up until 31 July 2018). Your acceptance of the thank you voucher does not affect this - you are still free to withdraw. If you would like to do so, please contact me at [email address]

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised by taking part in this research and would like any further information or would like to discuss this with anyone, you may wish to visit the Student Services webpages for further information and/or explore the spirituality and faith opportunities available at [the University name].

- Student Services [web page]
- Spirituality and Faith Support [web page]

Thank you again for taking part, and please do contact me at [email address] if you have any further questions, comments or thoughts about the project.

Researcher: [Name of University and contact details]

Supervisor: [Name of supervisor and contact details]