THE YOUTHSCAPE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH

NO QUESTIONS ASKED

THE FINDINGS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF 16-19 YEAR-OLDS IN LUTON

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

I was sat with a teenage girl recently in a youth drop-in centre. We were passing the time of day, talking about the jobs that she was applying for. After a short while we got onto the topic of God, and I asked her if she had any questions about God, faith or religion. She said, 'No not really. I don't have any questions about that'.

The astute among you will have guessed the direction of this report, given its title. What we have identified, through our qualitative study of 16-19 year-olds in Luton schools, resonates with the conversation I had with the teenage girl above; we discovered a profound lack of questioning around God, faith and religion among the young people we spoke to. This poses new questions for those of us seeking to engage young people in conversations around these important topics, and a potential shift in perspective when it comes to the starting points and in-roads to open up discussions around faith. In this report we outline five different reasons, highlighted from the interview data, as to why these young people may not be questioning God, faith or religion (p.18), and four practical ways we can respond to the findings (p.27).

Despite the lack of live questioning, the young people we spoke to all believed in some sort of higher power, and many had prayed at some point in their lives. They were passionately committed to the fair and equal treatment of all people, regardless of belief or religion, and demonstrated a sensitive and nuanced understanding of religion as a positive force which can be misrepresented by individuals. When given the space to talk about these topics, in the context of the interview, many of the young people commented on how positive an experience it had been, and asked if we would be back again. For some of them, it was the first time they had ever really thought about what they believed, and had been given the opportunity to discuss their beliefs openly without judgement.

There is much for us to learn from these findings about young people's engagement with God, faith and religion. We are only just beginning to unpack the implications of what we have found, and we invite you to join us on the journey of discovering what they might mean for our youth work.

Phoebe Hill
Head of research, Youthscape

LITERATURE REVIEW

WHAT WE KNOW

- There has been very little research carried out in the area of 'apologetic' style questions and young people.

- Looking more broadly to the religious landscape of young people and the nature of their engagement with faith and religion, according to the *British Social Attitude Survey*, 62% of 18-24 year-olds identify as having no religion [1]. There is a growing body of research around the 'no religion' category (or 'nones'), and the characteristics of the non-religion of this grouping.

- Although surveys of church attendance reveal low numbers of young people [2], Francis's *Teenage Religion and Values Survey* revealed that 41% of young people agreed with the statement 'I believe in God' while only 30% agreed with the more specific doctrine 'I believe that Jesus really rose from the dead' [3]. Francis concludes that beliefs are not disappearing but changing, and becoming more general.

- Davie's 'believing without belonging' thesis argued that belief persists in society, even if it is not associated with institutional religion [4].

- According to Smith and Denton's wide-scale study of teenagers in America [5], 'For most teens, religion is taken as part of the furniture of their lives, not a big deal, just taken for granted as fine the way it is' (122). Very few of the young people they interviewed talked to their friends or family about religion or experienced any conflict around it, and were benignly positive about it (i.e. it's generally a good thing and helps people to be moral). They found very few spiritual seekers, and many did not know what 'spiritual' meant, and hadn't heard of the 'spiritual but not religious' mantra. Although the teens said that religion was important to them, their responses were tepid, not animated. It seemed that for many of the young people, it was the first time that an adult had ever asked them what they believed. Most teens seemed 'content to live with a low visibility religion that operates somewhere in the mental background of their lives' (137). The young people were reluctant to appear 'too religious', and generally viewed themselves as the arbitrators of truth, with no one able to judge anyone else for their beliefs. Although reassured by the interviewers that they could be honest and open, many of the teens interviewed seemed to take great care not to offend them, and to try at all points to be politically correct. Smith and Denton coined the phrase 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' to describe the faith that these young people displayed: one that enabled them to live a moral life, helped them to feel good, happy and secure and ultimately involving a God who is not really relevant or engaged in everyday life.

- Savage et.al, who carried out a study of young people and religion in the UK, believe the apparent 'fuzziness' young people display

about religion to be a consequence of not giving religion or belief much thought [6]. They, like Smith and Denton, acknowledge the lack of a 'God-shaped hole' in young people, but found instead a 'formative spirituality' which ran through young people's engagement with the world. Savage et. al coined the phrase 'happy midi-narrative' to describe the storyline of the young people's worldview; 'happy' refers to the fundamental disposition that life is generally ok, and the 'midi' stands in contrast to a grand meta-narrative which relates to things beyond me, and also in contrast to an individualistic way of looking at the world. Rather, the authors argue, the narrative of these young people is communal on a small scale, relating to me, my friends and my family. This is, however, not transformative for the young people's lives, as they need a meta-narrative which can only be found in 'a Christ like way of life, for in him alone is true happiness to be found' (170).

- Phil Rankin [7] disagrees with the notion that young people are not spiritual seekers, and argues instead that their spirituality is 'buried'.

- Abby Day [8] explains that the young people she interviewed did not articulate their faith in terms of creed or propositional statements, but used 'belief narratives'. She writes that, 'This may reflect a shift from a propositional form of belief to a form that expresses faith and trust' (268). This, for Day, highlights a shift to a 'practice-centred' view of belief.

- Vincett et. al [9] argue that the late-modern environment created by the social influences of secularisation, pluralisation and consumerism have promoted a religiosity that de-emphasises propositional belief systems in favour of what they call 'performance Christianity', characterised by religious action in the everyday, a discourse of authenticity and a pluralistic approach to institutions (275).

- This notion of 'performance' relates to Shepherd's analysis of Christian young people as 'trying' to have faith [10]. There is also a close correlation here between Vincett et. al's finding that faith must demonstrate itself to be useful in everyday life, and Shepherd's emphasis on utility as a key factor in 'faith generation'.

- There are three other themes raised in the literature around youth, belief and religion which will prove significant for our study: family, prayer and death. The role and importance of the family in faith formation and religious identity is widely acknowledged (see the *Passing on Faith* [11] report for a helpful summary of the literature). Equally, the prevalence of prayer among young people regardless of religious affiliation is documented, as is the prominence of the theme of death (see Day [8], 274; Smith and Denton [5]).

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METHODOLOGY

The study consisted of hour-long interviews with 16 young people between the ages of 16 and 19 in Luton schools, carried out between May and December 2016. The first 8 young people were students from a tutor group at a Catholic secondary school, many of whom were studying RE A level. The researchers were introduced in their class, carried out a small sorting exercise to give them a taster of the project (which was also part of the interview) and then invited them to take part in an interview at a later stage. The second 8 young people attended an FE college, and were largely taking vocational courses. Approached via the student engagement team, they were briefed about the project and invited to take part.

We toyed with the idea of providing a list of questions to a broad range of young people, and asking them to select which questions they felt were most important to them. However, as there were many questions behind our research question, and because we wanted to understand how these questions interacted with the rest of young people's lives and also the specific language they used to express them, we decided to carry out a qualitative interview project.

Below are tables of the participants from the sixth form college and FE college:

TABLE 1: *The research participants, gender and religion*

SIXTH FORM			FE COLLEGE		
Participant 1	Male	Muslim	Participant 1	Female	Non-religious
Participant 2	Female	Non-religious	Participant 2	Male	Muslim
Participant 3	Female	Christian	Participant 3	Male	Muslim
Participant 4	Female	Christian	Participant 4	Male	Non-religious
Participant 5	Male	Christian	Participant 5	Female	Christian
Participant 6	Female	Non-religious	Participant 6	Female	Non-religious
Participant 7	Female	Christian	Participant 7	Male	Non-religious
Participant8	Male	Christian	Participant 8	Female	Non-religious

The ethnicities of the participants are diverse, broadly reflecting the diverse population of Luton. The sample included four Black British participants, six White British participants, two White Non-British participants (Eastern European origin), and four Asian British participants. We sought to reflect, as closely as possible, the ethnic make-up of Luton. Black British participants were over-represented in our sample, while Asian British participants were slightly under-represented and Mixed / other ethnic groups were not represented. White participants were also marginally under-represented.

TABLE 2: *Ethnicity of research participants compared to Luton and England and Wales*

SIXTH FORM	LUTON BOROUGH (ONS 2011 CENSUS)	ENGLAND AND WALES (ONS 2011 CENSUS)	RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
White	54.7%	85.9%	50%
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups	4.2%	2.2%	0%
Asian/Asian British	29.9%	7.5%	25%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	9.8%	3.4%	25%
Other ethnic group	1.5%	1%	0%

TABLE 3: *Religion of research participants compared to Luton and England and Wales*

SIXTH FORM	LUTON BOROUGH (ONS 2011 CENSUS)	ENGLAND AND WALES (ONS 2011 CENSUS)	RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
Christian	47.4%	59%	37.5%
Muslim	24.6%	5%	18.8%
No religion / religion not stated	22.6%	32%	43.8%
Other	5.4%	4%	0%

By religious grouping, Christians and Muslims were slightly under-represented, and participants of no-religion were over-sampled. Smaller religious groups were not represented (Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, other, which together make up 5.4% of the Luton population).

The interviews were semi-structured, with three different sections. The first activity to open up conversations with the young people was a ranking exercise, asking them to put in order of importance the following: popularity, appearance, relationship, sports, success, money, intelligence, education, job, spirituality, faith, friends, health, happiness, family. Once they had finished and we had discussed what they had done, we presented them with four big questions on cards, which would make up the majority of the interview. These questions sought to open up the four big themes of God, religion, spirituality and hopes and dreams. Hopes and dreams may seem an odd topic to include in this list, but we were keen to explore what was really important to the young people and at the forefront of their minds. The questions were:

- What does the word 'religion' make you think of?
- Could you describe some of your hopes and dreams for the future?
- What do you think about the idea that God, or gods, exist?
- Have you ever had a moment in your life which you would describe as spiritual?

We asked the young people to pick where they would like to begin, and once they felt satisfied with the discussion around that question, would pick where they went to next. When all four questions had been discussed, the interviewer then asked the young person one final question which was: 'On a scale of 0-10, 0 being never and 10 being all the time, how often do you think about these topics and questions?' The young people then shared, for each of the four questions, how often they thought about them.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from cross-sections of the data, either by school or by gender, given how small a sample we are working with. However, there were notable differences between the sixth form RE students and the FE college students. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those studying for RE A level had more religious terminology at their disposal, and demonstrated an understanding of the key tenets of different religions, particularly Christianity. This is also likely to be connected to the higher number of religious young people in the sixth form group, compared to the FE college group (6 to 3).

The project underwent Youthscape's ethical review process, and was approved by Youthscape's Research Ethics Committee. All names have been changed in this report.

THE KEY **THEMES**

1. FAMILY

At the start of the interview we invited the participants to rank 15 cards in order of importance to them. Below are the results from the ordering exercise (those placed top were given 15, and bottom 1).

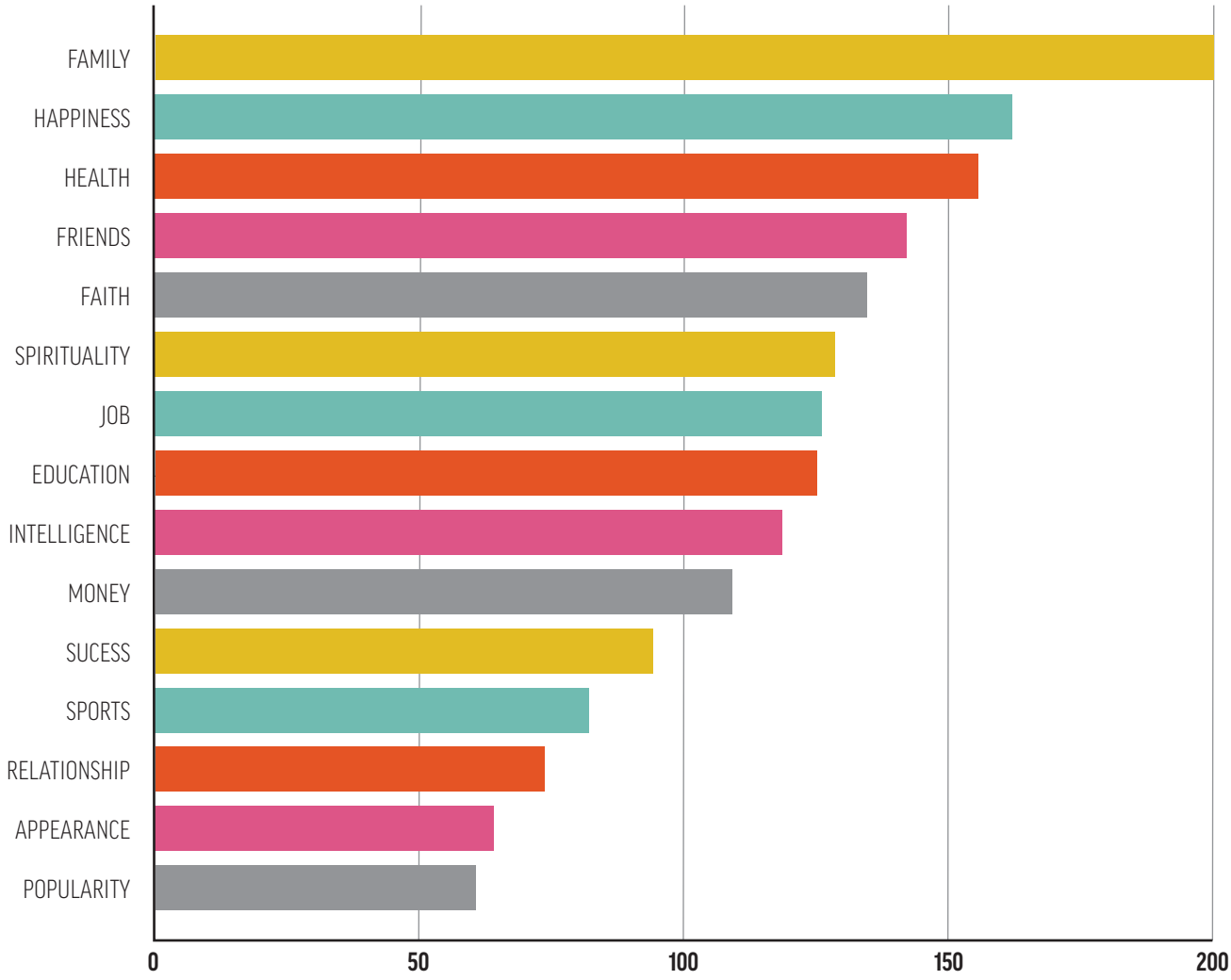


Figure 1. *Results from the initial ordering exercise*

It is evident from this exercise that family was most important to the young people we interviewed. When asked why they had placed family at the top, it seemed as though it was the 'obvious' choice, as family had always 'been there' for them:

Ammir: Well, the most important thing in my life is of course is my family.

Brook: Like my family is always there when I needed them. I think that's really important.

Rachel: Family is the most important because they're the ones that have supported me in my whole life.

Christina: Obviously, family is the most important for everyone because the person-- if you do have a family, it's the most important because like, even if I don't have a good relationship with my family, I'm still gonna love them and they still gonna be the first place like, I don't know.

The significance of family continued into conversations around religion. Fourteen of the sixteen young people followed the religious identity of their families, while the other two had made a conscious decision to reject their parent's religion (more on this on page 13). It was interesting to note that many of the young people associated religious belief with their upbringing. Here are a few exchanges where the young people linked their religious identity to that of their family:

Shahid: Yes, my family. This is the way I've been brought up.

Interviewer: - is it your experiences as well?

Shahid: Since the day I've been brought up and obviously when my mum used to send me mosque [and] stuff, I used to learn from there, and then obviously that's why. That's why - how I become mostly that I believe in God and stuff.

Interviewer: ...do you feel like you've been a Christian your whole life or is it something that happened a long-

Rachel: I'm not sure 'cause when I was younger I was adopted so I don't know-- if I was a different religion before, but I've grown with Christianity.

Interviewer: Is there anything in particular that helps you believe there is a God or makes you believe that there is a God-?

Tyreek: To be honest, I was just brought up to, like, believe, like, there is a God.

Interviewer: Does religion appeal to you?

Jemimah: No, not really. I don't think I could do it. But that's because I've never - they've been brought up that way whereas I've never been brought up that way, so.

Interviewer: Why do you think that some people believe that God exists and other people don't?

Matthew: Some of it is purely just the way they've been brought up. They've been brought up in the way for them to believe that God exists, in that way and that I can also – like for example like a Buddha or a Muslim would believe in Allah and prophet Mohammed and they're always going to believe in that because that's the way they've been brought up and that's the way they see the religion and likewise for a Christian or an atheist, they might just believe that God doesn't exist because it's logical to believe God doesn't exist. I believe it, but it's logical to believe that.

Interviewer: What do you think it means that some people have that faith and others-- others don't? How does that come about?

Kai: I think it is a lot through experience. I think a lot of people—naturally, if you are brought up in a religious family, you know it is a fact that you are more likely to be religious than somebody brought up in a non-religious family. It's not always true, but that's the way it is.

There was a tension in some of the interviews between the role of the family, and the emphasis on the importance of personal choice. Although many of the young people associated religion with upbringing, they also believed that choice was essential. The young people did not necessarily see any problem with these two aspects co-existing. Here's one example of how choice was of utmost importance for one of the young people:

Michael: ...religion shouldn't be forced upon, it's a choice, you need to try and find out in your- in your lifetime you need to experience something like a miracle, and that's what might make- might encourage you to believe in reli- believe in God.

2. BELIEF

All of the young people interviewed believed in some sort of higher power, even if they would not call themselves religious. Interestingly, three participants began by saying that they didn't believe in God or were unsure, but by the end of the interview said that there might be something that created the world. Here are some examples:

> **Brook:** [Reading the card: What do you think about the idea that God or gods exist?] I don't think anything, I just don't believe in God. Never thought about that.

[Later in the interview]

> **Brook:** I know that there may be a God. I mean, look at this planet, it's beautiful. Like who created that? Maybe created of science, but still. I believe in science, but religion as well a bit, just a bit. Yeah.

And another example:

> **Interviewer:** So, you're not sure about whether there is a God?
>
> **Sophie:** No, no, I'm not sure about that one.
>
> **Interviewer:** Have you ever arrived at the conclusion that there definitely isn't a God?
>
> **Sophie:** No, never. So, like, there is, but then I don't know, yet. So, like yeah.

[Later in the interview]

> **Sophie:** Well, I'd say he does exist. If I could say, like -- like I think like he would exist. Because how would -- how would we all be here right now if He didn't exist? So, like, yeah.
>
> **Interviewer:** So, if he created the world?
>
> **Sophie:** Yeah. So, just say God didn't exist, how are we all here then? He'd have to create us. So, like, yeah.
>
> For these young people, it seemed that the interview itself was a moment to reflect on whether or not there might be a God, and was possibly the first time that they were invited to talk about their faith or belief in an environment where they could speak openly.

3. DEATH

Death was a prominent theme in the interviews, brought up by all of the young people without prompting from the interviewer. For some of the young people, the death of a loved one was a significant moment to reflect spiritually. Here are a few examples:

Interviewer: When you said something happens in the family, what do you mean?

Rachel: You know like, if someone passes or whatever.

Interviewer: Okay, and in that moment - what are you thinking?

Rachel: Like, because sometimes it's been like close family members that have, like, said something like, "Is there a God?" Like, "what are you doing in the dark- doing in the dark?" Sort of like, you know, is there a God?

Interviewer: What do you think of the idea that God, or gods exists?

Lucy: I think it gives people hope. I feel-- because if you think when you lose a family member and you think that they can't go to nothing then it literally just becomes another lost life. I think that scares people. I think it scares me, because I'm scared of the unknown. When I lost my Nan, as much as I wasn't highly religious, a few months ago, in fact I was probably more angry kind of thing. I was scared because I thought that she was gone to nothing, so it was a really weird thing for me because as much as I hadn't thought about it very much before, when it happens, you think, "Oh my God, is she just gone? Is there anything", you know, you just think—what the hell—you just get confused really.

Interviewer: ... have [there] been times in your life when you've thought of God?

Jemimah: Yeah, yeah definitely like when my granddad was ill I just always thought about God and I prayed 'cause I wanted him to get better but obviously he wasn't gonna get better. I feel like by praying to God - it helped him stay alive longer.

In these instances, the death of a loved one was a moment to turn to God in prayer, to question about the existence of God, or to question about the existence of an afterlife.

4. PRAYER

Nearly all of the young people we interviewed (14/16) had experiences of prayer, even if they would not call themselves religious. Many had prayed in the midst of difficult situations, almost as an instinctual response to what was going on around them. Here is one example of a 'non-religious' person who had engaged in prayer:

> **Josh:** I prayed when I was about seven for my dad to return safely from Iraq. When I did I didn't think much of it being seven, but thinking back now I feel like sometimes I think about a God and all of that. I feel like that in itself is praying. I feel like by sparing a few moments of mine for whatever is out there I feel like I'm praying because that's what praying is, donating your time to remember that there is something out there. So I feel like even thinking about this kind of stuff is in it's own way praying, paying your respects to what you believe in.
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah. And was that prayer answered?
>
> **Josh:** Yes, my dad did return.

However, these moments of prayer were not necessarily 'transformative' for the young people, in the sense of changing their worldview or practice. For the young people who had prayed but showed little sign of change afterwards, it seemed as though praying was just something you did when you needed help, but that God was then not particularly relevant to the rest of life (this ties in with Smith and Denton's 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism', see Section 2).

For some of the young people, these prayer moments were transformative. It seemed that the prayer moment, and subsequent answers or lack of answers from God, counted as proof either of God's existence or lack of existence. Here are two examples from both ends of the spectrum:

Answered prayer as proof of God's existence:

> **Tyreek:** The only thing is wait, there's other things, loads of things, but I just distinctively remember being a kid and then when I went to, like, the holy place, like, the Mecca, I asked for a little toy, car toy and, like, my dad used to say, "Anything you ask when you go in there, you will get it." And then a couple of days I got, like, a car toy [laughter]. I was only a kid, but, yeah.
>
> **Interviewer:** So you feel, like, potentially your prayers were heard in some way?
>
> **Tyreek:** Yeah, yeah. And I didn't tell no one about the car; it was, like, in my head, I prayed in my head, then it actually happened. I was like, wow, that must mean something and then, yeah.

Unanswered prayer as proof that God doesn't exist:

> **Brook:** When I was a kid, I tried to believe in God 'cause like my dad was [a] really religious person. Like we had icons everywhere of Mary, of Jesus, you know. And I-- when my- when my--grandfather was sick, I prayed that he would be all right. I tried. I tried to believe in God. And next day, he died, and I was like, "Oh, okay."
>
> **Interviewer:** Hmm.
>
> **Brook:** I just -- I prayed it a lot, but like, it never helped.
>
> **Interviewer:** Hmm.
>
> **Brook:** Yeah.
>
> **Interviewer:** And so that was--
>
> **Brook:** And then my life- and then my life just went down, down the hill, 'cause like, I started to be depressed, like in self-harm. And I was to say like, well, God doesn't want us to be sad, but here I am. So, [God] didn't really give me, like, the faith to believe in him.

5. QUESTIONS

We employed a range of approaches to draw out big questions from the young people we interviewed. Our initial hope was that they would arise naturally from conversation and prompting around the topics of God, religion, spirituality and hopes and dreams. If this failed, we would ask something along the lines of the following: 'if God walked into the room, what would you ask him or her?' (This was not ideal, as it presupposed a God of some sort existing). Another tactic was to turn over the four question cards at the end of the interview, and say something like: 'I've asked you four big questions. Now I'd love you to write four big questions for me.' None of these were perfect strategies but helped us to get a sense of what sorts of questions or topics young people cared most about, and what felt like the most natural responses.

In general, we had to work quite hard to get questions out of the young people we interviewed. We found a general lack of questioning when we pushed for it. Here are a few of the exchanges as examples:

> **Interviewer:** Has there ever been a moment where you have had a question about your own faith, where you're like, "If God was here face to face with me right now this is what I'd want to ask you"?
>
> **Rachel:** No, I don't think so.
>
> ---
>
> **Interviewer:** I just wonder whether there's -- there's any questions you've got about God, faith and religion -
>
> **Sophie:** No. Nothing.
>
> **Interviewer:** - that I haven't asked you?
>
> **Sophie:** No. There's nothing at all.
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah? Okay.
>
> **Sophie:** Yeah.
>
> ---
>
> **Interviewer:** Do you have any questions about the Bible or prayer or any other, sort of, aspects of your faith?
>
> **Mulkina:** I don't know. I don't think I ask myself questions really.

Saying this, we did manage to get some interesting questions from the young people. Here were the questions raised by the young people, coded into five main areas:

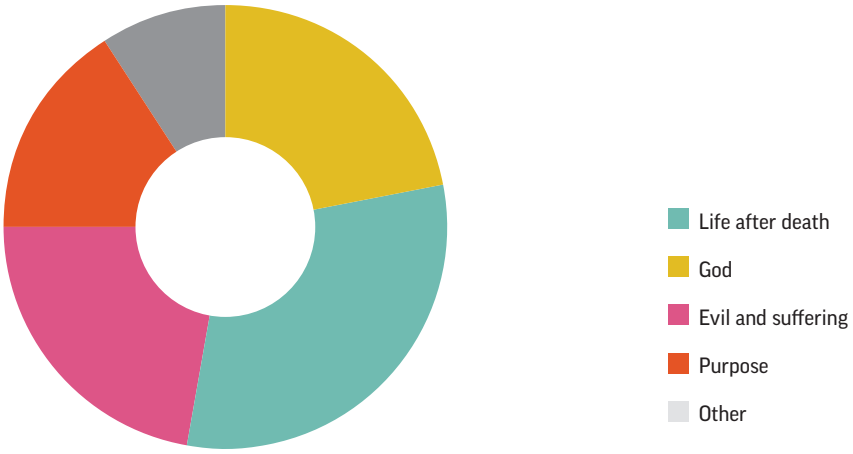


Figure 2: The questions young people had about God, faith or religion (grouped into five codes)

LIFE AFTER DEATH

"What is heaven like? What is hell like?"

"How do you know if you are going to the afterlife uh – you know – heaven or hell?"

"Do you think there is a heaven?"

"If he created people yeah and if he knows everything, what people does yeah, why did he put them here on the like on this planet like and why did he create heaven... because I don't get why. If you already know-- like you're God you know everything yeah, you know how that person is. He can look at you, he knows if you're good or bad. So I don't get why he put us here and he create the heaven and the hell."

"What happens after life?"

"What happens to people, when they die? Like, what happens to them? Obviously I understand that they go to heaven or hell, but like what is after life like? Where is it?"

"When will I die?"

"I'd probably confirm and say oh God is there, a hell? - just to confirm - and a heaven? Just to confirm, even though we know."

"Is there such a thing as an atheist dead man?"

GOD

"Do you hear what I say to you?"

"Where is he?"

"Should we know if there is a God?"

"What is God like?"

"How can Jesus be God and also the son of God?"

"Do you think God's real?"

"What does love mean to him?"

EVIL AND SUFFERING

"I go outside and see violence, I see crime, I see hatred, I see bullying, I wonder you know, if there is - if there was a God this wouldn't be happening. It just questions life. I just think, "How could people be this insensitive?""

"Because do you know how some people are like, "If God exists, how is he causing cancer to kids and how is he making people suffer." But then -- but then the God can't -- the world can't just consist of good, it has to consist of the bad as well. So, like I'm still not sure about that one."

"When will everyone start living in peace and harmony?"

"Because it's like, why would you let all this evil to go on. If--if you're surely there to bring comfort to someone's life, why equally destroying others? In our, kind of, world that's supposedly full of securities, safe, you know, just everything: love, attention, happiness. Why would you allow some things like that to happen?"

"I've seen so many successful people who do not believe in God or like don't have a religion or something and they're so successful, and I'm thinking when I do something and I just don't feel happy with what I've done and I'm like, "Why, why do they get to be so successful and I don't?"

"Do you know how to be happy in times of hardship?"

PURPOSE

"Do we have a purpose?"

"What is my purpose in this life?"

"What will help me to achieve my dreams and hopes for the future?"

"Is it our responsibility to use our skills and talents?"

"How am I going to become a better person?"

OTHER

"Will there be more British sitcoms on E4?"

"Is there life on other planets?"

"If my parents are – if my mum is a religious person, then why doesn't she – does she think that being bisexual is just like, you know, wanting to get attention? Why doesn't she accept the fact that I am?"

It was interesting to note that the questions mentioned by the young people were, in some cases, provoked by conversations in the interview itself. In these cases, the questions young people raised were connected to the content discussed in the interview, which may suggest that the interview itself was a catalyst or 'disruptive' element which offered space for reflection that young people may not previously have had.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

There were a few additional interesting findings from the interviews. These feel worthy of mentioning briefly, as they challenge prior held assumptions about terminology and young peoples' attitudes towards religion:

'SPIRITUAL'

On the whole, 'spiritual' was an unhelpful term to use with the young people we interviewed. The majority of those we surveyed did not know what the word spiritual meant, and either had to ask what it meant, or associated it with spirits and ghosts. Here are a few exchanges:

> **Interviewer:** Have you ever had a moment in your life which you would describe as spiritual?
>
> **Tyreek:** What do you mean by spiritual? Spiritual is - was it spirits and stuff like that?

> [in response to the word "spirituality" within the ordering exercise]:
>
> **Jemimah:** What does it mean by spirit?
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah spirituality, have you come across that that term before?
>
> **Jemimah:** No.

> **Ammir:** Spirituality, I don't really need. Don't know what that means.

> **Rachel:** Oh, this is hard. [laughs] This is a lot of-- This is hard. -- I don't understand like -- what is spirituality?

In the youth work community, 'spirituality' and 'spiritual development' have become familiar terms to describe a particular aspect of faith-based work. For example, Youthscape has historically run a course in local Luton schools called 'developing spiritually'. These findings suggest that 'spiritual' is not a helpful term to be used when talking with young people about God, faith or religion, as they may either not understand what it is about or think it is about ghosts and spirits.

RELIGION IS A POSITIVE FORCE

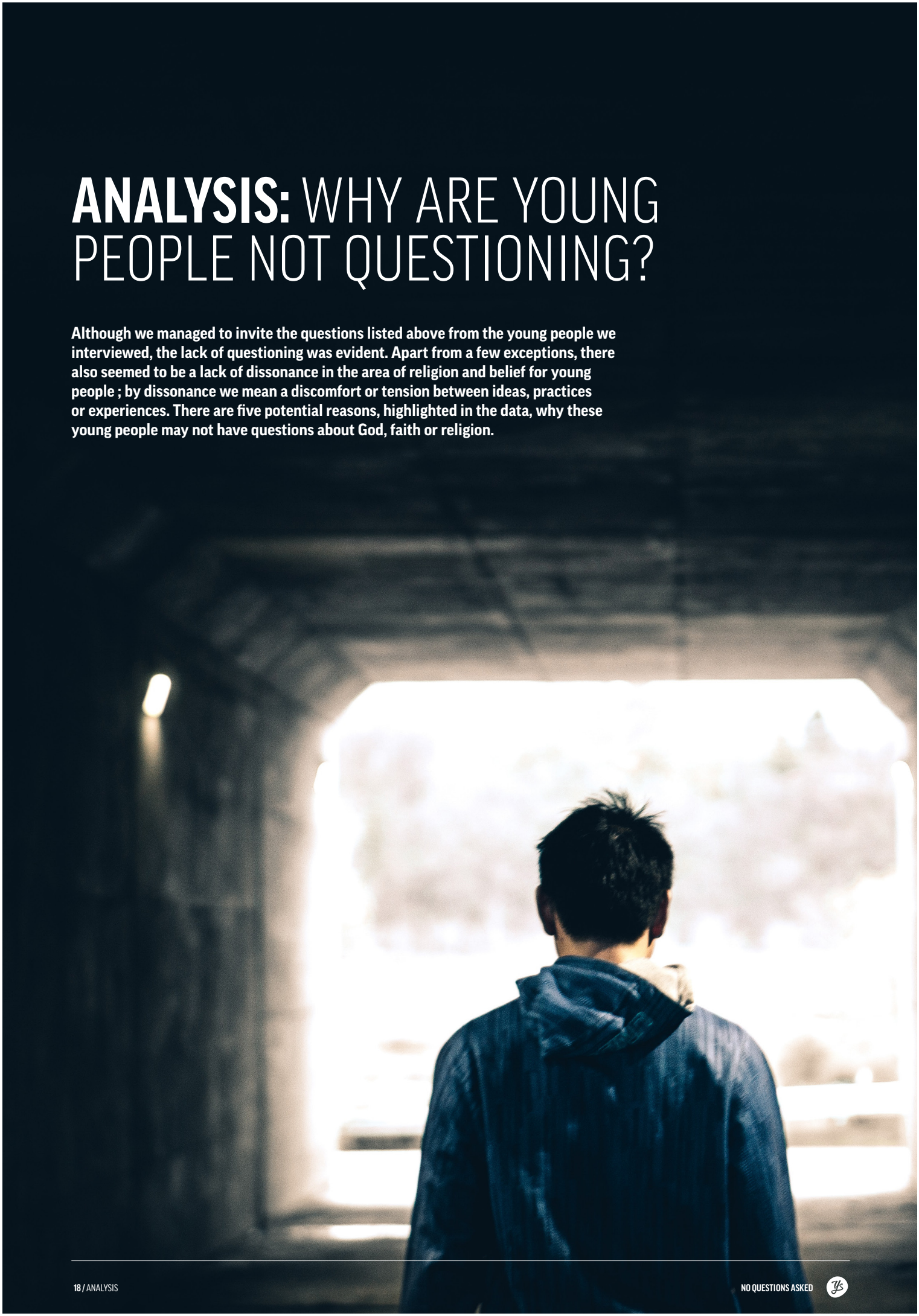
The young people we surveyed had a nuanced understanding of religion. They viewed religion as a generally positive force, although it could be misrepresented by individuals. There was a gracious sense among the young people that individuals connected to religious groups who commit atrocities (e.g. terrorist attacks) are not representative of the whole religious group. Here are some comments from the young people:

> **Kai:** Religion harnessed in the right way is always a positive, but, sadly, we have evil people out there who, over time, try to take religion and twist it and make it into a hateful, sort of, thing, you know, not just people like Islamic State, you know. All kind of pastors and people like that, where we have some monks, others, who abuse religion and try and use it to alter people's perception of what is real and what isn't. So, I think—religion used and set into positive and used in a positive way and religion used to try and bring people to together and try to inspire people and try and lift people, I don't think it can possibly be a bad thing. I always think it's a good thing.

> **Lucy:** It's positive but I feel as if it's used in the wrong way sometimes. It's used to oppress more than anything sometimes, like you hear about all the ISIS when they are trying to say, "oh they're Muslims" they're this, they're that. You are not, 'you say you are but you are not' kind of thing. It's just that I feel like it's being used in the wrong way to kind of—in an oppressive nature instead of a way to bring everyone together. But equally I feel like in such forces, religion is bringing everyone together-- like in the world globally, so it can be used. I think at this current time I feel like it's being used wrong.

ANALYSIS: WHY ARE YOUNG PEOPLE NOT QUESTIONING?

Although we managed to invite the questions listed above from the young people we interviewed, the lack of questioning was evident. Apart from a few exceptions, there also seemed to be a lack of dissonance in the area of religion and belief for young people ; by dissonance we mean a discomfort or tension between ideas, practices or experiences. There are five potential reasons, highlighted in the data, why these young people may not have questions about God, faith or religion.



1. QUESTIONING IS DISRESPECTFUL

We were surprised to find a lack of questioning among some of the religious young people in our sample. For some of the religious young people, this was on account of fear of what would happen if they aired their questions publicly , or being seen as a 'non-strong believer'. Here are some examples:

> **Interviewer:** Are you comfortable talking about any of those things that you don't have answers for at the moment?
>
> **Ammir:** Not really.
>
> **Interviewer:** Okay, yeah.
>
> **Ammir:** Yeah, not even to my parents. I wouldn't- You know, it's just something for me to--
>
> **Interviewer:** So, it's just some internal wrestlings there?
>
> **Ammir:** Yeah, I wouldn't really talk about it publicly or even privately, it's just something for me to figure out, something for me to, you know, accomplish later.
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah, and do you ever talk to God about those things?
>
> **Ammir:** Not really, again.

> **Shahid:** Okay if you're a strong believer, you wouldn't question if you know the answers, because you're a strong believer. But if you're a believer but not strong you will get questions in your head that oh, why is this happening? That's when a non-strong believer will tend to have believed and asking questions.

The caution around not saying the 'wrong' thing, exhibited above, continued into some of the interviews. Shahid was very careful throughout his interview not to 'offend'. When it was explained by the interviewer that he could be honest and open and wouldn't cause any offence, he continued to attempt to offer balanced replies. Here was his summary of the interview at the end:

> **Shahid:** Yeah, obviously, a lot of times difficult questions do pop up. Like they say, "Why do you believe in Islam?" That question is not difficult, but it's the way you're going to answer it. Like the - like these four questions were put in front of me I answered them in a way which I didn't disrespect anyone's religion, I didn't disrespect my own or - I tried to give it in a fair view, you know what I mean? Makes the way, if it was a religious person behind this chair right now, he would have given you a probably a religious answer, but the way I see it I gave you like a fair answer - I don't wanna be, obviously - I don't want to disrespect anyone or anything, and that's why. That's the way I felt so that's what I said.

Earlier on in the interview, Shahid gave a possible cause for his caution, and for his emphasis on respect:

> **Shahid:** It's not a problem, like, I have got a black friend [who] is Christian okay obviously we don't really talk about religion, but we look at each other the same. We don't, look at each other like he's black and you know obviously only unusually does he have [a] question if you see lately but, when the Mark Duggan thing happened, you know that Chris - I don't think it's like fair, like everyone's equal - you can't just because one person has done a crime, you can't blame the whole tribe, that's the way I see it - like, me and him are fine. We don't really, like - 'cause see, the reason us - he has different beliefs, but we don't really bring it up.

For Shahid and his friends, it seems easier not to talk about religion, as to highlight differences or question each other's religion would be seen as creating problems, division or tension. It's easier not to question each other's beliefs, out of respect. Shahid is keen not to be seen as 'religious religious' (he uses this phrase elsewhere in the interview), perhaps out of a desire not to create division or difference, but to live out his statement that he and his friends of other religions are in fact 'the same'.

The highly diverse population of Luton, coupled with recent instances of Luton as a town with religious tension[1] and the government's PREVENT strategy in schools, could all be factors that contributed to Shahid's caution. The emphasis on respecting your own religion, each other's beliefs and tolerating the beliefs of others may have contributed to Shahid's guarded responses, and lack of conversations about religion with his friends. He may also feel the need to be more guarded, given the context he is growing up in.

This highlights our first question for reflection: ***How do we encourage respectful questioning among young people, and create spaces where questioning is allowed and viewed positively?***

1. See for example the 'Christian Patrol' organised by Britain First in December 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/01/25/britain-first-luton-march-condemned_n_9067474.html

2. WE'RE ALL THE SAME

Following on from the respectfulness (or disrespectfulness) of questioning, the young people were keen to assert their acceptance of others, with many expressing the sentiment highlighted above in Shahid's interview that 'we are all the same'. In some cases, this seemed to arise from confusion around religious beliefs, in some cases was the result of pluralistic understandings of religion, and in other cases seemed to arise from a desire to demonstrate tolerance and acceptance (as with Shahid). Here are some of the comments:

All religions are the same:

> **Lucy:** I do believe there is a God, but I am not saying that with other religions there isn't more. I think God is a universal term. It's plural in its own sense, so there is everyone—I think everyone is included in there, so I do feel like there is a God, but equally as much as I say I'm not religious. I do believe there is a God—God, Gods, you know what I mean—it's a very universal thing.

> **Helen:** I feel like there's a lot of religions and I feel like all of them lead to the same God. I can't judge that, like some say Christianity is the only way to God, but I feel like it's not.

> **Josh:** I think they're all one and the same. Christians have one god, but they also have a devil whereas Hindus -- Muslims have several or just the one and they all point towards one is good, one is bad. It doesn't matter either way, we still believe there's something bigger than us.

We're all the same:

> **Shahid:** I don't think it makes you any different to anyone else is. Everyone is equal at the end of the day. You're all born, you're all humans. You all got a soul and a heart. So, now see, but religion is still quite a common thing for what people believe so people will be still strong on their religious type of views and stuff, but the way I see it is that everyone is equal, even though - also I do pray and stuff, but everyone is equal the way I see it. Because I've got - I've got many mixed-mixed race friends, I've got black friends, I've got white friends.

> **Interviewer:** How do you feel about the idea of different religions?

> **Rachel:** I don't mind, like, I just feel like everyone is the same. It doesn't matter what God you believe in. We're all the same, we're all people.

> **Sophie:** Religion. It's people's beliefs and like -- and like what people choose to do in their lives. Not -- it's not up to, like, other people. Like, it's them and how they want to be.

> **Interviewer:** Yeah.

> **Sophie:** But do you know, like, religion. How some, some people judge people because, because of how -- or how they have to wear like headscarves and all that lot. And people judge them and make them feel uncomfortable. I don't personally think that's right, because everyone's equal. We're still all humans. We've all got the same heart and that lot. So, I don't understand why people should be treated different because -- because of religion. So, like, I think religion personally is just, like -- it's just how people, like, try -- try to pick on other people, because of what they choose and think and that lot.

For the young people, the statement 'we're all the same' was viewed as a positive assertion, and seemed to be an ethical statement that people should be treated equally regardless of religion. Given their context, it may well be that religious disagreements have come to be associated with challenges to equality. In a context where religious difference has sometimes led to violence and oppression, the challenge here is how to encourage healthy discussion and debate around different religions among these young people, and to celebrate differences between them. If distinctiveness raises questions (which we might see as a positive thing) then some of the young people seem to be avoiding distinctiveness so as not to ruffle any feathers or raise any questions for other people. In a culture where 'we're all the same', and where young people can't see any differences or distinctiveness in the lives of their religious friends, their curiosity may not be sparked.

Perhaps unsurprisingly here, there were notable differences between the religious young people who were studying RE A level at secondary school, to their non-religious classmates and to those from the FE college. The religious young people studying A level RE had more religious terminology at their disposal, and knew more about the distinctiveness of different faiths. Two of the young people in this group struggled to reconcile their Christian faith with the implications for other religions:

> **Kai:** I am sort of along the lines of so I'm in between this, sort of, exclusivist, where only Christianity, and inclusivist of you can get on with all religions, but Christianity is the best religion form, and

I am sort of in the middle, leaning slightly towards the exclusivist point of view.

Matthew: I think it's a little bit unfair for a good practicing Muslim, who's lived their life as well as they can and not really been introduced to God because they've been so caught up in their religion and been fully in there, their faith and do what they've been told--

Interviewer: Yeah.

Matthew:--and for them to die at the end of it and not I don't know whether they go to heaven or not. I think that would be really, really harsh because if a person lives their life to the best they can in their religion, say for any other religion like Judaism or Buddhism or Hinduism, like if they live their life the way that their God wants them to, I think that it's unfair for them to not go to whatever their paradises, because every religion has a paradise. Yeah, I think that's a bit unfair, I don't know, but I think I read it or something, I think God introduces people to the religion at one point in their life. I tdon't know whether I read it or my dad told me. I think God introduces people to God, to him. And once he's in your life depending on what that happens and it's their choice whether they wanna accept it or not but I don't know whether that happens or not.

These were two of very few moments of dissonance or unresolved tension in the interviews. These two Christian young people were seeking to reconcile the message listed above that 'we are all the same' and that 'all religions are the same', with the distinctive truth claims of their particular faith.

Question for reflection: ***How do we positively raise awareness of the distinctiveness of different religions, and celebrate diversity?***

3. BELIEFS ARE PERSONAL

Among the young people we interviewed, religion was not really talked about, and was seen as a private and personal thing. Therefore 'spiritual' moments were not really reflected on, or talked about. Their lack of live questioning could be linked to this, as they are not used to having conversations around God, faith or religion. Here's an example relating to the lack of conversations:

Josh: [Talking about his mum] I haven't really talked to her about it because I never fully found the time to. I never really had the opportunity to bring it up, but I know she considers herself a spiritualist.

It's hard to believe that in the 16 years of his life Josh hadn't had the opportunity to have a conversation with his mum about her beliefs. The more likely scenario is that the subject has never come up or that he does not feel able to ask about her beliefs. For Josh, belief seems to be a personal and inward reality that isn't discussed openly. For Tyreek, a similar sentiment is expressed in his desire to 'find his own way' with his religion and belief:

Interviewer: And have you ever met anyone religious who you wanted to be like, perhaps because they're religious that, sort of, they have some characteristics that you admire?

Tyreek: I don't know if - but I would say that I'll be who I am when it comes to religion - not like, fine I'll like to get help to see it, but I wouldn't like to be how someone is and stuff like that. Find my own way for it.

Interviewer: Finding your own way, okay.

Tyreek: But like getting the knowledge and, like, learning about it.

Interviewer: So it's of interest?

Continued...

Tyreek: Yeah. But I wouldn't, like, aspire to be someone like that.

This also had implications for how Tyreek would 'persuade' someone else of his religion. Here's an exchange from later on in the same interview:

Interviewer: If you're trying to persuade somebody who didn't believe in God, what would you say to them? Would you try to persuade them? And if so, what would you, what might you say?

Tyreek: I would - I wouldn't say to them - I think I would, like, try and somehow show them that there is a God, but I don't know how to do that. [laughs] I would just show them a way.

Interviewer: Okay.

Tyreek: So they can see it for themselves, like, "Wow, there is a religion," or "there's a God."

Where 'finding your own way' is of utmost importance, there also seems to be an emphasis on each person finding religion or belief for themselves; personal experience becomes of paramount importance. For the young people who didn't have a religious upbringing, and hadn't encountered anything of God in their life so far, there was a sense that they hadn't experienced anything which would suggest that God was real. In other words, If God hadn't shown up in their life, in their frame of reference, then he hadn't shown up at all. This suggests a passive engagement with God, not a 'seeker' type engagement i.e. God has to come to me. In one example of this, Josh believes that no God has ever shown up or revealed himself:

Josh: ...there is no God that's openly said, I'm here. If he was here or God did appear and say, "I'm here, you have to believe in me now", we'd all become nuns we'd all become priests, we'd all become carbon copies of the Bible or whoever book it was about him.

Interviewer: Mm-mm. And so do you think God has done that?

Josh: No. I don't think that any God has shown up to sort of say, "I'm here."

For many of the young people, whether or not God had revealed himself to them individually served as a lack of proof, or a proof of God's existence; there was a clear link in the interviews between personal experience and proof of God's existence for the young people we surveyed.

Here is an example of a young person who had no personal experience of God and therefore felt that no proof had been given:

Christina: I'd have to have my own.

Interviewer: You have to have your own.

Christina: If that person can [have] their proofs and I'm gonna consider them as proofs, then there's nothing for me.

Interviewer: Okay.

Christina: Like. You know, I would not believe in, I have to just see the proofs with my eyes basically.

Where personal experience was proof that God was real:

Mulkina: Um, I feel like for people who don't, sometimes they haven't, like, experienced God according to be able to or, I don't know, some people just like, "I can't see him so he's not there."

[...]

Interviewer: How would you sort of describe that experience?

Mulkina: Like an overwhelming sort of love sort of thing quite just experiencing love, feeling like really overwhelming.

There was almost a sense with these young people that unless you experience something, it's not worth debating or questioning; questioning is futile. There was a 'come and see' attitude, as they recognised that unless someone else experienced it for themselves, they would not be convinced by argument. Personal experience therefore constituted the most significant proof, as another person's testimony was not seen as enough. This is nothing new, but highlights the shift in what young people regard as proof; it is less about facts or testimonies or historical accuracy, but about personal experience i.e. something becoming true for me.

Question for reflection: ***How do we create spaces for young people to have personal experiences of God, and chances to reflect on those experiences?***

4. RELIGION IS PRACTICAL, NOT ABSTRACT

When talking about religion and belief, the young people interviewed highlighted concrete and practical examples. In Vincett et. al's study (see section 2) the authors highlight a few characteristics of young people's practical or 'performative' faith, in contrast to a faith or religion built on propositional belief systems: it highlights religious action in the everyday, a discourse of authenticity around practical action and a pluralistic approach to institutions and religious spaces. The first two of these are evident in our sample of young people (they demonstrated a pluralistic approach to religion as seen above, but not necessarily towards religious institutions). The first of these – highlighting practical action in the everyday - is evident in an extract from Jemimah's interview. Here she discusses learning about Islam from some schoolmates, in response to a question from the interviewer about how she learns about other religions:

> **Jemimah:** ...I think you just learn, like --like being in the sixth form you just learn about their religion because you're surrounded -
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah.
>
> **Jemimah:** -by 'em so – like I don't feel ashamed to ask them questions about their religion.
>
> **Interviewer:** You don't? Okay.
>
> **Jemimah:** No, because they -- they're happy to answer like. They're not gonna look at you weird er they're happy to tell you.
>
> **Interviewer:** That's good.
>
> **Jemimah:** Coz they're interested that you're interested –
>
> **Interviewer:** Yes.
>
> **Jemimah:** - in them.
>
> **Interviewer:** And have you ever done that, have you ever asked?
>
> **Jemimah:** Yeah, yeah.
>
> **Interviewer:** What sort of questions do you?
>
> **Jemimah:** Like, "can you not drink water, either?"
>
> [Laughter]
>
> **Interviewer:** Okay so asking them about fasting?
>
> **Jemimah:** Yeah.
>
> **Interviewer:** Okay so practical.
>
> **Jemimah:** Yeah.
>
> **Interviewer**: Practical stuff.
>
> **Jemimah:** Yeah. Stuff like that.

Jemimah's questions are sparked by the practical activity of her Muslim friends, in their everyday lives at school. She later on describes religion as 'devotion', and thinks that her Muslim friends are 'amazing' for the way that they fast. For Jemimah, religion and belief are expressed by these practical expressions or out-workings.

Authenticity is closely linked to this, as those who are seen to be true believers are those who practice their faith authentically. Take the following extract from Jade's interview:

> **Interviewer:** Have you got friends who you can, sort of, share your perspective on God or share your faith?
>
> **Mulkina:** Yeah, but I don't feel like they really like that into it, like all my friends - not all my friends actually - but like two of my friends I'd say go to church and whatever and they grew up in Christian homes and stuff like that but I don't feel like they really take it that serious until it comes to a point in their life where they feel like they need to, like if exams come up.
>
> **Interviewer:** Mhm.
>
> **Mulkina:** Then obviously they'll start praying to God a lot more often, every night or if, like, they go through something in life, but then when everything is fine then, I feel like they are not that worried about God. So yeah.

According to Mulkina, those who pray throughout their lives, not just in bad times or when exams are on, are more authentic, proper believers. The strength of their belief is located in how frequently they prayed, in the extent of their practice. This 'turn to the practical' is emphasised by how uncomfortable many of the young people were in employing the propositional statements from their religious traditions. Here's an example from Shahid's interview, where he is trying to explain what Muslim's believe about those who don't turn to Islam:

> **Shahid:** Well in my religion like, obviously it does say um that everyone does have to turn to - obviously our religion and stuff, but - like I don't know how to explain it 'cause I don't want to say nothing wrong if you know what I mean. Like I don't want to say nothing, um, against my religion - do you understand what, like, I don't think nothing like the bad, but - but see that's what it says, like - I don't know how to explain it - 'cause I don't want to say nothing wrong and then, uh - I don't even know how to explain it, to be honest. You see my religion says that everyone should turn to our religion in other words.

Shahid is extremely uncomfortable in expressing the propositional beliefs of his own faith, and struggles to articulate what it is that Muslims believe, afraid that he might get it wrong. He's evidently attempting to locate his own beliefs within the propostional framework of Islam, but struggling. These young people were far more comfortable talking about the practical aspects of faith, over the propositional statements or creedal statements held by their religions, out of confusion or fear of getting it wrong (or perhaps out of a desire not to offend, see section 1 of the analysis).

There was also a sense in which religion was useful to the young people, in a practical way. Here is an extract from Mulkina's interview, where she explains the usefulness of having faith and knowing God in your life:

> **Interviewer:** [Talking about the death of a family member] Gosh, yeah, that's a lot. That's a big experience to happen when you're 14/15 yeah and what - it's obviously incredibly, incredibly sad - but did it raise certain questions for you about God? Is that one of the reasons?
>
> **Mulkina:** Not really, I don't think I really had any questions about it.
>
> **Interviewer:** Okay.
>
> **Mulkina:** I just more thought, like, if I believe in God it would make the situation, like, a lot easier to deal with. [...] Like being able to have someone to say, like, exactly how I feel. Because, obviously, if like, I was to be saying it to my friends, like, there's parts of it that you don't really wanna say. Because, like, it might reveal more about, like, what's going on in your family and you don't want all your life just out there, and whatever.

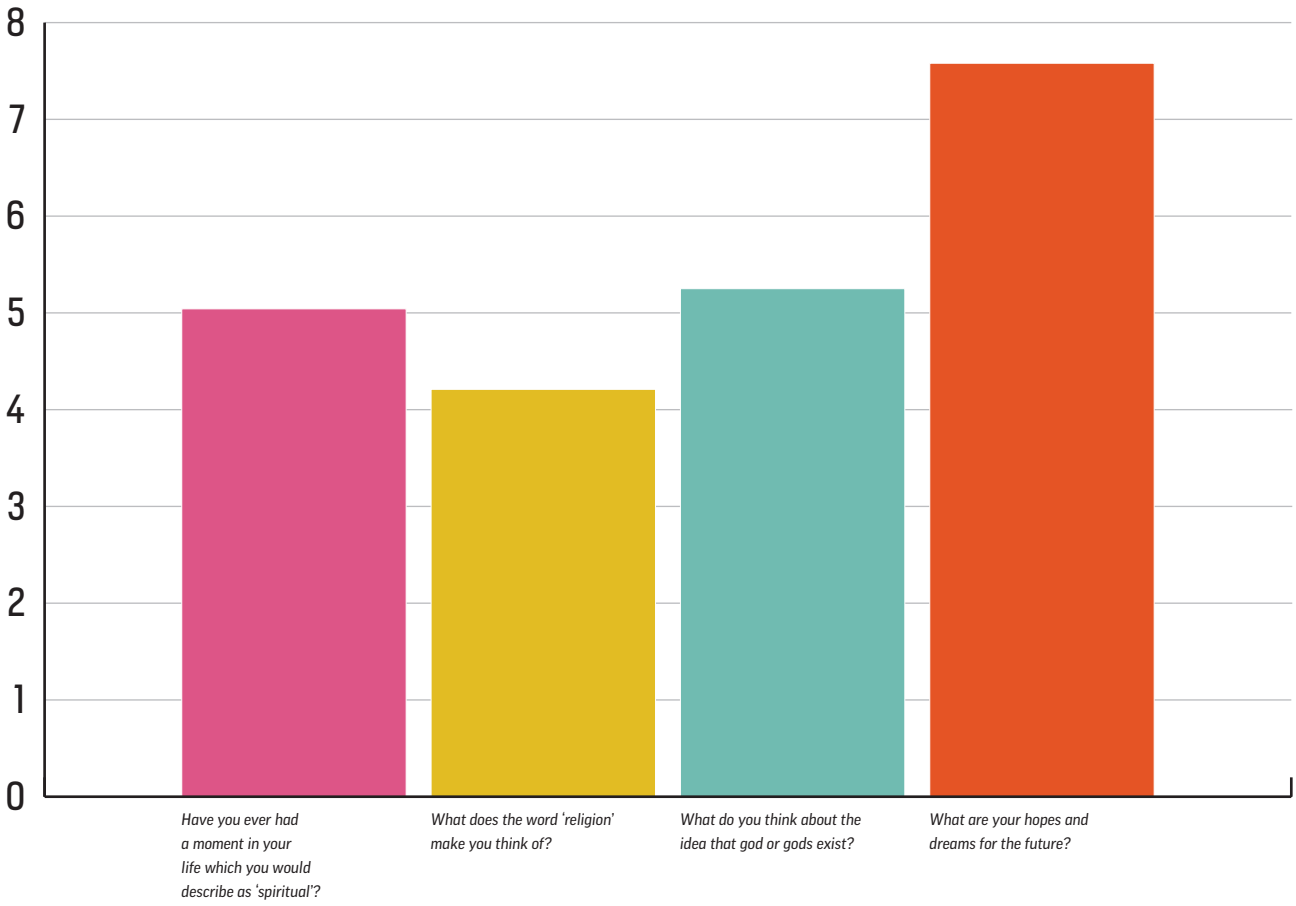
These three elements combined - the practical descriptions of faith, the discourse around authenticity, and the utility of faith - all point to a 'turn to the practical'. This move from theoretical to practical, from abstract to concrete, and from propositions to performance has implications for apologetics. There seems to be a disconnect between the apologetic approach and the way that these young people are engaging with belief and religion.

Question for reflection: ***How do we engage young people in the practice of our faith, and enable them to participate in it?***

5. RELIGION IS NOT A BIG CONCERN

Throughout the interviews, we were aware that the young people may answer our questions more out of politeness than passion, and may feel obliged to show interest in them. It was important for us to discover whether or not the questions we asked – and the topics being discussed - were actually important to the young people. At the end of the interview, we asked the young people to rate from 0-10 how often they thought about these questions, and how important they were to them. The graph below shows their responses:

Figure 3: *How regularly the young people think about these questions (or questions like them)*



Hopes and dreams were high up for the majority of the young people, and they responded saying that they regularly thought about their hopes and dreams for the future. Given their stage of life and the emphasis at school on working towards the future, this isn't surprising. The other questions were not totally irrelevant but were given, on average, 4s and 5s.

Although this may seem positive, the comments around this question indicate a lack of passion. Here are two examples to give an illustration of this:

> **Lucy:** It just makes me think of-- I feel like religion is not a big worry, just purely has to do with you and who you believe in, what God to you means.

> **Josh:** Spirituality is next because compared to all those things it's not really a problem. I do think about sort of out of the body things, and God and et cetera but compared to all the other things, It's not gonna prevent me being successful. I feel like I would change a little bit of my views to maybe get into a better position.

There is a sense in which God, faith and religion are neither offensive nor something to be passionate about, 'not a big worry' in Lucy's words. This dispassionate approach highlights another factor in the young people's lack of questioning, as to be engaged and questioning suggests a desire to know the answers, and passion of some kind. It seems that God, faith and religion have low salience and low function in these young people's lives (See Abby Day, 269) and reside in the 'background' of life (see Smith and Denton, section 2). God, faith and belief just aren't a big deal.

Question for reflection: ***How do we demonstrate to young people how important and significant God, faith and religion are (or could be) for their lives?***

WHAT NEXT?

We hope that you can see many different applications from the findings above for your work with young people. Some of these will not result in direct practical application but will contribute to a perspective change in how we approach the areas of belief and religion with young people. We are aware that this is a very context specific and small-scale study, and therefore cannot make generalisable conclusions from the findings. However, we want to provide some ruthlessly practical take-aways from this study which we are on a journey of thinking about at Youthscape, and which may prove of interest, and potential application, in other settings.

WE NEED TO...

- **Create safe spaces for conversation about belief and religion.**
- **Offer practical faith experiences for young people.**
- **Encourage religious young people to be different and bold.**
- **Start with prayer, death and afterlife.**

CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR **CONVERSATION** ABOUT **BELIEF AND RELIGION**

Having read the research and reflected on the findings, there was one thing, above everything else, that stood out to me:

> **Interviewer:** And has there ever been a moment where-- you have had a question about your own faith, where you're like, "If God was here face to face with me right now this is what I'd want to ask you"?
>
> **Rachel:** No, I don't think so.

It wasn't the questions asked by those who don't yet believe in God, but the lack of questions from those who already do.

Rachel grew up in a Christian home, and talks of her personal faith. Yet, when it comes to her questions for God, and her sense of curiosity about the divine, she had nothing to add. For me, Rachel's answer highlighted a spiritual apathy that feels hugely indicative of our experience on the ground at Youthscape, and much of our recent work and thinking has been centred around how we respond to this sense of spiritual apathy.

It's clear that young people themselves are not initiating these conversations, but the interview provided the opportunity to talk about their beliefs in a safe environment, without judgement. Several of the young people commented after the interview how much they had enjoyed it, and asked if the interview team were coming back next year. For me, this demonstrates that the opportunity is waiting, and is an indicator of the type of positive response we might get from young people if we create safe spaces and open up conversation.

Most of the young people began their interviews with a similar lack of interest, but over the course of the interviews the level of interest in these topics (prayers, belief in God) did seem to increase, and we unearthed and discussed some experiences and questions which they were then interested to reflect upon. The interview process was in itself a journey of discovery, and gave the young people the opportunity to reflect theologically on the potential significance of these 'spiritual' moments.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE INTERVIEW ENVIRONMENT?

When young people are in a safe environment, and are asked about faith, they are happy to enter into discussion. For me, there are elements of the interview that helped to create a 'safe space' which encouraged faith conversations:

1. All the young people who took part in the interview had opted in. Their involvement was voluntary, they had chosen to be there and it was not forced or compulsory.

2. They took the conversation to a depth that they felt comfortable with. Although the interviewer asked questions, the young people determined the response, and directed the conversation that followed. The questions were purposefully open, so that young people could choose to engage at the level they felt comfortable.

3. Young people were challenged to think - think about questions that they are often not asked.

4. They were individually listened to when they responded. The one-to-one nature of the conversation meant that young people felt 'heard', which led to further self-questioning and searching.

5. In most cases, the interview created a space in which the young people felt they could share without fear of judgement. The young people who felt that 'no answer was the wrong answer' demonstrated a journey of thinking and self-reflection.

6. Faith conversations should be seen as a journey. The more we invite young people into these types of conversations, the more their interest in faith, prayer, belief in God etc. seems to grow.

CREATING CURIOSITY

Last year we led a weekly 'chapel' as part of our drop-in which included prayer, worship and Bible teaching. No matter how 'youth friendly' we made the content, or how new the songs were, the group were disengaged, and as a team we realised that this was because deep

down, they weren't curious about the Christian story. So our mission became to create curiosity, and awaken questions in the young people we were working with.

This is by no means a tried and tested approach that is guaranteed to work in every setting. Instead, it's a few ideas that we have tried that have worked in our context, and might be helpful in yours:

1. Creating a reflective space that asks young people questions and challenges them to respond in a creative way.

Once a week we turned the entrance hall of our drop-in centre into a challenging and reflective space. Each week we wrote a question about God, faith, or the Bible on a big chalk board. For example, one week the questions was: 'Did Jesus ever get angry?'

We then placed three big red glass jars under the board, each with a different heading, such as 'always, sometimes, never'. We then placed a big wooden box of ball pool balls next to the jars and asked the young people to vote by placing a ball in one of the jars.

The visual installation attracted the young peoples' attention immediately, and although some of them didn't initially respond by voting, the majority of the young people who walked through the door stopped, read the questions, and then placed a ball in the relevant jar. We found that they were open to conversations on topics that had previously felt impossible, and some young people asked their own questions off the back of the questions they read on our board.

2. Creating opportunities to invite young people into conversations, and developing interests in topics such as the Bible and prayer.

The private, safe and non-judgemental space created by the interview allowed the young people to feel safe enough to engage, and, importantly, engage to an extent that they felt comfortable, with the depth of conversation being participant led. We knew that we couldn't create one-to-one space within our drop-in centre, but wanted to make sure that all of these elements were included in our work. As well as the question jars, we also led a similar conversation in our 'quiet room' next door. We intentionally asked questions based on the question on the board.

We found that asking the young people a series of questions in a drop-in centre didn't really work as well as we saw in the interview. Instead, we ensured that there were two leaders in the quiet room who were continuously having a conversation about the topic, and asking each other questions. These leaders would also ask questions to the young people in the room at the time, which could draw them into the conversation, but they were free to engage to whatever level or depth they wanted to. However, this also meant that the young people who were not ready initially to engage in conversation could simply observe, and after a few minutes, we found that a number of them would also join the conversations, and ask their own questions.

3. Modelling question based conversations

This type of questioning conversation among the leaders modelled to the young people that asking each other questions about faith wasn't something that was unacceptable, or caused tension, but instead set a culture in our drop-in centre where faith and prayer are not just acceptable topics of conversation, but are a fundamental part of who we are as an organisation.

We would then continue this question based conversation over a weekly meal a few days later, often on the same topic as the question on the board at the beginning of the week. The young people would collect their food and be asked a question. They would then make their way to a certain room depending on their answer. For example, one week the question was 'Was Jesus God, a Human, or God and a Human', those who thought Jesus was God would eat in the 'Quiet Room', those who thought Jesus was 'A Human' would eat in the 'dining room' and those who thought Jesus was 'both God and human' would eat in the 'living room', and in each room a leader would facilitate a conversation over the meal.

Again, we found that the interest levels around these topics grew, and we began to see young people asking their own questions as the weeks went on.

Jemimah Woodbridge *is the Assistant Director of Youthscape Luton.*

OFFER PRACTICAL **FAITH EXPERIENCES** TO YOUNG PEOPLE

When first reading over the report I nodded enthusiastically like a Churchill dog, saying "oh yeees". It certainly resonated with what I was experiencing in the young people I am privileged to spend time with. I have heard young people just like Jemimah talk of the devotion of their Muslim friends, which they encountered in a very real way as they fasted their way through Ramadan on the long August days. Others like Mulkina have told me of the real faith of those who practice their faith consistently in their day to day lives. Another group much like Shahid feel more confident talking about the practical out-workings of faith than accurately expressing the propositional beliefs. The findings point to young people primarily associating faith and religion with practical and concrete experiences, whether these are their own or others, over and above theoretical or propositional belief systems.

So we are faced with the challenge of providing young people with practical in-roads to explore and experiment with faith. I wonder if the place to start is by connecting with their own deepest longings and needs. We want young people to experience faith as practical and helpful for their everyday, as Mulkina suggested: "If I believe in God, it would make the situation like, a lot easier to deal with". This is a faith that is useful and makes a difference.

How might you help young people connect with their deepest longings?

How can we make faith practical, and useful?

Here at Youthscape we have been exploring the role of practice in young people's faith development for a while, and are on a journey of working out what this means for our youth work. Whether that's been telling the story of the disciples' miraculous catch of fish while barbequing some breakfast together with young people, or racing down to the beach in our onesies to watch the sun rise as a group, or even simply offering young people an iPod reflection. Through the different faith development projects and activities we have been part of, through trial and (lots of!) error, we are starting to wonder if we need to see our youth room less as a classroom, and more as a laboratory.

This chimes with Google's recent research around 'Generation C'. The 'C' stands less for a group than an attitude, and is defined by four traits found in yooing people: creation, curation, connection and community. Generation C is less excited, for example, by a session I lead from my ready-made material, than an opportunity to comment, create, curate and experiment with new ideas and experiences. This feels like a risky approach, and perhaps we immediately have a lot of questions. It leaves things more open-ended, and critically, it changes and shares the power dynamic. This would alter the way we plan and deliver our youth sessions and even the way we see our role as youth worker, moving away from 'teacher' to 'fellow learner'. This report from Google, combined with our research, may be challenging us to go beyond conversations around abstract ideas to incorporating experiential elements into our faith exploration. I know as a youth worker I am good at drawing out dialogue and having great conversations with young people, but what if these conversations shifted to reflections on real experiences? This may mean that our times with young people would still need helpful framing, but would require much less of my voice. Instead my role would mean facilitating personal and corporate experiences and hearing from young people about what they discovered.

Our latest explorations have led us to developing and piloting a practice-based course on the Beatitudes, for young people exploring faith. The shift towards the 'practical' has been simple, and feels like one that many of us in youth work are naturally wired to do. For example, in a session on the Beatitude 'blessed are those who mourn', we started by sitting on the floor as a group, head in hands, naming the broken things in the world that sadden us. Individuals spoke out loud what came into their heads: 'Racism...child abuse...bad leaders...people starving while

others have so much...'. Next we shared what was broken in us: 'Low self-esteem...comparing myself to my sister...my relationship with my Dad'. It was a profound moment. From there we were able to explore simple faith experiments that encouraged us to trust that there was a God who wanted to meet and comfort us. We were offering young people a faith that provided useful practices, that they could play around with themselves. As we ventured further into 'blessed are those who mourn', we then shared a practice of silence, each of us swiping away our distractions and thoughts, like we might to the apps on our phones. A significant section of our time together was then in silence as we gently invited the young people to open their eyes and come back into the room. This may not feel like anything new for you, and you may already incorporate practical experiences into your youth work. But for some of us, the subtle shift to more practical, concrete and visceral faith experiences with young people might be a significant one.

What would it look like if your youth room was more like a laboratory?

How could you introduce more practical experiments into your time with young people?

So we are convinced that we need to offer young people practical and useful experiences of faith and provide space for reflection. What might some simple next steps be?

1. REDISCOVER ANCIENT PRACTICES

The danger here is that this can feel like yet another set of activities for us as youth workers to conjure up and create, but actually I want to encourage you that much of this is about rediscovering simple ancient practices. Some on the most powerful experiments we have done with young people have been around for a long time, whether that is writing your own psalm of lament, praying the Ignatian examen or sitting in silent centring prayer. It is helpful to look at the language of these practices and keep them simple, but they remain useful and profound.

2. EMBRACE YOUR OWN GROUP RITUALS (AND CREATE MORE!)

You are already likely to have your own group rituals, the patterns that you tend to follow as a group when you gather, that will help anchor your young people and make them feel safe. Here at Youthscape we greet young people by name as they arrive at our drop-in and at our community meals we stop to applaud and thank the chefs for the night, before checking in around the dinner tables on everybody's high and low from the day. It is worth asking yourself: what are your existing group rituals? Considering the culture you want to create, what else might you like to add?

3. READ WHAT JESUS DID AND THEN HAVE A GO

There is something simple and radical about reading what Jesus said and did, and then actually putting that into practice with young people. They are less interested in the rational basis for the existence of God, but who Jesus was and how he behaved is curious and compelling. Whether that is tracking the Beatitudes or reading about the early Church giving away one coat if they had two, why not read that passage together and then invite young people to join you in doing the same?

Alex Drew *is the Director of Youthscape Luton.*

ENCOURAGE RELIGIOUS YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE **DIFFERENT AND BOLD**

How do we help young people to stand out from the crowd, when they're growing up in a culture that urges conformity? How do we ask them to stand for something absolute, when the world insists everything is relative? Perhaps most challengingly of all, how do we encourage teenagers to live in a way that demonstrates their belief in an exclusive religion, when the greatest social crime is intolerance?

I only got two detentions during my entire time at secondary school, and both were earned for quite bizarre reasons. The first was issued by the ICT teacher for my lazy one-handed typing technique, an extraordinarily petty sanction which rather belied the lack of real discipline issues in our class. The second however was more interesting, and the sort of thing that might these days attract the attention of the Daily Mail as further evidence of the marginalisation of Christian faith. I got a detention for inviting my teacher to come to my baptism.

To be fair to him, I did ask several times. Deciding to be baptised was part of a wider switch to being more 'public' about the faith I'd found a year earlier. I had been warned by my friends at youth group and in the Christian Union that I should 'expect opposition', and there was indeed a bit of teasing and name-calling once I revealed my allegiance to the God Squad. As my baptism date approached, I decided that I'd invite not only my classmates, but also my form tutor. The trouble was, I saw his polite decline as an invitation to pray for him, and then try again. After the third attempt, he landed me with 30 minutes in the dusty, smelly detention room. At the time I think I saw myself as a modern-day martyr.

When the day of my baptism came along however, something interesting happened. While that grumpy old secularist was nowhere to be seen, the balcony of the church filled up with half of my classmates, none of whom were Christian. Yes, they were partly there for the spectacle, but they'd also been intrigued that someone would care so much about a simple belief that they'd surrender themselves to the ignominy of half an hour's lock-up after school. After that, no-one was in any doubt about what I believed or stood for.

Twenty-five years later, standing up and standing out as a Christian at school is even more loaded. Where once you might have looked like a bit of a weirdo, now you risk being synonymous with intolerance and radicalism. In the context of a culture where the aim is to blend in, that's not only a public step toward affirming the thing you believe in, but it's also a step away from the safety net of conformity.

The research seems to bear out the idea that young people welcome this idea of uniformity, as if there's safety in sameness. Shahid, a Muslim interviewee, was at pains not to cause offence with his religious views, and espoused the idea that people are essentially all the same, that: "everyone's equal". Lucy, Helen and Josh all applied this idea directly to religion, and were keen to point to the idea of a universal God who ultimately sits above all expressions of spirituality. In a town like Luton, where theology takes on a more significant role than in most other parts of the UK due to the diverse population, the interviewees seemed to think that the desirable value of tolerance was best achieved by minimising the differences between worldviews.

Two of the more theologically-literate interviewees, Kai and Matthew, struggled with articulating the distinctiveness of their own Christian faith in this ultra-tolerant context. Others meanwhile, talked about how

faith was a private, personal thing, which allows it to stay out of public discussion and prevent the possible causing of offence.

There are some troubling implications to this however, if like me you are coming from a Christian mission perspective. For starters, Christianity through the centuries has demonstrably grown because of its all-in radicalness, rather than by being one choice among many. It's the faith that hymn writer Isaac Watts famously said "demands my soul, my life, my all"; it grows most spectacularly under oppression and persecution. The idea that it's something which can simply blend into the background of a tolerant society seems to run counter to this historical experience. A Christianity which simply offers one way of looking at the world is not very compelling.

The second implication is for those young people who today do feel brave enough to talk loudly and proudly about a faith which is exclusive and makes real demands on our lifestyle. In a context where intolerance is seen as a modern 'sin', they will inevitably face greater opposition, and perhaps even tangible sanctions (as I write, an Oxford college has just made the news for banning the Christian Union from its 'Freshers' Fair').

The greater complexity is that it's precisely the oppressed, persecuted variety of faith which seems to be the one that grows. So while greater opposition may feel uncomfortable, it is potentially also the key to more successful evangelism. A faith which stands out from the crowd in a culture that prizes tolerance is simultaneously offensive AND attractive. It's the sort of faith which provokes exactly the sorts of questions that it seems these young people are no longer asking.

For that reason, those of us involved in Christian youth leadership have two priorities here, and we cannot overlook either. We should absolutely be encouraging Christian young people – as I was encouraged in that much softer context 25 years ago – to live out their Christian faith publicly and provocatively. But we must not do that if we not also utterly committed to supporting them, to equipping them with theological robustness and emotional resilience, and to enabling a community of supportive peers who will rally alongside them.

Some of the young people who came to my baptism gathered ammunition from that night which was used to mock me for weeks. But some of my other classmates got a window into a faith which they subsequently found attractive even to the point of subscribing to it. In my experience, young people are inspired by the idea of taking up their own cross and following Jesus, but are so rarely presented with an opportunity to do so in practice. Properly supported, an encouragement to be more vocal and public about their faith, and to live by the standard to which it calls them, gives them a chance to do exactly that.

***Martin Saunders** is the Director of Innovation at Youthscape.*

START WITH THE IN-ROADS **OF PRAYER, DEATH AND AFTERLIFE**

Throughout the interviews with this group of 16-19 year-olds, one of the clear and most challenging discoveries for me is their lack of curiosity about religion, faith or God. With a high level of tolerance for different thought, and a low level of dissonance between opposing ideas, the young people seem less likely to have a desire to engage in thinking about faith and God. The usual "apologetic" questions don't seem to bother these young people or bring them into a conversation around God.

Instead, they seem to be interested in practical life; where and when they might think of God in relation to events in their life, and the usefulness of God. In the majority of the interviews, the young people brought up the subject of the death of a loved one, which had led them to pray and ponder the existence of the after-life. It was these three themes - prayer, death and afterlife - which came up time and time again in the interviews, and seemed to be the most 'spiritually' significant and important for the young people. Whatever the religious background, these seem to be consistent themes. It's interesting that these aren't often the starting point we have previously used when talking to young people about religion. How can we engage our students and young people using these topics?

Reading about their willingness to talk about God in this light, and their engagement with faith in this way, I began to ask myself a few questions:

> *How can we begin conversations with young people where they are at, in these areas where they are already interested, in a sensitive and meaningful way?*
>
> *What can we do practically to give young people the opportunity to reflect and grieve the loss that they have experienced?*

SPACES FOR PRAYER

Reading through the comments made by the young people, it seems clear that prayer is a fairly normal thing to do sporadically in life, particularly when help was needed. Whether the young people knew who they were praying to or not, the act of prayer, of praying to something greater than themselves, felt somewhat natural. This is an incredible finding, and invites us to create opportunities in schools and colleges for young people to pray and explore prayer.

Historically prayer rooms have been a common way in which this has been done, with multi-functional rooms providing different activities that help young people to pray. But for many different reasons these seem less commonly found in schools, and less used now (except perhaps for Prayer Spaces in Schools). Similarly, prayers in assemblies have lessened and many students don't have regular assemblies or regular religious services.

THE BIG IDEA

Typically, schools have two main spaces: the first is curriculum, lessons and assemblies; the second space is non-curriculum, lunch clubs and after school clubs. A space not often tapped into is "Third space". Third space is a neutral zone, one that requires self-engagement, is not obligatory and yet is open for all students to use in their day-to-day life in school. It's an art exhibition in the atrium; it's a video playing on school screens; it's an activity on a table along a corridor.

Third space could be a unique way of engaging students with prayer, to expand their understanding of what prayer is and how it can be used. To show that prayer can be woven into every area of life, and not just for times of darkness and despair. Utilising these third spaces for prayer could encourage students to question whether or not prayer could be, for them, a natural rhythm of life. These also may give young people the opportunity to share and reflect upon their own prayer experiences, and start to question what they might mean.

SOME EXTRA THOUGHTS

- Prayer rooms used to be a common feature in most schools and colleges, but these are becoming more and more rare. What other ways can we get students to engage with prayer in their places of learning?
- Could we have a prayer wall where students can leave a prayer, and be encouraged to pray for their peers?
- If your school has the technology, could you have a video playing in the corridors featuring ancient and modern prayers spoken by young people?
- What difference would it make if prayer was a natural thing to be talked about in school, having a place and space in the corridors and classrooms?

SPACES ON DEATH & AFTERLIFE

Death was one of the key themes throughout the interviews, and seemed to have an interesting relationship to spiritual practice or exploration. Tackling a topic like death needs to be done with sensitivity, and thinking about context is essential. There is evidently a need for safe spaces where young people can discuss, reflect and perhaps grieve the loss of loved ones. To ensure that pastoral care is available and that young people can process this healthily, it makes sense to have this in a more structured setting with an adult who can be there on hand. Using a structured setting means you can create an environment where young people are more able to open up and share. One way that we have attempted to do this at Youthscape is through our resource called OPEN.

THE BIG IDEA

OPEN looks at eight themes; meaning, values, purpose, forgiveness, responsibility, questions, hypocrisy and death. The resource aims to provide students with an opportunity to step back from the busyness of school or college life and to think about life's bigger questions. The session opens in a way that encourages them to be still and quiet and to be open to thinking about new ideas. Students are each given an iPod and, sitting in tables of 5 or 6, select an activity to engage with.

The session is mostly self-guided and flexible, and the young people can choose which activity they want to engage with and when. The activity around death presents different understandings of what happens when someone dies. It talks about the naturalness of death but also the grief that comes with it. It asks the young people some reflective questions on what they believe, and how that in turn might affect the way they live their life.

SOME EXTRA THOUGHTS

- When mentoring young people in schools, I have often found that what they need most is a space to express themselves and their emotions. Young people don't always have the tools to tap into their emotions in a way that helps them to cope with the situations they are in: rage, despair, hope, anxiety, excitement. When young people experience the death of something or someone, we need to have spaces for them to process.
- Could we create grief rooms with different activities that allow them to express their grief?
- Would it be possible to run sessions that tackle these emotions from a biblical perspective, showcasing the experience of grief through Jesus and other people in the Bible?

Lahna Pottle *is the 16-19s specialist at Youthscape.*

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